

Blood Father



by Tessa Dawn

A Blood Curse Novel

Book Six

In the Blood Curse Series

Published by Ghost Pines Publishing, LLC
<http://www.ghostpinespublishing.com>

Volume VI of the Blood Curse Series by Tessa Dawn
First Edition Trade Paperback Published June 12, 2014
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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ISBN-13: 978-1-937223-12-0
Printed in the United States of America

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Author may be contacted at: <http://www.tessadawn.com>

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Ghost Pines Publishing, LLC

Acknowledgments

Chad Jones, *Artistic Design*

Ghost Pines Publishing, LLC., *Publishing & Design*

GreenHouse Design, Inc., *Cover Art*

Lidia Bercea, *Romanian Translations*

Mercedes Arnold, *Reading & Critique*

Reba Hilbert, *Editing*

Credits

“*To Make You Feel My Love*,” written by Bob Dylan.

Dedication

To all those who have struggled with inner demons or fought to achieve personal freedom. (Tara, you are my hero!)

And for Carrie C ~ you know why!

The Blood Curse

In 800 BC, Prince Jadon and Prince Jaegar Demir were banished from their Romanian homeland after being cursed by a ghostly apparition: *the reincarnated Blood of their numerous female victims*. The princes belonged to an ancient society that sacrificed its females to the point of extinction, and the punishment was severe.

They were forced to roam the earth in darkness as creatures of the night. They were condemned to feed on the blood of the innocent and stripped of their ability to produce female offspring. They were damned to father twin sons by human hosts who would die wretchedly upon giving birth; and the firstborn of the first set would forever be required as a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of their forefathers.

Staggered by the enormity of *The Curse*, Prince Jadon, whose own hands had never shed blood, begged his accuser for leniency and received *four small mercies*—four exceptions to the Curse that would apply to his house and his descendants, alone.

Ψ Though still creatures of the night, they would be allowed to walk in the sun.

Ψ Though still required to live on blood, they would not be forced to take the lives of the innocent.

Ψ While still incapable of producing female offspring, they would be given *one opportunity and thirty days* to obtain a mate, a human *destiny* chosen by the gods, following a sign that appeared in the heavens.

Ψ While they were still required to sacrifice a firstborn son, their twins would be born as one child of darkness and one child of light, allowing them to sacrifice the former while keeping the latter to carry on their race.

And so...forever banished from their homeland in the Transylvanian mountains of Eastern Europe, the descendants of

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Jaegar and the descendants of Jadon became the Vampyr of legend: roaming the earth, ruling the elements, living on the blood of others...forever bound by an ancient curse. They were brothers of the same species, separated only by degrees of light and shadow.

Prologue

Kagen Silivasi reclined in an elegant, rust-colored armchair, staring up at the ceiling in his twin's vaulted Great Room. He was waiting, along with the other members of his family, to welcome Nathaniel's guests. Well, in truth, Vanya Demir and Saber Alexiars were hardly what one could call *guests*, and they weren't so much coming to see Nathaniel as all of the Silivasi brothers at once: It was more than just a little bit cryptic, this urgent, impromptu meeting.

Unsettling to say the least.

He glanced out the floor-to-ceiling windows, taking in the magnificent mountain view, before regarding his eldest brother Marquis inquisitively. "And you have no idea what this is about?"

"None," Marquis responded. He shuffled restlessly in his own armchair. "To tell you the truth, I'm still a bit shocked that the male had the brass to ask for this meeting, to step foot in this house"—he regarded Nachari's mate Deanna as well as their newly acquired little sister Kristina with deference—"to show his face around either of these females, willingly, after what he did to them."

"Agreed," Nachari Silivasi said, leaning back against the wall beside the fireplace. "It does seem like a bold move." He crossed his arms over his chest. "On the other hand, I also have to concede that the male is trying."

"Hmm," Marquis grumbled, refusing to say any more.

"It seems like only yesterday when we went through Vanya's conversion at the clinic," Kagen commented.

"Hell, it seems like only yesterday when the bastard didn't burn in the sun," Marquis retorted.

"Marquis," Kagen chastised. "At some point, we may have to let bygones be bygones."

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Nachari shrugged. “The way I see it: If Vanya wants to be with him—and it’s pretty evident she does—then that’s her call; and we all have to get used to it.”

“The way you see it,” Marquis growled. “Who asked you how you saw it?”

Nachari winked at the burly Ancient Master Warrior. “Love you, too, bro.”

“Whatever,” Marquis grumbled.

Kagen sat forward then. “I just don’t understand what this is about—what could Saber possibly have to say to all of us that is this important?”

Nathaniel, who was sitting next to his mate on the sofa, shrugged with indifference. “Perhaps, there’s an apology coming.”

Jocelyn rubbed her temples. “Maybe.”

Deanna shifted uneasily in her seat next, sharing a knowing glance with Kristina, who was nestled on the soft beige sofa beside Jocelyn. “I hope not,” she said wearily. “I’m not sure I’m quite as *forgiving* as my mate.”

Nachari strolled languidly to her side and sat on the arm of her chair. He took her hand in his and softly kissed her knuckles. “Not forgiving, love. Just...evolving.”

Deanna nodded and squeezed his hand.

As far as Kagen could tell, something important had passed between his little brother and the newly redeemed vampire not so long ago in the Red Canyons. Saber’s dark brother Diablo, along with two soldiers from the Dark Ones’ colony, had tried to kill Saber; and Nachari and Ramsey had shown up to defend the recalcitrant male, to try and save Saber despite the bad blood that existed between them. Whatever had taken place in that valley had quenched some of Nachari’s anger and begun to forge at least a tentative truce between the two males. As far as Kagen was concerned, Nachari was a wise and intuitive wizard. If he was beginning to see things in a different light, then perhaps a different light existed. He was just about to make a comment to that effect when Alejandra, Nathaniel’s live-in housekeeper,

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stepped into the living room.

“Mr. Silivasi,” she said in her thick Latin accent. “Your guests have arrived. Should I show them in?”

Nathaniel stretched fluidly in his seat to relieve some tension, and then he placed a protective arm around Jocelyn’s shoulders. Jocelyn had her own history with Saber Alexiaries, and none of the males seemed too keen on allowing their women to face the dangerous vampire alone. “Of course, Alejandra,” Nathaniel drawled in his typical, laid-back fashion. “Show them in.”

The maid retreated, and everyone in the room waited with bated breath.

Vanya appeared first, the regal beauty commanding instant attention as always. Saber was not far behind, his hand resting conspicuously, if not possessively, on the small of Vanya’s back. Now that was one visually jarring sight if Kagen had ever seen one: the devil in blue jeans staking claim to an angel of light.

Kagen watched the ensuing interaction unfold with interest: The moment Nathaniel and Saber’s eyes met, an undeniable spark of tension flashed between them, and the temperature in the room rose a couple of degrees.

“Dark One,” Nathaniel spoke in greeting.

The term *Dark One* was a bit confusing as Saber was no longer a Dark One, at least, not technically. In truth, he never really had been. He was a son of Jadon who had been stolen by the Dark Ones at birth, raised as a member of the house of Jaegar, and only recently returned to his true lineage. Still, he had been one obstinate nut to crack; and with all his defiance, rebellion, and just plain meanness, the term *Dark One* had stuck to him like glue. It might be years before the sons of Jadon stopped referring to him that way.

If ever.

Saber seemed to take it in stride, maybe even wear it like a badge of honor. With a gait as weighted in stealth as it was in swagger, he sauntered toward Nathaniel and inclined his head. “Nathaniel.”

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Nathaniel rose like vapor from a steaming cauldron, all at once ascending to his feet; and Jocelyn immediately took a place at his side. “Sweetheart,” she murmured, placing a gentle hand on his arm. She turned to face their guest. “Hello, Saber.”

Nathaniel couldn’t help it. He sidestepped between them and growled in warning, his watchful eyes darting back and forth between the pair. In truth, it wasn’t meant as a challenge: It was simply an unconscious signal—a way of saying, *Caution!*—from one male predator to another. In other words: *Back up. You’re too close.*

Kagen held his breath, waiting to see what would happen next. Both Jocelyn and Saber stepped back, their collective response so perfectly timed it almost appeared to be choreographed, a primordial waltz.

Nathaniel visibly relaxed, his powerful chest rising and falling with deeper breaths.

Peeking from behind the barrier of Nathaniel’s shoulder, Jocelyn forced an uneasy smile and tried again. “Hello, Saber.”

Saber looked her over with more than a small measure of scrutiny. He obviously remembered her. “You,” he whispered. “How have you been?”

Seemingly surprised, Jocelyn’s eyebrows shot up. “I’ve been...good.”

Saber nodded. “Still jumping into your mate’s battles?”

Jocelyn smiled then. “Not so much.” She smirked at him. “Avoiding guillotines?”

Saber laughed without restraint, and the sound seemed almost alien coming from such a ruthless male, bizarre in its unexpected nature.

Deanna Silivasi rose softly from her seat, placed her hand on her lower stomach, and quietly announced, “I can’t do this.” Her stately five-foot-ten frame seemed to fold inward, constricting in Saber’s presence. “I thought I could, but I can’t.” She was just about to leave the room when Nachari slid effortlessly behind her and placed both arms firmly around her waist.

“You *can* do this,” he whispered in her ear. When she started

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to shake her head, Saber stepped forward, and she visibly flinched, drawing back in surprise. When he descended to one knee in front of her, Deanna looked at him like he had grown a second head. She glanced over her shoulder at Nachari and frowned. “What is he doing?”

“He is trying to appear as nonthreatening as he can,” Saber answered for the Master Wizard. He bowed his head and shook it slowly back and forth. “Deanna, you have nothing to fear from me. Not now. Not ever again.”

Deanna tried to take a cautious step back but ran into the brick wall of Nachari’s chest. “I have much to...*remember* with you,” she said bitterly.

Saber stood slowly then. He reached as gingerly as he could, as slowly as he was able, and retrieved a burnished dagger with serrated edges from the waistband of his jeans. He flipped it deftly in his hand and extended the grip to Deanna.

Marquis stirred restlessly. His eyes flashed red, but he didn’t rise or interfere.

“In the house of Jaegar,” Saber said, “when someone has a wrong to redress, it’s done in blood, and then the matter is closed...forever.”

Deanna blanched. She shook her beautiful head, her exotic bluish-gray eyes clouding with distaste. “I...I can’t cut you, Saber.”

Kristina Silivasi rose from the sofa, took four long strides across the room, her hips swaying in an effort to balance her petite frame above her three-inch stilettos, and snatched the blade from Saber’s hand. She swung it neatly across his face, slicing from his left ear to the corner of his mouth, then, once again, from his right cheek to his temple, cutting deep into the bone. “I can,” she snapped.

Saber didn’t flinch, although Vanya did. “Should I leave it as it is, unhealed?” he asked.

Vanya sighed in exasperation. “Please, Kristina. I have to look at him for the rest of my life.”

Kristina stared at Vanya and frowned. “Fine. He can heal it

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later.”

Saber nodded. “Very well. Later then.”

Kristina looked startled by his compliance, more than a little off balance. Searching for a way to regain control, she smirked. “How are your flat tires, Dark One?”

Vanya dropped her head in shame.

“No longer flat,” Saber said. The corners of his mouth turned up in a smile, or a predatory scowl, depending on how one looked at it, and he winked at her.

Kristina drew back in surprise, and a tiny glint of respect registered in her eyes. “Cool.” She turned to face Deanna. “Are we good now, Dee? The second one was for you.”

Deanna nodded tentatively at Kristina. She forced herself to meet the vampire’s eyes once more, and something unspoken passed between them. “I don’t want your blood, Saber. I just want to know *why*.”

Again, Saber stood strong against the scrutiny. “I was a soldier in the Dark Ones’ colony. I was ordered to hurt the enemy, and I obeyed. I didn’t think; I didn’t feel; I didn’t reason. It may not be what you want to hear, but it’s the truth.”

Deanna frowned. “And now?”

Saber glanced at Vanya. “And now I am learning how to think and feel...and reason. Or at least I’m trying.” He shrugged then. “It’s all I’ve got.”

Nachari tightened his arms around his mate and waited. When she still didn’t speak, he whispered, “Deanna?”

“I’m still—”

“For what it’s worth,” Saber offered, “I am sorry.”

Deanna nodded and Marquis snorted. “Enough!” He waved his hand through the air, as if to dismiss the whole silly scene, and scowled. “You were a soulless bastard who deserved to die. We tried to kill you, but you wouldn’t burn. And now you’re in love with the princess. So you’ve come here to talk to us about something: Get on with it.”

Kagen rolled his eyes. Leave it to Marquis to put things in perspective. Of course, the Ancient Master Warrior did

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conveniently leave out the part where he almost removed Saber's heart for getting his mate's sister pregnant; but all in all, it was a fairly good summary.

Saber regarded Marquis thoughtfully and inclined his head. "Very well." He eyed an empty chair next to the fireplace and sat down. "May I?"

"Looks like you already did," Marquis snorted. He gestured at the chair. "Sit, stand, hang upside down if you like. Just talk."

Saber leaned forward and braced his arms on his elbows, looking as if he were bracing himself for the conversation. When Vanya made her way to his side, placed a supportive hand on his shoulder, and squeezed it reassuringly, Kagen tensed with anticipation.

What in the world was this all about?

Saber cleared his throat. "I don't want to take up any more of your time than is necessary, and I really don't know how to start, how to say this, so I'll just put it out there as succinctly as I can."

Nathaniel leaned forward, looking both leery and intense. "Go on."

Saber drew a deep breath. "In the colony, I did a lot of things other than fight, for the house of Jaegar. Mostly woodwork, iron work, shit with my hands." He eyed the females apologetically. "*Stuff* with my hands." When Marquis gave him an impatient stare, he hurried on. "And on a few occasions, I put data into our computers for the council—I fed the historic annals." He glanced upward as if searching for a better way to put it. "The historic annals are kind of like the colony's version of an electronic library, where we keep our important records, demographic information, our history." He sighed, frustrated by the recurring slip. "Where *they* keep *their* history."

Vanya stroked his shoulder with her hand as if to say, *You're doing fine*, and the whole thing made Kagen restless, uneasy deep down in the pit of his stomach.

Where in Hades was this going?

He shifted anxiously in his seat. "So?"

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“So, about 480 years ago, when the lycans attacked the valley, there were about thirty Dark Ones killed.”

Marquis’s jaw stiffened and he clenched his fists, cracking all ten of his knuckles at once, before relaxing once again and staring blankly at Saber.

Kagen inhaled deeply: The Silivasis had intimate knowledge of the lycan attack—how could they not? They had lost their own mother at the hands of the werewolves, and their father had been lost soon after.

Nathaniel cleared his throat, and Nachari pursed his brows. “Continue,” the Master Wizard said, his voice lacking its usual charisma.

Saber made eye contact with Vanya, and the princess nodded.

“At the time,” Saber said, “Salvatore and the other sorcerers spent an enormous amount of time and energy trying to locate our common enemy. Needless to say, we wanted revenge pretty badly. But more so, we wanted to find out where they lived so we could eliminate them once and for all.”

“They live all over the planet,” Nachari said thoughtfully. “Embedded in their Council of Nations; disguised as national headhunters; meeting on occasion with human militia leaders.”

“That’s true,” Saber agreed, “but there’s more to it than that. A lot more to it.”

“Like what?” Marquis asked.

“The sorcerers were able to discover something new, something really odd, something previously unheard of.” He took a deep breath and just put it out there. “Another dimension.”

“Another dimension?” Kagen asked.

“Yes,” Saber replied. “A world apart from our own, the origin of the werewolves.”

The entire room inhaled as one.

“What do you mean?” Nathaniel asked.

Saber looked off into the distance for a moment as if trying to *see* the right words. “I mean another dimension, a realm

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parallel to this one, but apart. A place called Mhier.” Before one of the Silivasis could interrupt him again, he explained: “There’s a reason none of us have ever been able to locate anything more than a regional headhunter here or there, a reason why we’ve never been able to ferret out an entire community or civilization of lycans and exterminate them. It’s because they’re not here. Not the majority of them, anyhow. Not in this dimension.” He sat back in his chair, apparently deep in concentration. “The sorcerers said that Mhier was like, I don’t know, a lost civilization from somewhere back in time, complete with salt mines, slaves, and some pretty gnarly animals. And from what I could garner from Salvatore’s entries in the annals, any Dark Ones that had been taken by the Lycanthrope were long dead, and the challenge of trying to get there was a greater risk than it was worth—it was better to just wait for their periodic attacks and fight them here.”

Marquis exhaled slowly then. “Okay, so no one is going to deny this is important information. *Very important information.* You should be sharing it with Napoleon. Why did you come to us?”

Saber scrubbed his face with his hand and swallowed hard. “Because it affects your family more than most.”

Kagen did not like the sound of that...wherever this was going.

Not one bit.

“How so?” he asked, his heart beginning to beat rapidly with a brash, resounding thud.

“Indeed, how so?” Marquis repeated.

Saber closed his eyes briefly. When he reopened them, they were dark with regret and deathly serious. “Because of a small entry I came across, written as no more than a footnote in the text.”

“Well?” Marquis Silivasi bit out impatiently.

Saber met the Ancient Master Warrior’s stare head-on. “It was the name of a vampire, a slave still living in Mhier, at least at the time of Salvatore’s last entry.”

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“And?” Nathaniel Silivasi demanded, his voice growing harsh with anticipation.

“And the name was Keitaro Silivasi.”

Nachari released his hold on Deanna and took two steps back, his stunning features flushing absent of color. He ran a rigid hand through his thick, wavy hair, and shook it out in disbelief. The wizard had only been twenty-one years old when their father disappeared; he had barely had a chance to know him.

Nathaniel’s fangs slowly extended in his mouth, and his eyes burned a deep crimson red; yet he said nothing. For centuries, he had believed Keitaro was still alive, and he had searched from one end of the globe to the other before finally giving up and laying the male’s memory to rest.

Marquis sat back in his chair, far too casually.

His piercing eyes dimmed from deep phantom blue to eerie shark black, the depths going vacant with barely concealed anguish *and rage*, and then he began to tremble.

Uncontrollably.

Kagen sat forward on the edge of his seat, watching Marquis carefully, fully expecting him to plunge over the edge of sanity at any moment: Marquis and Keitaro had been the best of friends, bar none. And their father’s loss had affected Marquis more tragically than any of the others, hardening his heart, changing his personality, molding him into the brutal, impassive male he was today. Kagen couldn’t help but wish Ciopori had come with him, that the other females had found someone else to watch their kids, because by the look on Marquis’s stony face, the male was slipping further and further away by the second, perhaps going somewhere from which he would never return.

To Kagen’s immense surprise, the huge male seemed to simply snap out of it. That is, in a truly creepy, *five-faces-of-Eve* kind of way. It was almost as if another personality had simply taken over for him, run his emotions through a paper-shredder, and discarded them in a bin on the other side, leaving him free to process the information. “That was almost five centuries

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ago,” Marquis grumbled in irritation. “Even if he was alive then, he’s unlikely to be alive now. Especially if he was surviving as a...a slave.” He stumbled over the last word despite his self-control.

Vanya took a deep breath then. “I don’t believe that to be true, brother-in-law,” she said. “I have reason to believe he might yet be living.”

“What reason, Princess?” Nachari asked, his tone also carefully controlled.

Vanya swallowed hard. “Before I met Saber, I had a dream about him, a dream that vexed me horribly and would not give me a moment’s peace. I dreamed that there was a fire-breathing dragon in the house of Jadon, and that our paths would cross inexorably. In the dream, he always burned me when I approached him; yet I couldn’t stay away. *I simply couldn’t*. Because he was guarding something so precious, so valuable to the house of Jadon. A treasure. One that had to be returned to the people.” She sat back and sighed. “Last night, I told Saber about the dream, and it sparked his memory. He believes—and I agree—that the treasure he was guarding was not his own return to the house of Jadon, but his knowledge of that single footnote: that marginalized entry. Your father’s name.”

Whatever...*whoever*...was guarding Marquis Silivasi’s emotions stepped aside. He shot out of his chair like a rocket, fueled by highly combustible energy, ready to launch to the sky, and roared like an angry lion. “Son of a bitch!”

Nathaniel and Nachari immediately flanked him on either side, both males placing a firm hand on his shoulders. “Settle down, Marquis,” Nathaniel warned, alluding to the powerful impact a male vampire’s emotions had on the earth around them. The last thing they wanted was to trigger an electrical storm or create a flash flood.

“Be calm,” Nachari said, immediately weaving an intricate pattern over the male’s head, no doubt some spell or another to catch his rage.

Kagen stood to face Saber then, his own heart practically

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beating out of his chest. “Do you know where the portal is, the entrance to this...this other dimension?”

Saber shook his head. “No, I never saw that information.”

Nachari’s expression grew intense. “Perhaps not, but if Salvatore Nistor could divine it with his sorcery, then I can find it using wizardry.”

Saber held up his hands in question. “I don’t know if that’s true or not, but I do know this: If you guys can find the portal, I can draw you a map of the territory.”

one

Dark Moon Vale ~ four weeks later

Kagen Silivasi strolled onto the rooftop terrace of Nachari and Deanna's lavish brownstone, located at the northern face of the forest cliffs, and smiled warmly at Deanna. "Sister."

"Hi, Kagen." Deanna's rich, bluish-gray eyes brightened. "How are you tonight?"

Kagen shrugged his broad shoulders. There was no point in answering—all of the Silivasi brothers were wound as tight as drums, and they had been for the last four weeks, ever since Saber had shared his shocking news with them. He glanced up at the sky, making note of the crystalline stars and the shimmering moon. "Beautiful night," he commented, trying to find something positive to focus on.

"Very beautiful," Deanna said. She turned to face Nachari and frowned, the slightest downward curve of her heart-shaped lips. The Master Wizard was sitting at a modern drafting table, beside a series of expensive, intimidating-looking telescopes, scribbling wildly on a piece of paper, his brow furrowed in concentration. "He's still at it."

"I see," Kagen said. He was just about to walk in Nachari's direction when Deanna took a step back and smiled.

"You cut your hair." She sounded genuinely pleased with the outcome.

Kagen chuckled lightly. "Yeah, just a little."

She appraised him thoughtfully. "No, I think it looks great." She took a step forward to assess it more closely. "Chin length suits you." She reached out to smooth her hand through a mass of his thick brown locks. "And these subtle layers, the way the waves lie so smoothly away from your face, it's...stunning, really."

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Kagen placed his hand on his heart. “Stop, sister. You’re going to make me blush.”

She laughed then. “Well, I think it suits you very well. Your natural highlights really bring out your eyes now.”

Kagen averted his eyes. He turned to appraise Nachari and frowned. “Wow, he really is concentrating if he missed that exchange. Otherwise, I would expect to have all six feet, 180 pounds of possessive male all over me about now.”

Deanna rolled her eyes. “Nachari doesn’t get jealous. Not really.” She gave Kagen a knowing glance then. “Not like Marquis or Nathaniel.”

“He *is* a vampire,” Kagen said, his tone laced with caution. “Don’t ever forget that.”

“Yes,” Deanna agreed, “but a very arrog—*self-assured*—vampire.”

Kagen smiled. “Well put.”

“Still,” Deanna said, eyeing her mate suspiciously, “perhaps I’ve grown old hat already.”

Kagen shook his head, dismissing the comment offhand, as he eyed the exotically beautiful female appreciatively. There was nothing *old hat* about Deanna Dubois-Silivasi, and there never would be. “Never,” he reassured her, meaning it emphatically.

Deanna cleared her throat and raised her voice. “I mean your hair is really *gorgeous*.” She put a strong emphasis on the last word.

Kagen cut his eyes at her and stared at Nachari.

Nothing.

The wizard was still deep in thought.

“In fact, I would have to say it’s *sexy as hell*,” Deanna added, whistling at her brother for effect.

“Stop it!” Kagen whispered. When Nachari still didn’t look up, he shrugged.

“Ah well,” Deanna said, feigning disappointment. “I suppose I’ll go check on our son then. I imagine Sebastian is still in love with me.” She laughed, making it clear she was only teasing. Despite all the recent turmoil surrounding Keitaro Silivasi,

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Nachari and Deanna were still like newlyweds, always gazing into each other's eyes, utterly incapable of keeping their hands to themselves, even in public. They were a match made in the heavens, quite literally.

"Your mate will step away from that desk soon enough," Kagen said. "Count on it." He gave her a conspiratorial wink. "In the meantime, I'm going to go see what he's working on so intently."

"Please do," Deanna said. "See if you can't get him to at least stand up and stretch his legs."

Kagen nodded. He watched as Deanna headed for the rooftop staircase and made her way back inside the brownstone, and then he took three long strides, sidled up to Nachari, and glanced over the wizard's shoulder to study his drawings. "So, how's it—"

"Back off, already!" Nachari snarled, leveling a severe glower at the Master Healer.

Kagen stepped back and threw up both hands. "Whoa, brother. I haven't even said anything."

Nachari sighed. "Sorry. It's going the same way it's been going. I'm making progress. It's just slow. Way too slow."

Kagen eyed the map on the desk, the one Saber Alexiares had drawn for the Silivasi brothers, the one that outlined the territories, tributaries, and passageways of Mhier, the realm of the Lycanthrope; and then he eyed the haphazard drawing Nachari was working on. It was a series of circles drawn with a compass, with one plot-point after another stressed in red ink. There were lines dissecting the circles and arrows connecting the lines. It looked like a frenzied maze. "The warriors are ready," Kagen said cautiously, referring to Marquis, Nathaniel, and Ramsey Olaru, the three other males who would accompany Kagen and Nachari into Mhier, to begin searching for their father, as soon as Nachari located the portal.

"Yeah, they've been ready," Nachari snapped defensively. The stress of the whole situation was really taking a toll on the otherwise laid-back male.

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“I don’t mean mentally, emotionally,” Kagen said. “I mean we have the tents packed, the weapons cleaned and sharpened, the silver ammunition cached in carriers, and the ability to haul it all now. We have enough blood bagged to *feed* for six months to a vampire if necessary. I mean, everything is finally *ready*.”

Nachari dropped his pencil and splayed his large hands flat over the page he had been scribbling on. “Everything except the one thing we need: to pinpoint the entrance to Mhier.”

Kagen was just about to reply, to try and say something supportive and encouraging, even though the delay was killing him every bit as much as Nachari, when Braden Bratianu rounded the corner. The boy had just turned sixteen eight days ago, on May 10th, and Kagen could’ve sworn he had grown two inches in the last month alone. He now stood about five-foot-ten, and his once thin, underdeveloped frame was beginning to fill out nicely; his body was adjusting quickly to its ever-evolving vampiric state.

“What’s up, Kagen,” Braden said. Did his voice sound just a little bit deeper?

Kagen took a scrutinizing look at the youngster: His chestnut brown hair, interspersed with occasional blond highlights, had darkened just a bit; and it appeared as if the boy was growing it out, even as Kagen had shortened his. It fell just beyond Braden’s shoulders now, and whether it was the longer hair or the rapid development, his features seemed just a little bit sharper, more masculine. More adult. “Hey, Braden. How have you been, son?”

Braden’s smile was exuberant. “Cool...cool. I’m hanging in there.”

Kagen chuckled beneath his breath. *Still Braden.*

“Hey, Nachari,” Braden said cautiously, not wanting to disturb him but eager to say something useful.

“What do you need?” Nachari asked. His voice was even, a paternal attempt at exercising patience.

“Um, yeah. I just...” Braden bit his bottom lip and wrinkled up his nose. “I just thought of something that might help.”

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Nachari looked up from his work and raised his eyebrows. “What’s that?”

Braden stepped forward and pointed at the cluttered page of dizzying circles and crisscrossed lines, circling a red dot in the middle with his forefinger. “So I was thinking that the nucleus—you know, the center of the map that represents the portal—might not be a place so much as an energy field.”

Nachari sat up straighter. “Meaning?”

“Well, you’ve already defined the coordinates, right?”

“Right,” Nachari said, his voice perking up with interest.

“The north represents—”

“The edge of the valley,” Nachari supplied. “The thick of the Dark Moon Forest.”

“Right,” Braden replied. “And the south represents the winding Snake Creek River.”

“As well as the Dark Moon Lake,” Nachari said, “the element of water.”

“*Right*,” Braden said, his own voice mounting with enthusiasm. Apparently, they were already on the same page.

“The east represents the steepest cliffs, and the west represents the meadow and the Red Canyons—”

“A hallow or a void.”

“I’m already with you,” Nachari said, swiveling around in his chair to meet the youngster’s eyes. “But the lines don’t intersect in a way that makes sense. I can’t divine the energy of anything close to a portal at the center of the four points.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” Braden took a step closer to the drawing, placed his fingers on the edge of the paper, and raised his brows. “May I?” he asked, sounded far more grown-up than usual.

“Please do.” Nachari leaned back in his chair and waited as Braden lifted the paper off the desk and began to appraise it thoughtfully.

“So, what if it’s not supposed to? What if it’s not a place but an energy?”

“Elaborate,” Nachari said.

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Braden sighed. He narrowed his eyes and furrowed his brows, deep in thought. “What if you were to go to the highest point in the northern forest and gather bark from a tree? You know, just to recreate the energy. Then do it again in the south, collect some water from the river and the lake. Then—”

“Take a chunk out of the Red Canyons in the west and some stones from the cliffs in the east,” Nachari supplied.

“Arrange them in a circle where the four lines meet—“

“In the center of the valley...and create our own portal?” Nachari shook his head in wonderment. “It’s not a place but an energy.”

“Maybe,” Braden said, his eager eyes brightening with anticipation.

“It’s worth a shot,” Nachari said, “but there’s still something missing.”

“What’s that?” Kagen interjected, chiming in on the conversation, his own hope beginning to rise.

“The energy of the lycans,” Nachari and Braden answered in unison. Their eyes met and a look of understanding, of mutual pride and admiration, passed between them.

Nachari stood up, appearing all at once to be all business, no nonsense. “Brother, do you remember when Nathaniel *eliminated* Tristan Hart? Do you know whether or not he kept anything that belonged to the lycan? Before he incinerated his body?”

Kagen scrunched up his face. “You don’t mean—”

“No. *No!* Not *that*.” Nachari winced, immediately grasping the reference to the unfortunate appendage Nathaniel Silivasi had removed from Tristan Hart, in effect making him a eunuch, before he ripped his heart out by way of his throat for trying to assault Jocelyn. “That’s disgusting, Kagen.”

Kagen sniffed. “Well, you’re the one asking.”

“I meant a trophy,” Nachari said. “You know, Nathaniel and his...creativity. He doesn’t just kill his enemies in unique, inventive ways; he often keeps a souvenir, for whatever reason.”

“Yeah,” Kagen said, grimacing. “He is a bit of a warped bastard, that twin of mine.”

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“No doubt,” Nachari said. “So maybe...just maybe?”

Nathaniel... Kagen immediately reached out telepathically to his twin on the familiar family bandwidth. No need to involve the entire house of Jadon in the communication.

Kagen, Nathaniel replied immediately.

I'm with Nachari, and we have a question for you, Kagen said, getting right to the point.

Ask away, Nathaniel said.

Do you remember Tristan Hart, the lycan?

Nathaniel's answering growl said it all: Of course he remembered the worthless bastard.

Kagen sighed. *Did you take anything...save anything...as a token of your kill?*

Of course not, Nathaniel said slyly, his voice taking on a dark, perilous edge. *That would be demented.*

No one is going to tell Jocelyn, Nachari added. *It's important, Nathaniel.*

The connection grew quiet.

Perhaps...a lock of that wild mass of unruly hair, Nathaniel said. *Why?*

Thank the gods, Nachari said. *We need it. To conjure a spell.*

Nathaniel hissed like a rattlesnake, sounding far more vampiric than civilized.

For Auriga's sake, Kagen barked. *He won't be any less dead if you turn it over, and you won't be any less the male who sent him to the afterlife.*

Why would you want to remember something like that, anyhow? Nachari cut in, incredulous. Apparently, he couldn't help it. *Hold onto a souvenir like that?*

Nathaniel harrumphed. *You have your telescopes; I have my museum. Don't worry about it, Wizard. It's a warrior thing.*

Nachari looked at Kagen and rolled his eyes, shaking his head back and forth as if to say, *cuckoo...cuckoo. Fine,* he responded. *How quickly can you get it to me, Warrior?*

Five or ten minutes, Nathaniel said.

“And I can have all of the objects, the energetic catalysts you need to work your spell, back to you in less than an hour.”

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Kagen spoke aloud. He had already released his silken brown wings, preparing to launch into flight, before Nachari could reply. “Bark from a northern tree, water from the south, stones from the eastern cliffs, and a piece of the Red Canyons? Do containers matter?”

“Not at this point,” Nachari said.

Braden swelled up with pride. “Then we’re going to try it?”

“Yes,” Nachari said emphatically. “We are definitely going to try it.” *Nathaniel, we will see you on the rooftop in five minutes then?*

Very well, Nathaniel replied. *I’ll be there.*

Thank you, Kagen added, knowing his twin hated to relinquish the trophy, no matter how compliant he sounded...for whatever demented reason.

Yep, Nathaniel drawled in acknowledgment.

Kagen chuckled then. *We’ll see you soon. Be well, brother.*

Be well, Kagen. With that formal exit, the Ancient Master Warrior closed the communication, and Nachari turned to Braden.

“Braden, I have to start working on a spell to conjure and open the portal. Would you do me a favor in the meantime?”

Braden’s handsome face positively lit up with excitement. “Yeah. *Yeab, of course.* What?”

“Bring Marquis up to speed with what we’re doing.”

Braden nodded his assent. “Most definitely.” By the self-satisfied look on his face, he clearly felt important. He started to say something else, but Kagen didn’t hear him. He had already launched into the sky, leaving the roof and soaring into the brilliant night, his large glossy wings spread out like an angel’s cloak behind him. He turned sharply to the right, toward the North Star, and then headed for the highest point in the Dark Moon Forest to retrieve the first mystic object.

two

Mhier

Arielle Nightsong waited in the shadows until the last of King Thane's guards had left the meadow. As one of Thane's four trusted alpha generals, it was Xavier Matista's duty to patrol Thane's private grounds each night before heading back to his own clan, the western pack of the Lycanthrope. She was careful to stand downwind as Xavier, the cruelest and most brutal of Thane's inner circle, passed by, singing a vile, dissonant tune in his harsh, arrogant voice.

She shivered as she watched Xavier stroll into the night, and then she said a prayer to the gods of her ancestors as she gathered her leather pouch under her arm and prepared to slip into Keitaro's hut. She had no doubt that the slave had been treated horrendously that day, for no other reason than Tyrus Thane, the king of the Lycanthrope, was still enraged as a result of his human wife's recent adultery; and being a miscreant bully as well as a sadistic animal, he had to take it out on someone. Keitaro Silivasi was as good a choice as any. After all, he was Thane's favorite prisoner—*favorite* meaning the one he hated the most—and Thane always kept Keitaro in a weakened, defenseless state by bleeding him out on a daily basis, constantly injecting intravenous poisons into the vampire's veins, some cruel combination of saline solution and liquefied diamond dust, and keeping his ankles chained and his wrists shackled at all times. Whenever Keitaro wasn't working or fighting, he was drugged so he couldn't run away or heal himself with his venom.

It was unthinkable.

Barbaric.

And it had gone on for hundreds of years.

Arielle had no doubt that Keitaro would be in need of her

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various healing herbs and tonics tonight, and that was why she had snuck away from the Rebel Camp.

Holding her breath, she tiptoed silently to the entrance of the small lean-to hut and quickly ducked inside the bearskin flap. Keitaro was lying on a threadbare blanket, the worn skin of a mule deer that had been killed what looked like decades ago, and never properly tanned or cured. His skin was covered in open sores and raised welts that looked like a mixture of a leopard's spots and a zebra's stripes, marring every inch of his otherwise immortal flesh. As usual, he had experienced a toxic reaction to the poisonous concoction that always flowed like acid through his veins. Even from ten feet away, Arielle could sense his agony.

Keitaro groaned as he turned on his side, and then he caught sight of Arielle from the corner of his eye. Raising his head and yanking on his chains—both arms were staked in cross-like fashion to the ground; it was how they always made him sleep—he met her gaze with a cautionary stare of his own. “Rielle, you shouldn't be here.” His voice was calm and paternal, despite his torment.

“Shh, Keitaro,” she whispered. “You know I could not stay away.”

The ancient vampire simply shook his head, his dark, intelligent eyes brimming with regret. “I'm fine, Rielle. I will survive.” He grimaced from the pain of speaking. “I always do.”

Arielle sighed. “Yes, you do, and my wonderful healing herbs have a lot to do with it.” It was a pitiful attempt at cheering him up. At cheering herself up.

Keitaro forced a smile then, however slight, his mature features framing his darkly tanned, handsome face. “Rielle,” he chastised, “one of these days you're going to get caught, and I'll never be able to live with myself when that happens.”

“It won't happen,” Arielle reassured him. “I'm always careful.” She dug into her pouch and removed a pain-relieving poultice of valerian root, skullcap, nettle, and cloves. As she stirred the mixture with a knotty stick, combining the herbs to activate their healing properties before beginning the treatment,

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she smiled brightly. “I’ll have you fixed up in no time, Mr. Silivasi.”

Keitaro frowned. “Mr. Silivasi? You really are in a formal mood today.”

She chuckled softly. “No, I just need to get in and out quickly.” Her eyes darted back and forth around the dimly lit, circular space, and she shivered. “I’m well aware of the increased danger of being here tonight.”

Keitaro rolled back over. He settled onto his back once more and tried to stifle a moan, unsuccessfully. “Then you should also know that it’s much too risky. Not worth the chance. I’m serious, Rielle.” His already gravelly voice deepened with concern. “You can’t keep coming back here, not just for me, especially not now, considering what’s about to happen to Queen Cassandra.”

Arielle removed a damp white cloth, pretreated with herbal antiseptic from her medicine bag, and began gently dabbing Keitaro’s wounds, cleaning them carefully, one at a time, preparing them for the ointment. When he grimaced beneath her touch, she frowned in apology. “I’m sorry...*I am*...this won’t take long.” She continued to dab at the wounds, taking extra care not to further irritate his already inflamed skin. “And yes,” she added, “I have heard about Cassandra, the fact that she cheated on the king and is soon to be executed for adultery. I can’t say I feel sorry for her, the evil witch.”

Keitaro inclined his head in a serious nod. “Nor can I, but that doesn’t mean I’m anxious to witness the foul event, to see what manner of torture Thane has cooked up for bride number nine.”

Arielle cringed. Every one of Thane’s young brides eventually met with a gruesome fate: If he didn’t accidentally kill them in a murderous rage, he grew tired of them and passed them on to his generals, who already had wives—*correction*, slaves—of their own. And if they managed to escape that horrific fate, he usually had them executed for one flimsy excuse or another. The bottom line was plain: Thane was utterly

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heartless, needlessly violent, and insanely evil. And as far as the lycan was concerned, women were nothing more than property to be used, abused, and discarded at will. “Hopefully, he will do it cleanly, *swiftly*, this time. Show some mercy for once.”

Keitaro chuckled low in his throat, and the humorous sound was distinctly predatory and raw. “Mercy? From Thane?” He sank further back into the roughened deerskin. “Then you really haven’t heard the latest news.”

Arielle raised her eyebrows in question. She tucked the white cloth back into her bag, scooped a large gob of ointment onto the pads of her index and middle fingers, and began to smooth the healing liniment on Keitaro’s abraded skin. “What news?”

“Thane has decided to execute Cassandra *in the arena* on Sunday.”

Arielle momentarily stopped dressing his wounds and clenched her eyes shut. “In the auditorium?” She blew out an anxious breath. “So he intends to make sport of it for all the other slaves and lycans to see?”

Keitaro nodded. “Yes.”

“And that means—”

“That he will want to use me as the opening act, part of the day’s entertainment.”

Arielle bristled inside and out. She ground her teeth together and continued applying the ointment. Why couldn’t Thane just leave Keitaro alone, just once? By all that was holy, he had played with the male like a prized toy for nearly four hundred years, or at least that’s how legend had it. One would think the king would tire of him eventually, perhaps find a new distraction in one of his human servants, one of the captured rebels, or even an insubordinate lycan. “One of these days, someone is going to kill that evil bastard, and I hope I’m there with a front row seat when it happens.”

Keitaro chuckled despite his pain. “Not as badly as I’d like to be the one to do it.” She pressed too hard on a wound, and he involuntarily jerked his leg in pain.

“Sorry,” she whispered, making a concerted effort to be

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more gentle.

Keitaro ignored the slip. “If only I could find a way to get to him.” He nodded at the intravenous bag of poisonous fluid, flowing steadily into his veins even as they spoke, and heaved a sigh. “If only I could break free of this poison...for just one night.” His eyes flashed a dangerous crimson red, and Arielle regarded him cautiously. Despite his station and his condition, Keitaro Silivasi was a dangerous predator and an unparalleled warrior; if the male were to ever be given a clean shot at Tyrus Thane, well, it would be hell’s fire and the devil’s vengeance unleashed in one fell swoop. She shuddered at the thought. She stared at the intravenous bag hanging above them, attached securely to a thick lodge pole, and wished like hell she could just disconnect it for him. But it was far too risky. The small monitor was connected to a trigger device of some sort, a detonator. One false move, and everyone would go up in smoke. Besides, the lycans didn’t just booby-trap their apparatus, they also relied heavily on curses and wards to protect their maniacal contraptions—it wasn’t like she could just disable the device or disarm the explosive. It took magic to disarm magic, and Arielle was only human. No one in the Rebel Camp had the skill to unravel a lycanthropic ward. Not to mention, the lycans had one other distinct and profound advantage over the humans born in Mhier: Because they could travel in and out of other dimensions, they had access to modern devices and technologies that the Mhieridians could not even hope to understand or manipulate, like the intravenous apparatus and whatever booby-trap accompanied it. “I’m sorry, Keitaro,” she whispered sadly. “I wish I could do more for you.”

Keitaro shook his head sympathetically. Even in his suffering, he sought to reassure Arielle, and didn’t that just make him one of the most endearing beings she had ever known. “You didn’t create this hell,” he said. “It isn’t your responsibility to fix it.”

Arielle chewed on her bottom lip, wishing she had something useful to say, something truly encouraging, not just

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lip service. After several pregnant moments had passed, she finally returned to the previous subject. “So, if Thane is planning to make a public sport of his latest wife—to execute her at high-noon, so to speak—and if he’s planning to use you as the opening act for his sadistic games, then who, or what, will you be fighting this time?”

Keitaro seemed to actually perk up, if that was even possible. His tortured yet handsome face grew rigid with anticipation. “Cain Armentieres.”

Arielle’s eyes opened wide in surprise. “*Cain?* Thane’s top alpha general? His closest ally?”

Keitaro nodded. “You really don’t know what happened, do you?”

Arielle shook her head. “Rumor has it that wife number nine, Cassandra Villanosa, was caught cheating on the king, as if that crazy werewolf needs an incentive to go off the deep end *again*. They say Thane walked in on her in the throne-room, of all places, and caught her with—” Her mouth dropped open as she put two and two together. “*Cain* was her lover?”

“None other,” Keitaro agreed, and then he frowned. “Although I think *lover* might be too civilized a word.” He winced as she applied another dollop of ointment to his skin and began to rub it into a welt, this time, on his battered chest.

“I can’t believe that the king’s best friend, his right-hand Alpha, would do something so stupid...so dangerous.”

Keitaro actually smiled then, his dark, intelligent eyes alighting with titillation. “At least there is justice now and then.”

“So that’s why you’re going to be paired in battle with Cain—Thane is planning to use you to punish him.”

“To kill him,” Keitaro supplied, “because there’s probably no one else in Mhier, outside of Thane himself, who can do it.”

“And Thane’s too proud—and self-important—to get his hands dirty,” she said.

Despite himself, Keitaro snarled.

“Then you think Thane should do it himself?” Arielle asked, hardly believing her ears. “Kill a female, no matter who she is?”

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The thought made her queasy inside: Keitaro was far too noble, far too reasoned, to casually sanction a male killing a female, not unless the circumstances were truly dire.

“That’s not what I’m saying,” Keitaro said. “But a real male attends to his own house. He handles his own business.”

Arielle shivered, and then she began to think about the upcoming battle, to picture Keitaro, an ancient vampire, legendary for his fighting skills, going up against an ancient lycan, legendary for his brutality and lack of fair play. “This isn’t a sure win for you, is it?” The moment the words left her mouth, she regretted them: Keitaro Silivasi was a legend for a reason, a rare, calculated killer, captured from the house of Jadon and forced to work as a slave in the salt mines for two hundred years, before Thane realized he was a prized, undefeatable combatant. He was one of the best warriors the lycans had ever seen: brutal, exacting, and lethal in his swift execution. He didn’t need a human female questioning his prowess, casting doubt on the outcome of the upcoming battle. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I didn’t mean—”

“That I could die in this battle?” His vivid eyes softened. “It is only truth, Rielle. Cain is one of the oldest werewolves in Mhier, and he’s a vicious son of a bitch with nothing left to lose.”

“No,” Arielle insisted, refusing to even consider Keitaro’s death as a potential outcome. “He isn’t your equal—*no one is*—I just meant that you are always in danger when you step into the arena. That’s all.”

Her hand slipped quietly into his, and he squeezed it softly before reluctantly letting go. “It’s okay, Rielle.” He shut his eyes and took several deep breaths as the healing ointment began to work on his wounds, to gently ease the pain. “I know what you meant, and honestly? I have never been more eager to regain my strength, to drink the rancid blood the king will give me right before the battle, no matter how foul and abhorrent, in order to dispatch my opponent.” He tightened his chained hands into fists instinctively. “I have been waiting 480 years to murder Cain

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Armentieres. It will be a sweet victory, one I will not relinquish to fear of death. Not when it will free us both.”

Before Arielle could respond, a set of heavy footsteps approached outside the door, rustling a pile of dry leaves on the ground. Arielle stuffed all of her healing supplies beneath Keitaro’s blanket, even as the vampire drew to immediate attention.

“Take my hand again, *now*. And. Don’t. Even. Breathe,” he commanded.

The moment Keitaro snatched Arielle’s hand, she felt a visceral infusion of power transfer from his body into hers; and then just like that, she was rendered invisible by the powerful being beside her—and just how had he drawn upon such power in his weakened, compromised state, anyhow? With all the diamond that was flowing through his veins, he should have been incapable of hearing the lycan’s approach, let alone doing something about it. Rielle wept inside. She knew the cost of performing such a feat would cost Keitaro dearly: physically, mentally, and energetically. His pain would return with a vengeance.

Xavier stuck his head inside the tent and scowled angrily. “Who are you speaking with, vampire?”

Keitaro snarled, his face a virulent mask of hatred. “The ghostly apparition of the jackal who birthed you, lycan.” His fangs elongated in his mouth. “Unchain me, and let’s talk it over.”

Xavier raised a clenched fist and held it in the air, obviously wishing he could pummel Keitaro’s face in. “Haven’t you had enough pain for one day, slave?”

Despite his weakened state, Keitaro Silivasi hissed, his midnight eyes heating in his skull until they shone bloodred. “You’ve been torturing me for centuries, you useless bastard. I don’t even notice it anymore.”

Xavier laughed then, the sound both guttural and harsh. “You’re lying, vampire.”

“And you’re inferior, lycan. So now, we both know where

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we stand.”

“One of these days,” Xavier grit out between clenched teeth.

“Yeah, whatever,” Keitaro snarled. “Either do something about it or get out.”

Xavier spat on Keitaro’s chest and stormed out in a fury; no doubt, he was struggling to restrain himself from acting on his threats. When he was finally gone, Keitaro released Arielle’s hand and glared at the deposit of spittle running down his chest. “Wipe that shit off,” he growled.

Arielle dug out her white cloth and immediately wiped the saliva away, crumpling the dirty rag in her hand. “That wasn’t very smart, Keitaro. You have to stop—”

Keitaro leveled a cautionary glare at her, cutting her off mid-sentence. Although Arielle knew it was not meant to be threatening—the vampire had meant it as a gentle warning—it put chills down her spine just the same: She should have known better by now, to challenge Keitaro’s pride or his anger when they were all the vampire had left. Keitaro Silivasi was not afraid of death, and he sure as hell was not afraid of Xavier Matista.

Arielle sighed, feeling all at once remorseful and out of place. If Keitaro Silivasi could have taken his own life before then, he would have. As it stood, his existence was a long, endless repetition of suffering and slavery, a hell on Mhier, without his wife, without his beloved sons, without any hope for an end...without a reprieve. He wanted to provoke one or the other: a chance to exact vengeance or a chance to die as he wished.

If it hadn’t been for Arielle’s own captivity—she had only escaped Thane’s clutches ten years prior, just before her eighteenth birthday—she would have never met Keitaro Silivasi, and the vampire would have been virtually alone. No, Keitaro Silivasi survived because King Tyrus Thane wanted him to survive, and it was a cruel, prolonged torment for the Ancient Master Warrior at best, a twisted joke at the least. But Keitaro would never back down to a werewolf, and Arielle knew that, if one day, Keitaro provoked one of the vulgar beasts into killing

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him, it would only be another victory. Still, she couldn't bear to see him take such chances. Keitaro was like the father she had never known. The rebel she had never met.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Keitaro said, interrupting her inner monologue. Before she could reply, he grasped her hand. "Promise me, you won't come back, Arielle; I mean it."

Arielle recoiled at his words. Not only had he snatched her hand a bit too brusquely, but he had called her Arielle, as opposed to the shortened version of Rielle, and that meant the vampire was deathly serious. "I won't promise that. I can't just leave you to the wolves." She winked at him, hoping to underscore the twisted humor in her words. "I will not, Keitaro."

Keitaro's jaw stiffened. "Look at me, Rielle, and listen to what I'm telling you."

Arielle met his gaze reluctantly.

"If the generals had not gotten drunk that night, if the sentry posted outside your hut had not passed out..." His voice trailed off, and he shook his head to dismiss the memory. "If Thane had gotten his way, if you hadn't escaped ten years ago, when you were still seventeen years old, you would have been wife number seven, not Leah. And after her death, he would have chosen you over Paulina as wife number eight. After her, you would have been victim number nine, not Cassandra. The king has always wanted you, and you, slipping through his fingers, humiliated him. Made a mockery of his manhood...and his throne. This is not a game, sweet girl. We both know that all nine of his previous wives have been executed or murdered at his hands: If he doesn't beat them to death, he eventually tires of them and has them killed." He glanced at her long and hard before softening his voice. "Even with your rare, incomparable beauty, you wouldn't stand a chance, long term. Every time Thane loses a wife, he sends his guard to search for *you*...again. This time will be no different. You need to go into hiding for as long as you can, and you need stay there until he has found another wife. I am not free, Rielle. I cannot protect you. He has

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never forgotten you. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Arielle nodded, understanding fully just what was at stake, what kind of risk she took every time she entered the encampment to see to Keitaro's needs, to try and ease his endless suffering. "I do understand, and I will go into hiding again. But I can't leave you at his mercy, not indefinitely. I just can't, Keitaro. It's hard to explain. I just...*can't*."

"By all the celestial gods, you are a pure soul, Rielle, and I love you like a daughter. Please, I have already lost my wife and my sons. Do not force me to lose you, too."

Arielle's eyes filled with tears, but she held back the ensuing river. "You are unspeakably dear to me, Keitaro."

"Then promise me you will not come back."

Arielle sat back on her heels and slowly shook her head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Silivasi. I just can't make that promise." She pressed her forefinger gently to his mouth to silence any protest. "Sleep well. Regain your strength for Sunday. I will light a prayer-fire for you in the Rebel Camp."

Keitaro shook his head sadly, clearly wishing he could change her mind. "Go, now. I wish I could change your mind, but I know that you are as stubborn as an ox. Just be careful."

"I will," she promised.

"You better be," he warned.

She smiled then and pressed a gentle kiss on his forehead. "Father of my heart," she whispered.

"Daughter of mine," he replied. "Be well, Arielle."

She averted her eyes and bowed her head, ever so slightly, in the way he had taught her, in the way of the Vampyr. "Be well, Keitaro."



Keitaro Silivasi sank deeper into the damnable blanket, the threadbare deerskin chafing his back, and tried to relax as the healing ointments began to work their magic on his raw, inflamed skin. He watched the bearskin flap over the doorway

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rustle, sway, and then settle into its normal position, as darkness, once again, enveloped the tiny hut. And then he closed his eyes.

Arielle Nightsong was truly the daughter of his heart, the one bright light he had in an otherwise miserable, endless existence. And her charitable visits, which she took at great risk to her health and her future—Thane would give *anything* to make her wife number ten—were more deeply appreciated than she could ever know. What point would there have been in telling her the upcoming games were rigged? That Thane would stack the approaching match heavily in Cain's favor, even though the arrogant king had every intention of seeing to it that Cain never made it out alive. As it stood, Cain would be equipped with the weapon of his choice, not to mention a lethal entourage of three vicious rhino-beasts, all trained from birth to kill on command, while Keitaro would be forced to fight with his bare hands, still in a weakened state. There had been no point in telling Arielle that the chances of him making it out of the match alive were slim to none. No, Keitaro had done the right thing. She would find out soon enough.

He sighed and struggled to find a more comfortable position, such as it were.

It didn't matter.

It was time.

Long past time, really, to finally exit this gods-forsaken realm and reunite with his wife Serena in the afterlife. A bare hint of a smile crossed his chapped lips as he, once and for all, accepted his fate.

At least he would have the ultimate satisfaction of taking Cain Armentieres out with him, murdering the vile alpha general of the Northern Clan of the Lycanthrope—the same one who had murdered his wife Serena so many centuries ago in Dark Moon Vale—on his way to the afterlife.

Perhaps this was why the gods had allowed him to live in such a barren purgatory for so long.

Of course...

“Sa razbun moartea nevestei mele, as mai suferii inca o mie

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de ani.” The words rolled off his tongue in his native Romanian language:

To avenge my wife in death, I would suffer a thousand years more.

three

Dark Moon Vale

Kagen Silivasi could hardly believe it: Nachari had completed the spell.

Using the materials Kagen had brought back from the four outermost directions of Dark Moon Vale, Nachari had managed to capture their essence, reconstruct their energy into an interwoven pattern that contained a portal at the center, and manufacture a spiritual doorway into another realm. There was nothing left to do but activate it in the valley, once they were ready to enter Mhier.

Well, that, and to go over their plans *and the map* one last time.

Unwilling to waste another second, Kagen and Nachari had called Saber Alexiars, asking him to bring his latest version of the map to the rooftop. To their surprise, the male had obliged them at once.

Nathaniel had returned to his sprawling cliff-side estate, right after dropping off the morbid trophy he had saved from Tristan's kill—he had wanted to spend his last night home with Jocelyn and Storm. And Marquis was still at his traditional three-story farmhouse, hunkered down with Ciopori, which was fine. The princess wanted to take full advantage of Marquis's last night in the vale, spending every waking moment with her mate, before the Silivasi clan ventured into the great unknown, perhaps never to return again.

Besides, Marquis really needed to center, to get his head on straight.

He was like a lit fuse ready to go off at any moment. He needed this time with Ciopori even more than she needed it with him. And, in truth, the impromptu meeting with Saber was only

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cursory—they had all gone over the map of Mhier at least twelve times already—they just wanted to *be sure*...

Of what?

Kagen couldn't really say.

Now, as he aimed a Maglite flashlight at the drawing, shining the luminescent beam on a ternary group of tributaries that flowed just southeast of a steep, perilous mountain range, he could feel his temperature rising, his stomach tying up in knots.

It wasn't as if it hadn't all been real before...

It was all *too* real, to coin a phrase, but somehow, now that Nachari had made it not only real but *possible*, it was also all too much. Too overwhelming.

Too close to home.

Kagen stared at the heavy black flashlight resting squarely in his palm—and didn't that just bring it all home?—it wasn't as if a vampire needed a flashlight to see in the dark. Heck, it wasn't as if Nachari's rooftop wasn't already lit up like a freakin' evergreen on Christmas. It was just that they wanted this to turn out right *so badly*.

They needed Keitaro to be alive.

Everything, *absolutely everything*, was riding on the outcome of this voyage, and Kagen didn't know how to control the variables: how to be any more prepared, any more deliberate, or any more careful than he was.

How to be any more strategic.

Like Marquis, he was also wound too tight for comfort, ready to splinter into pieces at the slightest provocation. It was almost as if something buried deep inside of him was stirring, a long-forgotten ember still glowing in the fires of his soul, and the slightest amount of kindling could set the coals ablaze.

Needing to get a grip on his emotions, to wrap his mind around concrete details instead of obscure possibilities, Kagen turned to regard Saber and Nachari. They were sitting side-by-side in front of Nachari's adjustable drafting table, which was a remarkable occurrence in and of itself, considering that just under three months ago, the two had been bitter enemies; and

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they were tracing the various diagrams on the page with their fingers, pointing, fine-tuning, and adding important notations to the page. Surely, the fact that they could work together like this had to be a good omen, a sign of even better things to come.

Kagen shook his head, once again trying to dismiss the incessant rambling in his mind. He stepped up to the drawing, maneuvered his body just slightly to the side of the table—he did not want to disturb Saber and Nachari—and pointed at the upper right quadrant, just below an area marked *The Arena*, just to the right of a large, fenced-in parcel of land, denoted *The Royal District*. “The slave quarters, the huts, how many are there? And how many lycans act as guards on a typical night?” he asked.

Saber shrugged his broad shoulders, his characteristic scowl tugging the right corner of his top lip upward. “I don’t know. Salvatore drew seven in his original plat, but there could be more...maybe less.”

Kagen frowned. He pointed to a vast area of high-peaked mountains that divided the realm in half, north from south, giving way to two distinct valleys: On the northern side, the *Mystic Mountain Valley* housed the slave quarters, the place they expected to find Keitaro, and on the southern end, the valley became a rocky ravine, the *Mystic Mountain Gorge*, nestled beyond both banks of an enormous, turbulent tributary called the *Lykos River*. “The mountains are treacherous?” he asked, not really expecting an answer. “Subzero temperatures and steep, unexpected cliffs—are there strange animals, prehistoric beasts, that dwell here as well?”

Saber shook his head, studying the region more closely. “Mmm...don’t know that, either.”

Kagen shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He pointed to another quadrant, located just left of center on the map. “And this, the *Wolverine Woods*; are they as dense as they appear?”

Saber shrugged.

“They clearly separate two very large districts, the dwellings of the western pack, about ten miles above, and the domain of

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the southern pack, about fifteen miles below. What are these communes like? Are they townships, cities, or fortresses? Do they have modern amenities, or will we be walking into some medieval time warp?”

“Sorry,” Saber said evenly.

Kagen sighed in frustration. “And the king of the realm—you said his name was Tyrus Thane—is he still living?”

Saber glanced at Kagen through the corner of his eye. Instead of speaking, he simply held up his hands, the gesture saying it all for him: *I honestly don't know*.

Kagen felt his alter ego stir, the character his brothers jokingly called Mr. Hyde, the counterpart to his rational Dr. Jekyll, and he wondered where all this intensity was coming from. Now was not the time to lose his cool. He pinched his nose at the bridge, trying to maintain his composure, and then he pointed once again at the map, his finger tracing the outline of the lower *Lykos River*, where it curved at the base of the *Mystic Mountains*, began to head east, and provided a natural barrier to the lower gorge and the *Skeleton Swamps*, just beyond a rocky crevice. “And the animals, the prehistoric beasts that inhabit the realm; you say we’ll find the majority of them here? Are any of them *supernatural*? Like lycans or vampires, something we should really be concerned about...prepared for?”

Saber didn’t respond this time. He simply pursed his lips together and looked off into the distance.

“Well?” Kagen persisted.

Saber met his eyes once more and frowned. “*Kagen...*”

“*You don't know.*”

Saber raised his brows and shook his head. His eyes heated with insolence, but to his credit, he didn’t say anything rude or defensive. He didn’t say anything at all.

And this just made Kagen angrier. “Well, what the hell *do* you know, *Dark One*?”

Nachari leveled a heated glare at his brother, his chastening green eyes reflecting his disapproval. “No need to go there, Kagen. He’s telling us everything he knows.”

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Saber rolled his shoulders and popped his neck to release some tension. “Nah, it’s cool. I’ve been called worse.”

“I bet you have,” Kagen snarled beneath his breath.

Saber clenched and released his fist, inadvertently snapping the pencil he was holding in two. He flicked it off the easel and gently picked up another one from the tabletop container, his shadowy eyes remaining fixed on the drawing. “Watch yourself, healer.” It was an icy warning: low, calculated, and laced with lethal intention.

Nachari gave Saber a sideways glance, beseeching him with his eyes. “Just leave him be. He’ll work it out soon enough. It’s not about you.” He turned his attention to Kagen. “You need to check your beast, Dr. J—he’s riding dangerously close to the surface.” His voice neither rose nor fell.

Saber licked his lips, and Kagen took a deep breath.

Work it out, indeed.

He needed to stay calm, focused.

After all, none of this was Saber’s fault. Saber hadn’t done anything to warrant this abuse, yet the knowledge, the very idea that the male had carried this information around for however many hundreds of years before sharing it with their family was sticking in Kagen’s craw like a burr beneath a saddle: irritating, stabbing, and constantly provoking. Just the same, Saber’s allegiance had been to the house of Jaegar—not the house of Jadon—there was no reason for the male to have approached the Silivasis, his sworn enemy, and divulged such a vital secret. At least not before he found out that he was truly one of them.

Not before his relationship with Vanya had changed him, at least to some degree.

Besides, Saber hadn’t invaded the valley 480 years ago, killed Kagen’s mother, or enslaved his father. Saber had not taken Keitaro to Mhier and done *gods-know-what* to him out of spite, cruelty, and vengeance. And none of that mattered anyway.

That was then.

This was now.

“Look,” Kagen finally said, his voice at least steady, if not

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altogether friendly, “I know you’re telling us everything you can. *I do.*” He turned to regard Nachari then, and his tone softened a bit more. “It’s just...*damn.* There’s so much we don’t know. Will it be day or night when we emerge? Will we retain all of our powers? Can we still function as we do in this dimension? Can we communicate telepathically with each other in Mhier *or* with Napoleon and our warriors back here in Dark Moon Vale? How many lycans are we potentially facing—a few, a dozen, *a thousand?* Can we get out the same way we get in?” His voice began to rise with concern. “What are the odds that Keitaro is even—”

“Kagen!” Nachari interrupted. “Saber doesn’t know. *I* don’t know. None of us know *anything* yet.”

Just then, Nathaniel Silivasi shimmered into view on the rooftop terrace, materializing just behind his twin. More than likely, he had come in response to Kagen’s increasingly erratic emotions. He placed a steadying hand on his twin’s shoulder and inclined his head gracefully. “Brother.”

The greeting was met with respect. “Nathaniel.”

Nathaniel’s touch was as light as a feather, nothing intimidating or intrusive, just a symbolic gesture of solidarity, as if he was trying to say, *I’m here.*

Kagen glanced at Nathaniel’s hand and willed his muscles to relax. “I’m fine,” he whispered, hoping to reassure the vampire.

Are you? Nathaniel asked on a private telepathic bandwidth. He turned his attention to Nachari and Saber and stoically regarded them both: “Brother...soldier.” He tightened the pressure of his hand on Kagen’s shoulder. “Is all going well this night?”

Nachari gave Nathaniel a knowing glance. “As well as can be expected, under the circumstances.”

Saber smirked. “Just peachy.”

Kagen clenched his eyes shut and tried to devise an internal plan to ratchet things down a notch. He opened his eyes, angled his body ever so slightly toward Saber, and bowed his head, infinitesimally. “Apologies.” He tried to stop the next words

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from rolling off his tongue, but they spewed out anyway. “*Son of Jaegar.*”

Hell—now that was uncalled for, he thought. *Not to mention untrue.*

Saber chuckled in response to the glib apology, cloaked in a fresh, new jab, and slowly ran his tongue over his teeth, over his fangs. “Forget it. You’re obviously on edge.”

“Forgot,” Kagen clipped, clearly taking offense at the appraisal as he shrugged his shoulder abruptly to dislodge Nathaniel’s hand.

Nathaniel glided forward in an instant, placing his large muscular frame between Kagen’s chest and Saber’s back, before the newest member of the house of Jadon could get up and offer Kagen exactly what he was itching for: a fight. He eyed Saber intently and spoke as plainly as he could. “He’s trying to provoke you, Saber. Why? I don’t know. Don’t let him.” He spun around to face Kagen then and gestured toward the far end of the terrace. “Take a walk, healer.”

Kagen linked his hands behind his back, cracked his knuckles, one at a time, and took several paces back to gain some space. There was a reason why he lived in borderline isolation at the end of a winding dirt road, on the other side of a stony bridge that crossed a rushing stream; and it wasn’t so he could socialize on a daily basis. “*Yeab*, fine.” He strolled away, brooding, taking several measured strides in the opposite direction of the other males, until he stood at the far end of the terrace, at the edge of the iron railing, alone.

Stopping to stare at the ground, he couldn’t help but notice a particularly ugly pine cone on the terrace floor. It had fallen from the low branch of an overhanging Ponderosa, one that had grown right out of the rocky face of the canyon wall, and the oblong thing was half brown and half black, oddly rotting from the inside out. Somehow, Kagen found the presence of the hideous pine cone disturbingly ironic, and then he booted the misshapen thing over the side of the ledge, watching as it soared like a rocket, traveling so fast and so far that it was impossible to

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tell where it landed.

And just like that, the fuse was extinguished.

The growing rage...was gone.

Strolling back to join the others, he sighed. "Saber..."

"Yeah?"

"I..."

The hot-blooded male held his gaze, waiting.

"I don't know what my problem is, okay? But you're not it."

It was as close to an *authentic* apology as Kagen was going to come.

Saber shrugged it off. "Been there a time or two, myself."

Kagen smirked. "Yeah, I imagine so." He took several deep breaths in a row before continuing to speak. "There is something *else*, a little less petty, that I wanted to talk to you about." He gestured toward Nachari and Nathaniel with his open hand. "That *we* wanted to talk to you about."

"And that is?" Saber asked.

Kagen sighed. "It's about your offer to come with us to Mhier, to help us navigate the territory...utilize the map." He ran his fingers through his hair, feeling suddenly weary. "It's just...we all talked it over, and we're not prepared to let you do that. You're not coming with us on this one."

Saber didn't react. He didn't snarl or flinch or even cut his eyes. He simply chuckled in three clipped bursts and then grinned, the derisive sound a paradoxical mixture of acceptance and contempt. "Ah'ight."

"Ah'ight?" Nachari echoed, looking at the male who sat beside him through the corner of his eye. "That's it?"

"What the hell do you expect me to say?" Saber replied. "That's jacked up? That's typical? *Whatever*. You don't want me with you—it's all good."

Kagen frowned, feeling unexpectedly burdened. "No, soldier"—the term was at least better than *Dark One*—"it's not *all good*. It's all necessary."

"Necessary for whom?" Saber asked.

"For everyone involved," Kagen said. He set his jaw and met

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Saber's steely gaze head-on.

"Look," Nachari intervened, setting down his pen on the easel and swiveling in his chair to face Saber directly. "This isn't some sort of prejudice or malice. This isn't about the past or any unresolved issues between you and us."

Saber raised his brows. "So you're saying that all those *issues*—what I did to your women, what I put Vanya through—they've all been resolved?" He eyed Nachari, Kagen, and Nathaniel in turn, his wary eyes awaiting a reply.

Nathaniel whistled low beneath his breath. "You offered your blood to settle the score. Kristina drew it, Deanna refused it, and Vanya forgave you. On some level, Jocelyn owes you her life; so yes, I am willing to call the scales balanced, at least as far as my household is concerned."

Saber nodded, accepting Nathaniel's words. "And you, healer?" He stared pointedly at Kagen. "You didn't try to pick a fight with your brothers this night—you tried to pick one with me. Can you honestly stand there and tell me you aren't still harboring a grudge?"

Kagen considered Saber's words carefully. "I've picked more fights over the centuries with my brothers than I can count, so don't flatter yourself, Saber." He smiled faintly. "Honestly, I haven't even had time to think about it since you told us about Keitaro: It's been the furthest thing from my mind, Dark—" He caught himself before he said *Dark One* again. "*Dragon*," he offered, making polite reference to Vanya's pet name for the hot-tempered male.

Nachari chuckled beneath his breath, partly because—well, he was *Nachari*—and partly because he was trying to ease the tension. "I like that better anyhow. It suits you." He rolled the word off his tongue in a deliberate Romanian accent: "*Dragon...*"

Saber rolled his eyes, but there was nothing playful in the gesture. "All right; that's fair." He angled his head to acknowledge Nachari directly. "Nicknames aside, *wizard*, you still haven't answered my question: Have you also resolved what happened...between me and your *destiny*?"

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Nachari's jaw tightened, and his expression grew all at once stern. "What happened *between* you and Deanna?" he echoed, his voice dropping to a cautionary tone. "What you *did* to Deanna," he clarified.

"What *I did* to your *destiny*?" Saber repeated.

Nachari shrugged, and the gesture was guilelessly honest. "Maybe—maybe not—point is: You're one of us, Saber. I don't know how many ways we can tell you that, *show you that*. And as far as we're all concerned, you're here to stay." He stared at the vampire with penetrating eyes, and then he gestured with his head, indicating the familiar, concealed pouch in Saber's front right pocket. "I will say this: You could help things along quite a bit by putting that damn Crest Ring on your finger—oh, maybe before the next millennium." He held up both hands for emphasis. "Just sayin'."

Saber tapped his hip pocket and nodded. "I'm working on it."

"And *we're* working on it," Nathaniel said candidly.

"Point is..." Nachari picked up where he had left off. "None of that has anything to do with what we discussed about going into Mhier, our decision to do it alone."

"Alone?" Saber said. "Just the Silivasis *and* Ramsey Olaru." It was clearly a rhetorical question.

Kagen frowned. "Look, Saber; the fact that you even offered to take such an enormous risk—just to help us find our *father*?" His voice faltered on the last word, but he pushed through it. "We all know what that means to a male like you."

"A *proud* male," Nachari clarified. "Independent."

"Obstinate," Nathaniel said, apparently trying to keep it real.

Saber snarled at the Ancient Master Warrior, but his eyes were smiling this time.

Nathaniel took a step back, chuckling.

"We know what that took," Kagen repeated. "It's not a small thing. But us, accepting your offer, that's not a small thing, either."

"You have a two-and-a-half-month-old son," Nachari said.

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“And you’re mated to an original princess, one who has been through more than enough in the past year,” Kagen added.

“We can’t risk it,” Nathaniel chimed in.

“No way, no how,” Kagen said. “There’s a good chance, a *very* good chance, that none of us are going to come out of this alive, that none of us are coming back. Keitaro is our father. We owe him *everything*. But you? You owe your *destiny* and that child. You owe Lorna and Rafael, at least a chance to get to know you. The stakes are too high. We can’t gamble with the lives of so many who have already suffered so much.”

Saber nodded slowly, carefully considering Kagen’s words. “And Ramsey?” He obviously had to ask. “How is that different?”

“Ramsey doesn’t have a *destiny* or a son,” Kagen said bluntly. “If you were unencumbered, if things were different—well, things might be different.”

“Even Braden is staying home on this one,” Nachari said. “It is what it is.”

Before Saber could reply, Braden Bratianu sauntered up to the circle of vampires. Since he lived at the brownstone with Nachari, Deanna, and Sebastian, it wasn’t unusual for the curious youngster to try and eavesdrop on adult conversations, and he had obviously overheard the tail end of this one. He threw his hands up in the air, huffed with indignation, and stomped his foot on the deck, looking for all intents and purposes like a spoiled brat, a recalcitrant boy in a man’s body. “Dang, Nachari!” He glared at the wizard in defiance. “So when were you going to tell me?”

Nachari rubbed his brow with his thumb and forefinger, belying his frustration. “Braden...”

“No...*no!* That is *so* messed up!”

Nachari shook his head then. “We so don’t have time for this, Braden,” he muttered beneath his breath. Turning to face the youngster head-on, he lowered his voice and spoke in a measured, paternal tone: “I’m going to make this real short and simple: Since your parents placed you in my care, you have been

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kidnapped by lycans and nailed to a cross, where you ended up getting your *neck broken*, I might add. You erased the memory of a twelve-year-old girl and got so sick when you merged with Napoleon, after the Dark Lord Ademordna tried to possess him, that you threw up your guts and broke several of your ribs. Not to mention, you recently got into a *confrontation* with Ramsey Olaru over Kristina.” He paused to amend his last comment. “Okay, well, it wasn’t much of a confrontation, really. More like—”

“More like some half-crazed, rock-throwing, chest-thumping display of insanity,” Nathaniel added, smiling. He glanced at Braden and grimaced. “Yeah, Ramsey described it to me. You’re lucky he didn’t snap your little confrontational neck.” He shrugged. “Just making an observation.”

Nachari cut his eyes at Nathaniel and quickly rushed his next words before Braden could take offense, which was the last thing they needed. “Point is: You weren’t placed in my care so I could use you as I see fit, whenever the need arises. I’m supposed to be your teacher, your mentor, your protector. And you are *not* going into the completely unknown world of the lycans with us. You’re just *not*.”

Braden slowly sucked his teeth, smacked his lips, and crossed his arms over his chest, taking a judicious step back. “Ah, okay. So it’s like that, then?”

Nachari narrowed his gaze, about to lose his patience. “Yes, Braden. It’s *exactly* like that.”

“Fine,” Braden snapped. “I’ll just go find my woman, then—leave you all to it.” He threw up his hands in frustration and stomped away.

“His woman?” Nathaniel asked, his bottomless black eyes narrowing in question.

Nachari shook his head and sighed in exasperation. “Kristina.”

“Oh,” Nathaniel said, apparently hesitant to pry any further. “Does Kristina know this?”

“He never lets her forget,” Nachari said, his voice thick with

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exhaustion.

Kagen smiled, thinking about Braden's latest antics: Ever since Napoleon had shared Nachari's secret with the flighty youngster, the secret the demoness Noiro had told him during his captivity in the Abyss—the fact that he was not beholden to the Curse; he would never have a Blood Moon; and he could, in fact, sire female children one day and was, consequently, promised to Kristina—Braden had become like a blowfish, swollen with self-importance and masculine pride. “If she doesn't kill him before he turns twenty-one,” Kagen told his twin, “I don't think Napoleon is going to leave her a choice.”

Nachari shrugged. “Female children...pretty valuable.”

Nathaniel nodded in assent. “Indeed.”

And then they all turned back to regard Saber. “Sorry about the interruption,” Kagen said. “At this point, I don't know what else to add to what we've told you, only to say *thank you* for offering.” He made a profound gesture of respect then, by holding out his hand in an offer of friendship. He only half expected Saber to take it.

Saber stood, stared at the extended palm, and took a reflexive step back, moving away from the healer. “Despite what you might think, I can reason objectively...*sometimes*.” His mouth turned up in that wicked, scowl-laced grin so characteristic of the male. “And I understand your reasoning. It's cool. Honestly. No need to get too formal.”

Nachari pushed back his chair and stood up brusquely. He took one determined stride in Saber's direction and, without hesitating, punched him right in the bicep. His eyes flashed red, and his fangs extended of their own accord. “Damn, Dragon,” he snarled, inclining his head at Kagen's outstretched hand. “Take his hand already. *Shit*. See, that's why you're still having trouble fitting in.”

“Damn,” Saber snarled, “and I thought it was because my mom only packs bologna sandwiches in my lunch.”

Nathaniel burst into laughter, clearly amused by the all-too-human reference.

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Saber threw up both hands and laughed, surprising the heck out of all of them. “I was going to, wizard,” he said. Stepping confidently forward, he clasped Kagen’s forearm instead, and both of their palms instantly linked around each other’s wrists before sliding forward into a firm, finger-clasping grasp. “Be careful,” he said next, his tone betraying the seriousness behind his otherwise playful demeanor. “The beta lycans are no match for our kind, but the Alphas are deadly. And Mhier is their world.”

Kagen nodded solemnly. “We understand our enemy, and we have a score of our own to settle.” He relaxed a little then. “Just take care of Vanya and Lucien.”

“Always,” Saber replied, finally releasing Kagen’s grip. He turned to regard Nachari. “When are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow morning,” the wizard answered, “around six AM.”

Saber’s posture straightened reflexively. “Well, may the dark lords be with—” His eyes grew wide as he caught the inexcusable slip and immediately ducked out of Nachari’s reach, covering his exposed bicep with a palm. “May the *gods* be with you,” he quickly amended, laughing.

“Dude,” Nachari barked. “You are so *incredibly* jacked up. You do know this, right?”

Saber cringed, and then he smiled.

And his smile gave Kagen hope.

If the celestial deities could take a lost, soulless monster like Saber Alexiars, give him to a princess, and bring him back into the light, even just a little, enough to actually *smile* and mean it, then they could also lead the Silivasi brothers to their father.

To Keitaro.

After all these years.

They had to.

Kagen paced to the other end of the terrace, once again, needing to clear his mind, to find solace in isolation. As he glanced at the vast night sky, he felt oddly connected to the dark, expansive void; he couldn’t help but wonder what the future

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held, just what were they about to embark upon; and he had to reassure himself once more:

They were ready.

At least he hoped they were.

They had the map. They had packed everything they needed to track, to fight...to survive. And Nachari knew how to open the portal, how to usher them into the strange new world of Mhier, the native home of the Lycanthrope.

Now all they needed was a little luck.

And a lot of courage.

And a chance, *just one chance*, to atone for the unforgivable sins of the past: a healer who couldn't save his mother; a son who no longer knew his father; a vampire who walked with one foot in both worlds because he never truly felt worthy of existing in either one.

Although just why, he couldn't say.

Kagen Silivasi had been a faithful servant to the house of Jadon, a loyal brother to his beloved siblings, and a consummate healer to his noble race, the Vampyr. He had tended broken bones, mended wounded flesh, and always, *always*, saved lives.

At any cost.

It was the least he could do.

Yet, it was never enough...not even close.

And therein lay the rub: that unidentifiable ember that burned at the center of his soul, masking, if not outright hiding, something so combustible and profound that he didn't dare confront it, let alone try and name it.

It just was.

And his carefully controlled life—indeed, his seemingly perfect persona—concealed it like a pile of cooled gray ash, cleverly masking whatever lay beneath the slag, cloaking the nameless pain, concealing the anonymous rage.

Disguising the red-hot coals glowing just beneath the surface.

For reasons he couldn't name or even comprehend, Kagen Silivasi worked tirelessly to remain detached from his past, to

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stay ahead of a memory he didn't even possess, and he healed fervently in an attempt to avoid that mysterious, marginal part of his soul that frightened him the most, the part that wasn't a healer at all.

The part that, given half a chance, would seek to take life rather than sustain it.

The part that wanted to hunt...and claim...and devour.

And kill.

Until all the rivers ran crimson with blood.

Until somehow, those same *blood rivers*—those sanguine pools of righteous retribution—eventually swept away the original sin.

About The Author

Tessa Dawn grew up in Colorado where she developed a deep affinity for the Rocky Mountains. After graduating with a degree in psychology, she worked for several years in criminal justice and mental health before returning to get her Master's Degree in Nonprofit Management.



Tessa began writing as a child and composed her first full-length novel at the age of eleven. By the time she graduated high-school, she had a banker's box full of short-stories and books. Since then, she has published works as diverse as poetry, greeting cards, workbooks for kids with autism, and academic curricula. The Blood Curse Series marks her long-desired return to her creative-writing roots and her first foray into the Dark Fantasy world of vampire fiction.

Tessa currently splits her time between the Colorado suburbs and mountains with her husband, two children, and "one very crazy cat." She hopes to one day move to the country where she can own horses and what she considers "the most beautiful creature ever created" -- a German Shepherd.

Writing is her bliss.

Books in the Blood Curse Series

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