

# **The Mysterious Legend of Vladimir**

**By KC Bouma**

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## **The Black Family Crest**

### **Prologue**

**March 7th 1427,**

The carved trail that leads to the castle was treacherous under normal circumstances. Unfortunately, the night was exceptionally cold, for the north wind blew down the face of the Carpathian Mountains, bringing with it a late winter storm that had dumped at least six inches of snow, and still coming down at a steady rate.

Ten days had passed from the time Nadia, Empress of Romania, had fled her war-torn country and headed into the Transylvania Alps, taking with her only a handful of her rogue warriors, along with her trusted physician, Phaedra. The raging storm made traveling difficult for the weary group, principally for Nadia. She was in the last stage of pregnancy, and the baby moved constantly. By the time they made it to the other side of the Alps, her baby was coming. They barely made it to Castle Vlad, where Phaedra helped deliver the beautiful baby boy.

As Nadia held out her hands for her son, Phaedra clung to the baby. “I shall give him to you only if you free me. My love is waiting for me just on the other side of Ploiesti.”

Furious, Nadia shouted, “Give me my son, and I shall grant you your demands, but only if you stay with me for three days, until I’m stronger.”

After Phaedra agreed, she handed the Empress her son. Looking down at him, in a soft voice she said, “My beautiful child, I shall name you after the castle in which you were born. Your name will be Vladimir Dracula the Great. You, my son, will be a great warrior and feared by all.”

The Empress handed Phaedra the baby and said, “Bring Vladimir back to me in three days; by then, I will be healed, and my warriors will lead you safely to your love.”

“Thank you, my Empress; I will never forget what you have done for me.”

Three days later, Phaedra returned with the infant. When she handed the Empress her son, the Empress ordered her guards to seize Phaedra. “Take this gypsy out to the forest, drain the blood from her throat, and then throw her into the Moldavia River.”

Before the guards could haul her away, Phaedra shouted, “I curse your son! On the night that he shall wed, he himself will drain the blood from his wife’s throat. From that moment on, he will no longer walk the earth when the sun is high. He will only feed from the throats of his victims, and that, my Empress, is how he will be feared.”

Nadia’s laugh echoed throughout the castle as her guards hauled Phaedra away.

The sun’s orange glow had just set below the tree tops, casting dark shadows throughout the forest. The four Carpathian warriors entered without a thought as to what evil could be waiting, for they were mighty fighters chosen from an elite group of men. Not a single one was less than six foot, and their strong arms and hands were used as powerful weapons. They were a force to be reckoned with.

Phaedra stood on the bank of the Moldavia River. Without fear, she looked up into the eyes of her would-be killers. “You need not do this, for the Empress would not know if you set me free.”

Anton, the strongest of the four men, stepped forward. “Sorry my Lady, but the Empress has ordered your death.”

With a swift swipe of Anton’s blade, Phaedra fell into the river. The moment her blood mingled with the flowing water, a strange red mist engulfed the river, and slowly made it way up the bank. The three guards slowly backed away, trying to escape the mist that seemed to be following their every move. Turning around, they began to run, but the mist prevailed in consuming them. Falling to the ground, they screamed in pain as their throats burned with a hungry taste for blood. Eyes as red as the blood moon, speed faster than the Carpathian wolves, and strength that would rival any creature known to the forest. With their minds ravaged by the transformation, they feed in a frenzy, on every man, woman and child. The small forest village at the bottom of the Carpathian Mountains lay silent, for a breath could not be felt, nor could a cry be heard, for the village was dead.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

**Spring 1452,**

Lying in the tall grass, Vladimir gazed into Victoria’s dark brown eyes. Leaning over, he brushed her long curly black hair behind her ear and whispered, “My love, as our wedding day nears, I have a strange sensation running throughout my body. It is as if my senses have been heightened;

I can smell things I have never smelled before, I can hear from miles away and I can see in the dark as if it were day.”

Victoria smiled. “Oh my love, it is just an illusion. Our love has overwhelmed your senses.”

Vladimir took her into his arms with such speed that it was a blur. Devouring her mouth, he took small bites of her lips and then he slowly slid his tongue into her warm sweet mouth. Her soft moan drew him back so he could look into her eyes. Gliding his tongue across his sharp teeth, Vladimir moved down to her throat. Lingering, he could feel the blood pulsating through her veins. The urge was strong to sink his teeth into her throat and drain her of her blood, but when he heard Victoria mutter his name, it was as if the thought had never occurred. Vladimir made his way back to her mouth. As his kiss burned with passion, it consumed her memory of his un-human speed. Victoria’s body ached with desire as she lay in his strong arms, running her fingers through his long black hair. She muttered, “I love you, Vladimir.”

Swiftly, he rolled her over on top of him. With the most delicate of lips, Vladimir pulled her down and kissed her with tenderness. When his tongue parted her lips, the sweet essence that he had tasted earlier set a fire burning deep inside of him, a burning need that only her blood could quench. The fear of harming her forced Vladimir to pull back. He muttered, “I love you.”

She could see that his brown eyes were much darker and more dangerous looking than she had ever seen before. Yet, she was not afraid.

As the weeks went by and their wedding day approached, Vladimir’s anxious tendencies intensified. He was no longer the kind, gentle, patient man that everyone had known and loved.

Slowly, he was becoming a rogue; he tended to be vicious and short-fused. But what terrified him more than anything were the times when he would retreat from the forest without a memory of how the blood of an unknown victim was on his hands and mouth. Concerned, Nadia came to her son on the night before he was to take his bride and said, “My sweet Vladimir, what has become of you? I know not the man I look upon; you have changed right before my eyes. My darling son, I wish there was something I could do to ease your pain.”

Pacing the floor, Vladimir stopped, and then turned and glared at his mother. “I feel and see the changes that are growing inside of me, yet I’m unable to fight this overwhelming urge. Mother, I feel the need to devour everyone that stands before me, even my sweet Victoria, but my need will not allow me to flee. It is like my destiny has been chosen for me and I have no control of it. So if you want to help, Mother, please tell me, tell me what to do.”

Nadia stumbled back as if the wind was knocked out of her; she knew that the anger that spewed from her son’s mouth was that of the curse, the curse that was placed on her son. She knew the curse was about to come to fruition. The only way to stop it was to kill Vladimir, and that was not an option. With tears in her eyes, she said, “My son, you are right; your destiny has been chosen, but what you do with it is up to you.”

Vladimir looked at his mother. “What am I to do?”

“It is told that on the night that you take Victoria to your bedchamber, you will drain the blood from her throat. Vladimir, you are a strong man, you must fight the feeling that grows inside you. Otherwise, poor Victoria will die, and you, my son, would live with a cursed soul for eternity.”

Shocked, Vladimir pulled back from his mother. He shouted, “What do you mean, and why is it that this is the first time I have heard of this curse?”

When Nadia tried to take hold of her son’s hand, he pulled away. “I want to know the damn truth, all of it, now!”

Finally, Nadia told Vladimir of the curse that was placed on him at birth, and how she thought that it was just a myth, until she saw the changes that started to take root in him.

Vladimir sank down into the chair, trying to grasp onto the reality of his life. Looking up at his mother, he said, “I should have been prepared for this, but you’re right; I am strong and I will fight, I will fight just like Nikolia has taught me.”

Nadia smiled and said, “I know you will, my son.” Her smile faded as he stormed out the room, fearing that the curse was stronger.

Vladimir awoke in a cold sweat, remembering the vivid nightmare. Victoria walked toward him in a long flowing white gown. The guests stood, and then turned to look at the bride as she walked down the aisle. The screams echoed throughout the Chapel. Confused, Vladimir looked at the guests and then back at his bride. That was when he saw that the white dress was covered in blood. Victoria’s face was as pale as the gown she wore, and her eyes were as red as the blood that covered the front of her dress. Shaking his head, Vladimir reminded himself that it was just a nightmare, a nightmare that was caused by a story that his mother had told him. Climbing out of bed, he went to the window. The sun had just peeked out over the mountain, the sky was a brilliant blue, and the birds sang a soft melody. Vladimir refused to dwell on the nightmare that had plagued his sleep because today, Victoria would be his bride. He knew his love for her could overcome the curse that his mother said was placed upon him.

Time flew by with friends and family checking in on him, making sure he had the ring, and that his clothes were just right. But, what he remembered the most was the encouraging words from his mother. “You are strong my son, and no matter what happens, I love you.”

On the way down to the cathedral, Vladimir’s stomach was tied in knots. His heart told him he could conquer all, but his senses had him fearing his very existence.

Standing in the large cathedral, he watched his beautiful Victoria walk toward him. At that moment, he knew he could never hurt her. He put the curse out of his mind completely. Vladimir took Victoria’s hand and vowed with joy and happiness to love her for eternity.

The ballroom was alive with laughter as Vladimir and Victoria greeted friends and family. Throughout the evening, they ate food, drank wine and danced to the melody of a violin and harp. When the large bell rang its midnight chime, the doors that led in and out of the ballroom slammed shut. The guests screamed for their lives as Vladimir's eyes became black as coal and his rage spun out of control. His mother stood out on the veranda and watched helplessly as her son slowly drained the blood from the throats of everyone who were now trapped in the large ballroom, with the exception of his beloved wife. Somehow, she had escaped and was now running throughout the winding maze of corridors of Vlad Castle.

With the blood of his guests now flowing through his veins, Vladimir's senses were heightened a hundred times more than he had experienced throughout the months prior to the wedding. When he touched the banister, he could feel the deep grain of the wood. The sound of the bubbling creek outside the castle walls reached his ears. The corridor that he walked down was as black as midnight; yet, he could see the black spider that hung in its web up high in the corner. The smells that flooded his nostrils were confusing, with the exception of the sweet feminine smell of Victoria.

Terrified, Victoria hid in a dark, empty room. It was as far away from the ballroom as she could possibly find without getting lost. Her mind was ravaged with the image of Vladimir looking up at her after he had drained the blood from her friends' throats. His eyes, his eyes were like nothing she had ever seen before, black, cold, and dangerous. She desperately prayed that he would give up looking for her, and then at first light she would flee for help.

Her heart nearly stopped when she heard his taunting laugh; then Vladimir said, "My sweet Victoria, you can't hide from me. I can hear your blood pulsating through your veins and your rapid heart is fluttering as fast as a hummingbird's wings."

Trying to block out his laughter, she silently sat in the far dark corner, her knees drawn to her chest. Hands over her ears, she laid her head down onto her legs, and silently she prayed that this nightmare would go away.

"We're damned Victoria, so your prayers will go unheard; I know where you are."

She knew it was a lie; how could he know? His taunting continued until her mind was so ravaged by fear that she could no longer think. By the time the door blew open, she was curled up in a ball lying on the cold damp floor. The moment Vladimir saw his beautiful Victoria lying on the floor, he ran to her. His emotions were overwhelmed; he wanted to protect her, yet he craved to feel her, to taste her, to be with her. Swooping her up into his arms, he carried her to their bedchamber. After laying her on the bed, Vladimir brushed her hair back from her face, revealing her red soft lips. With intentional slowness, he leaned down and fed on her mouth; slowly, he worked his way down to her throat. Vladimir's body shuddered with excitement the moment he felt the blood pulsating through Victoria's vein. With passion, he sank his long sharp teeth into her throat, sipping her warm sweet blood.

Her eyes fluttered open; muttering his name, they shared the same mind shattering passion, until the last drop of blood was drained from her delicate body. Vladimir laid his head on Victoria's cold, pale chest, surrendering to the day sleep that now consumed his way of life.

## CHAPTER TWO

As the sun rose over the mountain, shining its golden rays over the quaint village of Transylvania, the Empress gazed out the window as she ordered her warriors to collect the bodies of Vladimir's victims. "Take them to the same place where the gypsy Phaedra lies dead. Once there, burn their bodies and throw the ashes into the Moldavia River. I must warn you, be back in your homes by sunset. Do not leave. If my son comes knocking, do not answer him. He cannot harm you unless you invite him in. His soul is lost forever. My son is neither dead nor alive; the kind, gentle man that you all have come to know and love is no longer."

After choking back a sob, she said, "You mustn't trust him, for your lives depend upon it."

Without turning around, Nadia knew it was Nikolia that was walking toward her, for no other would dare approach her without asking first. When he stopped, she turned to look up at him. The light poured through the tall window and splashed on the velvet sash of sapphire and ruby that draped over his shoulder, signifying that he was of the highest rank. The reflection of the gemstones washed over the man that stood before her, and his stance was like a warrior at battle, just before wielding his mighty sword. Nikolia had the face of a warrior-tough, intense, with knife-edged cheekbones that added hollows, a mouth that was full, but firm with concentration. Eyes dark brown, and ice cold beneath thick brows the color of chestnut. His dark hair curled over the white tunic he wore, the sleeveless shirt revealed well-toned muscles. But what Nadia noticed the most was the explosions of emotion in his eyes. Blinking back the tears that tried to consume his very soul, he caressed the side of Nadia's face. "It's our fault; we should have seen it coming. I will not let him go through this alone. Oh God, Nadia, I should have been there for him."

Stepping away from his gentle touch, she shouted, "He is my son, and I will take care of him."

Grabbing her arm, he pulled her to him. "No, not this time. I will not let you shut me out. Damn it, Nadia, he is my son too!"

The warriors silently stood behind Nikolia, not knowing what to do. When he turned around, he said in an unusually sharp tone, "Go, and do as you were told."

Before they exited the room, he walked to them, and told them in a much calmer voice, "I'll meet up with you as soon as I'm done here."

Without saying a word, they left him alone with the Empress.

Nadia couldn't bring herself to turn and look at Nikolia. She knew if she looked at him, her heart would melt. His olive-colored skin, long dark hair and piercing brown eyes always made her weak in the knees. Nikolia walked over to the window where Nadia stood. Gently, he grabbed her arm; pulling her toward him, he gazed into her hazel eyes and said, "My love, all these years I have done as you have wished, but not tonight. Tonight, our son will know who his real father is. I will return before nightfall and face our son alone, and you will stay locked in our room until my return."

"You can't do that to me."

He pulled her so close, their mouths brushed one another's as he spoke. "Watch me! I will do whatever it takes to keep you safe."

"He is my son; he won't hurt me."

"He is our son, and we have no idea what he is capable of."

"I will not let you face him alone. Nikolia, if he hurts you, I will die."

"My sweet Nadia, I love you." After kissing her, he went to Vladimir's room and took care of Victoria. Then, he left to go and help dispose of the rest of the mess his son had made, because that is what fathers do.

### Night Fall,

Nikolia sat in one of the large renaissance chairs that flanked both sides of the enormous stone fireplace. He knew the library would be the first place Vladimir would go. It was his favorite place when there were heavy thoughts on his mind. His father was sure that he would remember the horrific act he had bestowed upon his beloved Victoria and their guests.

Nikolia remained calm when the twelve-foot arched wooden door blew open and Vladimir flew across the room with such speed that a human eye could not detect. His dusky gold skin was now pale and as smooth as porcelain, eyes black and dangerous, and his hair was shiny like black silk.

Vladimir's vampire tendencies not only enhanced his powers, but also added to his intense masculine beauty. Nikolia handed Vladimir the glass of warm blood that sat on the table between the two chairs, and then motioned for him to sit.

With a perplexed look on his face, Vladimir said, "I sense that you do not fear me."

"How can I fear you, Vladimir? It was I who taught you how to walk, hunt and to be the wonderful man that you are today."

"I'm no longer that man."

"I know that, but I believe there still is a part of the old Vladimir inside the new you."

After drinking the blood, Vladimir sat the glass down, looked over at Nikolia and asked, “It was your blood I just drank?”

“Yes!”

As Nikolia’s blood flowed through Vladimir, his mind became clear. He now knew Nikolia’s thoughts. Jumping to his feet in a blinding flash, he shouted, “You are my father!!”

Nikolia calmly stood and said in a firm voice, “Sit down, Vladimir!”

Clenching his teeth, Vladimir snarled, “I can snap you like a twig.”

Nikolia smiled and said, “I knew there was still a part of the old you left. Now sit!”

Confused, Vladimir said, “There’s no fear in you at all.”

A slight chuckle emerged from Nikolia when he said, “Don’t you remember when I taught you how to fight as a boy? You looked at me and said, ‘One day, I’ll be able to snap you like a twig.’”

Before Nikolia could finish his sentence, he stumbled and fell back into the chair.

Vladimir was at his side before Nikolia realized what had happened. “Father, what ails you?”

“I’m weak from the blood I gave you. Summon your mother. She’ll know what to do.”

With his mind, he called out to her for help. Like always, there she was. And she too, showed no signs of fear, at least not of him. He only sensed her fear as she ran to Nikolia. She feared that their son had hurt the man she loved, the father she had hid from him. He also sensed regret; regret that she had kept such a horrible secret from her beloved son. At that moment, he knew he could not hate her for this; there must have been a reason for the lie that they had kept from him all these years.

“See, I knew he wouldn’t harm me.”

“I know my love, but what happened to you?”

“I think I gave him too much of my blood.”

“You did what?”

“He drained his own blood and had a glass waiting for me.”

“You fool! Where is the wound?” Grabbing hold of his wrist, she could see that it was still seeping blood.

The moment Vladimir saw the blood, an overwhelming scent filled his soul. A low growl emerged deep from his throat. Nadia turned and looked at her son. "If you can't handle seeing your father's blood, go now and fetch me my black bag."

After repairing Nikolia's wound, Nadia went to her son. "My dear boy, we must dispose of Victoria's body before sunrise. Your father brought her down to the river; he thought that you would want to say goodbye."

Shocked, Vladimir said, "What are you talking about?"

Nadia gently placed her hand on her son. "The curse that Phaedra predicted has come to pass."

Vladimir put his head in his hands as he remembered the passion they shared as he drank from Victoria's throat. The realization of what he had done was more than he could comprehend. As his mind flashed back to the night before, he knew that she was lying dead down by the river that they had often visited alone, and there he would say his final goodbye.

### **CHAPTER THREE**

The years had passed by and Vladimir's powers had grown immensely. Nikolia taught him how to hunt and feed on wild animals instead of humans, breaking the gypsy's prophecy that all would fear his son. As everyone he loved grew old and died, he stayed the same. Vlad Castle was no longer his loving home, but a tomb filled with memories of what he was and what he had lost.

In spite of everything that Nikolia had taught him, slowly the prophecy came to fruition for Vladimir. The village below knew not the kind man that lived in the dark castle high on the mountain. All they knew was the mysterious legend of Vladimir.

The night wind blew its chilly breath down off the north face of the Transylvania Alps, keeping Vladimir inside the castle for the night. Although the elements no longer affected him, it was the memories of his mother that kept him in on nights such as this. He could see her sitting in the chair, sipping cocoa by the large fire. She would say, "Nights like this are not fit for man or beast."

So enthralled with his memories of the years gone by, Vladimir had not sensed the approaching visitor until he heard the knock on the door. He knew it must be a stranger because there hadn't been a soul that graced Vlad castle in over a hundred years, but what kind of person would dare wander up to his castle?

Vladimir cautiously opened the door, not knowing what to expect, when a woman fell into his arms. Her curly black hair hung down her back in a tangled mess; her tattered cloak was caked with mud, and the knitted gloves were threadbare, exposing her delicate fingers. Even though her face was smudged with dirt, he could tell she had an exotic look about her.

After pondering over the circumstances he found himself in, he picked up the woman and carried her up the large winding stairs. Laying her on the bed in his mother's old bedchamber, Vladimir could sense the sun was about to rise. Quickly, he laid out clean clothes, a basin of water and scented oils for her to wash with. Then he retreated to his bedchamber for the day sleep. The shining sun peeked through the large beveled window; waking her from a relaxing slumber. The bed she laid in was like nothing she had ever slept on. And the room, the room was magnificent with its large marble fireplace, and the scent that lingered in the air was that of jasmine and lavender. Climbing out of bed, her feet sank into the soft plush rug. Not knowing what she just stepped on, she looked down. Amazed, she wiggled her toes, and then walked to the other side of the bed where the window was. Opening the draperies the rest of the way, she gazed out over the magnificent Mountain View, the same mountain she had descended. The pain she felt made her look away. Walking around the room, she stroked her fingers over the soft bristles of the silver backed brush that sat on the graceful cherry wood vanity. The light that streamed from the window slanted over the perfume bottles of crystal and cobalt; in the clothing room there were beautiful dresses that only a queen would wear. After a further look around, she saw a dress that was laid out for her on the settee, along with a note. It read,

“I will be gone for the day and shall return by dinner. I hope the dress that I have chosen for you is to your satisfaction. If not, please feel free to pick out what you like from the clothing room. I must warn you that the castle is in need of great repair, so it is imperative that you remain on the first floor. I am sorry that I no longer have staff, so it will be up to you to prepare your own meals. I'm sure you will find everything you need.

Sincerely, Vladimir”

Ivana could sense that the master of the castle had exquisite taste; so to honor him, she would wear the dress that he laid out. To show the master her appreciation, Ivana dusted and cleaned the first floor. The vestibule was the hardest to clean, the marble floor was dull, and the grand circular staircases had cobwebs between the banisters. His kitchen looked as if no one had been in it in over a hundred years. The ash from the cold hearth had been blown all over the large marble counter tops. After cleaning the kitchen, she started a large fire in the hearth, picked fresh fall flowers from the herb garden and placed them on a large wooden block table. She also put flowers on the formal dining room table, and pulled back the dark draperies that revealed French doors that led out to another magnificent garden. To her surprise, the gardens were well taken care of, unlike his home. When she finally made it to the library, she could tell it was his favorite room; that was where she found the most clutter. By the time she was done, everything shined as if it were new and the three fireplaces that were in the kitchen, dining room, and library all had fires ablaze. In the library, she waited for his return, along with a glass of wine and his dinner.

The moment Vladimir entered the castle his senses were aroused. He could smell her scent that lingered in the rooms that she had cleaned and the food she had cooked. He could hear the melody that she was humming, but what brought the grin that spread across his face was the way

her heart fluttered. It had been years since he heard such a wonderful sound in his home, and the thought of a beautiful woman anticipating his arrival excited him the most.

Vladimir was still standing in the grand vestibule when Ivana walked out of his library. She stopped the moment she saw him. Silently, she stood marveling at the man that stood before her.

His beauty was like nothing she had ever seen, and the more she stared, the more her senses swirled. Unexpectedly, she became intoxicated with his mere existence. There was something about him that was calm and peaceful; something that soothed her. Except for his dark chocolate eyes, they frightened her. They seemed somehow powerful and omniscient, probing and deadly, yet she felt safe in his presence.

In that short moment, Vladimir wanted her with an urgency that stunned him. It was a desperate need he hadn't felt in a long, long time. Not wanting to frighten her with his needful looks, he broke the trance that had hypnotized them both. He walked toward her with such speed and grace that her blurred vision nearly made her faint. Taking her hand, he brushed her knuckles across his lips. Her sweet feminine scent filled his senses. Vladimir's mouth watered with the need to taste her lips and to feel his tongue dance with hers.

He stepped back and said, "What might be your name, my dear lady?"

She bowed her head to him and said, "I am Ivana."

"Well Ivana, might I ask what brings you this far up on the mountain to my home?"

"I'm sorry, my lord, that I have intruded on your privacy, but my family was attacked and killed by a pack of wild wolves just on the other side of the Alps."

With tears running down her face, she said, "There was nothing I could do for them; I barely made it to the cliffs by the time the wolves got to me. There, I clung to the side of a ledge until sunrise. It took me all day and into the night to make it down the mountain. Then the storm rolled in; the only thing I could see was the flickering light of your castle in the far distance. I knew if I made it to the light, I would be safe. That, my lord, is the last thing I can remember until I awoke in the beautiful room that you brought me to."

"Come Ivana, and sit by the fire with me."

After they ate, he fixed her some of his mother's favorite hot cocoa; he handed it to her and said, "Here, drink, my mother would say that her cocoa could sooth the soul."

"Your mother must have been a wise woman."

A faint smile came across his face, and then he took her hand and said, "You must be devastated, losing your family in such a horrific way."

"No, not really, they meant nothing to me."

Dropping her hand, he silently sat; not knowing what to say as raw rage began to fill him. How could a woman so beautiful and vibrant be so hateful and callous? What kind of person was she?

He sat in the lonely castle every night, missing his family, and they had been gone for over a hundred years. Yet this woman sat before him not caring about the family she had just lost. He refused to probe into her mind, to read her thoughts. He refused to subject himself to such vile feelings. All he knew was that he wanted her out of his home, but what repulsed him the most was how he still thought of her, how he wanted her, how he craved to be with her. Yet, he was disgusted by her lack of compassion, compassion for her dead family.

When she finally looked up at him, she noticed that his light chocolate colored eyes had turned. They were now deep, dark, and almost black. They looked like a raging storm that had brewed up out of nowhere, ready to unleash havoc on an unsuspecting victim. His hands were clenched on the arms of the antique chair he sat in, his jaws were tightly closed and his breathing was raspy. His looks were that of a wild animal that was stalking its prey and at any moment about to commence its kill. For the first time since she had arrived, she felt true fear. Suddenly, she remembered how he had spoken of his own mother, and then how she had just expressed her lack of feelings of the brutal death of hers.

“Vladimir, my tears are for my mother, the mother that my father’s family stole me from. The last time I saw her I was only six, and the only thing I remember was seeing her on her knees with her hands held out for me, screaming my name. They did not take me from her because they loved me. No, they took me to hurt her. They’re hateful, and my grandfather beat me almost every day; and if he didn’t, my father would. So yes, I’m glad they’re all dead, and yes I’m sad that I had to witness such a brutal death. But I’m glad I’m free from my family, I am free to mourn my mother’s death. When they told me she died, I was not allowed to weep. My tears are for her, for her loss, and for my loss of her.”

Ivana watched as the rage drained from Vladimir’s eyes; she watched with agony as they filled with pain. Quickly, she stood and walked over to look out the large windows. Looking into his sad eyes was more than she could stand.

“The sky is full of stars tonight.”

She jumped, not realizing he was right behind her. She turned, looking up at him as he said, “They are beautiful, aren’t they?”

“Yes.” The moment Ivana spoke, his senses were again aroused. He could smell her, but he needed to taste her, he needed to feel her. Slowly, he traced the side of her delicate face with his fingers. When her body shuddered, he experienced a brief but powerful rush of desire. Leaning into her, Vladimir pulled her moist full lips to his. His enchanting kiss was stimulating. The longer their mouths intertwined, the more intoxicated she became. Before he knew it, she was limp in his arms. Swooping her up, Vladimir carried her up to the bedchamber. After laying Ivana on the bed, her eyes fluttered open.

“What happened?”

“I kissed you.”

“That must have been some kiss.”

He smiled and said, “It’s late and you need to sleep.”

As he got up, she grabbed his arm. “Will I see you tomorrow?”

“I will be home by dinner.” He leaned down and kissed the top of her head.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

Weeks went by, and every night Vladimir would bring Ivana a different gift. She had shoes, dresses, flowers and jewelry that she had never dreamt of owning.

During day she would scrub and clean a new part of the castle. Each room was unique and held its own exquisite style. His mother must have traveled the world, collecting along the way. There were crystal vases, paintings, and furniture that was hand carved by master carvers. Vladimir was so enthralled by Ivana’s company that he had not noticed she was slowly cleaning her way up to the third floor west wing, the wing where he slept during the day. On the anniversary of her first month being in the castle, Ivana stood on the third floor.

At the end of the long corridor were twelve-foot stained glass doors. Her heart pounded as she walked down the corridor, with the anticipation of what might lay on the other side of those beautiful doors. Slowly, she opened the doors to the Grand Ballroom, the doors that had not been open for over a hundred years. If it weren’t for the thick dust and streaming cobwebs, the room would be breath-taking. The floor was Egyptian marble, and twenty feet above was a gold-leaf ceiling with twelve chandeliers. The circular room had window from the ceiling to the floor, and the glass doors led to verandas, each with a different view. Knowing that there was nothing she could do without Vladimir’s help, she closed the door behind her. Never could she imagine the horrors that had taken place in that very room over a hundred years ago.

As she turned to walk away, she saw another door. The ornate carving was that of the forest; it was so detailed it looked as if you could walk right through it. After running her hand over the beautiful door, she opened it, only to find the room black, black as night. Retreating from the darkness, she returned with a lit lantern; this time the room came alive. The canopy bed’s drapes were pulled tight and the window across the room had thick black velvet drapes; not a single ray of light could shine through. The first step she took, the drapes on the bed flew open. There, crouched down on his knees was Vladimir. His eyes were red as blood, and when he growled like a wild animal, he revealed long, sharp fangs. Too frightened to even scream, Ivana turned and ran to the stairs.

In her mind, she could hear Vladimir desperately say, “My love, I will not harm you. Please don’t leave me.”

She stopped just at the top of the stairs, turned around and saw the man she loved. Before he could reach her, she slipped and fell.

“NOOOO!!!” He screamed, as he ran to her as fast as lightning.

Cradling her limp body in his arms, he knew she was alive, for the sound of her blood rushing through her veins filled his ears. Gently, he examined her body for broken bones; the only thing he found was a few bruises and a small laceration on the side of her head. Carrying her to her bedchamber, he made her comfortable, and throughout the night, Vladimir tended Avana’s needs, not leaving until the dreadful sun forced him into his day sleep. The only comfort he had as he laid his head down was hearing Ivana express her love for him.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Ivana slept all night and half the day. When she awoke, she knew Vladimir had stayed with her. She could smell his fresh woody scent in her bed. Sitting up, she thought about what she had seen, but even though he had looked like a monster at the time, she knew he was a kind loving man, the man she had fallen in love with. She climbed out of bed, drew herself a bath and then went about her day. She knew he was up there, so she stayed on the main floor, not out of fear, or at least that was what she told herself.

Joy filled his heart as he watched her pick the flowers from his mother’s garden and gently place them in the basket. Vladimir watched the same ritual she had performed every night, but this night he was afraid she would be going. He thought how anyone as beautiful as Ivana could love what he had become; yet, there she was. She had not left him, like he had anticipated.

Ivana started heading back up the stone path, when she caught a glimpse of Vladimir standing by the French doors, he just stood there looking at her. Dropping the basket of flowers, their eyes locked onto one another’s. She stood there gazing into his eyes, unable to move, for his sensual hypnotic stare. He took a step back, worried that he had frightened her, until he saw the smile on her face.

She ran, throwing herself into his arms. “Oh Vladimir, I’m sorry. You told me not to go up there, but I forgot. I just went up there to clean, that’s all.”

“Marry me, Ivana! I know that you know nothing about me or what I am. All I know is that I love you more than my life and I don’t want to live another day without you in it.”

Ivana looked up at him, not believing the words she had just heard. How could a man like Vladimir love a peasant like her? He could have anyone. He had all the money in the world, and

he was kind and gorgeous. Yet it was she, she he had asked to marry. Her heart fluttered with excitement; she threw her arms around him and said, “Yes my love, yes I will marry you.”

The excitement that filled her heart was short lived when she realized the secret that she carried with her could possibly destroy their love.

He could sense her excitement had turned into anguish. Pulling back, he looked into her eyes. That was when he saw the tears. With his thumb, he brushed them away. “My love, what is it that took away your joy?”

“Oh Vladimir, there’s something that I must tell you. And that, my love, might change your mind.”

“There’s nothing you can tell me that would change the way I feel about you. You I will always love.”

Vladimir took her by the hand, and led her into the castle. While sitting in the library, he could tell she was having a difficult time speaking what was on her mind.

Not knowing how to tell him her story, she stood and walked over to the window.

With the speed of a sleek cat, Vladimir raced to her side. While standing behind her, he gently stroked her long black hair. “Don’t fret my love, and just tell me what weighs heavy on your mind.”

She turned and looked at him with tears in her eyes. “I know what you are, and I also know what you do. Vladimir, it is because of my ancestors that this curse exists. My mother’s great grandmother Aradia was Goddess of the Night. When Zeus learned that she would lure men to her bedchamber and then drain the blood from their throats, it infuriated him. So he stripped her of all powers, and then sent her to live in the human world. From that moment on, she could walk the world only at night; her food was that of blood from men that she would seduce.”

“Ivana, my love, I am what I am because of a curse, a curse that a gypsy placed on me over a hundred and twenty five years ago. It has nothing to do with some Greek myth.”

“It’s neither a myth nor legend; that gypsy had to be related to my mother. Every child that Aradia had, they carried the night curse.”

“That can’t be true. Phaedra was my mother’s day servant.”

“But it is true. Although Aradia could no longer walk the earth when the sun was high, her children could. The Sun God Apollo loved her and granted their children the ability to walk in the sunlight.”

“So you have the night curse?”

“No, the curse that flowed through my family’s blood has thinned. There are only twelve of my aunts left that I know of. That is, if my father’s people haven’t killed them.”

“When my father found out about the curse, his family thought they were witches. They set out to kill them all, but we fled. Then one day, they found us. I was too young to know what happened. I do know that some of them survived, I heard them talk of it.”

“Are there others like me?”

“You are the only male that I know of, and the only one that can’t walk when the sun is high. Vladimir, they can help you, I know they can. We just have to find them.”

Vladimir looked out at the dark night sky. He wondered if it could be possible to have his life back, a life that had been stolen from him when he was an infant. He remembered that his favorite time of the day was when the sun would peek up over the mountains, and the early morning dew would linger in the hollows and around the river. He and Nikola would hike in the morning for hours until the sun would dry the dew, then Nikola would say, “Boy, it’s time to go home.”

Vladimir could still hear the haunting voices of his parents in his head. There were lonely nights when their voices brought Vladimir pain. Then there were other nights he would sit by the fire and he could hear his mother say, “Boy, what have you done now?” Those were the times a smile would linger on his face, for he could see his mother as if she was standing right in front of him.

Vladimir turned and looked down at Ivana. “Where do we begin to look?”

“We start on the other side of the mountain where my father’s caravan was attacked. There, you might be able to find their scent.”

“I thought wild wolves were responsible for their deaths?”

“They were. The wolves are the protectors of the Night Gods. From the moment my father’s family began executing my mother’s family, the wolves became their protectors. To this day I have no idea why.”

“We’ll leave at sunset tomorrow.”

“Vladimir, what about the sun? It’s a two day hike, just to the summit.”

“If I go alone, I can make it back by the break of dawn.”

“They won’t come to you. They’ll think it’s a trap.”

“If they have the powers that you say they possess, then they will know who I am, just by my scent alone.”

For the first time in her life, Ivana feared for someone other than herself. All she had ever known was the constant hatred that her father and his family had displayed toward her and their continuous brutality. What she didn't know was how her mother's family would greet an outsider, an outsider who had been cursed by one of their own.

She looked up at Vladimir, "Please don't go. What if something happens to you? I don't want to be alone. Please Vladimir, don't leave me. I love you, and that's all that matters; we can live with what you are."

"That's just it Ivana, I can't. You have no idea what it is like watching the ones you love grow old and die while you stay the same."

"You're right, Vladimir, I will die. But we can have children, lots of them. Then they will have children and so on. You will never be alone again. You will always have family in the castle."

"I won't have you, and that is one pain I can't live with. Please don't ask me not to go and seek out your family for their help."

"Vladimir, let's think this through. You can't go out there without a plan."

"Can you draw me a map of where the attack took place?"

"Yes. But!"

"NO buts, Ivana. I have to do this."

While Vladimir was out on his nightly hunt, Ivana sat by the fire. With tears in her eyes, she decided to write a letter to her aunt. The only name she could remember was her mother's Aunt Aphaea:

"Dearest Aunt Aphaea

I am writing you this letter in the hope that you will remember who I am. My grandmother was your sister Elipsis; I am Ivana, daughter of Metis. I am the only one left of my father's tribe. So now your people can live in peace, no longer in the fear, which the man I was forced to call father had bestowed upon you. I am truly sorry that I was a weak child who was unable to forewarn you of the brutal attacks that wretched man had committed. I only hope that you can find it in your heart to forgive me and not seek revenge on the man that I have sent to you for help. Vladimir is a kind, compassionate and honest man that has saved my life and now in return I hope that you can save his.

Sincerely, Ivana"

After closing the envelope, she pressed the VD monogram into the hot red wax. Stepping away from the ancient desk, she paced the library, waiting for Vladimir's return. She knew it would be

a long hunt because tomorrow night there would be no time to feed. His sole purpose was to make it to the battleground and back by the break of dawn.

She had hoped that once there, he would find some clue as to where they had gone. She knew tracking them was nearly impossible; they left no trace that they even existed. Yet, Vladimir's senses were a hundred times keener than any human. That was what she feared; she feared that once he had their scent, he would not return until he found them. She feared that he could be gone for weeks or months, if not forever.

The thought of losing Vladimir put an ache in her heart. An ache that surpassed the pain that she felt the day her father came to her and told her that she had to marry Styx. His looks were as striking, as his brutality. Ice blue eyes, long blond hair, and the face of an angel, but the temper of Hades himself.

Ivana remembered when she said, "Father, why must I marry him? He already has three wives and ten children."

While beating her, he said, "Because you are the Chosen One. You should be thankful that someone like Styx would want a half-breed whore like you."

How could he call her names? She had never been with a man before. Nor had she wanted to be with one until she had met Vladimir. Vladimir would be the only man she would ever be with. The only man she had dreamt about every night from the time she had met him. Her lips would kiss every part of his body while her hand explored places that she'd not dare think of doing while awake, or would she?

She shivered at the mere thought of her dreams as he stroked her in warm hot places that made her scream out his name. When he would taste the blood from her throat, she would tremble from the sheer ecstasy that ran through her.

Just the thought of her dreams made her yearn for his touch, to smell his musky, manly scent. She waited and waited until it was hard for her to keep her eyes open. Yet, her need to be with him was overwhelming, making her do something she hadn't done since the day she found out what he was.

After changing into her warm cotton gown, Ivana made her way up to his room, the room that had revealed Vladimir's true identity. The room she had vowed that she would never go to again, for fear that it would change the way she had felt toward Vladimir. She now knew that nothing could nor would change the love that she felt in her heart. Vladimir was the man who owned her heart, mind, body and soul and nothing in that room would change that. Not even the fear she felt the night when she saw his red glowing eyes and long vicious teeth, snarling at her like he was a wild animal that was about to pounce on its prey.

When she opened the door, her heart jumped, not from the memory of that night, but the things she saw. Vladimir's room was inviting and warm, the canopy drapes were pulled back in swag, white candles were on all the tables and the smell of roses filled the room. On the bed was a note.

It read,

“My dearest love,

From the moment that I had fallen in love with you, I had hoped that you would come back to my room.

Yet, I had a slight fear that I might have frightened you away forever. I knew deep down that one day you would forget that terrifying night and come to me. I have made my room inviting to you, so that when you come you will feel warm and safe. I will protect you from all that you fear.

LOVE YOU ALWAYS, VLADIMIR.”

Her heart was filled with sharp emotions as her senses flooded her mind. She could smell his woody scent mingled with soft rose, see the flickering light of the many candles, feel the warmth of the fire that still burned. The full romantic moon that shone through the large window had her desiring him in a way that she thought would never be possible.

Ivana closed the heavy drapes in front of the window, threw a log on the fire, washed with the warm rose-scented water, and then climbed into Vladimir's bed.

The long hunt lasted until just before the break of dawn. When Vladimir walked into the library, Ivana wasn't in the renaissance chair that she slept on. On the nights that he would stay out late, he would come home and find her curled up by the fire, waiting for his return.

Vladimir's pounding heart increased by her absence; he ran up to her room, just to find it empty.

Fearing for her, he spun around the room, trying catch her scent, but it was all around him. In every direction he turned, he could smell the sweet perfume of Ivana's skin. Stopping, Vladimir dragged his fingers through his hair, trying to calm his thoughts. Suddenly, he heard the faint flutter of her heart. With his keen hearing, he followed the sound. Surprised at where it led him, he slowly opened the door to his bedchamber. There she was, snuggled under the blankets, with his pillow cradled in her arms as if it were their child that she was comforting.

The flickering light of the candles shone off her creamy porcelain face, cheeks flush and pink, lips warm and sensuous. Vladimir's heart and body yearned to touch her, touch her in the same way he had in his dreams that he had every night since the moment that he had met her. He leaned over and softly brushed his lips to her mouth, then he whispered, “How is it that someone who lives in the shadows of the night, finds his shining angel. An angel of the sun, an angel of the day. You are an angel of light, while I am a dark shadowy soul of the night.”

He had not realized that her eyes were open as he spoke his thoughts, until her hand caressed the side of his face and she said, “My sweet, sweet love, you are my angel that walks in the light of the moon.

You are not a lost dark soul of the night, but a beacon that shines bright.

You are my dark angel of the night.”

She pulled him down to her and kissed him, as she had never kissed him before. With Ivana’s soft breasts pressed against him, Vladimir’s body was on fire. The sweltering passion he felt surging through him was like nothing he had ever felt before. Not even his sweet Victoria could heat his blood the way Ivana had.

Vladimir could feel the powerful desire that rolled over him. When he heard the deep moan emerge from her throat, he was intensely mesmerized, inexplicably drawn to her. The desire he felt for her coiled through his veins, making him throb for her.

Slowly, he unbuttoned his shirt. Dropping it to the floor, he climbed into bed hovering over her.

Dipping his head, he took possession of her lips. Masterfully kissing, their tongues swept passionately into one another’s mouths. Nowhere else did their bodies touch, but Vladimir could feel her with every single cell of his body.

Ivana was drawn to him in a way that she had never been drawn to a man before. Pulling him to her, she whispered, “I want to taste you, and to feel you inside me.”

She quivered with need, as he slowly slid inside her. In the heat of passion, she whispered out his name.

Vladimir looked down at Ivana and said, “I love you.”

Breathless, she whispered in his ear, “I love you Vladimir.”

She could feel the prickly hair of a day’s growth on her hand as she caressed his face. Looking up into his dark brown eyes, she said, “Feed from me, Vladimir”

“What if I can’t stop, what if I hurt you?”

“Please Vladimir, now.”

With his fangs already extended, slowly he sank them into her slender neck. When her warm sweet blood rolled down his throat, Vladimir stalled for a moment. She tasted of honey and juniper. It was a taste that set his soul on fire. Fearing he wouldn’t be able to stop, he drew one last drink, sealed the wound with his tongue, and then they made slow passionate love. Not even the day sleep that consumed his life could break the spell she had over him.

The tears streamed down her face as Vladimir spoke the most precious words she had ever heard. Gently, she kissed him, and then whispered again, “I love you. I think I fell in love with you the moment I read the letter you had left me on the first day I arrived. Your words were kind and gentle; I will always love you.”

“I love you too, Ivana, that’s why I must break this curse, for I could not live one moment without you.”

While holding Ivana close to him, Vladimir kissed the top of her head. Before surrendering to the day sleep, he whispered, “I will never allow another soul to harm you. If they do, they shall surely pay the price.”

## Chapter SIX

The last sliver of sun slowly dropped down over the Transylvanian Alps, arousing Vladimir from his sleep. To his surprise, Ivana still lay sleeping in his bed. His heart warmed with the thought of her waking next to him. Leaning over, he kissed her with such passion he was amazed that she hadn’t woke up. He whispered her name, but still she hadn’t awakened. Sitting up, he noticed her skin was pale and cold to the touch. Frantically, he searched for tooth marks, fearing that he might have drained her blood in the heat of passion, but he found none. Cradling Ivana’s cold limp body in his arms, he rocked her back and forth, crying, and pleading for her to awaken. He gasped for air when he heard her mutter, “Vladimir, I’m so cold.”

“I know, my love.” Gently, he laid her head down on the pillow. He walked over to the large fireplace, and stoked the fire to a raging blaze until the room was as hot as Hades. After making sure that she was warm and comfortable, he did something he hadn’t done in over a hundred years. He went down to the small village below his castle. Knocking on many doors, he finally found a woman physician who was willing to come with him.

Clotho had never been to the mountain where the dark Gothic castle stood. She had heard stories that the castle was haunted and that the master himself was the Dark Knight of Evil, but the man who stood before her now was nothing like what had been described to her. Yes, he looked dark and secretive, yet gentle and kind. His brown eyes drew her in, his soft lips looked sweet and tasteful, and his voice was strong and luring. His manners were impeccable; Vladimir was the only man that had respected her as a physician. All the men in the village would rather die than to come to her for help. That suited her fine, for the women loved her soft touch, but this man that looked like a dark angel put his faith in her to help the woman that he loved. He had begged for her help, and at that moment she knew the stories were not true. In her mind, any man that would beg for his love had to be exceptional.

Vladimir slowed the carriage down just before he entered the dense forest. He could sense fear in Clotho as they slowly traveled the dark winding road that led up to the mountain. When he felt

her slight tremors, he said in a kind voice, “There’s a blanket under the bench you can wrap yourself with.”

She looked over at him and said, “Can’t you feel it? It’s not the cold that has me shivering, but the evil that lingers in the wind.”

Within a blink of a second, she could see his eyes change from brown to black. His head rose, sniffing the air as if he were some kind of predator, trying to catch the scent of its prey. He yelled, “Hold on,” as he snapped the reins that controlled his horse.

Not slowing until they reached the castle, Vladimir took her hand to help her down from the carriage. Suspicious, he sniffed the air around her, then said, “How is it that a human can sense evil in the air?”

Her blue eyes swirled

like a crystal ball. She grabbed his arm with speed that rivaled his own and said, “Never let your guard down, Vladimir. You must use the powers that you possess at all times. If you let your emotions control them, you and the ones you love will truly die.”

Pulling away with much force, he glared into her eyes and growled through his clenched teeth, “Who, and what, are you?”

“I could be your worst nightmare, but that is not why I’m here. I’m here for Ivana. Ivana is my sister, Metis’s daughter. I was sent to look after her when we were informed that she had survived the attack on her father’s caravan.”

“If that is true, then why is it that you did not seek her out; why is it that you hide yourself from her?”

“I was sent here as an observer only. My family needed to know if she is a threat to us.”

“How could she threaten your family? She knows nothing of your kind.”

“Vladimir, don’t insult me with your lies.”

With such speed and force, Vladimir grabbed Clotho by the back of her hair. Pulling her inches from his razor sharp teeth, a growl emerged deep from his throat as he said, “Ivana needs help; help that I can’t give her. You are her only hope, but I must forewarn you that if you hurt her, I swear on my mother’s grave I will kill you. Then I will do something that I haven’t done in over a hundred years; I will drain the blood from your dead body.”

With a blink of his eye, Clotho disappeared from his grasp. Then he heard a whisper from behind him; she said, “You underestimate my powers.”

By the time Vladimir turned around to face her, she had pulled him close to her. She whispered, “Don’t you feel it? There’s something evil out there. It’s watching us. It’s stalking us. It’s waiting for us to separate and when we do, it will kill us one by one until there is nothing left of us.”

With Clotho’s hand on Vladimir’s, they instantly appeared in his vestibule. At the snap of her fingers, all the doors and windows locked and the drapes fell closed, preventing evil from seeing in.

“What the hell? How did we get inside?”

Before she could reply, something hard hit the door, growling, snarling, then silence.

Vladimir ran up the stairs with the speed of light. By the time he opened the door, Clotho was standing over Ivana. She turned toward him and said, “She’s OK, she’s just sleeping.”

Grabbing Clotho’s arm, Vladimir pulled her out into the hall. Spinning her around to face him, he said, “I want a straight answer. What are you?”

“I am part human, part goddess and very little vampire. But I’m sure Ivana has told you all about our people.”

“She has told me the history of your family, but she knows nothing of the powers that you possess. I would like to ask you a question that has me furious.”

“I don’t think you’re in a position to make any demands.”

“Demands? I just want to know, if your family is so powerful, then why is it that you left Ivana with her father? A father who allowed everyone to abuse her?”

“We tried; that family was under the protection of the were-animals.”

Before Vladimir could ask what the hell the were-animals were, Ivana cried out his name.

Running to her bedside, Vladimir sat down next to her and said, “I’m here, my love.”

Her skin was much colder than it was before he left, and her eyes were red; the dark rings were more prominent against her pale skin. Brushing his fingers across her lips, he whispered, “I have a friend here that can help.”

He pulled Clotho close to him and said, “If you hurt her, I will kill you. I don’t care what kind of powers you have or how long it takes, but I will track you down and annihilate everyone and everything you love.”

“Back off Vladimir, we need each other.”

Before she could speak another word, all the doors and windows in the castle shuttered. Using his senses, he scanned the corridors and rooms of the castle. Finding nothing, he looked at Clotho and said, "What evil have you brought down on us?"

"I know nothing of this evil. The first time I sensed it was when we entered the forest."

When Ivana cried out, Clotho was at her side. She looked up at Vladimir and said, "I need lots of water, and Vladimir, don't open the door to anyone, no matter what they say." Before he left the room, she snapped her fingers and all the fireplaces in the castle burst to life, candelabras lit, and the torches in the halls began to blaze.

Sensing her need to help Ivana, Vladimir felt at ease in leaving her alone with Clotho. The moment he stepped out into the hall, Vladimir's heightened senses told him that no one had entered the castle. With un-human speed, he headed into the kitchen. The windows held no curtains, and the darkness crept in like a plague, waiting to devour whatever might be in its path.

Instantly, a strange sensation engulfed him. So intense, he could feel evil all around him penetrating deep in his marrow. He felt it watching him, stalking him, wanting to feed on his very soul. He knew his powers could no longer protect Ivana or himself from the evil that lurked on the other side of the castle walls. The evil he felt was prominent and vicious. It sought only to destroy, and he was its prey.

But why! He had not betrayed anyone. Yet, it was he that the evil soul was after.

"If you can hear me, I must warn you, I will protect what is mine, and that also means Clotho. As long as she is in my home, no harm will come to her. I feel that your power is great, but I must tell you, my father taught me to be a great warrior. I will fight you if need be, although I would prefer to settle this in a more diplomatic way."

The castle exploded with laughter, laughter so sinister that even Hades himself would shiver.

In Vladimir's mind, he heard Clotho's voice. "Don't antagonize him Vladimir, we have no idea what he is, nor do we know the extent of his powers. Now, hurry, Ivana is calling for you."

The night went by without another sound from the unknown presence, and Ivana's condition had not improved. Clotho could see fear in Vladimir's face just before his body succumbed to the day-sleep. She placed her hand on his and said, "I will not allow any harm to come to either one of you, I give you my word."

"Protect Ivana."

In the village far below Vlad castle, Kronos awoke to an empty bed, the fire had died out and the room was cold.

He yelled out to his wife, "Nyxie, why the hell didn't you wake me before the fire went out? It's cold in here!"

No response. He got up and stormed through their modest home. He came to a quick halt when he saw that the front door was ajar and blood was all over the floor and walls. Running to his daughter's room, he saw his two-year-old baby girl sleeping like an angel, as if nothing had happened.

He scooped the baby up into his arm and ran out into the streets yelling for help. The townspeople and constable came to him as he fell to his knees in the middle of the street.

Kronos cried, "Nyxie's gone! And there's blood everywhere!"

Constable Aether looked at Zephyrus and said, "Have your wife take Kronos and the baby to your home. I want you to come with me."

The moment Aether pushed open the door, their nostrils flared with the overwhelming smell of blood. The sight of splattered blood sent Zephyrus running out of the house with his hand over his mouth trying to hold back the bile coming up his throat.

After Aether searched the home, he came out to where Zephyrus was sitting. Patting Zephyrus on the back, he looked up at Aether and saw that he too was pale and shaking.

"Did you find her body?"

Aether shook his head no, and then said, "It's really strange. With that much blood, you would think there would be a trail to follow, but nothing. It's like she just disappeared."

"Aether, did you know that the Dark Lord from up on the mountain was in the village last night? He was looking for Clotho."

Perplexed, Aether looked at Zephyrus and said, "Why, what did he need with the new doc?"

"That's just it, no one knows."

"I'm going to go and search out back by the forest. I need you to go over to Clotho's house and bring her back up to my place. Zephyrus, don't tell anyone about what we found."

He walked down the dirt road of the quiet village. There were many people out in groups, staring, whispering, yet afraid to ask what they found. Zephyrus's face was drawn and pale, the shape of his mouth and dark eyes showed fear. To his surprise, he made it all the way to Clotho's home without a single approach. Not even the strong burly men of his village wanted to know about the carnage that they had found in Kronos' home.

After several knocks on the door, Zephyrus walked around to the window. Peering in, he called out, "Clotho, are you home?" He heard nothing. Walking to the back door, he pounded even harder, calling out her name. Still, nothing.

His heart pounded, fearing that the new doc had succumbed to the same fate as Kronos' wife.

Storming into Aether's home without knocking, he shouted in a frantic voice, "She's not home and it looks as if she has been gone all night."

Aether came running into the room where Zephyrus was standing; in a rather calm voice he said, "Boy, you nearly gave me a heart attack. Now sit down and catch your breath."

Zephyrus sat as he was told, and then, putting his head into his trembling hands, he cried out, "What if the legends are true? What if he did live over a hundred years ago, and after his wedding, he turned into a vampire and killed all of his guests?"

Aether said, in a calm, yet demanding voice, "You know that story is just legend. It was told to us as children so we would not be tempted to go up and bother the master of Vlad castle."

He looked up at Aether; fear plagued his large brown eyes, his masculine six-two body looked like that of a small frightened child. When he spoke, it was barely a whisper. "But what if the stories are true, and now he is after us all? One by one, we disappear just like Kronos' wife. All that blood. Aether, what did he do with the body, and why can't we find her? With that much blood, there should have been a trail to follow. I know the Dark Lord did this, I know he did."

"We don't know that for sure."

"Yes, we do! Last night was the first time he came into our village, and now Kronos' wife is dead."

"Maybe it's just a coincidence."

"I don't believe that and neither do you. We need to go up there and do to him what he did to Nyxie."

With very little patience left, Aether yelled, "You need to pull yourself together. We are not going up to that mountain and accuse anyone of anything, although we will go up there to see if Clotho is there. If she isn't, we will come back here and then decide what our next plan is. All I know is you can't go around making accusations like that, otherwise we'll have a lynch mob on our hands, and that's one thing you don't want. After you calm down, I want you to go out and get a few of your best men and bring them back here. Then we'll all go up there and check on Clotho. Zephyrus, please don't voice your theory, not until we have the facts." Zephyrus stormed out of the house and did as he was told.

The knock on the door consistently became louder and louder. By the time Clotho entered the grand vestibule, she could hear Aether yelling, "Clotho, if you're in there, we need to talk to you. Please open the door."

The moment she opened the door, she could see the relief on all four of the men's faces when they saw that she was fine.

After a brief sigh, Aether said, "Have you been here all night?"

With a perplexed look, she said, "Yes, why?"

"Last night, Kronos' wife was killed."

"Oh my God, what happened?"

Zephyrus stepped forward and said in a sarcastic voice, "We were hoping that you could tell us."

"What the hell, how would I know?"

Zephyrus yelled, "Well, you were with him last night."

Aether grabbed his arm and pulled him back. "You need to control yourself, and we are not here to make accusations." He looked back at Clotho and apologized, and then said, "We do need to ask you some questions, if you don't mind."

"Yes, of course." Then she led them back to Ivana's beautiful garden.

After sitting on the marble bench, Aether said, "Was Vladimir with you the whole night?"

"Yes, his wife is gravely ill."

"Oh! We had no idea he was married. Do you think I could talk to him?"

"Vladimir left early this morning to go and get his wife's family. He'll be home late tonight. Maybe you can come back then."

Just as the four men stood, the French doors opened, and out stepped a frail Ivana. She said in a barely audible voice, "Clotho, is everything OK?"

Zephyrus caught Ivana in his arms before she fell onto the hard stone floor. Clotho motioned for Zephyrus to carry Ivana up to her room. After laying her on the large feather bed, Clotho took them down to the vestibule. The four men could not believe what they saw. The castle wasn't dark and gothic, but vibrant and alive, and the soft colors were beautiful, warm, and inviting.

Just before leaving the castle, Aether took Clothos' hand and said, "I hope you can save her. She sounds like a very kind woman."

Clotho smiled and said, "Yes, she is."

All the way back to the village, Zephyrus spoke not a single word. He thought that a woman like Ivana would never marry a monster that would viciously kill another human. Confused, they wondered who or what was out there stalking them, killing them, and only God knew what would come next.

Night after night, Vladimir stayed by Ivana, not even going out to feed. Finally, on the third night, Clotho said, "Vladimir, you need to go feed, otherwise you might attack one of us."

Appalled by her accusations, he shouted, "I would never do such a thing."

"Vladimir, there are many things you know nothing of and that is one of them. You must feed on a regular basis or your animal instincts will emerge. It could be dangerous for Ivana. If you were to make love to her while hungry, you could drain her without even knowing it, until it was too late."

He put his head into his hands and cried out, "Damn your family for cursing me, damn you all to hell."

Clotho jumped up, grabbed his arm and shouted, "What do you mean you were cursed? I thought you were bitten by one of our own."

Confused, he said, "No, your Aunt Phaedra placed a curse on me as an infant."

"Vladimir, have you and Ivana made love?"

"I don't think that is any of your business."

"If you made love to her, she is probably with child, your male child, and he is draining her. She needs to feed, and she can only feed from you. Now tell me, did you make love?"

"Yes! Yes! Now what does it mean, he's draining her? And how do you know it's a boy?"

"The night curse was placed on a few select men, for all male vampires can have only male children. When Zeus cast my grandmother Aradia out of Mount Olympus, he also cursed her."

"I already know her history."

"Vladimir, just listen. Her curse included that she was to never have a male child. To a god or goddess, that was like a death sentence to their kind, for only a male can carry on the powers and then pass them on to their children."

"How is it that you have un-human powers?"

"My father was a god. When my grandmother found this out, she tried all sorts of magic, but she kept having daughters. Then one night on a trip to Olympus, her sister told her that a vampire could give one of her daughters a male child. The only thing was, she would have to turn him into the vampire, and that would mean she would have to sleep with her daughter's lover. So on the day that her daughter Gaia was to take Rodolfo as a husband, Aradia seduced Rodolfo. While making love, she sank her teeth into his throat, slowly sipping the essence of his life. Just as his

soul was about to slip into the realm of heaven, she blow her icy cold breath into his mouth.

When she did that, their souls began to intertwine, and then she bit her lower lip and let her blood drain into his mouth. She changed him into a vampire, and then she erased his memory of the wild sex that she performed. What Aradia didn't know was that a male vampire's sexual tendencies were vicious. If they weren't taught how to curb their sexual appetite, they could easily rip out the throats of their lover, without even realizing that they had done it until it was too late. When a vampire makes love to his mate, their senses are heightened even more than they normally are. He wants to touch them, smell them, taste them, and just before his body explodes inside of her, he sinks his teeth into her neck. At that point, his need to consume her is overwhelming, and then it's too late, she is dead. That is why there are no male vampires, with the exception of the Chosen Ones."

Shocked by the realization that he could have easily killed Ivana the same way he killed Victoria, he got up, walked over to the bed where Ivana slept and whispered to her, "I will never hurt you."

He turned and looked at Clotho and asked, "How many male vampires are there?"

"Just three, including yourself. Rodolfo is eleven-thousand-years-old and Drago is five-thousand-years-old."

"Why is there such a large gap from the time she made Rodolfo to Drago?"

"My grandmother's grief over the loss of Gaia was overwhelming. Out of fear, she vowed to never place other children in danger like that again."

"She must have changed her mind, because there's Drago."

"Yes! But this time she had a plan. She spent many years with him; teaching and grooming him for the day she would change him over. Still, she would not use one of her daughters. There was a young woman who was sentenced to death for killing her husband, so my grandmother sent Drago to her. Even with all the years of training, at the moment Drago's body erupted with pleasure, his need to taste her was overwhelming. In his mind, he thought, just one sip. Leaning down, he slowly sank his teeth into her soft delicate throat. When her body responded, it was with such wild heat, that his body succumbed to the same wild passion. As their bodies sustained the same wild rhythm, he kept drinking and drinking until his blissful ecstasy was fulfilled. Drago looked down at the once beautiful woman, and then screamed in horror when he saw what he had done. Her whiskey colored eyes was drawn back into deep dried out sockets, lips cracked and pulled back from her mouth, and her body shriveled, dry of all fluids."

Clotho could see disgust and fear on Vladimir's face; patting him on the hand, she said, "Now go Vladimir, you need to feed for Ivana and your son."

Just as he was about to leave the room, he turned to Clotho and asked, "How am I to feed her?"

“I will make a small incision in your wrist, and then you let your blood drip into her mouth. When she’s stronger, we can put it in a cup.” As he walked out, he laughed, remembering his father had done the same thing for him once.

A few nights later, Vladimir ventured down into the village. He found the four men that had been up to his castle in a small inn, drinking ale. Walking toward them, he could hear them discussing a plan on how to keep their village safe from who or what had taken Kronos’ wife Nyxie.

When he stepped to the side of their table, Aether looked up at Vladimir and said, “Is there something I can help you with?”

“Yes. I would like to personally thank the man that caught my wife and safely brought her up to our room.”

While the other three men sized Vladimir up, Aether stood and said, “Please, let me get you a chair so you can join us.”

When Aether returned with a chair, he pointed out that it was Zephyrus who had carried Ivana. Vladimir stood back up, bowing towards Zephyrus. Taking his hand, he said, “I owe you more than you can imagine. My wife is with child and if she would have fallen, she and our baby could have died. Pregnancy has not been to kind to Ivana; it has made her sick and weak, so I would like to express my gratitude. If ever you are in need of help, please call on me.”

Just as Vladimir began to leave, Aether said, “There is something, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Like I said, anything you need.”

“As you know, the night you were in the village, a friend of ours’ wife came up missing. The odd thing was, there was so much blood, but no trail. It’s like she just disappeared. I was wondering if you had seen anything on your way out of the village that night?”

“I neither heard nor saw anything. But when Clotho and I entered the forest, my horse could sense something, and at that time we fled as fast as my carriage could go. I’m truly sorry for your loss; I wish there was something more I could tell you.”

“Just keep a watch out, and if you see anything, let me know.”

“I will.” Vladimir walked away with a sense of guilt that plagued his soul. What he knew, he could not tell them, but then again, he really knew nothing of what was out there. All he knew was that it was evil, so evil that not even he himself dared face it, not yet anyway.

While the months flew by, Vladimir was relieved that the evil that had stalked Clotho and himself had not graced them with its presence. Otherwise, it would have been quite difficult for Vladimir to feed.

With Ivana's strength back, and the baby growing faster than normal, he was feeding two and three times a night. Vladimir was having a hard time sustaining the three of them, yet he did it.

Between the feedings, Vladimir would ride his stallion down to the village, keeping a safe eye on the villagers. On many nights he could sense Aether and Zephyrus out on patrol. He also knew they felt a great sense of relief knowing that Vladimir was keeping a safe watch on them. What shocked him was the sense that they knew what he was; yet they did not do or say anything.

On the night that the evil returned, Vladimir, Aether and Zephyrus were standing just outside the old inn. Suddenly, Vladimir yelled, "Get inside the inn, and don't let anyone leave until I return."

With blinding speed, Vladimir disappeared right before their eyes. After several minutes, he returned back to the inn. Motioning for Aether and Zephyrus, he whispered in a soft voice, "We need to get everyone into the church."

Looking at them with dread, Vladimir said, "It's back!"

"What is back?"

"The evil that killed Kronos's wife, and if we don't get your people to the church and fast, who's to say how many will die tonight?"

By the time they closed the church door, a dense fog had rolled in. In the far distance, they heard a howl of an unknown creature.

Zephyrus's wife clung to him as she asked, "What was that?"

"I don't know, sweetheart, but I need you to go and keep the other women and children quiet."

Aether and Zephyrus walked over to the door where Vladimir stood looking out. Turning back toward the men, Vladimir said, "I need to get home to Ivana and Clotho. You will be safe here tonight, but I must warn you, you must not open the door to anyone. Not even to someone you know. The evil that is out there can't enter unless you invite it in. I have no idea if it can shape shift."

Aether grabbed Vladimir's arm and said, "What do you mean, shape shift?"

"All I know is there are creatures out there that can change from human to animals. Aether, keep everyone inside until morning, and if I'm not back tomorrow night; bring everyone back here to the church. Do this until I tell you otherwise. Now lock the door behind me, and don't open it."

Hours had passed since Vladimir had left. All was quiet, the children were sleeping, and the men and women sat in groups, talking in a low whisper. Suddenly, a voice cried out, "Kronos, please help me, please Kronos!"

He was out the door before Aether or Zephyrus could get to him. By the time he reached Nyxie, she was lying at the bottom of the church steps. Sweeping her up, he turned and started walking up the steps. Before he could get half way up, Aether said, "I'm sorry Kronos, she can't come in."

Before he had a chance to respond, Nyxie snarled, "You fools. Do you think Vladimir can save you? It's because of him that I'm here. He killed my mate, and until one of you turns him over to me, I will slowly kill each and every one of you until there is no one left."

Nyxie changed into a gray, hairless wolf that stood on its hind legs, eyes that glowed red, pointed ears, and a long snout that was filled with razor sharp teeth. Its reflexes were as fast as lightning and within the time it took to take a breath it had ripped out the side of Kronos's neck. They stood watching in horror as it lapped up Kronos's blood with its long black tongue.

The moment Vladimir opened the castle door, Ivana wobbled over to him. Wrapping her arms around him, she cried, "There was a voice; it sounded like you, Vladimir. He told me to come to him, and that he was hurt. When I got to the garden door, I saw him; he looked just like you. If it weren't for Clotho, I wouldn't have gone out. It was awful. We watched him out in the garden as he changed into a horrible creature. Vladimir, he was taunting us; he said that you killed his mate and that he wouldn't stop until the baby and I were dead."

Clotho could sense his rage while he held Ivana tight in his arms. In his head, he heard Clotho say, "Vladimir, control your emotions. Remember, our lives depend on how well you can contain yourself."

He shot back his response, and in her mind she heard him snarl, "He's threatening my family."

"I know, just remember we are stronger if we keep our wits and stand together."

Vladimir looked down at Ivana and said, "I want you to know, I would never kill anyone."

"I know that."

"Clotho thinks you might have fed on his mate, while she was in the form of a wolf."

Vladimir wrapped his arms around Ivana and said, "I'm sorry that I put you and the baby in this kind of danger. I'm sorry that I took the life of another person. If I had only known that such creatures existed, I could have been more careful. I knew nothing of them, and now because of that, your life is in danger."

Clotho patted Vladimir on the arm and said, "No one knew of their existence until the night Rodolfo snuck up with a pack of wolves. To his dismay, they turned into humans. After befriending them, there was a code that we followed. We would not hunt wolves and they would not come into our villages."

“So, because I broke the code and drank from the throat of a wolf, now everyone has to pay the price.”

“The code is sacred; once broken, nothing can fix it.”

“You’re saying there’s nothing I can do to fix this.”

“I’ve summoned Rodolfo; he’ll know what to do.”

Night after night, they could feel his evil presence, but Vladimir was fast enough to elude him long enough to feed for himself and his family. But when he would try to go down to the village, all the entrances were blocked.

During the day, Aether and Zephyrus would escort people to their homes so that they could bring back clothes, food and warm blankets. The church was now their home until they could come up with a plan on how to keep their village safe from the creature that had now killed Kronos and his wife.

How could they fight something so evil? How could they ever trust their friends or neighbors to be who they say they are? That creature looked just like Nyxie, and Vladimir said that he thought it was a shape shifter, so that meant that it could look like anyone of them.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The following night, a storm rolled in over the mountain. Its angry roar was like nothing they had ever heard before. The vivid lightning crackled through the very air that they breathed, and the thunder was so loud their ears ached. Between the lightning and thunder, they could hear his constant taunting. His laughter was as loud as the thunder itself. Then he said, “Where is Vladimir? I see he is not here to protect you. So why is it that you are willing to give up your own lives for him? Lure him here as I have asked, then I will leave you be. Otherwise, you will live in constant fear of not knowing if I am someone you know or love.”

Zephyrus’s wife sat holding Nyxie and Kronos’s baby girl. She stood up and said, “Look at this baby I hold, she is orphaned. How many more children are we willing to do that to? Just so we can protect a man that we don’t even know?”

Everyone began to shout all at once. Aether yelled, “Silence!! We’re not handing over anyone and that is final. You have no idea what that creature is capable of, or if he will do as he promises. For all we know, we could hand over Vladimir to him and then he could still kill us all. At least we have Vladimir to help lead us; if we hand him over, we have nothing.”

After Aether eased their fear, and the storm rolled out, they fell asleep to the soft lullaby of the rain that hit the tin roof.

Ivana's scream drowned out the loud clap of thunder. Vladimir was at her side before the next strike of lightning could light up the sky. Squeezing Vladimir's hand, she said, "The baby's coming."

Clotho shouted, "Vladimir, I need you to bring fresh linens and water up to your room. Now, go and hurry!" Clotho and Ivana disappeared out of the library, and reappeared inside her and Vladimir's bedchamber.

By the time Vladimir had entered his bedchamber, five minutes had passed by. While setting down the water, he said in a sarcastic voice, "Damn it, Clotho, when are you going to show me how you disappear like that?"

"In due time my dear nephew."

The constant thunder and lightning stayed in rhythm with Ivana's screams. Dawn was soon approaching, and Ivana's labor was still the same. She pulled Vladimir down close to her and said, "The sun will be coming up soon, and I don't want to have the baby without you. Please Vladimir, do something."

He looked over at Clotho and asked, "What can we do?"

"Let's get her up, and have her walk around; maybe the gravity will help push the baby down into the proper position."

After twenty minutes, with her in excruciating pain, they laid her back down; still no change.

"Vladimir, I need you to put your hands on Ivana's stomach. With your mind, tell the baby that he needs to turn around."

Willing to do anything to help Ivana, Vladimir laid both his head and hands on Ivana's stomach.

Using his mind and voice, he said, "Hey, little guy, I'm your papa; your mommy needs your help, you need to turn the other way. Come on sweet baby, move." Vladimir could feel the baby move, and with each movement, Ivana would scream. Only fifteen minutes passed from the time the baby moved and he was born.

Clotho handed the baby to Ivana. With tears in her eyes she cried, "Vladimir, he looks just like you." His long black hair barely covered his tiny ears, long eyelashes nearly obscured his piercing black eyes, skin soft and pale as cream.

"He's perfect," whispered Vladimir.

Ivana kissed the top of her son's head and said, "Nikola shall be your name."

Vladimir kissed Ivana's mouth; with their lips still touching he whispered, "Thank you my love."

Ivana whispered back, "I love you."

Clotho interrupted their warm family embrace when she said, “Ivana, you need to try and nurse.”

After several attempts, Nikola kept spitting the milk out. Ivana looked over at Clotho and said,  
“What am I doing wrong? I can’t get him to feed.”

“Sweetheart, I don’t think it’s you. Vladimir, give me your hand. With her long nail, she sliced the tip of his finger open. Now put your finger in the baby’s mouth.” Immediately, Nikola began to suckle on Vladimir’s blood. Just before Vladimir surrendered to the day sleep, he fed the baby one last time. Throughout the day, Ivana and Clotho fed the baby their blood; he tolerated it, but preferred his father’s.

At the break of dawn, Aether awoke to the same musical sound of the rain that pounded on the tin roof the night before. With a sigh of relief, he knew they would have twelve hours without the worry of being stalked, until he heard Zephyrus call out his name. The two of them were the only ones awake, and they wanted to keep it that way for the time being. At least until they found the Argos family. Triton, his wife Adonis, and their son Car were missing and the back door was ajar.

They walked out to the back of the church and followed the narrow stone path that led to the small cemetery. Just on the other side of the white picket fence was a large pool of blood. As it mingled with the rain, it ran down the hill, like a winding river of blood. It looked like every drop of blood was drained from their bodies, and there in Triton’s shriveled right hand was a note.

It read,

“One by one, your families will meet the same demise as did the Argos family. Save yourselves or pay the price.

Sincerely, Marquis de Sade”

Asius awoke on the church floor with a voice talking in his head; it said, “Go out to the cemetery and see what they’re trying to hide from you. Asius, you must decide for yourself what must be done.”

On his way out the back door, Asius woke Nestor and Zetes. In a whisper, so not to wake the women, Asius said, “I think Aether and Zephyrus are trying to hide something from us. The three men walked up on Aether wrapping a body in a sheet, while Zephyrus was digging a hole. Asius yelled, “What the hell are you doing?”

Then he heard the voice in his head say, “There’s a note, it’s in the bag on the ground.”

Reaching down, he picked up the note, and read it out loud. After reading, he shouted, “What the hell! Why are you trying to hide this? Don’t you think we have a right to know what we’re facing?”

Before Aether could respond, the three men stormed back to the church, telling everyone about Triton and his family. Asius started making wild accusations about how Aether and Zephyrus were only protecting Vladimir, and that they didn't care if they all died, as long as Vladimir kept giving them money.

Aether waited until Asius was finished ranting, then he said, "I have been friends with the lot of you since we were young lads. You all know since I took on the role as constable our village has been safe up until now. What we are facing out there is evil, and you can't trust it. If you don't believe me, go out there and look at what it did to Triton and his family. All of you saw what it did to Kronos. Trust in Vladimir. He said if we stay in the church we'd be safe. No one has been attacked except for the ones that ventured out on their own. Once they stepped out of the church, they were brutally attacked, and it wasn't Vladimir that attacked them. If we hand Vladimir over to the creature, who is to say when it would ever end? With Vladimir on our side, at least we have someone to help us, to tell us what to do next. Without him, we're stuck here."

Asius shouted, "We haven't seen Vladimir in days. So how can he tell us what to do? He left us here to fend for ourselves. I say we go get him."

Zephyrus was tired of hearing Asius ranting. He stood up and said, "You know there's not enough time to go all the way up to the mountain and back down by nightfall. We would be stuck in the forest, and at the mercy of that creature."

"I refuse to be a prisoner of this church for one more night." Without saying another word, Asius, Zetes, and Nestor stormed out of the church.

Zephyrus started to walk toward the door. Aether grabbed his arm and said, "Let them go. There's nothing you can say to change their minds."

The sun had set over the mountain, and a strange thick fog settled in around the small village. All were in the church for the night with the exception of Asius, Zetes and Nestor.

Vladimir awoke to the sound of his son's soft squeaky cooing. When he rolled over, Nikola was between him and a sleeping Ivana. Kissing the top of Nikola's head, he said, "Good evening little man."

While staring at his son, he heard Ivana say, "I think he might be hungry, and apparently he likes your blood better than Clotho's or mine."

Vladimir laughed as he stroked the side of his son's face. Then he looked over at Ivana and said, "He was awake during the day?"

"Yes."

"The sun, did it bother him?"

“His eyes seemed to be a little sensitive, otherwise he was fine.”

“What does Clotho think?”

“She’s not sure. We did some tests on him; we already know he likes blood, not milk. He can be exposed to the sun, but Clotho thinks only in short amounts of time. She thinks he’ll burn easily; she’s also concerned about how sensitive his eyes are. We also know he’s very strong; when he squeezed my finger earlier today, it turned purple.”

Vladimir nicked the tip of his finger with his sharp tooth, and placed his bleeding finger into his son’s mouth. Nikola cooed softly as he enjoyed his feeding. Vladimir laughed at his son’s funny expressions as he fed. Vladimir said, “Nikola, I don’t want to hear that you hurt your mommy again. We are strong men and we protect our women, we don’t hurt them, especially Mommy.” Nikola opened his eyes cooed loudly, then closed them. Shocked, Vladimir looked at Ivana and said, “I think he understood me.”

“Clotho had the same feeling.” Before Ivana could finish her sentence, there was a loud knock on the door.

Clotho yelled, “Vladimir, I feel evil approaching!”

Vladimir was opening the door before Ivana even knew he had left the bed. As soon as he saw Clotho, she shouted, “Go, feed Vladimir, and get back as soon as you can.”

“I’m not leaving my family.”

“You’ve been feeding the baby; you need to replenish so you can be strong. Now go! Vladimir, be as fast as you can.” When he saw the fear in Clotho’s face, his heart began to pound.

He kissed Ivana and his son and said, “Stay in the room with Clotho, and I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

As he sprinted away, she shouted, “I love you, Vladimir.”

Within minutes he was standing in the forest. The remnants of the rain still dripped from the leaves and the ground was soggy. The fog that had rolled in made him uneasy. It was in a strange formation, and the smell was like nothing he had ever smelled before. When he moved, the formation would move. Immediately, Vladimir knew he was in for a fight, a fight that he had to win, not for himself but for his family. When Vladimir heard the familiar laugh, he shouted, “Face me like a man, instead of hiding behind the cover of fog.”

One by one, the men stepped out of the foggy formation, until Vladimir was completely surrounded. Their clothes were alike; shirts and slacks black, boots to the knees with razor sharp toes, and their black cloaks brushed the wet ground. Vladimir instinctively knew they were

brothers; their hair was long and black, they all had matching dimples in their cheeks when they smiled, and their black eyes were not human, but looked like that of a canine species.

The first man that attacked Vladimir was so fast that he didn't even know what hit him. The second blow was just as fast and furious. The third time sent Vladimir flying through the air, not stopping until he hit a tree with such force that it snapped in half. His bleeding body was so weak he could barely move, and then he felt a gentle touch. Looking up, he saw Clotho. Pushing her away, he shouted, "Get back to Ivana and my son."

"They are safe. It is you that needs my help."

The laughter was so loud that it echoed off the mountain, and then Marquis de Sade shouted, "Retreat, my brothers, the deed is done."

Clotho disappeared, leaving Vladimir lying on the forest ground. Looking up to the sky, he could see and smell the black smoke that billowed over the treetops. With very little strength left, he pulled himself up and ran as fast as he could.

Desperately, Vladimir tried to reach his son and Ivana. Just as he made it to the castle grounds, he saw the fire that had engulfed the entire castle. Hearing the flutter of their heartbeats for the last time, grief consumed him as he fell to his knees, screaming out their names.

He had not realized how long he had sat and watched his home burn down, with his family in it, until he heard her voice; the sweet voice of his Ivana. In his head she said, "You must leave now; go Vladimir, find shelter, for the light will be up soon. We are gone from this place; we are warm and safe and shall always be in your heart and mind. We will love you always."

He pleaded for her to stay; and when her soft voice faded, it was replaced with a deep, dark sinister voice that continued to echo in his mind. It didn't take long for him to realize that the male voice was his own. He said, "I now walk through the shadowy realm between life and death. I am neither man nor beast, I am something else entirely. I am solitude. I am darkness. I am the shadow you fear in the night. I am a lonely spirit whose destiny was chosen for me. I AM ALONE!!!"

## **Chapter Eight**

Silently, the three of them walked down the mountain road. Just before entering the forest, Nestor stopped. Running his trembling fingers through his long black hair, he cried out, "Oh my God, what have we done?"

A stranger's voice behind them said, "I would like to know that myself."

Asius was the first to turn around. The dark stranger stood at least six-eight, his long black hair blowing in the wind, and when he talked he hadn't tried to hide his long fangs. In an arrogant

voice, Asius shouted, "We did what we had to do to protect our families and the village we live in."

The stranger laughed and said, "If you think that you will make it back to your village alive, then you don't know Marquis de Sade. Yes, he will allow the people of your village to live, but you on the other hand all of you will die, and it will be brutal. You fools, you should have listened to your constable; he knew what he was talking about. Only Vladimir could have saved you, but no, you had to take matters into your own hands, and now you will pay the price. You had better hope that it's de Sade that hunts you down and not Vladimir."

With a trembling voice, Nestor said, "What do you mean, Vladimir? He's dead."

"You fools, he wasn't in the castle. Clotho, his wife and newborn son were the only ones home. You killed his family, and his son was only a day old."

Nestor looked at the other two men and said, "We deserve to die."

As he turned and walked away, Asius shouted, "You were always the weak one. Go, go get yourself killed; see if we care."

The dark stranger laughed and said, "He's the only one that will make it out alive." Swirling his long black cloak around his body, Rodolfo disappeared.

Nestor walked over a mile before he noticed the strange fog behind him, then he heard the terrifying screams of his friends. Turning around, he began to run to them, and then he heard a voice emerge from the fog. It said, "There is nothing you can do for them; now go and tell your village that they are free."

"I can't leave them; they're my friends."

"Leave, or die with them. Believe me, they would walk away if it were you screaming."

"But. . ."

"Go now, or die!"

Nestor walked up the steps of the church just as the doors began to open. When Aether and Zephyrus came down to him he said, "It's over! They're all dead, including Vladimir. Marquis de Sade has spared me so that I could tell the story; the story of his brutality and how he does not tolerate betrayal. We are to never speak of this day to anyone."

Aether and Zephyrus rode up to the mountain to see for themselves. Before they reached the castle, they could smell the smoldering fire. Zephyrus dismounted his horse and walked back to the garden that they had stood in the day they met Ivana. Bowing his head, he said, "Dear God, what have they done? Clotho was in there, along with Ivana and the baby!"

With his head bowed, he said, "Aerther, Vladimir was our friend; he didn't deserve this. He was a good man, and those damn fools led Marquis de Sade right to them. It's their fault."

"Yes, it was, but they paid the ultimate price with their lives."

"Nestor should pay for this."

"You know that's not true. He would never harm women, let alone a new baby."

"I know, but Aerther, he came up here with those damn fools. That makes him just as guilty as the rest of them."

"That's something he'll have to live with for the rest of his life."

"It's not enough."

Aether patted Zephyrus on the back and said, "Yes it is, my friend. Yes it is."

Heeding Marquis de Sade's warning, they never spoke of the tragedy and loss they endured. Until one night, Nestor mysteriously disappeared, never to be seen again.

## **Chapter Nine**

Vladimir awoke with a smile on his face, anticipating the feeding of Nikola. Rolling over, his smile suddenly changed to panic. Panic to grief, to anguish, to rage. His family was gone and he was alone.

The day sleep had healed his wounds, but his heart ached. He lay on the cave floor, unable to move. The pain was so severe; he lost the will to even feed. Nights flew by, and still Vladimir would not feed. All he could do was sit in front of the burned out ruins, hoping to hear Ivana's sweet voice in his head, but it never came.

On the fifth night, he cried his last tears for Ivana, Nikola, Clotho, and the burned out castle that held the memories of his parents. Just as he was about to walk away, a strange woman screamed in his mind, "This is no way to mourn my granddaughter; she would want you to live. Now, go and feed, you fool."

She was right; Ivana would want him to live. The only time Vladimir would leave the cave he was sheltering in, was to feed, and then he'd come right back. Before he knew it, days turned to weeks, weeks to months, and months to years.

Ten years had passed, and Vladimir remained in the cave. His clothes were tattered, his hair long and dirty, and his body smelled like that of a cave dweller that he had become.

After feeding one night, Vladimir went to the banks of the Moldavia River. Sitting down, he looked at his forced reflection in the water of himself. He said out loud, "It's time to move on."

A voice behind him said, "I totally agree."

Jumping to his feet in a crouched stance, Vladimir snarled, "Who the hell are you?"

"I am Rodolfo. I was summoned to come to your aid."

"Ten years too damn late, don't you think?"

Rodolfo's lips curved into a slight smile when he said, "What had happened to your family was written in the book of life. So, my being there would not have changed the outcome of events. I arrived right afterward and saw your grief, and that was when I decided to give you time to heal.

Plus, I'm tired of watching your pathetic life pass by; it's now time for you to pull yourself together, and fulfill your destiny as a vampire.

My God man, you're a vampire; don't you smell yourself?"

"Piss off Rodolfo, I'm not in the mood."

Rodolfo snapped his fingers and instantly Vladimir was clean, shaved, and had on new clothes and a long black cloak. Within a blink of an eye, Vladimir and Rodolfo stood in a large Gothic castle. It wasn't light and airy like his and Ivana's castle. The floors were black marble, the fireplace was large enough to stand in, and in it was a fire just as big. The black granite torches that were mounted on the black walls were lit. Everything was black, with the exception of the red flames that flickered; the castle looked like it had belonged to Hades himself.

"Where the hell are we?" Vladimir demanded.

"My home, and I demand respect while you're in it."

"Respect, my ass. I didn't ask to be brought here." Vladimir turned and tried to walk out the door, but it wouldn't open. No matter how hard he pulled, still it wouldn't budge. Twirling around, Vladimir shouted, "Open the damn door."

Before Vladimir's mind could even register what had happened, Rodolfo had slammed him up against the door and said, "I told you, I demand respect."

No matter how hard Vladimir fought, Rodolfo held him back without any effort. Giving up, Vladimir slid down the side of the door, and sat on the floor. With a defeated look, Vladimir asked, "What do you want from me?"

"What I have said all along; respect. Now, you must get some rest; tomorrow your training will start, and until you have learned all of your powers, you will be staying in my home. I've hired you a squire; he'll be at your constant call."

"I don't need a squire."

Just then the squire walked in. Rodolfo said, "Vladimir, this is Nestor, your squire. He will show you to your room."

After Nestor opened the door to Vladimir's room, Vladimir said, "Do I know you?"

"I don't think so my Lord. Master Rodolfo says all squires look the same with our silly uniforms on."

"That could be; all my mother's guards looked the same, with the exception of my father."

If Vladimir knew that Nestor was at his castle on the night of his family's brutal attack, the man would have been dead before he made it out of the vestibule.

Rodolfo erased Vladimir's memory of Nestor, and Nestor's punishment for his role in the attack on Vladimir's family was to serve Vladimir, for eternity.

## **Chapter Ten**

The squire entered Vladimir's room just as the sun went down. After laying out his clothes for the day, the squire said, "My Lord, your food is waiting for you."

"Thank you just put it on the table."

"I don't think you understand. The lady is waiting just outside your door."

Vladimir jumped out of bed and shouted, "I don't feed from humans!"

"Master Rodolfo said that feeding from humans will make you stronger."

"I could give a damn what your Master Rodolfo thinks. I will not kill a human."

Before Nestor could explain, Rodolfo appeared in Vladimir's room. Patting Nestor on the back, "I'll explain everything to him."

After Nestor left the room, Vladimir said, "I'm not feeding off of innocent people."

"You don't have to kill them. Just take what you need; you'll know when to stop."

Before Vladimir could protest, in walked a beautiful woman. She was nothing like Ivana. Her hair fell in long blond ringlets, eyes as blue as the sea, and her skin was creamy white and smooth as silk. Without saying a word, he stood and glared.

When Natasha looked into Vladimir's dark eyes, all she could see was pain. Just as she was about to touch his hand, a low growl emerged deep from his throat, "Don't touch me."

"I'm sorry my Lord, I didn't mean to offend you."

"No, it's not that, I just don't like to be touched."

"I will remember that, my Lord."

She knew why she was there, and what he was about to do, but she wasn't afraid. Her mother had been Rodolfo's lover since she was a small child. She learned one night what he was when she woke up in the middle of the night afraid. She ran into their room and saw Rodolfo drinking the blood from her mother's throat. Instead of being punished, Rodolfo carried her back to her room that he had decorated just for her. While rocking her to sleep, he sang a soft melody; she looked up at him and said, "Goodnight, Papa."

Although he wasn't her real father, she loved him the same, and she knew he loved her. So, no, she wasn't afraid of the man he sent her to.

Months flew by, and the only thing Vladimir would touch on Natasha's body was her shoulder as he fed from her throat. When he was done, Natasha would leave the room hurt and disappointed that he had ignored her. Vladimir did not realize that every time he would feed from her that her heart, body, and mind intertwined with his. Until one night, Natasha looked up into his eyes. Doing what she had never done before, she stroked the side of his face. She knew she was to never touch him, so when he stared at her with his dark mysterious eyes, she was terrified he would reject her, push her away, tell her to get out. But what happened next, she would have never thought.

The moment Vladimir gently pulled Natasha into his arms, a surge of excitement ran down him. It wasn't the loving desire he felt with Ivana. No, it was hard, raw lust; he wanted to ravage her right here, right now, on the floor. Not his bed; his bed was for Ivana. His need was so strong; he hadn't realized that she was trembling. Looking down at her, he saw the tears that rolled down her cheeks. After shaking off the overwhelming urge to devour her in every way possible, he said, "I promise I will not harm you."

"I know," she whispered.

Slowly, he removed her clothes; laying her down on the soft rug in front of the fireplace, he began to explore her curvaceous body with his hands and mouth. He would not enter her body for that was only for Ivana.

Running her fingers through his long black hair, Natasha moaned from the pure ecstasy that had consumed her. Vladimir smiled down at her as he heard her musical pleas for mercy.

"Make love to me, Vladimir," she moaned as her body burned for the release of the raging desire that ran throughout her.

As he continued to please her, he said, "Enjoy what I offer you, my dear."

The moment Vladimir sank his long sharp teeth into her throat, she screamed from the raging release that left her body.

After taking only what he needed, he brushed her hair back behind her ears and said, "I can't make love to you Natasha, not yet."

"I'll wait as long as it takes."

Caressing the side of her face, he leaned down with intentional slowness and fed upon her mouth.

## Chapter Eleven

A year had quickly passed by, with Natasha coming to Vladimir's room every night, and Rodolfo training him how to fight with weapons and hand to hand combat. Rodolfo even summoned a man from a small island off Japan to help show Vladimir a strange fighting technique that was taught in his country. With his constant training, Vladimir was lethal, and once a week he would drink a glass of Rodolfo's powerful blood. Vladimir was becoming stronger and stronger as Rodolfo's ancient blood raged through his veins.

Vladimir awoke to the sound of a raging storm; looking out his window that overlooked the Ligurian Sea, all he saw was the angry waves that slammed up over the bluff. A grin spread across his face when he smelled Natasha walking into his room. Immediately, he wanted her in a way that he hadn't wanted a woman in over eleven years. Turning toward her, he watched as she walked to him.

Taking her hand, he led her to his bed. Smiling, Natasha said, "Not the floor?"

"I want to make love to you Natasha, and when I feed from your throat, I want to be inside you, feel you all around me the moment our pleasure erupts into pure ecstasy."

Natasha's emotions choked her as she realized what he'd just said to her. She wanted to make love to him the very first night, but she knew his love for his wife stood in the way. Natasha knew if she was patient, that one day he would want her. The only thing was, she hadn't thought that it would take over a year before he came to her.

Gently laying her on the bed, he slowly removed her dress. Opening her eyes, she said, "I love you, Vladimir."

Caressing her face, he said, "I'm sorry Natasha, but those are three words I will not curse you with."

With tears in her eyes she said, "Make love to me Vladimir."

Melting away his own clothes with his mind, he laid next to her. As his hands slowly explored her body, and caressed her every curve, she begged for mercy. Just as she thought she couldn't take it, he slowly slid into her. When Natasha screamed out his name, he sank his teeth into her throat. The pleasure that the two of them shared ran through them like wild fire. Pulling his teeth out of her throat, he licked the small wound with his tongue.

With his thumb, he brushed the tears from her cheek, "Why didn't you tell me that you never made love before?"

"I wanted to be with you, Vladimir. I thought if you knew that I was saving myself for the man that I would marry one day, you would push me away."

"Oh, Natasha you know what I am, and I can't offer you what you need."

"I need only you my love."

Knowing that she was unable to bear his children, he made love to her all night, not fearing that she would awaken like Ivana did all those years ago. Weak, cold and with child, a child he would not want for fear of losing it. That was a pain he could not bear again.

As the nights passed, Vladimir found himself enjoying Natasha more and more, until it was her that filled his daydreams instead of Ivana. He had not even realized Natasha had taken away the pain of losing Ivana until the night he and Rodolfo were fencing, and a loud voice echoed throughout the castle. It said, "What have you done, you damn fool."

Immediately, using his new powers that Rodolfo had taught him, Vladimir locked down the castle with his mind, and summoned Natasha and his squire at the same time.

Calmly, Rodolfo walked over to Vladimir, handed him the sword and said, "Protect Natasha and your squire. Vladimir, once I walk out that door, lock it behind me; if for some reason you're forced out of the castle, do not leave them behind."

"That is one mistake I will never repeat," he replied.

After hearing that Rodolfo was leaving the castle by himself, shocked, Nestor said, "Master, you can't hold him off alone."

Rodolfo smiled and said, "There's a lot you still need to learn about the powers I possess."

Before leaving the room, Rodolfo looked back at Vladimir and said, "If I'm not back by sunset tomorrow, Nestor will know what to do."

Vladimir could sense evil in the air; grabbing Rodolfo's arm he said, "If you're in trouble, let me help."

Rodolfo laughed and said, "My friend, it's not I who is in trouble."

Before Vladimir could ask who, Rodolfo vanished.

"Damn it, I hate it when they do that. Clotho promised me that she would show me how."

Vladimir stopped talking. He couldn't finish his sentence; the pain would engulf him if he thought of that time so long ago, a time just like tonight; but tonight he would not allow history to repeat itself.

## Chapter Twelve

After his squire retired to his room for the night, Vladimir and Natasha laid by the fire. Sensing his anguish, she just laid in his arms without saying a word.

Just before surrendering to the day sleep, Vladimir said, "Promise me Natasha that you will stay with Nestor throughout the day."

Before she could reply, he had fallen asleep, but this time he awoke throughout the day. Confused, he summoned Nestor.

When his squire entered the room, Vladimir said, "Why is it that I'm awake while the sun is high?"

"It's the blood of the ancient one working through your veins."

"What are you talking about, what ancient one?"

"Master Rodolfo is over eleven-thousand-years-old, his blood is ancient, and he has become accustomed to the sun."

"Does that mean I can go out in the sun?"

"Soon, but not yet, the more you feed from the master's blood, the more immune to the sun you will become."

"Has Rodolfo returned?"

"Not as of yet, but he has stored blood for you."

The moment Vladimir drank Rodolfo's blood, a strange foggy day sleep consumed him. He dreamed that he was in a dense forest, tied to a tree. The limbs were bare and alive, whipping at his naked skin. As the blood from his wounds dripped to the forest floor, a strange wolf like creature emerged from the depths of the earth. Its gray, hairless body stood well over eight foot, and his long snout was filled with sharp teeth. Vladimir wasn't afraid when the creature began to lick the blood from his wounds with its long black tongue, and with each lick, his wounds healed. When the last drop of blood was licked clean from Vladimir's body the creature slowly transformed into a tall dark man. In the shadowy realm of the forest Vladimir's powers were

rendered useless. He could barely see the stranger; his shiny black hair hung down to his shoulders, eyes dark and wicked. His clothes were nothing like Vladimir had ever seen, black leather pants and a white button down shirt with the cuffs rolled up, black boots with silver buckles, and the long black cloak was lined with blood red silk. When the man stepped out of the shadow and Vladimir got a good look at him, he realized that it was Rodolfo.

Suddenly, a blinding light shined down through the trees. Terrified, Vladimir knew it was the sun, slowly moving toward him. As soon as the first ray hit the top of his foot, his whole body became rigid. It wasn't painful, just a strange electrical shock running through him. The more the sun engulfed him, the more his body surged with energy. The foreign twine that enslaved him to the tree snapped free. Falling to the ground, he landed on his feet, fully clothed in the same black Gothic attire that Rodolfo wore.

Rodolfo handed Vladimir a pair of odd looking eye covers. Not knowing what to do with them, Rodolfo pulled out a similar pair, and put them over his eyes. He said, "Put them on Vladimir, they'll protect your eyes from the sun."

Doing as Rodolfo said, he put the eye covers on, and instantly the bright sun was dimmed, as if a shade was pulled down. Vladimir's burning eyes felt an immediate relief. Looking back at Rodolfo, "What are these things?"

"In the distant future, they will be called sunglasses."

Baffled by his remark Vladimir gave him a strange look, "How is it that you know the future?"

"In time you, yourself, will learn the powers that we possess, but for now there are more important things that need to be done. I'm in need of your help; go to Nestor, he will know what to do. Remember Vladimir, do not leave them alone."

Immediately, Vladimir awoke from his dream, fully clothed in the black Gothic attire he had on in the dream, and on the end table were the sunglasses.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

With his new Gothic clothes and sunglasses on, Vladimir walked into the sitting room where Natasha and Nestor were waiting for him. The moment he walked in, Natasha gasped for air. He was wicked looking; dark, seductive, captivating, yet dangerous, with a slight edge of evil.

Walking straight to Natasha with unhuman speed, he swept her up into his arms. With her breasts pressed hard against his chest, he lifted his sunglasses up. Looking down at her with his dark seductive eyes, he whispered in an arrogant voice, "You look good enough to feed upon."

She muttered, "MMM, I love this new look."

After a long sensuous kiss, Vladimir scraped his teeth across her throat. Just before sinking them in, Nestor cleared his throat, and said, "The horse and carriage are ready, my Lord."

Vladimir snarled at the interruption, "If you can excuse us for a moment, we'll meet you out at the carriage."

As soon as Nestor left the room, Vladimir pulled Natasha back into his arms with such speed that it was a blur. Rubbing his hand up and down the small of her back, Vladimir suckled on the lobe of her ear. Slowly, he began kissing down her throat. With her dress slightly pulled up, he slid into her just as he sank his teeth in.

Natasha screamed out his name as their bodies convulsed with pleasure. While holding her weak body which was drained by the pure climax that raged through her, Vladimir leaned down and licked the wound on her throat watching it heal right before his eyes. Revitalizing her with a passionate kiss he said, "We need to go, Nestor's waiting."

Nestor stood, holding open the carriage door. As soon as Natasha and Vladimir climbed in, Nestor handed Vladimir five large pouches. Looking inside them, they were all filled with gold. Vladimir said, "What is this for?"

"It is yours my Lord. Rodolfo recovered your gold from the castle the night of the fire and has been holding it for you ever since."

After Nestor closed the door, Natasha picked one of the coins up, studying both sides. She looked over at Vladimir and said, "I have never seen gold before. Rodolfo always made sure my mother and I had everything we needed."

"What happened to your mother?"

"Nothing, Rodolfo sent her to my grandmother's until she gives birth to my brother."

Vladimir's breath caught in his throat as he remembered the birth of his own son. Unable to speak, he leaned back and took slow, deep breaths.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

Sensing his anguish, Natasha stroked the side of his face. Smiling, she laid her head on his chest and silently listened to his heartbeat.

The constant rhythm of the carriage ride rocked Natasha to sleep.

Sweat rolled down the side of her face as she cried out, "Please Vladimir, help us."

Running down the long corridor with the baby in her arms, there were flames everywhere. She knew there was no escaping. Opening the first door she came to, Natasha and the baby ran to the

far side of the room. When the flames burned through the door, Natasha kissed her baby's face.  
She said "I love you, Nickola."

Just before the flames consumed her, Natasha jolted out of her deep sleep, screaming,  
"Nickola!!!"

With tears streaming down her face, she looked at a shocked Vladimir and said, "She took our  
baby."

Rage slammed through him with such force that he hadn't realized how hard he grabbed a hold of  
Natasha until she cried out in pain. Before letting go, Vladimir shouted, "Don't you ever speak of  
my son again."

Staring into her eyes, Vladimir was trying to grasp at the reason behind Natasha's hateful words.  
That's when he saw that her bright blue eyes were now identical to Ivana's. He shouted, "Who  
the hell are you?"

Cradling herself in the corner of the seat, she cried, "I don't know why you're so angry at me. I  
fell asleep and had a dream that I was in a fire. Just as the fire was about to engulf my baby and  
I, a strange woman appeared out of nowhere. She said that she would come back for me, but she  
never did. My baby's face looked just like yours."

"You called out the name Nickola."

"That was his name. Vladimir, I could feel the warmth of his skin, the smell of his black hair.  
The dream was so real, and the sense of his loss is so overwhelming, it's eating at me like a  
disease."

Laying her head down on her legs, she began to cry. He saw the black bruises on her arms where  
he had grabbed her.

Wrapping his arms around her he said, "I'm sorry."

"Vladimir, why are you mad at me?"

"My son's name is Nickola, and he and my wife died in a fire."

Looking up at him with Ivana's eyes, she cried, "Vladimir, what is happening to me?"

"I don't know my love, but we'll find out."

While Natasha slept in his arms, Vladimir couldn't stop thinking about his son. Was he alive, had  
Clotho made it to the castle in time? Why would she take him, and not Ivana? Maybe it was too  
late, she couldn't go back, but why not bring Nikola back to him? What does Natasha have to do  
with all of this; he could sense that she knew nothing. Strange things were happening, her blue  
eyes, why were they now brown, not just any brown, the same color brown as Ivana's. Vladimir's

senses told him that if he found Ivana's family, he would find the answers and just maybe his son. He also wondered if Rodolfo knew, of course he knew, but how much of it did he approve of.

Natasha was bounced awake, as the carriage dredged up the rugged mountain road. With sleepy eyes she looked up at Vladimir, her heart broke when she saw the way he looked down at her. She knew that his feelings had changed for her, but why, it was just a dream, or was it. Without saying a word Natasha grabbed the blanket that was under the bench seat, covering up she stared out the window at the snow covered mountain peaks. As the scenery passed by Natasha saw strange images flashing before her eyes. It was as if she were someone else. She could see little girls that looked to be the same age playing in a field, one's hair was as black as night, and the other was shiny like the sun. The woman in the far distance yelled, "Ivana, Natasha, it's time to come in."

Natasha heard herself yell, "OK, Momma we're coming."

She held Ivana's hand till they reached the house. That was when Natasha saw that it wasn't her mother, but another woman, a woman that looked just like Natasha. Suddenly, another vision flashed before her eyes, this time her and Ivana were being dragged away by three men, three men that she knew, one of which was their father and his two brothers. Natasha couldn't believe that her life was a lie, and that she had a twin sister whose husband she was in love with. Just before they arrived in the town of Turin, in the northern region of Italy, Natasha had her last vision for the day.

Ivana and her were sent to their cold bedroom without food. With Ivana being the smallest, she shivered and said, "I'm cold, and hungry Natasha."

After covering Ivana with her own blanket she whispered, "There's berries down by the river, I'll go get us some."

"NO, Natasha if Papa catches you, you'll get a beaten."

Kissing, Ivana's cheek she said, "I'll be right back."

Before she even made it to the bank of the river, Rodolfo grabbed her, instantly disappearing. Tears rolled down her face the moment she realized that her sweet sister had been left behind with that wretched family.

In her mind she whispered, "Ivana I would have never left you alone with them."

Natasha jumped, when she heard Ivana in her head say, "I know my sweet sister I saw the man that took you that night."

As Ivana's voice faded it was replaced with Vladimir's, he asked, "Are you OK?"

Without looking at him she said, "I'm fine."

The tears continued to stream down her face, she knew he could sense her anguish, but he didn't care to console her, not even with a gentle touch.

By the time the carriage pulled up to the inn, her tears had dried, but what shocked Natasha the most was when Vladimir rented three separate rooms. When Nestor brought her luggage up to her room he asked, "Is everything alright my Lady?"

Smiling she just shook her head yes, fearing if she spoke she would burst into tears. Closing the door behind her, Natasha climbed into bed and cried herself to sleep.

When Rodolfo appeared in her dream he said, "My sweet child why are you so sad?"

"Why is it that you lied to me my whole life, and what is happening to me, I feel so strange? Father please, help me."

"My sweet child, at first light Vladimir will be asleep, that is when I want you to go to the stables, and there I will have a carriage waiting for you."

"I love him father, but I fear that he will never return the feelings."

"Patience, my dear daughter, and soon he will come to you."

Rodolfo disappeared, and at first light Natasha was on the carriage, by the time Vladimir woke she was hundreds of miles away.

## **Chapter Fifteen**

Still angry with Natasha, Vladimir couldn't stand the thought of feeding from her. Not understanding his own rage towards her he fled into the forest to feed. By the time he returned hours had past, and in his room, waiting, was an anxious Nestor. Jumping to his feet he shouted, "Did you not hear me summoning you?"

With the power of his mind, he slammed Nestor up against the wall, he said, "I'm the master, not you, I come to know one."

"Because of your arrogance, Natasha is gone. If any harm comes to her Rodolfo will kill us both, so you better hope we can find her."

When Vladimir tried to throw Nestor out of his room, he was stop by a resistance that he had not expected. This time it was Vladimir who flew across the room. Landing on his feet, he charged Nestor with so much force that the two of them smashed through the door. With his massive hand wrapped around Nestor's throat Vladimir snarled, "What the hell are you, and why is it, that my senses tell me that I know you?"

"I'm your squire, and in order to protect you during the day sleep I was granted powers equal to yours."

"Great, I have a squire that can kick my ass."

"No Master, I can only protect myself from you. If a squire turns on his master, he loses his powers, then dies a slow, painful death."

Letting go of Nestor with a ruff shove, Vladimir snarled, "Go to the stables and buy two black stallions. Make sure that they are well groomed, fed, and fast as hell."

"What about the carriage?"

"Give it to the inn keeper for the damages we caused."

"But Master, the carriage is worth way more."

The look that Vladimir gave his squire, told him to do as he was told.

Within the hour they were riding hard and fast, and in the direction in which Natasha had fled. As they raced down the mountain road, the horses' hooves sent plumes of dust spewing into the air. Their cloaks billowed behind them, creating a black ominous silhouette that frightened everyone that road up on them. Every town they came to, it seemed that they had missed the carriage by only a few hours. While resting the horses, Vladimir said, "Why is it that we can't catch up with her?"

Vladimir looked at Nestor and knew something was going on. Grabbing him by the shirt he said, "Is there anything you want to tell me?"

"No Master."

Vladimir shouted, "Damn you Rodolfo, if you're keeping her from me I'll kick your ass."

Before Vladimir knew what had happened, Rodolfo appeared out of thin air slamming Vladimir up against the wall, he said, "Never, ever threaten me, all I have to do is snap my fingers and your dead. Now what do you want?"

"I need to talk to Natasha."

"You treated my daughter like shit, and now you want my help in getting her back. You're lucky I don't kill you."

"She knows something about my son, and I want to know what it is."

"You damn fool she knows nothing, but on the other hand, I know everything. Your actions, depend on if I tell you or not."

Remembering what his father had said, "Vladimir you must always stay calm in the presence of your enemy, especially, if they have what you want."

After taking a deep breath, calmly, Vladimir asked, "What is it that you want from me?"

"My daughter's life."

"What the hell are you talking about, I would never harm her."

"Not intentionally, but there are things going on here, that are more powerful than you or I. Vladimir if we don't work together on this, Natasha will die, just like her twin sister."

"She never told me she had a sister."

"She didn't know, until the dream. That's when she started to have visions. Vladimir, Natasha and Ivana, are twins."

"NO!! That can't be."

"It's true. On the night that I was sent to rescue the girls, I could only get to Natasha, from that moment on The Three Fates erased their minds of each other."

"What are, The Three Fates?"

"They are the goddess of fate, and believe me they can be cruel. The twins' mother was also a goddess, and because Ivana was the first born she has the power to consume the second twin's life if the first one dies. Vladimir the transformation has started, and only you can stop it."

Vladimir hadn't heard the last part when he said, "I can have my Ivana back."

Rodolfo knew he had to stay calm, his daughter's life depended on it, "Vladimir, Ivana has been dead for over eleven years, if she takes over Natasha's body, Natasha dies. Is that what you want, are you telling me that Natasha meant nothing to you?"

Vladimir turned his back to Rodolfo, running his fingers through his hair, "No, I don't want Natasha to die. I care for her, but I love Ivana. Rodolfo, what am I to do?"

"You know what is right, you must save Natasha."

"But, how?"

"You must tell her, that you love her."

"I can't."

"Yes you can, I see how you look at her. Vladimir put your feelings for Ivana to rest, she's gone. Then you will see how much you love Natasha. Your daughter's life depends on what you choose."

"I have no daughter."

"Yes, you do. She grows inside of Natasha."

"That's a lie!! I could sense that she could not carry my child."

"You are right; she can't carry your male child, but a daughter, yes."

"I know the symptoms, and she had none."

"I will bring her to you; you'll sense the baby growing inside her. She herself knows not of the baby, if you tell her she will think you love her only because of the child. Then she will die."

"I need to think, can you take me to my castle back in Romania?"

"I can give you a few days, that's all. We don't have much time Vladimir."

## **Chapter Sixteen**

Rodolfo left Vladimir standing in the once beautiful garden that belonged to his sweet Ivana. Vladimir stood, gazing at the land around him. It had been over a hundred years since he had seen the mountains and forest when the sun was high in the sky. His mind drifted back to a time, where things were simpler. Hearing the memory of his father's voice brought a smile to Vladimir, a smile that hadn't spread across his face since the fire. He sat on the stone bench that he had retrieved from the mountains for his mother's garden over a century ago. Resting his head in his hands, "Father I wish you and mother were here, I don't know what to do, what to think, or feel. I wish you could tell me what to do."

Silently, he waited for his father's voice, but Vladimir knew it wouldn't come. Standing up, he began walking through the ruins of his burned out castle. Vladimir bent down to pick up a chipped teapot when he saw the reflection of a silver object. Putting the teapot down, he pushed the debris aside revealing his father's sword. Raising the sword, it looked as if it had been well kept, polished, stored in its glass case, instead of lying in the ruins. Running the tip of his finger over the priceless find, he heard someone behind him. Reeling around with the sword raised in his hand, Vladimir stumbled back, struggling to suck air into his lungs, he gasped loudly.

Laughing, at the shocked look on Vladimir's face Nickola said, "Son, you know what the right choice is. You don't need your mother nor I to tell you what to do."

"I love Ivana, but I don't want harm to come to Natasha."

"Are you sure that Ivana is what you want. Think about it my son, she came to you when you were lost and alone. She eased your pain, when there was no one else. I know you love her, but Vladimir if she showed up with Natasha which one would you have chosen?"

"It was Ivana that came to my rescue, Ivana that loved me, and Ivana that gave me a son. Not Natasha."

"That is true, my son, but it has been Natasha for over a year, it's her love that has saved you from a life of loneliness. I fear if you choose Ivana, and Natasha dies, that is when you will realize that you made a mistake. Can you live with that mistake, knowing that you could have saved Natasha's life, but instead you let her die? Ivana is your past, leave her there. Natasha is the future, go and find her, before it's too late."

When Nickola vanished, a tear ran down Vladimir's face, "I love you father."

In his mind, Vladimir heard Nickola say, "I know son, I love you to."

With the need to rest, Vladimir walked to the cave where he had lived the worst ten years of his life. The moment he surrendered to the day sleep, he began to dream. Vladimir was relaxing in a hot spring. With his eyes closed and his head lay back on the rocks, he enjoyed the bubbles that fizzled around him, massaging his body. Opening his eyes he saw Natasha swimming to him. Sinking down under the warm water, she came up right in front of him. In the warm clear water he could see her body, she looked more seductive than ever. Her swollen breast pressed against his hot skin, and when she sat on his lap Vladimir could feel her hot sweetness inviting him in. Lowering herself onto him, she threw her head back and cried out his name, "Vladimir, drink from my throat, until you feel the essence of my blood running through you."

The slow rhythm, of their bodies rocked in the water, while his hungry mouth and hands explored her breasts. Their bodies screamed for release and just as he sank his teeth into her throat, he thrust deep inside of her filling her with his seed. Laying her head on his shoulder Natasha said, "I love you Vladimir."

"Oh, Natasha."

When she slowly rose up off of him, she felt empty, bereft without him. Natasha knew, he would never return the feelings, and in that she found terrible loss, the pain of heartache engulfed her, threatened to bury her. She choked on a sob, when she said, "It's alright Vladimir, I will take only what you offer. Maybe someday you'll learn to love me."

Slowly she disappeared into the mist, and Vladimir was startled out of his dream, and at that moment he knew what he had to do.

## **Chapter Seventeen**

Eleven thousand years had passed, and still Rodolfo remembered the room he now stood in as if it were just yesterday. The cold, horrifying memories flashed before his eyes. He could see the warm, sweet blood flowing from the throat of his beautiful wife, Gaia. Looking down, he could see her blood covering his hand and bare chest. The taste of her essences in his mouth screamed out to him. To this day, he remembered her taste, her scent, her touch; everything about her still lingered in the room and in his mind. If only he had known how to control his hunger back then, she would still be alive. His senses became engulfed with pain, a pain that not even the eleven millenniums could erase. When the door behind Rodolfo slammed, he snarled when his senses filled with her sweet scent.

She screamed, "How dare you come here!"

With blinding speed, Rodolfo crossed the room. Inches from the goddess, he sucked in the very essence that surrounded her. Her beauty was like Natasha's. Blond hair, eyes blue as sapphires, skin creamy white and soft as silk. Unlike Natasha, her temper was short fused, vicious, and she could strike as fast as a viper. She showed no fear as he snarled in a husky growl, "Believe me, Aradia, this is the last place I want to be, but I warned you to never send Drago to my land."

"You knew it was time to bring Ivana back, yet you threw Natasha into Vladimir's arms. That's why I sent Drago, to try and stop you."

"Aradia, do you actually believe that Drago could have stopped me?"

With her arrogant laugh, she said, "NO! But it worked. You left them alone, and Natasha is with Drago as we speak."

"That can't be. I sent her back to my castle in Italy."

Stroking the side of his face with her long slender fingers, the goddess laughed and said, "Yes she is, and the transformation has begun."

Wrapping his massive hand around the five-foot petite goddess, he lifted her up off the ground. Once their eyes met, he snarled, "If harm comes to my daughter, I will kill you and all of your family, starting with Ivana, leaving you for last."

Before throwing her to the floor, "Aradia, enlighten me, why is it that you hate the women in your family that look like you?"

Looking up at him she growled, "My daughters and granddaughters that look like my husband Apollo can mate with vampires, and only then can they have a male child. The others who look like me, will only have females, no matter who they mate with."

As he disappeared, he could hear her haunting scream, "Vladimir will never choose Natasha over Ivana, never!!"

The bed that Natasha laid in wasn't as comfortable as the one in her own room, but it would do for now. With tears streaming down her face, she whispered to herself, "I love you Vladimir, but I'm too good to play second best. I thought I could love you enough for the both of us; I can't, and I won't."

Her eyes grew heavy, and just as they closed, she heard a soft voice say, "Come to me, Natasha. I'm just outside of the village that you're in."

Obedying the soft seductive voice, silently she slipped away, and there, at the end of town waiting for her was Drago. After climbing into the carriage, he caressed the side of her face, "Vladimir was a fool to let you go the way he did. I, on the other hand, know how to treat a beautiful woman."

Captivated by his spell, she purred from the mere touch of his hand.

Smiling down at Natasha, "Yes, my dear, I could please you, but not yet. I want to see the rage in Vladimir's eyes when I'm deep inside you. When your body shudders with pleasure, and it's my name you call out, I want to see pain in his eyes. Now sleep; our journey is almost complete."

The carriage pulled up to a large cobblestone cottage that was nestled deep in the dark woods. The sound of the raging river that wound around the cottage was nothing but tranquil. The trees that flanked both sides of the banks whispered an ominous creak and groan. As the wind from the mountain blew its angry breath off the frigid peaks, the barren branches swayed to the constant beat, as they scraped across the window pane. Suddenly, the bedchamber that Drago had brought Natasha into lit up from the flash of lightning that streaked across the sky. The earth shook from the loud rumble of thunder that boomed. Just as quickly came the raging onslaught of the ice cold rain, hammering the cottage with a forceful beat. Through it all, Natasha heard nothing, for Drago held her in a deep sleep, a sleep that nothing could awaken.

Drago leaned over her, breathing in her sweet feminine scent of juniper and honey. His fangs surged from his gums with the need to taste her delicious essence that flowed through her veins. His mouth lingered on her throat, feeling her blood pulsating on his lips. Drago's tongue swept across her delicate skin, just before he sank his fangs into the soft hollow part of her throat. The moment her blood, Vladimir's blood, touched his lip, Drago screamed. Vladimir's blood burned like acid in his mouth. Stumbling backward, he fell to the floor just as Aradia appeared in the room.

Looking down at Drago, "You fool, do you not know that Vladimir feeds from her. She is his soul mate, making her blood poisonous to other vampires. Now go and clean her blood out of your mouth before it kills you."

After Drago left the room, Aradia walked over to Natasha. With the tips of her fingers, she stroked the wound on Natasha's throat. Instantly, the teeth marks disappeared without a trace.

Stirring from the touch of her great, great grandmother's healing hands, Natasha muttered,  
"Vladimir."

Looking down at the sleeping Natasha, Aradia said, "Yes my love, Vladimir is coming, but by the time he gets here, you will no longer be Natasha. Ivana is who he will find."

Throwing her head back, Aradia's wicked laugh was so loud that Drago could hear it over the raging storm.

## Chapter Eighteen

Nestor hadn't stepped foot on the mountain since that dreadful night all those years ago. Standing before the large burned out castle, Nestor bowed his head. As a tear slid down his face he whispered, "God please forgive me." appeared in the Transylvania cave just as Vladimir became fully awake. Surprised by the appearance of his squire, he jumped to his feet and shouted, "What are you doing here?"

Fearing Vladimir's response, Nestor braced himself for an attack, "It's Natasha! Rodolfo is unable to find her!"

With lightning speed, Vladimir had Nestor slammed up against the cavern wall. With a loud growling snarl, "What do you mean he can't find her? He told me she was at his castle in Italy."

"She was supposed to be, my Lord, but she's gone. Rodolfo needs you back in Italy, now."

With Vladimir's hand still around Nestor's throat, Nestor disappeared, along with Vladimir, back to Rodolfo's castle. He knew he had to seize the opportunity before Vladimir had the chance to protest.

The moment Vladimir realized where he was, he threw Nestor to the floor and snarled, "What's Rodolfo's plan?"

Standing up, Nestor brushed his hair back and glared at Vladimir, "Vladimir, you are the master, and I'm your squire, but I will no longer put up with your abuse. You must understand that we are a team, and if we are at odds with one another, it won't work."

"I told Rodolfo that I'm in no need of a squire, so you're free to go."

"Why must you be such a damn fool, Vladimir? This is not about you. It's about saving Natasha, or don't you care?"

Rodolfo appeared in the room; as the arguing continued. Just before Vladimir's rage spun out of control, Rodolfo shouted, "That's enough, damn it. The two of you need to pull yourselves together and work as a team. Vladimir, Nestor is your squire. He is who you need to depend on,

as a confidant, a friend, and most of all, an ally. If the two of you can't figure that out, then one if not both of you will die when we go to war with Drago and his warriors."

Rodolfo disappeared without saying another word. Calmly, Nestor said, "I'm turning in for the night my Lord; if there is anything you need, I'll be in my bedchamber."

Quietly, Nestor turned around and walked away. Before he made it to the stairs, Vladimir said, "I do care about Natasha."

Without turning around, Nestor said, "I know you do; now rest, for tomorrow will be a long night."

Without feeding from Natasha, Vladimir quickly succumbed to the day sleep. The moment his eyes closed, he began to dream. He saw Ivana walking through the garden, picking her favorite flowers. Gently placing them in the basket that she carried, she looked up and saw Vladimir standing in the window watching. Suddenly, his smile faded when he felt the evil presence. He heard a voice say, "She's mine, and you will never find her."

Terrified, Ivana dropped the basket and began to run toward the forest. The black sky constantly lit up by vivid lighting, and the thunder's echo bounced off the mountains with a mighty roar that was deafening. By the time Vladimir reached the forest, she was no-where to be found. He could neither see, smell, nor hear her, she was gone, gone forever. His heart weighed heavy with the pain of her loss, yet he knew he had to let her go, but how?

Natasha tossed and turned, trying to wake from the forced sleep that Drago held her captive in. Unknown to her captors, the moment Drago tried to feed from Natasha, her subconscious mind woke. She could now hear all that was being said. In her mind she called out to Rodolfo, she said, "Father, where are you? Please help me."

"I hear you my dear, but I sense nothing. Natasha, I need you to calm down and tell me where you are."

"I'm not sure. They have me in some kind of sleep, but yet I'm awake. Father, a woman name Aradia is talking to me, the only thing is, she's calling me Ivana. She said that the transformation has already begun. What is she talking about?"

"It's nothing you need to worry about. Natasha I need you to call out to Vladimir, his blood flows through you. Only he can sense you, but because you're so far away you have to call out to him."

"I would rather die than to call him for help. I allowed him to use me, but never again. It's Ivana he wants, not me."

"That's not true, he loves you; I can sense it."

"You can sense it all you want, but I know the truth. He used me to fill a void, and the moment I needed him, he let me down, he turned his back on me without thinking twice about it. That Father, is not love"

"My sweet Natasha, you must understand that Vladimir has been deeply wounded. Ivana was all he had; he'd been alone for over a hundred years when she saved him from a life of loneliness. His love for her grew deep and fast, and when he lost her and their son, Vladimir lost everything. When I found him eleven years later, he was broken and barely living. Until he met you, you changed him; he found a reason to want to live. It's you he loves; it's just going to take time for him to figure it out."

"Father, if he hasn't figured it out by now, he never will."

"Natasha forget about Vladimir for a moment; it's you that need the help. Call out to him so we can find you, afterwards if you don't want anything to do with Vladimir, I'll send him away. For now we need him to help find you. Please, Baby call out to him."

Between the forced sleep and the tiny baby that now was growing inside of her, Natasha fell into a deep sleep before she could call out to Vladimir.

## **Chapter Nineteen**

Rodolfo stormed into Vladimir's room, kicking the side of his bed he shouted, "Get up! We need to find Natasha and only you can sense her."

Vladimir's eyes flew open, and with a husky snarl he said, "What the hell do you think I'm doing. Before you came barging in I could feel her heart beating with mine. Damn it I lost her."

Rodolfo sat at the foot of Vladimir's bed, with his head bowed he said, "I can't lose her. Natasha and her mother, Isabella, are all I have. I was a lot like you when I met Isabella, lost and alone. She saved me, and when I took Natasha from her abusive father, the three of us became a family. I love her as if she were blood, of my blood, and flesh, of my flesh."

Rodolfo looked back at Vladimir, "You know how it feels to lose a child, please Vladimir, help me find her."

Vladimir lied back down, closed his eyes and said, "Leave me to my thoughts so I can try and reconnect with her."

Before leaving, Rodolfo left a glass of his ancient warm blood. The moment Vladimir drank it, he laid back down, closing his eyes he could feel her heart beating in unison with his own, but what surprised him was how calm and peaceful he felt. The thought of his heart beating as one with someone other than Ivana was strange for him. Until he heard the small flutter of another

heart, his chest tightened, his lungs gasped for air, his fist clenched, and his eyes flew open.  
Sitting up he screamed,

"NOOOO!!!"

Both, Rodolfo and Nestor appeared in Vladimir's room at the same time, Rodolfo shouting,  
"What's wrong!"

Vladimir kept the heart beat to himself, when he said, "I found her! They have her back in Romania, she's in a cottage in the northern part of the Carpathian Mountains, but I'm not sure of the exact location. We need to head into the mountains now! The closer I'm to her the more heightened my senses will be."

"We will, just not yet, we need a plan. Vladimir try and talk to Natasha, tell her we're coming. Nestor, prepare a plan, I need to talk to someone first then I'll be back. The two of you need to be ready for war, and that means you need to settle your differences now."

Rodolfo disappeared without another word. Before walking out the door, Nestor looked at Vladimir, "I will fight to the death by your side my Lord,"

"I may not like you in my face all the time, but I also will fight to the death by your side my strange friend."

Nestor laughed, and walked out the door, knowing that Vladimir could hear, he said, "You're the strange one, my Lord."

Vladimir laughed at Nestor's comment, then closed his eyes and mind off to the world, using all of his powers he summoned Natasha, "Damn it Natasha, I know you can hear me. Just listen to me. I'm sorry, when you called out my son's name, instantly I was engulfed with such pain. I took it out on you, and for that I'm truly sorry. Natasha, I would never intentionally hurt you, you are the one that saved me. You gave me the will to live. Please, let me make it up to you. Call out my name so I can find you, please Natasha."

When he heard her soft voice in his head, he whispered, "Hold on my love, I'm coming."

Rodolfo stood just on the other side of the Carpathian mountains; that part of the Balkans was well known for its dense forests and raging rivers. The region was also known and feared by all, especially by the farmers and villagers living around the forest. Many had walked in, never to come out. Stories were told of tall, dark, mysterious men who would stand just on the other side of the forest. With their magical voices, they would lure beautiful women to them, devouring their minds, bodies and souls with their seductive ways. Throughout the centuries, the mysterious men earned the name "The Dark Carpathian Gods of Lust." Legends say they were born from Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, and that their immortal strength came from their father

Ares, god of war. As the years went by, the stories changed, and though not knowing truth from myth, all the people truly knew that once you went in, you never came out.

Before Rodolfo entered the forest, he could sense the fear that lingered in the village below; but what disturbed him the most was the friction between the Carpathian gods themselves. He had taken only three steps into the forest, when suddenly; Marquis de Sade appeared before him. Marquis stood just slightly shorter than Rodolfo's six-eight frame and his dark bulging muscles were designed for killing, but his face was that of the most beautiful god. His eyes were a deep majestic brown, lips plump and tasteful, and his nose slightly crooked from the many battles that he was in. The scar that ran from his right eye down to his ear had not taken away from his masculine beauty. When he spoke, his voice was strong and filled with authority, capturing everyone's attention.

The moment he saw that the intruder was Rodolfo, a broad grin spread across his face. Taking hold of Rodolfo's hand, Marquis said, "It's an honor to see you again, my friend."

Returning the hand shake, Rodolfo said, "After I tell you what has brought me to your forest, you may change your mind."

Admittedly, the expression on his face was dread; looking into Rodolfo's eyes, Marquis said, "The woman Drago has, she's your-"

"She's my daughter, and I'm here to claim her. The only thing I ask from you is that your family will not interfere, and that you will grant us safe passage through your forest."

"Rodolfo, you know that you are my dearest friend, but I can't go against my brothers. I'm sure you felt the tension as you entered the forest. Our tribes are at odds with one another because of the choices that some of the brothers have made. I do not agree with Drago taking the woman and bringing her to my forest. You know the laws of my tribe; if a brother's friend seeks refuge, and it has been granted, he is protected under the laws of the forest. Not even I can go against the laws, no matter how much I disagree. If I had known that she was yours, I would have fought against the tribe's discussion. I'm sorry Rodolfo, it's out of my hands."

"Marquis, I will do whatever it takes to bring my daughter home, even if it means going to war with your family."

Rodolfo disappeared without another word, without telling de Sade that his worst rival, Vladimir Dracula, would be fighting at his side. What worried Rodolfo the most was Nestor, the very man that de Sade allowed to walk away on that dreadful night eleven years ago. Vladimir could not find out about Nestor's involvement.

## **Chapter Twenty**

Vladimir and Nestor had just left the weapons room when Rodolfo appeared. Nestor knew things did not go as planned by the look on his master's face.

Without greeting them, Rodolfo said, "There's a problem; the Carpathian gods will be supporting Drago. Vladimir, you and Nestor need to go Ploiesti; see if you can convince Aether and Zephyrus to join us."

With a shocked look, Vladimir said, "They're just men! They will die! No, I won't ask them!"

Nestor placed his hand on Vladimir's shoulder; "My friend, they will be granted powers as I have. At one time, I was just a mortal man, and now, my powers rival yours, as does my life span."

Shaking his head, Vladimir said, "I know the pain of living a long life, and it is not what I would grant on my worst enemy."

Rodolfo looked up at Vladimir; his dark hazel eyes were now blood red and filled with rage. He shouted, "I don't recall asking you! It's an order! Nestor, you go into the village below the Carpathian Mountains; tell everyone to stay away from the forest, for soon there will be a war. Now go!"

When Rodolfo turned back toward Vladimir, his eyes had changed back to his normal soft hazel; he said, "I know that they are your friends, but we need their help. Do you know that Aether has no family, and that Zephyrus's wife died last year from a fever? The two of them have no one left; they are alone. We can bring them into our family. Vladimir, this life can offer them the world, a world like no other, a world that not even you have explored. You look at only the evil aspects of what we are, but you must believe me, there is so much more. It's time, my friend, for me to show you how to jump through the ages."

Placing his hand on Vladimir's wrist, Rodolfo jumped through time, bringing Vladimir with him. Rodolfo watched as a curious Vladimir looked around; his feet sank into the softest floor he had ever felt. The walls were smooth, not of stone, and the lights that hung from the strange ceiling were glowing with something other than fire. In a peculiar voice, Vladimir asked, "What is this place?"

"It's my home, in the year 2013. Vladimir, go and stand by the drapes."

Rodolfo pushed the retractable remote, and slowly the drapes opened, revealing the New York skyline. Vladimir jumped back and shouted, "What the hell are we in?"

"It's called a sky rise."

While looking out at the strange world far below them Vladimir said, "Why would you want to live in the sky?"

"Because you can see the whole city from here."

"There are so many people down there. What are those yellow things they're getting into?"

"They're taxicabs. Instead of horses, we ride in those."

"What is the purpose of you showing me this strange place?"

"To let you see that life becomes much easier, and the people are kinder in this age. Vladimir, it's not a primitive, savage world, like the one we just came from. I'm sad to say that evil still lingers in this time, but for the most part, the humans are good.

You need to see that all of us can live long, happy lives here, and that includes Nestor, Aether, and Zephyrus."

"I will ask them to join our war, but if they say no, I will not force them. Is that clear?"

"That is all I can ask for, but Vladimir, if they say no, please try to persuade them if possible. Now let me show you how to travel through the ages. With your mind, you need to will yourself to a place and time; say, for example, you would like to go from one room to the next; just picture yourself there. The same goes when you want to go back in time. Think of a place and the time you wish to go in. Now, take us back to my castle in Italy."

The moment Vladimir took hold of Rodolfo's arm, he willed them back to Italy 1564. He held his breath as they were hurled through space. A vortex of stars engulfed them, there were many moons, and the three suns were bright orange, yellow, and red. The velocity that it took for them to travel through time was extremely difficult to bear. Unlike the times Vladimir traveled with Rodolfo and Nestor, his body screamed with excruciating agony. Behind his eyes was an explosion of pain as the blinding light of the stars and moon penetrated them. Vladimir continued to hold his breath as the torment of traveling at the speed of light was rapidly decreasing, leaving only the terrible stabbing pain in his head. Standing in front of the large fireplace inside of Rodolfo's castle in Italy, Vladimir ran his fingers through his long black hair; looking up at Rodolfo, he said, "What the hell just happened to me? It felt like my skin was being ripped away from my bones. Why is it that has never happened to me before?"

With a nasty grin, Rodolfo said, "Your mind was open as you concentrated on your destination. Next time, close all your senses, and just think of where you need to be."

As Rodolfo turned to walk away, Vladimir shouted, "You bastard."

Laughing, Rodolfo said, "You leave for Ploiesti tomorrow, to go and recruit your friends."

## **Chapter Twenty One**

Vladimir stood just outside the old inn. He could sense his friends; they were sitting at the same table that they always sat at. Yet, things seemed different; the small village was in deep sorrow. Old death lingered in the air. Vladimir knew that everyone there had lost someone they loved to the fever. Although a year had gone by, he could still sense their anguish. When Vladimir walked through the door, the Inn was filled with smoke, bellowing up from the pipes that the men puffed on. In the corner was a young Carpathian man strumming his lute. The moment the man saw Vladimir, he stopped strumming in the middle of his tune; with everyone looking up, the Inn became deathly silent.

Zephyrus stood staring, not knowing if he believed what he was seeing, until he heard Aether say, "Is that you, Vladimir?"

Smiling as he walked toward his friends, he said, "Yes, it is I."

Stuttering, Zephyrus said, "We thought you died in the fire."

In a strong, deep voice, Vladimir said, "At times I wish I had."

Collecting his composure, Zephyrus said, "But how? Aether and I went to your castle; there was nothing left of it."

Vladimir told them the story of how de Sade and his brothers attacked him, and set fire to his castle that had taken the lives of his family and Clotho. From that time on, he had lived in the cave for nearly ten years, until a man named Rodolfo came for him.

The two men sat and listened to his story in shock; neither one of them told Vladimir what they had known. Even though they knew not where Nestor was, they were sure Vladimir could find him, and if he knew his role in the fire, Vladimir would surely kill him. That was something neither man wanted. They knew Nestor's guilt consumed him, and that was punishment enough. They were sure that was why he disappeared all those years ago. Aether could tell that Vladimir had come back for a reason, and that reason frightened him. He wasn't frightened for himself, or Zephyrus, but for the people that lived in the village. After closely listening to Vladimir's story, Aether said, "Vladimir, the people of this village cannot go through what we endured eleven years ago. So if you are here to ask us for help, I'm sad to say, the answer is no."

Vladimir placed his hand on Aether's shoulder and said, "First, hear me out my friend. Yes, I'm here to ask the two of you for a favor, but I promise you, the village will not be involved."

After Vladimir told them of the pending war, he looked at his two friends and said, "I know it's a lot to ask, and I wouldn't ask if we didn't need your help."

With a vague smile, Aether said, "I can put my best man in charge of the town while we're gone, as long as you can guarantee me that no harm will come to my people."

Vladimir silently contemplated on how he was going to explain that they weren't coming back.

With a somber look, Vladimir said, "I give you my word, no harm will come to your people. There is one problem; if you agree to go to Italy and train for this war, there's no coming back."

Aether and Zephyrus looked at each other, not knowing what to say; when Zephyrus looked back at Vladimir, he said, "Can you give us time to think it over?"

"Our time is short. I can only give you until this hour tomorrow. At that time, I will send my squire for your answer. Before I leave, I must stress to you how much I need you. This war is to bring back the woman that is carrying my baby. A vampire named Drago has taken her, and if I don't get her back, I could lose them both. "

The three men walked out of the Inn. Before Vladimir leaped through the ages, Aether took his hand in a shake, and said, "There's no need for you to wait for your answer; we will help you. By the time your squire arrives for us, we will have our affairs in order."

## **Chapter Twenty Two**

Vladimir awoke to the still silence of the castle. Instead of getting up and going to the window that overlooked the Ligurian Sea, just like he had done every evening from the time he had arrived in Italy, he stayed in bed, contemplating the decision that he must make. Was his father right? If Ivana and Natasha showed up at his castle together, which one would he have chosen? The sweet, shy, and timid Ivana, or the sexy Natasha, who could please him in so many ways. Vladimir's heart and soul belonged to Ivana, yet it was Natasha that possessed his dreams. For some reason, he was still unable to tell Natasha that he loved her. Was it because he couldn't let go of his grief for Ivana, and allow himself to love Natasha?

The longer he lay there, the more Vladimir tried to convince himself that it wasn't love that invaded his dreams. It was Natasha's warm, sweet blood that called out to him, and how she would wrap her body around him, as he made love to her. He could hear her as if she were laying on top of him, gasping, vibrating in pleasure, and when he heard her whisper his name, he himself moaned, "Natasha."

Jumping out of bed, he shouted, "No! It's just lust I seek from her. It's Ivana that owns my heart, its Ivana that I must choose, not Natasha."

Walking down the stairs to see why the castle was so quiet, Vladimir's body craved Natasha's sweet blood, her soft touch, to hear her gentle whisper calling out his name. By the time he got to the bottom of the stairs, his hands were clenched into tight fists. Vladimir's rage toward himself was on the verge of boiling over; growling under his breath, he said, "Stop it, you damn fool! It's just the sex, and her blood you crave. I'm not in love with her, It's Ivana I want and need."

"Stop kidding yourself Vladimir, it's my daughter you love."

Vladimir stood glaring at Rodolfo; he said, "I will help bring her home, but if you think that I will chose Natasha over Ivana, you're wrong."

With a smug grin, Rodolfo said, "I don't think, I know! My daughter is your soul mate. The moment you find her, and hold her in your arms, you yourself will see. Mark my words."

Before walking out of the room, Rodolfo said, "Nestor will be back with Aether and Zephyrus by this time tomorrow."

The moment Rodolfo left the room, Vladimir could hear his father's voice screaming in his mind, "Let Ivana rest in peace; Natasha and your baby girl are the ones who need you. My son, Ivana is dead, leave it that way, for it's not natural for the dead to come back. You know not what she would be like if you allow her to come back."

As Vladimir's father's voice faded from his mind, he could hear the lingering echo, "Let her be, my son, let her be."

With his face buried into his cupped hands, Vladimir cried, "How? How do I do that, when my heart cries out for her?"

Vladimir turned around the moment he felt the warm breeze caress the back of his neck. Looking at the silhouette that now stood in the doorway, he smiled when she said, "My dear, sweet son, why must you lie to yourself? It is Natasha that you love. Vladimir, open your heart and eyes, and you, my son, will see the truth. You will always love and miss Ivana, but she is no longer your life; you must be with Natasha and your baby girl."

Before his mother disappeared, Vladimir asked, "Why is it that everyone thinks that they know what I want?"

With her transparent hand, she caressed the side of Vladimir's face. Nadia said, "Damn it boy, you were always stubborn as hell. My son, I love you, and I know you'll do what is right. You always do."

Nadia smiled at her son, and then vanished.

### **Chapter Twenty Three**

Drago stood over a restless Natasha; she tossed and turned, trying to awaken from the mind-controlled slumber he had her in. Licking his lips, Drago said, "If your blood wasn't poison, I would show you what a real man can do in your bed."

In her mind, Natasha screamed, "You could never be the man that Vladimir is. You are a vile, disgusting animal, and if you touch me, Vladimir will kill you." After screaming out her thoughts, she had hoped that would come to be true. Yet, she knew not if Vladimir cared enough for her to avenge her rape.

In the gentle voice that he always used on Natasha, Rodolfo spoke in her mind; he said, "Don't worry, my sweet daughter, your grandmother will not allow Drago to harm you. She knows my wrath; now rest, my sweet child, for I'm gathering troops to come for you."

Shutting her mind down, she slowly drifted off to sleep. Her dreams were filled with Vladimir; each time he would turn his back on her, leaving her to fend for herself, and each time he was angry at her, but why? Maybe she would never know, and why should she even care.

Nestor rode his black charger into the village where he had once lived. No one recognized the strong confident man that was dressed all in black. Dismounting the charger in front of Aether's office, everyone who was walking down the dirt streets stopped and stared at the tall dark stranger. Walking up onto the planked boardwalk that led to Aether's office, Nestor's stride was that of a Trojan warrior. He was once a timid man that followed Asius's every move, even if he thought it was wrong. Not now. Now, he was a warrior who was about to lead Aether and Zephyrus on a journey. A journey like no other, a journey that will teach them to be big, strong warriors, warriors who could rival the strongest Trojans.

Aether stood the moment the tall dark stranger closed the door behind him. He was dressed in clothes that Aether had never seen before; long black leather coat, black jeans, and a thin black top without buttons. His boots had strange buckles on the back of the heels that clicked as he walked across the room, and his eyes were covered with strange black glasses.

When Nestor removed his sunglasses, Aether gasped for air when he realized that the tall dark stranger was Nestor. Not the weak, timid Nestor that he knew for over twenty years, no, this man was a mighty warrior. A warrior that no ordinary man could defeat. Immediately, Aether's smile faded when he realized that Nestor was the squire that Vladimir had sent. Aether shouted, "Are you mad? If Vladimir finds out that it was you who set fire to his castle, you're dead. My God Nestor, what happened to you? You're different! Where did you go all those years ago?"

Nestor's calm attitude was unlike what Aether had been accustomed to. Dropping down into his office chair, Aether's mouth hung open when Nestor said, "Calm down Aether. When Zephyrus gets here, I'll explain everything to you both."

After explaining to both men how he had come to be Vladimir's squire, Nestor took hold of their arms, and the three of them leapt through time. Aether and Zephyrus both gasped as the force began. They were whirled through the room, through the office walls, through the forest, across the village. And then, as they were hurled with the speed of light through the atmosphere, past suns and stars, the two men screamed; the velocity felt as if it was ripping their bodies to shreds. When they landed, they let out a loud groan on impact.

May 30th 2013, Bar Harbor, Maine.

Two years had rapidly passed by, with Aether and Zephyrus mastering the art of karate. With their god-like powers, they surpassed the most advanced Black-belt sensei known to man. Their marksmanship and fencing skills were also equally mastered. Nestor proudly watched on as his two friends finished their training. While walking down the large spiral staircase, Nestor looked out the two-story windows that covered the entire wall. He was going to miss his time here, his home that overlooked the emerald green Atlantic Ocean. He was going to miss the island of Bar Harbor, and the unique people that called this island their home.

Nestor, Aether, and Zephyrus leapt from Bar Harbor, 2015 to the bottom of the Carpathian Mountains on May 30, 1564, one day after the time they had left. Their two-year stay into the future was as if it had never happened. Yet they were distinctively different. Their long, dark hair was pulled back in a tie, the army fatigues that they wore blended into the Carpathian Mountain terrain. Slung over their shoulders was an M16 A4, and strapped to both legs were marine stiletto MK2's with a double-edge 12.5 inch blade. The double shoulder holster held a special forces Carry 1911. The firepower that the three men carried was enough to destroy a small village.

Vladimir and Rodolfo stood just on the other side of the knoll watching the men as they approached.

Vladimir growled, "Who the hell are they?"

Rodolfo's arrogant grin spread across his face when he said, "That's Nestor and your two friends."

Vladimir glared at Rodolfo with a skeptical look. Then he said, "How is that possible? I just left them yesterday; they were two ordinary men. Now they look like dark rogue warriors, warriors that could easily take out a small Trojan army."

After laughing at Vladimir's comment, Rodolfo said, "I sent them into the future where they were trained in lethal combat for two years. There's a lot you need to learn about our breed. When we want something, we get it, and I wanted the best. We need the best to help get Natasha back, and I knew it was them from the very first time we met."

"Met! When did you meet Aether and Zephyrus?"

"Back when your castle was burned; I stayed around for awhile to make sure you were OK. That was when I first saw them. I watched those two big men cry over your loss; it is friends like that, Vladimir, that you need on your side, especially in a war like we're about to face."

By the time the five men met at the edge of the forest, Vladimir could sense their lethal powers. Before any one of them had a chance to speak, they could feel the ground beneath their feet rumble, and echoing off the mountain, they could hear a mighty war cry. Quickly, they turned around looking back down the grassy knoll they had just left. There, charging toward them, was a sea of black stallions, and on their backs were Highlanders. Dressed in their Scottish war

clothes, their red and black plaids were worn around their loins, and the strap was fastened by a large lion's head brooch at the shoulder. Hanging from their large black belts were long swords that rubbed up against their bare thighs. The Highlanders' knee high boots were strapped into the stallions' stirrups, giving them the power to dig into the horse's side. The stallions were explosive and hot, as if they knew they were going off to war, and they wanted to go immediately. The sight brought Vladimir back in time, a time when he would watch his father and his warriors ride in from a long battle. He felt pride every time his father came home. He thought no one could ever beat them in a battle. But now, looking down at the strong warriors that were just as capable as his father's, he feared for their lives. Vladimir now knew that evil lurked about the land, evil that no man could defeat.

The Highlanders stopped just feet from Vladimir and the others. The commanding leader was a masculine, mighty warrior, standing at least six-foot-two, long blond hair, and eyes as blue the Celtic Sea. When he spoke, it was with a thick Scottish accent. "I'm Lord MacNeil of Glasgow, we be here to help ye in your battle."

"I'm Count Rodolfo, my men and I must decline your help, but we are grateful for the offer."

"Me brother's clan lives in the village, we be here to make sure there'll be nay more attacks. We battle together, and that be final."

Vladimir could sense the Highlanders' stubborn pride, and knew they wouldn't listen to reason. Looking over to Rodolfo, Vladimir said, "Let them help; they're good strong warriors that possess some kind of healing powers. Don't you feel it?"

"I sense nothing, Vladimir, but if you want them to war with us, it will be on your conscience, not mine,"

Ignoring Rodolfo's comment Vladimir said, "You are now our ally in this war. Our goal is to reach a cottage just on the other side of the forest. Once there, surround the cottage, and allow no one to enter or leave, for my woman is being held captive."

"We willna let ye lass be taken from the cottage. Ya dinna ken the powers of our ancestors. 'Tis their blood that flows through our veins that keeps us alive for sometime, mayhap longer than ye. Our strength be that ten times of any man, so ya notta worry about us."

Aether looked over at the other four men and said, "Now that we have that cleared up, like they say in 2013, let's rock and roll."

Vladimir and the Highlanders looked at Aether like he was crazy. Shaking his head, Aether said, "That means, in this case, let's go to war."

The Highlanders raised their swords, and then let out a savage war cry. Above the loud cry, you could hear the stallions' bridles clinking from their mounts, weight being shifted from foot to

foot. When MacNeil turned back toward his Highlanders, he could see their swords shining in the full moon light. The autumn air had a brisk bite, revealing the men and their stallion's steamy breath. In the far distance, he could see the last two warriors that carried his clan's red and black banner, bearing his lion, crossed swords and fleur-de-lis. He smiled with pride, raising his sword high. MacNeil shouted, "A Dhomhnaill!"

"A Dhomhnaill," the men shouted.

The stallions reared, screaming, pawing the air, and on their rider's command the stallions charged down the hill into the forest.

Vladimir could hear the clashing of swords and the deathly cries as he, Nestor, and Aether ran toward the cottage. Rodolfo and Zephyrus took to the north, blocking the attack of the Carpathian gods. Just as Vladimir's team crossed the bridge over the raging river, Aether fell to his knees. Vladimir ran to him, blood seeping from his mouth, and an arrow sticking out of his chest. Aether whispered, "Go, my friend, it's too late for me."

"You'll be OK, I promise!"

Vladimir looked up at Nestor and shouted, "Get him out of here, now!"

"I can't! I am your squire; where you go, I go!"

"Damn it, Nestor, do as I say, now go!"

Just then, MacNeil rode up. Before Vladimir had a chance to plead for his help, MacNeil said, "Go! Ya need to get to yer lass. I'll take care of yer friends."

Vladimir was at the front door of the cottage before Nestor had a chance to protest. Turning back toward the bridge, the three men were gone. Vladimir had a feeling that would be the last time he would ever see his dear friend. He could hear the war raging all around him, the clashing swords, the dying cries, the stampeding horses. Yet, he could neither hear nor sense Rodolfo and Zephyrus. Pushing the fear out of his mind, Vladimir crept into the cottage without making a sound.

The cottage's cobblestone walls held an eerie silence. The further Vladimir walked in, the more prevalent the evil became. Suddenly, as if a curse was lifted, he could smell the sweet honeysuckle scent that seemed to always linger on Natasha's soft skin. Sensing the room that she was in, Vladimir ran up the stairs with blinding speed. Ripping the door off its hinges, he saw Natasha lying on the bed.

Kneeling over her, he brushed her hair back away from her face. Kissing her lips, he broke the mind-induced sleep. The moment her eyes fluttered open, Vladimir said, "You're safe, my love."

Pulling back to look at her, he saw the teeth marks in her throat. The rage that consumed him was like nothing he had ever known. His scream blew open every door, and broke out all the windows. What angered him the most was when Drago had the nerve to appear in the doorway. Slowly he stood, fists clenched, teeth snarling. Vladimir growled, "You're going to die a slow and painful death, you bastard!"

Vladimir got halfway across the room when he felt a powerful presence behind him. Spinning around, Vladimir saw Natasha in Aradia's clutches, then he heard a baby crying in the other room.

Aradia screamed, "Clotho's found the baby; go after her, you damn fool."

Turning back toward Aradia, Vladimir saw that she had leaped through the ages, taking Natasha with her. The baby's cry was cut off in mid-scream. Then he heard Drago's voice echoing through his head; "You can't find them both. Which shall it be, Vladimir? Your son, or Natasha.

Vladimir dropped to his knees and screamed, "NOOOO!!!"

As the eerie silence once again consumed the small cottage, Vladimir was alone.