



Dark Blood (The 'Dark' Carpathian Book 26)

By Christine Feehan

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The fates of a warrior reborn and a seductive Dragonseeker are irrevocably entwined in the new Carpathian novel by #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Christine Feehan, “the queen of paranormal romance” (J. R. Ward).

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Zev Hunter was an elite warrior, a dark-blood dealer of death to rogue Lycans who preyed on mankind. He was a loner, never given to personal attachments, and damned fierce at his job. But Zev begins to question his past and his purpose when he awakens in the darkness of the sacred cave of warriors—and is soothed back to consciousness by the sensuously familiar voice of one woman, the woman who has haunted his fantasies for centuries. She was Branislava, member of the Dragonseeker clan...

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For this half-mage, half-Carpathian temptress, the ritual of awakening Zev to the council of warriors was the only way to save him. Locked away for his own protection, the time has now come for his rebirth, for his blood to stir with that of the ancient warriors before him. He has been assured by Branislava that their fates are entwined, that their spirits are woven together for eternity and that his new purpose in life is beyond imagining.

Now, with a blood-sworn vow of honor, mercy and endurance, and under the influence of a siren as bewitching as Branislava, Zev begins to wonder what his purpose is, what it means for the future of the Carpathians and what it is about his rebirth that he has to fear...

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *Dark Blood*

“Fans of Christine Feehan know that she creates a phenomenally visual world...*Dark Blood* is no different...High fives all around.”—VampireBookClub.net

And for the Carpathian series

“After Bram Stoker, Anne Rice and Joss Whedon (who created the venerated *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), Christine Feehan is the person most credited with popularizing the neck gripper.”—*Time*

“Feehan has a knack for bringing vampiric Carpathians to vivid, virile life in her Dark Carpathian novels.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“A mesmerizing series.”—*Library Journal*

About the Author

Christine Feehan is the *New York Times* bestselling author of many novels, including the Carpathian series, the GhostWalker series, the Leopard series and the Sea Haven series. She lives in northern California.

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1

Sound came to him first. A low, drumming beat growing louder. Zev Hunter felt the vibration of that rhythmic booming throughout his entire body. It hurt. Each separate beat seemed to echo through his flesh and bone, reverberating through his tissue and cells, jarring him until he thought he might shake apart.

He didn't move. It was too much of an effort even to open his eyes and figure out what that disturbing, insistent call was—or why it wouldn't go away. If he opened his eyes he would *have* to move, and that would hurt like hell. If he stayed very still, he could keep the pain at bay, even though he felt as if he were floating in a sea of agony.

He lay there for a long time, his mind wandering to a place of peace. He knew the way there now, a small oasis in a world of excruciating pain. He found the wide, cool pool of blue inviting water, the wind touching the surface so that ripples danced. The surrounding forest was lush and green, the trees tall, trunks wide. A small waterfall trickled down the rocks to the pool, the sound soothing.

Zev waited, holding his breath. She always came when he was there, moving slowly out of the trees into the clearing. She wore a long dress and a cape of blue velvet, the hood over her long hair so that he only caught glimpses of her face. The dress clung to her figure, her full breasts and small waist, the corset top emphasizing every curve. The skirt of the dress was full, falling over her hips to the ground.

She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Her body was graceful, fluid, an ethereal, elusive woman who always beckoned to him with a soft smile and a small hand gesture. He wanted to follow her into the

cool forest—he was Lycan, the wolf that lived inside of him preferred the forest to the open—but he couldn't move, not even for her.

He stayed where he was and simply drank her in. He wasn't a man clever words came easily to, so he said nothing at all. She never approached him, never closed the distance between them, but somehow, it never mattered. She was there. He wasn't alone. He found that as long as she was close to him, the terrible pain eased.

For the first time though, something disturbed his peaceful place. The booming beat found him, so loud now that the ground lifted and fell with an ominous, troubling thump. The water rippled again, but this time he knew it wasn't the wind causing the water to ring from the middle of the pool outward. The drumbeat throbbed through the earth, jarring not only his body, but everything else.

The trees felt it. He heard the sap running deep in the trunks and branches. Leaves fluttered wildly as if answering the deep booming call. The sound of water grew louder, no longer a soft trickling over rocks, not a steady drip, but a rush that swelled with the same ebb and flow as the sap in the trees. Like veins and arteries flowing beneath the very earth surrounding him, making its way toward every living thing.

You hear it now.

She spoke for the first time. Her voice was soft and melodious, not carried on the wind, but rather on breath. One moment she was on the other side of that small pool of water, and the next she was sinking down into the tall grass, leaning over him, close to him, her lips nearly skimming his.

He could taste cinnamon. Spice. Honey. All of it on her breath. Or was it her skin? His Lycan senses, usually so good at scent, seemed confused. Her lashes were incredibly long and very dark, surrounding her emerald eyes. A true emerald. So green they were startling. He'd seen those eyes before. There was no mistaking them. Her bow of a mouth was a man's perfect fantasy, her lips full and naturally red.

The booming continued, a steady, insistent beat. He felt it through his back and legs, a jarring pulse that refused to leave him alone. Through his skin, he seemed to follow the path of water running beneath him, bringing life-giving nutrients.

You feel it, don't you? she insisted softly.

He couldn't look away. Her gaze held his captive. He wasn't the kind of man to allow anything or anyone to ensnare him. He forced his head to work—that first movement that he knew would cost him dearly. He nodded. He waited for the pain to rip him apart, but aside from a little burst through his neck and temples that quickly subsided, the expected agony never came.

What is it?

He frowned, concentrating. The sound continued without a break, so steady, so strong and rhythmic, he would have said it was a heart, but the sound was too deep and too loud. Still, it was a pulse that called to him just as it called to the trees and grass as if they were all tied together. The trees. The grass. The water. The woman. And him.

You know what it is.

Zev didn't want to tell her. If he said the words, he would have to face his life again. A cold, utterly lonely existence of blood and death. He was an elite hunter, a dealer of death to rogue packs—Lycans turned

werewolves who preyed on mankind—and he was damned good at his job.

The booming grew louder, more insistent, a dark heralding of life. There was nowhere to hide from it. Nowhere to run even if he could run. He knew exactly what it was now. He knew where the sound originated as it spread out from a center deep beneath him.

Tell me, Hän ku pesäk kaikak, what is it you hear?

The melodic notes of her voice drifted through his pores and found their way into his body. He could feel the soft musical sound wrapping itself around his heart and sinking into his bones. Her breath teased his face, warm and soft and so fresh, like the gentlest of breezes fanning his warm skin. His lungs seemed to follow the rhythm of hers, almost as if she breathed for him, not just with him.

Hän ku pesäk kaikak. Where had he heard that before? She called him that as if she expected him to know what it meant, but it was in a language he was certain he didn't speak—and he knew he spoke many.

The drumbeat sounded louder, closer, as if he was surrounded on all sides by many drums keeping the exact beat, but he knew that wasn't so. The pounding pulse came from below him—and it was summoning him.

There was no way to ignore it, no matter how much he wanted to. He knew now that it wouldn't stop, not ever, not unless he answered the call.

It is the heartbeat of the earth itself.

She smiled and her emerald eyes seemed to take on the multifaceted cut of the gems he'd seen adorning women, although a thousand times more brilliant.

She nodded her head very slowly. *At long last you are truly back with us. Mother Earth has called to you. You are being summoned to the warrior's council. It is a great honor.*

Whispers drifted through his mind like fingers of fog. He couldn't seem to retain actual words, but male voices rose and fell all around him, as if he were surrounded. The sensation of heat hit him. Real heat. Choking. Burning. His lungs refused to work, to pull in much needed air. When he tried to open his eyes, nothing happened. He was locked in his mind far from whatever was happening to his body.

The woman leaned closer, her lips brushing against his. His heart stuttered. She barely touched him, featherlight, but it was the most intimate sensation he'd ever experienced. Her mouth was exquisite. Perfection. A fantasy. Her lips moved over his again, soft and warm, melting into him. She breathed into his mouth, a soft airy breath of clean, fresh air. Once again he tasted her. Cinnamon. Spice. Honey.

Breathe, Zev. You are both Lycan and Carpathian and you can breathe anywhere when you choose. Just breathe.

He was not *Sange rau*.

No, not Sange rau, you are Hän ku pesäk kaikak. You are a guardian.

The breath she had exchanged with him continued to move through his body. He could almost track its progress as if that precious air was a stream of white finding its way through a maze until it filled his lungs. He actually felt her breath enter his lungs, inflating them.

I'm not dreaming, am I?

She smiled at him. A man might kill for one of her smiles.

No, Zev, you're not dreaming. You are in the sacred cave of warriors. Mother Earth called the ancients to witness your rebirth.

He had no idea what she was talking about, but things were beginning to come back to him. *Sange rau* was a combination of rogue wolf and vampire blood mixed together. *Hän ku pesäk kaikak* was Lycan and Carpathian blood mixed. He wasn't certain what or where the sacred cave of warriors was, and he didn't like the word *rebirth*.

Why can't I move?

You are coming to life. You have been locked away from us for some time.

Not from you.

She had been with him while he was locked in that dark place of pain and madness. If there was one thing he knew for absolute certain, she had been there. He couldn't move on, because he hadn't been able to leave her.

He remembered that voice, soft and pleading. *Stay. Stay with me.* Her voice had locked them both in a sea of agony that seemed endless.

Not endless. You are awakening.

He might be waking, but the pain was still there. He took a moment to let himself absorb it. She was correct, the pain was subsiding to a tolerable level, but the heat surrounding him was burning his body. Without the air she'd given him, he would be choking, strangling, desperate.

Think what body temperature you wish. You are Carpathian. Embrace who you are.

Her voice never changed. She didn't seem impatient with his lack of knowledge. Before, when she was a distance from him, she hadn't been aloof, she simply waited. Now she felt different, as if she expected something from him.

What the hell? If she said to think about a different body temperature other than the one burning his flesh from his bones, he could give her that. He chose a normal temperature and held that in his mind. She spoke to him without words, telepathically, so she must be able to see he was doing as she asked.

At once, the burning sensation ceased to be. He took a gasping breath. Heat filled his lungs, but there was air as well. He knew her. Only one woman could speak to him as she did. Mind to mind. He knew her now. How could he have ever forgotten who she was?

Branislava.

How had she gotten trapped with him in such a terrible place? He sent up a small prayer of thanks that he hadn't left her there. *She* had been the one to whisper to him. *Stay. Stay with me.* He should have recognized her voice, a soft sweet melody that was forever stamped into his bones.

You recognize me. She smiled at him again and he felt her fingers brush along his jaw and then go up to his forehead, brushing back strands of hair falling into his face.

Her touch brought pleasure, not pain. A small electrical current ran from his forehead down to his belly, tightening his muscles. The current went lower, coiling heat in his groin. He could feel something besides pain, and wouldn't you know it would be desire?

It seemed absurd to him that he hadn't known all along whom she was. She was the *one* woman. The *only* woman. *The* woman. He'd known women, of course. He'd lived too long not to. He was a hunter, an elite hunter, and he was never in one place long. He didn't form attachments. Women didn't rob him of breath, or put him under spells. He didn't think about them night and day. Or fantasize. Or want one for his own.

Until her. Branislava. She wasn't Lycan. She didn't talk much. She looked like an angel and moved like a temptress. Her voice beckoned like a siren's call. She had looked at him with those unusual eyes and smiled with that perfect mouth, inciting all sorts of erotic fantasies. When they danced, just that one unforgettable time, her body had fit into his, melted into his, until she was imprinted there for all time, into his skin, into his bones.

Every single rule he'd ever made about women in the long years he had lived had been broken with her. She'd robbed him of breath. Put him under her spell. He thought of her day and night and fantasized far too much. He wanted her in every way possible. Her body. Her heart. Her mind. Her soul. He wanted her all for himself.

How did you get here? In this place?

It alarmed him that he might have somehow dragged her down into that sea of agony because he'd been so enamored with her. Could a man do that? Want a woman so much that when he died, he took her with him? The idea was appalling. He'd lived honorably, at least he'd tried to, and he'd never hurt a woman who hadn't been a murdering rogue. The idea that he might have taken *this* woman into hell with him was disturbing on every level.

I chose to come with you, she replied, as if it were the most normal thing in the world to do. *Our spirits are woven together. Our fate is entwined.*

I don't understand.

You were dying and there was no other way to save your life. You are precious to us all, a man of honor, of great skill.

Zev frowned. That made no sense. He had no family. He had his pack, but two of his pack members, friends for so many long years, had betrayed and tried to murder him. He was mixed blood now, and few of his kind would accept him.

Us all? he echoed. *Who would that be?*

Do you hear them calling to you?

Zev stayed very still, tuning his acute hearing to get past the heartbeat of the earth, the flow of water beneath him, reaching for the distant voices. Men's voices. They seemed to be all around him. Some chanted to him in an ancient language while others throat-chanted as the monks from long ago had done. Each separate word or note vibrated through him, just as the heartbeat of the earth had.

They summoned him just as the earth had. It was time. He couldn't find any more excuses and it seemed no one was going to let him remain right where he was. He forced himself to open his eyes.

He was underground in a cave. That much was evident immediately. There was heat and humidity surrounding him, although he didn't feel hot. It was more that he saw it, those bands of heat undulating throughout the immense chamber.

Great stalactites hung from the high ceiling. They were enormous formations, great long rows of teeth of various sizes. Stalagmites rose from the floor with wide bases. Colors wound around the columns from the flaring bases to the pointed tips. The floor was worn smooth with centuries of feet walking on it.

Zev recognized that he was deep beneath the earth. The chamber, although enormous, felt hallowed to him. He lay in the earth itself, his body covered by rich black loam. Minerals sparkled in the blanket of dirt over him. Hundreds of candles were lit, high up on the walls of the chamber, illuminating the cavern, casting flickering lights across the stalagmites, bringing the muted color to life.

His heart began to pound in alarm. He had no idea where he was or how he got there. He turned his head and instantly his body settled. She was there, sitting beside him. Branislava. She was truly as beautiful as he remembered her. Her skin was pale and flawless. Her lashes were just as long, her lips as perfect as in his dream. Only her clothes were different.

He was afraid if he spoke aloud she would disappear. She looked as ethereal as ever, a creature from long ago, not meant for the world he resided in. The chanting swelled in volume, and he reached for her hand, threading his fingers tightly through hers before he turned his head to try to find the source—or sources—of that summons.

There were several men in the room, all warriors with faces that had seen too many battles. He felt comfortable with them, a part of them, as if—in that sacred chamber—they were a brotherhood. He knew their faces, although most he'd never met, but he knew the caliber of men they were.

He recognized four men he knew well, although it felt as if a hundred years had passed since he'd seen them. Fenris Dalka was there. He should have known he would be. Fen was his friend, if someone like him could have friends. Beside him was Dimitri Tirunul, Fen's brother, and that too wasn't surprising. The brothers were close. Their last names were different only because Fen had taken the last name of a Lycan in order to better fit in during his years with them.

Two figures stood over another hole in the ground where a man lay looking around him just as Zev was. The man in what could have been an open grave looked pale and worn, as if he'd been through hell and had come out the other side. Zev wondered idly if he looked the same way. It took a few moments before he recognized Gary Jansen. Gary was human, and he'd waded through rogue wolves to get to Zev during a particularly fierce battle. Zev was very happy to see him alive.

He was familiar with Gregori Daratrazanoff. Usually Gregori wasn't far from his prince, but he hovered close to the man who struggled to sit up. Gregori immediately reached down and gently helped Gary into a sitting position. The man on the other side of the "grave" had the same look as Gregori. This had to be another Daratrazanoff.

On the other side of Gregori, a short distance from him, stood two of the De La Cruz brothers, Zacarias and Manolito, both of whom he knew and who had joined with him in a battle of some kind. The actual facts were still a little fuzzy. A third man stood between them.

In the center of the room were several smaller columns made of crystals forming a circle around a bloodred formation with what looked to be a razor-sharp tip. Standing beside it was Mikhail Dubrinsky, prince of the Carpathian people. He spoke very low, but his voice carried through the chamber with great authority.

Mikhail spoke in an ancient language, the ritual words to call to their long gone ancestors. “*Veri isäakank—veri ekäakank.*”

To his absolute shock and astonishment, Zev understood the words. Blood of our fathers—blood of our brothers. He knew that was the literal translation, but the language was an ancient one, not of the Lycans. He had been born Lycan. He had heard the language spoken by Carpathians down through the centuries but he shouldn’t have understood the words so clearly.

“*Veri olen elid.*”

Blood is life. Zev’s breath caught in his throat. He *understood*. He spoke many languages, but this was so ancient he couldn’t have ever learned it. Why was he understanding it now? Nothing made sense, although his mind wasn’t quite as foggy as it had been.

Branislava tightened her fingers around his. He turned his head and looked at her. She was so beautiful she took his breath away. Her eyes were on his face and he felt her gaze penetrating deep. Too deep. She was already branded in his mind. She was coming far too close to his heart.

“*Andak veri-elidet Karpatiakank, és wäke-sarna ku meke arwa-arvo, irgalom, hân ku agba, és wäke kutni, ku manaak verival,*” Mikhail continued. The power of his voice rang through the chamber, raw and elemental, bringing Zev’s attention back to him.

Zev understood the words. We offer that life to our people with a blood-sworn vow of honor, mercy, integrity and endurance.

What did that mean? This was a ritual—a ceremony that he felt part of—even though he didn’t know what exactly was going on. The appearance of Fen and Dimitri was reassuring to him. The longer he was awake, the more his mind cleared. The two were of mixed blood, although both had been born Carpathian.

Mikhail dropped his palm over the very sharp tip of the dark red column. At once the crystals went from dark red to crimson, as if Mikhail’s blood had brought them to life.

Verink sokta; verink terád. Mikhail’s voice swelled with power.

Zev saw sparks light up the room. He frowned over the words Mikhail had uttered. Our blood mingles and calls to you. He was mingling his blood with someone of power, that much was obvious from the way the columns throughout the room began to come alive. Several gave off glowing colors, although still very muted.

“*Akasz énak ku és juttasz kuntatak it.*”

Zev translated again as the columns began to hum. Heed our summons and join with us now. The columns throughout the room rocked, the multicolored crystals illuminating, throwing vivid, bright colors across the ceiling and over the walls of the chamber. The colors were so dazzling, Zev had to shade his sensitive eyes.

Crimson, emerald, a beautiful sapphire, the colors took on the strange phenomenon of the northern lights. The humming grew louder and he realized each took on a different note, a different pitch, the tone perfect to his ear. He hadn’t noticed that the columns appeared to be totems with faces of warriors carved into the mineral, but now they came to life, the color adding expression and character.

Zev let out his breath slowly. These warriors were long dead. He was in a cave of the dead, and Mikhail had summoned the ancient warriors to him for some purpose. Zev had a very bad feeling that he was part of that

purpose.

“Ete tekaik, saʔeak ekäakanket. med, kutenken hank ekäakank tasa.”

Zev swallowed hard when he translated. We have brought before you our brothers, not born to us, but brothers just the same.

Zev had been born Lycan and he'd served his people for many long years as an elite hunter who traveled the world seeking out and destroying rogue wolves who preyed on mankind. He was one of the few Lycans who could hunt alone and be comfortable and confident doing so. Still, he was Lycan and he would always have the need to be part of a pack.

His own kind despised those of mixed blood. It mattered little that he became mixed blood giving service to his people. He'd been wounded in hundreds of battles and had lost far too much blood. Carpathian warriors had more than once come to his aid as they had done this last time.

Zev looked up to find Fen on one side of him and Dimitri on the other. The two De La Cruz brothers stood with the stranger between them.

Gregori and his brother stood on either side of Gary, who now was getting to his feet with Gregori's help. Zev took a breath. He would not be the only man sitting on his ass while the others stood. He was getting up or would die trying.

Zev let go of his lifeline and the moment he did nearly panicked—another thing men like him didn't do. He didn't want her to disappear. His eyes met hers. *Don't you leave me.*

She gave him a smile that could allow a man to live for the rest of his existence on fantasies. *We are tied together, Zev. Where you go, I go. Only the ancients can undo a weave of the spirits.*

Is that what this is about? He wasn't certain he wanted to continue if it was.

Not even the prince can ask for such a release. Only me. Or you.

She gave him the information, but he had the feeling she was a little reluctant. That suited him just fine. He wasn't willing to relinquish his bond with her just yet.

Fen, I don't have a stitch on and I want to stand up. I'm not going to lie in this grave like a baby. For the first time he realized he was absolutely naked and Branislava had been beside him the entire time holding his hand—even when his body had stirred to life she hadn't run from him.

At once he was clean, and clothed in soft trousers and an immaculate white shirt. He struggled to get to his feet. Fen and Dimitri both reached for him at the same time, preventing him from falling on his face and making a fool of himself. His legs were rubber, refusing to work properly. For a Lycan, that was embarrassing, but for an elite hunter, it was absolutely humiliating.

Mikhail looked over at him and nodded his approval, or maybe it was relief at him being alive. Zev wasn't certain yet if he was relieved or not.

“Aka sarnamad, en Karpatiiakak. Saʔeak kontaket tekaiked. Tajnak aka-arvonk és arwa-arvonk.”

Hear me, great ones. We bring these men to you, warriors all, deserving of our respect and honor. Zev translated the words carefully twice, just to make certain he was correctly interpreting the prince's discourse

with the ancient warriors.

Gary, standing between the two Daratrazanoff brothers, straightened his shoulders as if feeling eyes on him. Zev was fairly certain that somehow, those spirits of the dead were watching all of them, perhaps judging their worth. Colors swirled into various hues, and the notes blended together as if the ancient warriors questioned the prince.

“Gregori és Darius katak Daratrazanoffak. Kontak sarnanak hän agba nókunta ekäankal, Gary Jansen, hän ku olenot küm, kutenken olen it Karpatii. Hän pohoopu kuš Karpatiikuntanak, partiolenaka és kontaka. Saʔeak hänet ete tekaik.”

Gregori and Darius of the great house of Daratrazanoff claim kinship with our brother, Gary Jansen, once human, now one of us. He has served our people tirelessly both in research and in battle. We bring him before you.

Zev knew that aside from actually fighting alongside the Carpathians, Gary had done a tremendous amount of work for the Carpathians, and had lived among them for several years. It was obvious that every Carpathian in the chamber afforded him great respect, as did Zev. Gary had fought both valiantly and selflessly.

“Zacarias és Manolito katak De La Cruzak, kăktă enă wăkeva kontak. Kontak sarnanak hän agba nókunta ekäankal, Luiz Silva, hän ku olenot jaquár, kutenken olen it Karpatii. Luiz mänet en elidaket, kor3nat elidaket avio pälăfertiilakjakak. Saʔeak hänet ete tekaik.”

Zacarias and Manolito from the house of De La Cruz, two of our mightiest warriors, claim kinship with our brother, Luiz Silva, once Jaguar, now Carpathian. Luiz saved the lives of two of their lifemates. We bring him before you.

Zev knew nothing of Luiz, but he had to admire anyone who could stand with Zacarias De La Cruz claiming kinship. Zacarias was not known for his kindness. Luiz had to be a great warrior to run with that family of Carpathians.

“Fen és Dimitri arwa-arvodkatak Tirunulak sarnanak hän agba nókunta ekäankal, Zev Hunter, hän ku olenot Susiküm, kutenken olen it Karpatii. Torot pälăpălă Karpatiikuntankal és piwtăt és piwtă mekeni sarna kunta jotkan Susikümkunta és Karpatiikunta. Saʔeak hänet ete tekaik.”

Fen and Dimitri from the noble house of Tirunul claim kinship with our brother, Zev Hunter, once Lycan, now Carpathian. He has fought side by side with our people and has sought to bring an alliance between Lycan and Carpathian. He is of mixed blood like those who claim kinship. We bring him before you.

There was no mistaking the translation. Mikhail had definitely called his name and indicated that Fen and Dimitri claimed brotherhood with him. He certainly had enough of their blood in him to be a brother.

The humming grew in volume, and Mikhail nodded several times before turning to Gary. “Is it your wish to become fully a brother?”

Gary nodded his head without hesitation. Zev was fairly certain, that like him, Gary hadn’t been prepped ahead of time. The answer had to come from within at the precise moment of the asking. There was no prepping. He didn’t know what his own answer would be.

Gregori and Darius, with Gary between them approached the crystal column, now swirling a dull red.

Gregori dropped his hand, palm down, over the tip of the formation, allowing his blood to flow over that of the prince.

“Place your hand over the sacred bloodstone and allow your blood to mingle with that of the ancients and that of your brothers,” Mikhail instructed.

Gary moved forward slowly, his feet following the path so many warriors had walked before him. He placed his hand over the sharp tip and allowed his palm to drop. His blood ran down the crystal column, mixing with Gregori’s.

Darius glided just behind him with the same silent, deadly way of his brother, and when Gary stepped back, Darius placed his palm over the tip of the bloodstone, allowing his blood to mingle with Mikhail’s, Gregori’s, Gary’s and the ancient warriors who had gone before.

The hum grew louder, filling the chamber. Colors swirled, this time taking on hues of blue, green and purple.

Gary gave a little gasp and went silent, nodding his head as if he heard something Zev couldn’t. Within minutes he stepped back and glanced over to the prince.

“It is done,” Mikhail affirmed. “So be it.”

The humming ceased, all those beautiful notes that created a melody of words only the prince could understand. The chamber went silent. Zev became aware of his heart beating too fast. He consciously took a breath and let it out. The tension and sense of anticipation grew.

“Is it your wish, Luiz, to become fully a brother?” Mikhail asked.

Zev took a long look at Zacarias and Manolito. The De La Cruz brothers were rather infamous. Taking on their family as kin would be daunting. Only a very confident and strong man would ever agree.

Luiz inclined his head and walked to the crystal bloodstone on his own, Zacarias and Manolito behind him. Clearly Luiz had not been wounded. He was physically fit and moved with the flow of a jungle cat.

Zacarias pierced his palm first, allowing his blood to flow down the stone, joining with the ancient warriors. At once the hum began, a low call of greeting, of recognition and honor. Colors swirled around the room as if the ancients knew Zacarias and his legendary reputation. They seemed to greet him as an old friend. There was no doubt in Zev’s mind that the ancient warriors were paying tribute to Zacarias. Many probably had known him.

When the humming died down, Luiz stepped close to the stone and pierced his palm, his blood flowing into that of the eldest De La Cruz. Manolito came next and did the same so that the blood of all three mingled with that of the ancient warriors.

At once the humming of approval began again, and the great columns of both stalagmites and stalactites banded with colors of white and yellow and bright red.

Luiz stood silent, very still, much as Gary had before him, and just as Gary had, Luiz nodded his head several times as though listening. He looked up at Zacarias and Manolito and smiled for the first time.

“It is done,” Mikhail murmured in a low, carrying tone of power that seemed to fill the chamber. “So be it.”

Zev’s mouth went dry. His heart began to pound. He felt tension gather low in his belly, great knots forming

that he couldn't prevent. There was acceptance here—but there could also be rejection. He wasn't born Carpathian, but Fen and Dimitri were offering him so much more than that—they stood for him. Called him brother. If these ancient warriors accepted him, he would be truly both Carpathian and Lycan. He would have a pack of his own again. He would belong somewhere.

The feeling in the great chamber was very somber. The eloquence of the long dead slowly faded and he knew it was time. He had no idea what he would do when asked. None. He wasn't even certain his legs would carry him the distance, and he wasn't going to be carried to the bloodstone.

"Is it your wish, Zev, to become fully a brother?" Mikhail asked.

He felt the weight of every stare. Warriors all. Good men who knew battle. Men he respected. His feet wanted to move forward. He wanted to be a part of them. He was physically still very weak. What if he didn't measure up in their eyes?

You aren't weak, Zev. There is nothing weak about you.

Her voice moved through him like a breath of fresh air. He hadn't realized he was holding his breath until she spoke so intimately to him. He let it go, braced himself and made his first move. Fen and Dimitri stayed close, not just to walk him to the bloodstone, but to make absolutely certain he didn't fall on his face. Still, he was determined it wouldn't happen.

With every step he took on that worn, stone floor he seemed to absorb into him the ancients who had gone before. Their wisdom. Their technique in battle. Their great determination and sense of honor and duty. He felt information gathering in his mind, yet he couldn't quite process it. It was a great gift, but he couldn't access the data and that left him even more concerned that he might be rejected. Somewhere, sometime, long ago, he felt he'd been in this sacred chamber before. The longer he was in it, the more familiar to him it felt.

As he approached the crystal column, his heart accelerated even more. He felt sheer raw power emanating from the bloodstone. The formation pulsed with power, and each time it did, color banded, ropes of various shades of red, blood he knew was collected from all the great warriors who were long gone from the Carpathian world, yet, through the prince, could still aid their people. Mikhail understood their voices through those perfectly pitched notes.

Fen dropped his palm over the tip of the stalagmite. His blood ran down the sacred stone. The colors changed instantly, swirling with a deep purple through dark red. He stepped back to allow Zev to approach the column.

Zev wasn't going to draw it out. Either they accepted him or they didn't. In his life, he couldn't remember a single time when he cared what others thought of him, but here, in the sacred chamber of warriors, he found it mattered much more than he wanted to admit. He dropped his palm over the sharp tip so that it pierced his palm and blood flowed over Fen's, mingling with that of the one who would be his brother, and that of the great warriors of the past.

His soul stretched to meet those who had gone before. He was surrounded, filled with camaraderie, with acceptance, with belonging. His community dated back to ancient times, and those warriors of old called out to him in greeting. As they did, the flood of information through his brain, adhering to his memories, was both astonishing and overwhelming.

Zev was a man who observed every detail of his surroundings. It was one of the characteristics that had allowed him to become an elite hunter. Now, everything seemed even sharper and more vivid to him. Every

warrior's heart in the chamber from ancient to modern times matched the drumming of the earth's heart. Blood ebbed and flowed in their veins, matching the flow of the ancients' blood within the crystal, but also the ebb and flow of water throughout their earth.

Dimitri dropped his palm over the crystal and at once, Zev felt the mingling of their blood, the kinship that ran deeper than friendship. His history and their history became one, stretching back to ancient times. Information was accumulative, amassing in his mind at a rapid rate. With it came the heavy responsibility of his kind.

The humming grew loud, and he recognized now what those notes meant—approval—acceptance without reserve. Colors swirled and banded throughout the room. Those ancient warriors recognized him, recognized his bloodline, not just the blood of Fen and Dimitri who claimed kinship, but his own, born of a union not all Lycan.

Bur tule ekämet kuntamak. The voices of the ancestors filled his mind with greetings. Well met, brother-kin. *Eläsz jeläbam ainaak.* Long may you live in the light.

Zev had no knowledge of his lineage being anything but pure Lycan. His mother had died long before he had memory of her. Why would these warriors claim kinship with him through his own bloodline and not Fen and Dimitri's? That made no sense to him.

Our lives are tied together by our blood. They spoke to him in their own ancient language and he had no trouble translating it, as if the language had always been a part of him and he had just needed the ancients to bridge some gap in his memory for it all to unfold.

I don't understand. That was an understatement. He was more confused than ever.

Everything including one's lifemate is determined by the blood flowing in our veins. Your blood is Dark Blood. You now are of mixed blood, but you are one of us. You are kont o sívanak.

Strong heart, heart of a warrior. It was a tribute, but it didn't tell him what he needed to know.

Who was my mother? That was the question he needed answered. If Carpathian blood already flowed in his veins, how was it he hadn't known?

Your mother's mother was fully Carpathian. Lycans killed her for being Sange rau. Her daughter, your mother, was raised wholly Lycan. She mated with a Lycan, and gave birth to you, a Dark Blood. You are kunta.

Family, he interpreted. From what bloodline? How? Zev knew he was taking far longer than either Gary or Luiz had, but he didn't want to leave this source of information. His father never once let on that there was any Carpathian blood in their family. Had he known? Had his mother even known? If his grandmother had been murdered by the Lycans for her mixed blood, no one would ever admit that his mother had been the child of a mixed blood. The family would have hidden her from the others. Most likely her father had left his pack and found another one to protect her.

The humming began to fade and Zev found himself reaching out, needing more.

Wait. Who was she?

It is there, in your memories, everything you need, everything you are. Blood calls to blood and you are whole again. The humming faded away.

“It is done,” Mikhail said formally. “So be it.”

2

Fen clapped Zev on the shoulder hard enough to make him wince. “Looks like I’m your big brother. I knew eventually there would be an upside to meeting you. I’ve got another little brother to boss around.”

Dimitri groaned. “Now we’re in for it. He’s going to strut around all puffed up. No one will be able to live with him.”

Zev tried not to fall over. His stomach throbbed with pain. For the first time since he’d been so gravely injured protecting Arno, one of the Lycan council members, he looked down as if he might see the wound through the white shirt Fen had provided. His hand went up to cover the spot where it felt as if he had a huge hole torn through him. He half expected to feel the flesh gone right through the shirt.

The revelations from the ancient warriors were almost too much to process, just as all the information they had packed into his mind was. He swayed with weariness. He found he could barely think with his mind turning over and over trying to understand the things about him that had been revealed. Had he been in a dream state? Was it real? Right now, only the pain felt real. The rest of it felt surreal.

His fingers bunched the material of the shirt into a fist and he looked around slowly, carefully, wanting to see only one person. His breath caught in his throat. He felt his wolf leap forward as if to protect him. He was still disoriented, and it was impossible in his present state to process the wealth of information now imprinted on his brain. He found it difficult to stand, let alone think, and he needed her.

“Maybe you should sit down,” Fen suggested, genuine concern in his voice. “I’m happy you’re alive, Zev, but we may have called you back a little too soon.” He glanced over Zev’s shoulder to the man approaching him from behind.

Zev didn’t think there was much question about it. He wasn’t fully healed yet. He could barely control his body temperature. There was a note of guilt in Fen’s voice that his mixed blood picked up when his mind seemed to be all over the place. “There must have been a reason to wake me.”

He knew the prince had come up behind him. Mikhail made no sound, but the awareness of power couldn’t be mistaken. He turned to greet the prince of the Carpathian people.

Mikhail clasped Zev’s forearms in the welcoming of warriors. “You gave us all a scare, Zev. We weren’t sure you would make it.”

“Neither was I,” Zev admitted. He looked around the chamber. He needed to see her. To touch her. Where *was* she?

“You need rest, Zev,” Mikhail said.

As if he hadn’t figured that out for himself. *Why did you wake me?* he asked Fen.

“Dimitri and Fen feel more comfortable in the forest and both have homes there. We can accommodate your preference, forest, mountain or even the village itself, but you’ll still need care, at least until you’re stronger,” Mikhail continued.

He only wanted one person caring for him, and she was no longer in the chamber.

Where are you?

Was that him? He sounded possessive, even irritable that she dared leave without his knowledge. He didn't want her out of his sight.

"Thank you, I appreciate the offer of a house. I'm still a little shaky." He pinned Fen with his steel-colored eyes. He may have just come back from the dead, but he'd always gone his own way, fought his own battles and was a force to be reckoned with. There was another reason to awaken him before he was healed other than to present him for judgment before the ancient warriors.

Where are you, Branislava?

His snapped the question a second time, demanding an answer. He used his most commanding voice, one that brooked no refusal.

I need to reassure Tatijana that I live.

She had the same, perfect melodic voice, unaffected in the least by his domineering, *idiotic* short-tempered pack leader voice.

Wait for me.

He winced, hearing himself. He sounded like a dictator. He couldn't help how he sounded. It should have been a plea, not a command. She wasn't part of his pack, but he was used to obedience. Even the Lycan council took his word as law. More, he was annoyed that he didn't understand why it was so necessary to have her with him. It made no sense to him and until it did, until he could figure out why it was so important to keep her close, she wasn't going anywhere.

There was a small silence—a distancing—as if she'd been in his mind, but now had pulled away from him. His heart stuttered and he stretched, reached, unable to let go of her. He had been aware of the other men in the chamber talking around him, of the steady drip of water and the small hiss of flames, but now his complete concentration was on Branislava.

Zev willed her to return to him in spite of his overbearing, officious manner. He actually counted his heartbeats, waiting for her answer. Had he been strong enough, he would have gone after her. He knew he could follow her trail. Few eluded him once he was in pursuit.

He smelled her first, that blend of cinnamon, spice and honey. The moment she was close, he drew her scent into his lungs and was able to breathe fully again. He tasted the mixture that was unique to her, on his tongue, and instantly wanted—no needed—more.

He turned his head to gaze at her. The impact was the same as it always was when he looked at her. He hadn't been cured of whatever spell he was under. Looking at her almost hurt she was so beautiful.

Thank you. I don't know what's gotten into me.

Zev held out his hand to her, needing to touch her physically. It was strange to need anything at all, let alone physical contact. He ignored Fen and Dimitri's raised eyebrows when she didn't move. He continued to hold out his hand. Waiting. He said nothing at all, just let her make up her mind. *Willing* her to reach for him.

Branislava put her hand in his. His fingers closed around hers. Her hand felt small and fragile in his. At once everything in him settled and he felt whole. Complete. That was confusing as well. He'd always managed to be just fine on his own.

"I'd like you to meet Gary Jansen," Mikhail said.

"I remember him," Zev said. "Our last meeting was during the fight with the rogue pack attacking all the women and children. He fought like a banshee. Without him, I'm not certain I'd have made it through that battle."

As Gregori and Gary approached them, Mikhail added, "Gregori's like an old mother hen fussing over her chick. Now that he has Gary to drive insane, maybe I'll be lucky and he won't fuss over me so much."

"You're not ever going to get that lucky," Gregori shot back, in no way perturbed by Mikhail's needling. It was clear the two men were old friends.

Mikhail shrugged, a small grin lighting his piercing, dark eyes. "I thought that might be the case. One can only hope."

It was the first time Zev could ever recall seeing the prince, or Gregori, for that matter, relaxed.

He was aware of everything now as if his mixed blood had heightened every sense, as if both wolf and Carpathian were on the alert. The heat in the chamber. The water. The fact that Gary Jansen and Luiz Silva were both unattached males in very close proximity to Branislava. The breath hissed out of him in a long, slow growl under his breath.

He tugged on Branislava's hand, drawing her closer to him. *I don't want to fall on my face in front of the prince.* It was a lame explanation, but the only one he could think of for explaining why he needed her close to him.

"It's very good finally meeting you, Gary," Zev said aloud, offering his right hand to shake. Gary was very pale, but he looked incredibly fit for having suffered a mortal wound, essentially death and conversion.

"I'm glad you made it through," Gary said. "Gregori kept me up-to-date on everything that was happening." He bowed low toward Branislava, offering her a smile. "It's good to see you out and about. You look beautiful."

Right there in that sacred cave, surrounded by very perceptive warriors, Zev felt a kind of snarling rage burst through him like a live volcano. He actually saw red. Waves of crimson banded through the room, and in his mouth, he felt teeth lengthen. He fought back the change, refusing to allow the wolf side of him freedom.

He'd never experienced such an emotion or even one with such intensity. The Carpathian side of his nature seemed to be a little hard to control. He was going to have to get used to it—and so was his wolf. He doubted if the ancient warriors and the prince would be so welcoming to a snarling, raging wolf.

He glanced at Branislava to see how she took Gary's compliment. The man was being honest—there was nothing at all in his demeanor to suggest anything else—but still, Zev didn't think it was proper, when he was holding her hand, to have another man complimenting her. And bowing? Come on. He'd been human, not Carpathian. Showing off was ridiculous.

It is always acceptable and proper for a man to tell a woman she is beautiful. There was the merest hint of amusement in Branislava's voice. "Thank you, sir," she said more formally to Gary. *And bowing is very*

courtly and always welcomed.

Fen raised an eyebrow at him. *Your wolf is showing.* Fen didn't even try to hide his taunting laughter. It was nothing at all like the gentle, kind, *soothing* hint of amusement Branislava had in her voice.

Zev sent him a quelling glare. He forced his attention back to Gary, determined to get his attention off of Branislava. "How did you manage to get in with this bunch?"

"I was their enemy," Gary admitted. "I saw an actual vampire attack and I joined a society that hunted vampires—except they weren't really targeting vampires. More often it was people they didn't like. I helped some people to escape, and Gregori was there to help them, too, although I didn't know that at the time. We met. That was quite a few years ago. My life was very different. I was skinny and tripped over my own feet when I walked. In my wildest dreams I never thought I could ever really fight a vampire and win, but over the years, I've had to learn."

"But you still were going to try back in those days," Gregori pointed out. "You never lacked for courage."

"I thought you were supposed to be a genius," Mikhail said. "Yet you chose to hang around Gregori." His grin widened. "And all the rest of us."

"Well, I can never say my life is dull," Gary said, with an answering smile that faded quickly. "You gave my life a sense of purpose."

Gary wasn't skinny now. He was fit and strong, with the look of a warrior who had seen many battles—and he probably had. He had been their go-to man during the day when the Carpathians were underground.

"I'm Darius." The man who looked much like Gregori introduced himself. "Gregori has told me so much about you. All good, which is rare for him."

Zev managed a smile. He scented a woman on Darius, and knew instinctively he had a lifemate. He breathed away the itch that seemed to come and go over his skin. "It's good to meet you, too." He'd definitely been awakened too early. His wound throbbed and pulsed with pain. No matter how hard he tried to push it away, the pain pushed back.

Zacarias De La Cruz, his brother Manolito and the newcomer Luiz joined them. Luiz was built like a Jaguar, compact with ropy muscles and a fluidity when he walked that couldn't be mistaken. Manolito was like Fen, Dimitri and Zev, a mixed blood.

Zacarias looked Zev over, bowed to Branislava without saying a word to her.

See, now that's courtly. Gary might be able to learn a few things from the man.

Branislava's soft laughter moved through his mind, but she didn't reply.

Zev, hurry through the introductions, you're looking like you might drop dead all over again, Fen warned.

Zev nodded at Luiz, gritting his teeth. He *felt* like he might drop dead as well, but that was impossible now. Two unattached males were very close to Branislava, and both were looking at her as if they might engage her in conversation at any moment. And just why the hell would that be so wrong? What had gotten into him? Joints and muscles ached. His skin itched. His jaw felt as if it might shatter, and he clenched his teeth trying to breathe away the need to change. His wolf prowled closer than ever to the surface.

"It's nice to finally meet you," Luiz said. "I've heard of you, of course."

Zev tried to reply, but Luiz's gaze kept straying to Branislava, and if he shook hands or attempted speech, all they would get was his wolf.

As if he knew there was a problem, Zacarias glided smoothly between Luiz and Zev. He didn't posture, but he was definitely a threat. Instead of backing down, the alpha wolf rose with a snarling challenge Zev could barely suppress.

Why is your wolf so close? Dimitri asked. *I can feel that you're fighting him.* He stepped closer to Zev, moving in on his other side protectively.

I don't know, but he wants out and he's looking for a fight.

Zev. Gregori reached for both Dimitri and Fen as well, as they were now tied to Zev. He knew all three could hear. Your eyes have changed color and you're giving off a very dangerous scent. Should I remove the prince?

Zev breathed hard to try to stay in control of the wolf raging to get out. He saw in images of heat, colors banding and shimmering. He pinpointed the hearts of every single person in the room. He heard them, loud and strong, calling to him.

Gregori, Zev is severely wounded, Fen reminded. He can barely stand.

He's dangerous, one of the most lethal men I've ever met, and there's no quit in him. He'll fight until he's dead. And he'll take as many with him as he can.

Zev wished he could reassure them all, but he wasn't certain anything more than a growl or snarl would come out of his mouth. He concentrated on trying to breathe, but it seemed as if every breath he drew contained fire so that his lungs burned, adding to the need to change. He kept his head down, knowing if Gregori and Zacarias could see the wolf rising, the other warriors in close proximity could as well.

Branislava moved closer to him, almost protectively, sliding under his shoulder. That small movement seemed to appease his wolf enough for him to breathe. Unfortunately, that small movement on her part instantly drew the attention of the men around them, including that of Luiz, who couldn't seem to stop staring at her. A low warning growl escaped before he could stop it.

Mikhail looked at him and then at Branislava speculatively.

Get me out of this situation now, Fen. I don't know what's wrong, but if that man keeps looking at her that way, I'm not going to be able to stop myself from attacking. Admitting to that weakness when he knew Branislava could hear was one of the most difficult things he'd ever done.

Fen didn't hesitate. "Zev needs to rest now. He's been awakened far too early out of necessity," he announced. "I hate to cut introductions short, but he needs to leave now." He indicated Zev's shirt.

Zev followed his gaze to the crimson stain spreading wider over the white material. He covered it with his hand. His palm came away coated with blood.

Mikhail nodded and stepped aside. Fen led the way to the outside of the chamber, with Dimitri close behind Zev and Branislava.

The moment they were out of sight of the others, Fen halted. "I'm going to take you out of here, Zev. You can't walk the distance and you can't shift right now." He indicated the blood. "That's genuine. I didn't put it there. Your wolf came too close to the surface and your body won't stand up to the change yet."

"Are you going to tell me what's going on? What's happening to me?" Zev demanded. He'd had enough of intrigue and his own strange behavior.

Let them get you home, Branislava said. I can attend your wound.

I need to know what's going on. He tried not to snarl the demand, but it came out that way despite his best effort.

I need to heal your wound. She didn't flinch in the face of the wolf. She used her soft, melodic voice that could bring any man to his knees. Even his wolf seemed to respond, subsiding enough that he could do as she asked.

He swore under his breath, but he nodded to Fen. Fen didn't wait to see if he'd change his mind. He caught up Zev and took him through the caves, going through the lower and upper chambers with astonishing speed. The caverns leading down to the sacred chamber were really miles of maze, a true labyrinth, but Zev knew instinctively that he could find his way back in spite of the rapid ascent.

The velocity wrenched at his body, but he didn't protest, wanting to get answers as soon as possible. They burst out of an opening between rocks that looked like no more than a mere crack when he looked back. Branislava, with Dimitri right behind her, emerged after them.

Which direction, Zev? Fen asked.

Take me to the house in the forest. He needed the familiarity of the trees and open air. He was Lycan and the forest would always be his first choice.

The terrible need to change, that snarling, raging wolf, had retreated, but the aftertaste was a blow to his pride. He'd nearly lost control in front of everyone—and he was a master of control. Not once in all his long years had he ever come that close. He knew he was a dangerous man. He was Lycan, born to a time when they still hunted prey. He had managed to overcome that hunger. He was able to fight without a pack. He negotiated peace among packs. To lose control was appalling, almost beyond his comprehension.

The forest felt cool and fresh when they entered it. The scent of ancient trees aided in calming his wolf. He breathed in the air, taking in familiar scents. He was aware of every living thing within a few miles. This was home.

The house was small, built of stone like so many in the area were. This one was deep in the forest, far from everyone else. Wolves inhabited this territory, and he immediately felt a kinship with them. It didn't surprise him to catch Dimitri's scent, very faint, mingling with that of Dimitri's lifemate, Skyler. They had been running with the wolves at some point earlier in the evening.

Fen didn't set him down until they were inside the stone house. He set him on the bed that had already been made up. The scents of Tatijana, Fen's lifemate, and Skyler were everywhere. Fen had called ahead and they had made the house welcoming for him. Still, it was significant that neither were present.

Branislava put a hand on his chest indicating for him to lie back. He put his hand over hers, just for a moment, as he eased down onto the bed. Her palm was right over his heart and her touch seemed to go right

through him.

I know something is wrong with me, but I would never hurt you. That much he was certain of. It might be the only thing he knew for certain.

I never thought you would.

She pulled her hand out from under his to catch the edges of his shirt and rip it open. He winced when he saw the wound. It was an ugly mess, the hole far bigger than he anticipated. The edges were mending from the inside out, but it had a long way to go.

Branislava turned her head to glare at Fen and Dimitri. Zev realized she was angry—not at him—but at them. She turned back to him, her touch gentle as she placed both hands over the wound. He felt warmth in her touch, which seemed to grow hotter.

You need to go to ground, Zev. This wound needs to heal.

I need to know what's going on. Gregori said I was a dangerous man, and he spoke the truth. I can't lose control. I can't allow my wolf to take control from me in any situation.

Branislava sighed and sank onto the bed beside him. When she lifted her hands, they were free of his blood and he knew he was no longer bleeding. “We are lifemates,” she announced. She didn’t sound happy about it.

Zev frowned and slowly sat up. Puzzled, he looked to Fen for an explanation.

Fen shook his head, holding both hands up. “I don’t know what happened, Zev. When you were so severely wounded, all of us fought for your life. No one wanted to let you go, but you were so far gone and there was very little time . . .” He broke off, shrugging again.

“I wove my spirit to yours,” Branislava confessed. “It was the only thing I could think to do to keep you from dying. You wouldn’t go if you would take me with you.”

“You said either one of us could undo that weave,” Zev remembered.

She nodded slowly. “That’s true. But it will not release us altogether.” She looked down at her hands. “I knew when I first saw you.”

“That’s impossible,” Fen said. “He’s Lycan first. How can a Lycan be lifemate to a Carpathian? A Dragonseeker?”

“I don’t know the how of it, just that it is so,” Branislava replied.

“Okay,” Zev said softly, realizing she was distressed. He was beginning to be able to read her. “Now what happens?” Now, some of what the ancients had said to him about how everything was about blood was beginning to make sense. They called him “Dark Blood,” not mixed blood. He was both.

Her heart was pounding too fast at the admission that she was his lifemate. He reached out and took her hand. “You have no reason to fear me. Whatever this thing is between us, you tell me what you want to do. I would never force you into anything.”

Fen ran both hands through his hair, and Dimitri turned away to stare out the window into the night.

Zev's frown deepened. "You're not telling me something I clearly need to know," Zev said. "Just say it."

"Until you claim her, until she is fully yours, you'll struggle with control. Your wolf is going to rise anytime a man is close to her. You think you're dangerous now, but wait until a little time has gone by and she's just out of your reach. Madness can set in. You're mixed blood, which means both your wolf and your Carpathian will drive you to keep her safe," Fen explained.

"Dimitri didn't claim Skyler for years," Branislava pointed out. "Tatijana told me all about it."

"It was a different situation," Fen said. He pinned Branislava with a stern gaze. "Much different, and you're well aware of that."

It was all Zev could do not to leap from where he was and attack Fen, just for the tone he used and the look he gave Branislava. He let his breath out slowly, forcing his years of discipline to come to his aid.

"Don't do that to her," he said, keeping his voice low. "None of this is her fault. How could any of us know what would happen?"

"We need you right now," Fen said. "You have to be 100 percent. Two more council members arrived this evening, and there are more Lycans in our village than we have Carpathians. Trying to kill every male in close proximity to Branislava doesn't make for good diplomacy."

Branislava flinched as if Fen had struck her. Every protective instinct of both species rose in Zev like an exploding rocket. His fingers bunched in the thick quilt on the bed, hiding the curved claws trying to burst from the ends.

"Fen, I think it best if you leave us for now." Zev managed to get the words out without growling. "We need to work things out between the two of us."

Fen sighed. "I apologize, Branislava. Zev is right, none of this is your fault. How could any of us know this was going to happen?"

"I knew," Branislava admitted in a low tone. "When I saw him there at the dance. When he took me into his arms. I knew then, just like I know we should complete the binding ritual."

Zev shook his head. "We'll talk it out and figure it out together. Fen is right, I am extremely lethal. I refuse to lie to you about that, but no one, least of all me, is going to tie you to a man you don't want."

"That's your Lycan talking," Dimitri said, "not your Carpathian."

Branislava attempted a small smile. "I already tied us together, remember? Our spirits remain woven together. Where you go, I go."

"But we can undo that," Zev reminded her. "You told me so yourself. You're not trapped, because that's how you're feeling, isn't it?"

Fen and Dimitri made a move as if to go but Branislava held up her hand. "I need to know why you insisted on waking him early. It's important to any decisions we make here."

"Zev is the one person the Lycan council still trusts. We have no idea who is friend or enemy. He knows Lycan politics and he's aware of personalities and every intrigue these people may try. The alliance is no longer as important as figuring out who our enemy truly is. Zev is the person who can do that."

“The council members are friends,” Zev said. “I’ve spent my life protecting them and enforcing their laws. I can’t just switch sides.” He ran his hand through his hair. It was thick and long, untamed and hanging around his face, instead of being pulled back as he normally wore it.

“You would still be protecting them. You know assassins are trying to kill them. They’re at risk just as the prince is. Hopefully you’ll figure this out and keep them all alive,” Fen pointed out.

Dimitri nodded his head. “You are truly our brother. Our blood runs in your veins. We all three are tied together in a blood bond. We would never have risked your healing unless the situation was dire.”

Branislava’s hand crept toward his, slowing smoothing the pads of her fingers over his knuckles where his fists were still bunched in the quilt.

Zev felt more of the tension drain away. At least he knew *why* he was all over the place. Finding how to control it might be difficult, but now that he knew the reason his wolf was bordering on being out of control, he was certain he had the discipline to overcome his knee-jerk reaction to other males near Branislava.

“I’ll be honest with you both, I’m not certain I’m up for the challenge yet. I can barely stand, let alone protect the council members.” He detested the admission, but he had to be straight with them. He could end up being a liability if they counted on him. “I could get you all killed if I can’t hold my own in a fight. You can’t be worried about whether or not I can protect myself.”

Fen nodded. “We’re aware of that. Mikhail said you’d say that. He wants you to consider allowing him, with Gregori, to heal you.”

Branislava gasped. She whipped her head around to look at Fen. “That isn’t done. You know that. Even I know that.”

“Of course it’s done,” Fen said. “The prince is the most powerful man we have.”

“Which is why it isn’t done. Let us try again. Skyler is a powerful healer. We’re Dragonseekers, Gregori on his own can aid us.”

“You’ve all tried, Gregori included,” Fen argued. “He’s Lycan, they regenerate very fast. He’s mixed blood and they regenerate even faster. He isn’t healing, and you know it.”

“The wound was too severe,” Branislava admitted, her voice pleading.

Zev turned his hand over and took hers, placing her palm over his heart. “Don’t be upset. I’ll heal. I always do.”

She shook her head and looked down at her lap.

Fen sighed again. “Actually, Zev, you’re supposed to be dead. No one could have healed that wound. By weaving your spirits together, she cheated death, so to speak. She knew you wouldn’t go into the other world and force her to go with you.”

Zev shrugged. “I don’t give a damn how it was done. As far as I’m concerned she was more than courageous, betting on me when all of you believed I would die—that I was supposed to die. I’m here. I’m alive.”

He caught Branislava’s chin in his hand and tipped her head up, forcing her to look into his eyes. “We’ll do

this together. We'll find out who is behind all this and then, I promise, we'll sort things out between us."

"You might have to do the sorting out between you *before* you find out who's behind this mess," Dimitri muttered under his breath.

Zev shot him a quelling glance. "Don't listen to him. What's between us is just that—between us and no one else. Understand?"

Branislava nodded, giving him another small smile that sent his heart into overdrive.

"Tell me about this healing process with the prince and why he so rarely does it." Zev tore his gaze from Branislava and looked directly at Fen, refusing to allow him to sidestep the question.

"One or the other can heal like anyone else. Gregori is known to be one of our greatest," Dimitri said, when his brother remained silent. "The combination of Mikhail and Gregori is more like a nuclear bomb going off. If they aren't precise, if they miss one small calculation, take the heat too high or . . ."

"I get it," Zev said. He sighed and tapped out a rhythm with Branislava's palm over his heart while he considered his various options.

It isn't done because it's considered too dangerous.

The hole in his gut hurt, a constant throbbing reminder of the huge wooden stake blown into him by a bomb as it tore apart a table. He really preferred not to remember how that enormous splinter nearly as big as his fist ripped through his body.

How much longer before I heal naturally in the earth?

There was a small silence. He turned his head to look at her, bringing the tips of her fingers to his mouth. He used the edge of his teeth to scrape along the pads of her fingers, waiting for her reply.

Wolves are very oral, aren't they?

It was the last thing he expected her to say. Laughter welled out of nowhere. He didn't laugh as a rule, and it hurt like hell to do it, but he couldn't help himself.

Yes, I suppose we are.

Amusement set her green eyes sparkling like emeralds. *I like that you have a sense of humor.*

"I've found, being around Fen and Dimitri, that I need a really good sense of humor," he replied aloud, raising his eyebrows at the two men claiming kinship with him.

"You're a riot a minute," Fen said. He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned one hip against the wall.

"You tell me what you want to do in this situation. If you want to take the time to heal naturally in the earth you will heal—eventually. You're Carpathian and you're strong. It could take months, even a year, but you will heal."

Months? A year? Branislava had been in the ground with him. She knew whether or not that wound was healing fast or slow.

In my opinion you're healing very rapidly for such a mortal wound, but Fen's right, it could take several

months, probably longer. You shouldn't have survived.

Zev sighed. "Did Mikhail ask you to waken me? Or was it your idea?"

Fen looked uncomfortable, but he didn't answer.

"Fen argued for days not to bring you out of the earth," Dimitri said. "Mikhail and Gregori insisted it was imperative. Both believe that without your knowledge of the Lycans and the council, we don't have a chance avoiding an all-out war, let alone securing an actual alliance."

Zev bit down gently on Branislava's fingertips as he considered the various possibilities. This woman sat in silence beside him, contemplating changing her entire life to become the lifemate of a virtual stranger in order to keep him from killing every single male who came near her. Duty. He sighed. He'd spent more than one lifetime doing his duty to his people. When did it end? He was damned exhausted.

You are not entirely a stranger.

There was that small note of humor in her voice. He realized she rarely spoke aloud, preferring to talk only to him. He'd noticed, the single time they'd danced together, that other Carpathians had flocked around her, but they had done most of the talking. She was very quiet, almost subdued, but her nature wasn't at all passive.

Beneath that cool, quiet surface was a fiery, passionate woman, as fierce as any warrior he'd fought with. He knew, because he'd seen her dragon. Bright, crimson-red scales tipped in gold, she'd been a sight in the sky. He was in her mind and saw that will of iron, honed in the ice caves where her father had kept her prisoner.

His heart thudded hard when he made that connection. Of course she would think being forced to become his lifemate would be a form of imprisonment. How could she not? She craved freedom, and yet, the moment she surfaced, almost the very day, she had met him and she had known they were lifemates.

"Tell Mikhail and Gregori, I'll do it," he said, making his decision.

Beside him she stiffened, but she said nothing.

You know there is no other choice for me. If there's a chance I can prevent bloodshed, I have to try.

Fen straightened, shaking his head. Clearly he wasn't any happier than Branislava, but he'd done his duty, just like she would do, just as he chose to do.

Zev shrugged his shoulders. "We're warriors, Fen. It's what we do. Who we are."

Fen nodded. "They're taking a hell of a chance with your life, Zev."

"For Mikhail to consider doing such a thing, knowing Branislava tied herself to me, he has to have good reasons. He's our prince, I accepted that when I chose brotherhood. I'm sworn to protect the council and have a need to help those who are my people as well."

He wanted to lie in the cool earth and not think anymore. He'd made his decision. "I'll ask Mikhail to get the ancients to release our spirit weave," he added to Branislava. "Just in case something goes wrong."

Branislava abruptly pulled her hand from Zev's and got up, moving away from him and across the room to stare out the window. She radiated hurt. Her long, thick hair was banded with fiery red over the red-gold strands. He caught a glimpse of those green eyes, now changing color, deepening to an intense blue green like the deepest sea. Stormy. Turbulent.

He swore he could see sparks flickering in the air around her body as she stood with her back to him. Fen and Dimitri stepped back, and Fen lifted his hand.

That's our cue to exit. We'll tell Mikhail of your decision. If you make it out of this one alive, Fen added, we'll come for you next rising and bring you to the cave of healing.

Dimitri snickered. *You have a lot to learn about women, Zev. She's not the little submissive thing you thought, is she?*

He had never thought of Branislava as submissive—exactly. He'd seen that fiery dragon of hers and known she was a fierce warrior. But, okay, maybe he'd been a little arrogant thinking he could make decisions—all the decisions. He was particularly good at making decisions, giving orders and having everyone follow them.

"Fen, before you go, what's a 'Dark Blood'? What does that mean?" The moment Zev uttered the question aloud, the room went silent. Still. Even the insects ceased their constant droning. Fen and Dimitri slowly turned back from the doorway to stare at him. Branislava turned and leaned against the wall, her eyes wide.

"Where did you hear that term?" Fen asked, walking back into the middle of the room.

"In the chamber, when the ancients spoke to me. What does it mean?" He frowned at their reaction. "Is something wrong? Mikhail must have heard them."

Fen shook his head. "Mikhail summons them and he can understand them, but when they speak to the one who mingles blood with them, it is private, only between you and them. How did they come to use the term Dark Blood?"

Zev hesitated answering. He didn't need any more bad news. War was brewing and he was expected to stop it. His woman was upset with him, and he was facing possible death on the next evening. Worse than all of that was the pain that shook him each time he took a breath.

Branislava moved, drawing his attention. She was wearing modern but very feminine clothes. Everything about her was feminine. Just looking at her helped drain the tension from his body. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen in his life. When she spoke, he heard music in her voice. When she moved, he heard the flow of water, that connection to the earth itself.

I didn't mean to hurt you, Branka. I'm tired. He was so damned tired he thought about just lying right there on the bed and letting himself escape the persistent pain. *But that's no excuse for not thinking before I spoke.*

We will talk about the weave of spirits when we're alone.

He marveled at her ability to sound so sweet when she was laying down the law. There was a note of absolute steel in her musical voice. The sound of it made him want to smile. He was alpha, he'd been recognized as alpha even as a child. Few in authority ever stood up to him, but here was a little slip of a woman, with porcelain skin and enormous green eyes, giving him the look from under feathery lashes that said she meant business.

"Zev. I need to know," Fen insisted. "What exactly did they say to you?"

"I thought you said the conversation with the ancients was meant to be private," Zev countered.

Do you know what Dark Blood means? he asked Branislava. He would much rather she deliver bad news to him than Fen, if it was bad. The ancients had welcomed him, not rejected him. If being a Dark Blood was bad, surely they wouldn't have called him family.

She gave the slightest shake of her head. *I heard Xavier speak of hunting a Dark Blood, but as far as I know, he never found one and I had no idea what it was.*

"Damn it, Zev, do you have to be so stubborn?" Fen demanded. "We're your brothers. We're mixed blood, the same as you are. We're under that same death sentence the Lycans dole out whenever they find one of us. Do you really think we'd suddenly go the other way and kill you over something you and the ancients talked about?"

"He's swearing at me," Zev pointed out to Dimitri with a little grin. He would have laughed but it would hurt more.

"Yeah, he does that sometimes. He thinks it's okay now because you're his little brother," Dimitri said, with an answering grin. He shrugged his shoulders. "It's best to ignore him. Swearing makes him believe he'll intimidate us into doing whatever he wants us to do."

Zev nodded. "I see. I suppose we have to let him think he's bossing us around."

"If we don't, he sulks," Dimitri said. "Just answer him so he doesn't go ballistic on us. I'm heading out in a few minutes to go hunting with Skyler. We've got our own wolves." He turned around and lifted his shirt to show the tattoo of two wolves staring back at Zev. "We're learning to hunt vampire with them. It's a lot more fun than listening to big brother give lectures."

"Nice," Zev said. "I agree. I'd rather be doing anything than getting a lecture from Fen."

"Keep it up you two clowns. Those wolves of yours can't protect you from me, Dimitri, and you're going to be healed sooner or later, Zev," Fen threatened.

"It's going to be sooner," Zev said. "I'll let Mikhail take his shot at this and see what he can do. I can't very well leave diplomacy to you." He counted his heartbeats. Five of them. "The ancients called me Dark Blood." He frowned. "It didn't make sense to me. They said I was of mixed blood now, but I was Dark Blood. I tried to find out what they meant, but they seemed to believe I would know."

Fen and Dimitri exchanged a long look. "I don't understand. Dark Blood is a bloodline. Like Dragonseeker. Like Dubrinsky. Names change but the bloodline remains the same. Dark Blood is the oldest lineage we have, and there are no more. Our last lifemated couple was lost to us centuries ago. They had a baby with them, and when the prince heard of their death, he sent out warriors to try to find the baby, a little girl, but they came to the conclusion she was killed by the vampire who slaughtered her parents," Fen explained.

"What else did they tell you?" Dimitri asked.

"That my grandmother became mixed blood and when her pack found out, they killed her. She had a daughter, a baby, at the time. My grandfather took the baby and disappeared, went to another pack, and that child, my mother, was raised Lycan. I know that she died in childbirth."

“The only way your grandmother could have been mixed blood would be if she was Carpathian and she mated with a Lycan. There would be no chance of her becoming *Sange rau*. Women don’t become vampires,” Fen said.

“So his grandmother could have been the child of the last of the Dark Bloods, thought to have been killed when her parents were,” Dimitri said. “I remember that time. It was long ago, and we mourned the loss of that couple. They were—extraordinary.”

“He was a warrior beyond what any of us had known,” Fen added. “Everyone looked up to him. She was just as strong. They were often referred to as ‘strong heart’ or ‘heart of a warrior.’ When we studied battle techniques, it was always their techniques, their strategies.”

“They became legend,” Dimitri said. “No one could figure out how a vampire could have killed them.”

“It must have been during the time the Lycans were being decimated by the *Sange rau*,” Zev ventured. “It would have to be for the Lycans to murder my grandmother. How else would they have even known about mixed blood?”

“So if a Lycan family found a baby during that time . . .”

“Or *anytime*,” Zev clarified. “Lycans are good people. If they found a baby all alone, especially if they could see evidence that the parents were killed by the *Sange rau* they would have raised the child as their own. They could have even believed she was Lycan. She wouldn’t know about lifemates, and if a Lycan claimed her and she fell in love with him . . .” He stopped. “Could that happen?”

Dimitri nodded. “Of course.” He looked to his brother for confirmation. Fen nodded, and Dimitri continued. “It isn’t the same, the all-consuming focus and love we have for our lifemates, but some women have found happiness with a man outside of our society.”

“If Lycans had stumbled across this child, took her in and raised her as Lycan,” Fen said, his voice gathering excitement, “then she wouldn’t have ever known why she was different. She might not even notice the difference. When she wanted to be wolf, she could shift, and she might think that’s what her family did.”

Zev nodded. “It was centuries ago and they didn’t discuss the how or why of things back then. They knew nothing of bloodlines or DNA. How she became a mixed blood is anyone’s guess, but if her parents were so skilled in combat, she probably was, too. She most likely fought and hunted alongside her husband. When wounded, he gave her blood.”

He, too, was beginning to believe in the possibility of solving the mystery. Some of the ancient warriors in the sacred chamber had been of the Dark Blood lineage and had recognized him. They knew the history of his grandmother, and that meant that somehow she’d made her way back to them.

“She gave birth to a daughter,” Fen said. “And that daughter was your mother.”

“Were there any other children? Did you have uncles? Aunts?” Dimitri asked, hope in his voice.

“My father never mentioned any other, but he was a secretive man. I doubt that he knew anything of my mother’s family. I asked him and he just shrugged and said my mother didn’t talk about them—ever.” Zev shrugged. “I honestly thought maybe her family had gone rogue and my father and mother had been too ashamed to talk about them.”

“If you really are a Dark Blood,” Fen said, “Mikhail needs to know.”

“It would explain why Branislava is his lifemate,” Dimitri added. “His blood called to hers. Her soul is the other half of his.”

At least, in the Carpathian world, he might be able to offer her something besides the detested mixed blood his people viewed him as.

I do not need you to be anything other than who you are. I see the heart of you. I see your character. It matters little to me what bloodline, if any, you are from. You do have the heart of a warrior and a great capacity for kindness. You are both fierce and compassionate. Both good qualities. There is no deception in you and I admire that tremendously.

His heart leapt at the compliment. No one had ever said anything like that to him, let alone the most beautiful woman in the world. She could make the blood sing in his veins with just a smile, let alone such a tribute. She definitely was the kind of woman that could bring him to his knees much easier than he would have wished.

Her soft laughter brushed against his mind. His stomach did a slow somersault. He loved the sound of her laughter.

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