

# MOON'S WEB

## Chapter 1

The scent of snow on the wind raised the hairs on my skin, like distant thunder. The window of the bus was open, and I couldn't help but lift my nose as the icy breeze rushed past me. I gazed up at the cloud covered sky and knew that the moon was just behind that thin barrier. The heavy weight of it pressed with a sensuous, almost sexual, insistence. It desperately tried to reach the wolf inside me. I realized that all sound had stopped in the bus. Until moments ago, it was a party on wheels. Liquor flowed freely among the poker and dice games. But now, as we reached the edge of the park near Wolf Lake, the others began to snuffle and writhe. A woman's high pitched whine made me shiver.

A deep voice like liquid velvet reached my ears. "Soon, my wolves. Soon I will let the moon take you."

I glanced to the front of the bus. Nikoli Molotov's eyes glowed yellow, revealing the effort he was expending. He had told me he would use the Sazi magic inside him to keep the pack members from turning to their animal shapes until we were well within the state park. But the thin shell of magic could barely contain the power that welled up inside of me. I felt like an overripe fruit, threatening to burst through my own skin.

There are few actual wooded areas around Chicago, my new home. But supposedly, the lakes and the parks can be sealed with magic so that no humans would want to enter. There are deer and rabbits and other animals for the pack to hunt. I'd never been hunting with a pack. Until recently, I hadn't know there were others like me, excepting for the one who turned me into the animal I now was.

Who'd have believed that there were real werewolves among us in modern society? I certainly didn't. I'd spent my first Sazi year in partial denial. While I sealed myself away each month so I could turn into a wolf at will in the privacy of my hotel room, I'd not sought out others like me. I hadn't wanted to. Until I met Sue, I had pretended — had hoped — that this disease would just go away.

The hissing of the air brakes interrupted my thoughts. The whines and whimpers around me forced a deep throated growl from my throat. The magic roiling through the close confines of the bus was stifling. You could walk on the tension. The scent of musk and fur was sweet but overpowering. My muscles were twitching in earnest now. It was hard to breathe. At the front of the bus, Nikoli smiled.

"Come, my wolves," he whispered. "Come join the hunt." He exited the bus first and we all followed like zombies. My vision was already pink-hazed with blood. I struggled to keep down a howl. Nikoli stood patiently as we undressed. There was nothing sexual about it for me, but some of the other men had to turn their eyes away from the lithe nude forms of the women in the group. The scent of trees and snow filled my nose. I glanced past the sign identifying the William. W. Powers State Conservation Area. In the distance, I smelled the sharp hot and sour soup scent of abject fear. I quickly wiped a small line of spittle from the side of my mouth. I tried to appear composed but it was a lie.

“So, how does this wor . . .?” I began, when Nikoli interrupted.

“Let the hunt begin!” he boomed and released the magical shield protecting me. The moon’s force struck me like a sharp blade, shattering my control and sending me to my knees. I screamed in pain as a thousand pinpoints of light and magic erupted from my skin. Fur raced over my body and twisted my limbs. A full-grown, hungry wolf leapt out from inside me and I couldn’t stop it if I wanted to.

I didn’t want to.

The world suddenly shifted to a thousand shades of grey and black. I looked around me as I stood in the moonlight. There were over a dozen snarling wolves still shaking their heads to orient themselves. I’d met one or two of them as humans. Their scent was still the same. I scanned the group for the leader of the pack. He wasn’t hard to find. I think my eyes got a little wide.

Nikoli was the largest black timber wolf I’d ever seen. He easily stood three foot high at the shoulder. The only white on him was two spots on his knees. They glared like headlights in the darkness beneath the amber lights in his eyes. I realized that I didn’t own a gun big enough to defend myself if I’d have met him in the woods as a human. It might be time to go shopping.

A howl broke the air and others joined in. It was deep and throaty, not at all the high-pitched yelp of a coyote—which is all I’ve ever heard until now. It’s only been a few months since I’ve had enough human thoughts after the change to recognize the difference. That’s thanks to Sue. I could feel fragments of her warmth and anticipation in the back of my mind. I knew she would be enjoying every minute of this new experience. The thought of the hunt was getting my mate turned on.

I like that in a woman.

She had believed in the mating bond even before I did. While the sex with her has always been incredible because I can actually *feel* her pleasure, I had struggled with giving up what I believed was my identity.

But when she was dying of a gunshot wound, I’d accepted the life bond in order to save her. I’ve been cut off from her for weeks while she’s been healing in Colorado. I missed her and hoped she would be home soon. I hated that I could barely feel her presence.

One of the wolves spoke. It’s still weird hearing human speech coming from a furred muzzle. “Where’s dragon lady tonight, Nikoli?”

A decidedly evil chuckle erupted from the black wolf. His eyes turned and locked on mine. “Our lovely Asri did not believe she could trust herself to ride on the bus and attend the pack meeting around our newest acquisition.”

Now, what the hell did that mean?

“Which brings me to business,” he continued. “Let us all please welcome our newest member of the pack. Anton, please step forward.”

I sighed. I had tried repeatedly to get my new pack leader, a former member of Czar Nicholas II’s court, to call me Tony. That’s me — Tony Giodone, former high-end assassin, catering to both the paying public and the mob. I’m good enough to have never been caught. But a stupid mistake on my last job caused me to go underground and assume a new — or more precisely — a *former* identity. Here in Chicago, I’m Joe Giambrocco. But Nikoli keeps Russian-izing everything. I’d finally decided that Anton was better than Yosef, if I was going to be stuck with a Russian name.

I stepped forward and the other wolves parted for me. They slid outward to form a circle with me and Nikoli in the middle. He towered over me, muscles rippling under black fur. His

yellow eyes held no warmth.

“You are Sazi now,” he said. “You are blood of my blood. But to be part of my pack, you must first swear fealty to me and mine. You must give of yourself so that the others will recognize you as brother.”

Okay, see, now *this* was starting to make me nervous. It’s one thing to be part of a club, but another thing entirely to swear some sort of blood oath.

I felt my eyes narrow, which probably wasn’t my best move. “Just what are you asking me to do?”

He smiled then, a baring of sharp pointed teeth. “I rule here. You will accept my authority over you. Yes?”

I had no problem with that. “I accept your authority as the pack leader. Yes.”

“Excellent.” I had just turned to leave when I froze completely. I literally couldn’t move. I felt a flash of panic in the back of my mind. It wasn’t mine. Sue knew something I didn’t, but it was a struggle to keep connected with her. The magic that flooded my body and mind was overwhelming. It was a pounding ache with sharp edges.

Nikoli stalked toward me. His lips had pulled back even further to reveal pink gums. “Then know my *power*, whelp!” He came at me in a rush of fangs and fur. I could do nothing to defend myself. He bowled me over and his teeth found my neck. A flash of pain seared my mind as his fangs broke through skin. But the pain washed away as quickly as it began. My mind was floating suddenly as a wave of magic filled me. Suddenly, I could hear his voice in my mind. It was as thick and sweet as honey.

“You are pack of my pack, young one,” said the voice. I knew I was bleeding, but I couldn’t seem to feel it. I could hear Sue trying to call to me. It was a struggle to hear her.

The liquid baritone continued. “You will live for me, through me, and we all will live for you. We will protect you and you will always be fed. Be now one with the Sazi, Anton.”

I came to myself with a dozen noses sniffing my head. I abruptly remembered part of my training on Carmine and Linda’s island after Sue’s near-death. One of the Sazi psychiatrists explained that the packs only functioned in the modern world because one person could control the individual wolves.

“If the wolves were all autonomous,” Dr. Betty had said, “Then the world would quickly learn of us. Most of the lesser wolves cannot be trusted when prey is near. Humans are prey to our kind. If we were to attack them, it would be war. The humans would slaughter us all because people have always destroyed that which they fear. Only by having a leader strong enough not to be affected by the moon can the natural instincts of the wolves be restricted to proper prey. We insist that lesser wolves remain with a pack so that the pack leader can maintain control.”

It made perfect sense and a part of me was pleased. However, the part of me that was still an individual railed against the thought. It also frightened me that I had to struggle even harder to reach Sue when Nikoli was in my head.

I was shaky as I stood. It was a little unnerving that Nikoli’s face was painted with my blood and that the other wolves were tentatively licking at it. Yuck.

“Now, my pack, let us begin the hunt!” He turned and moved in a blur of speed. I found myself following behind him in the rest of the pack, before I even realized I was moving. It was like being in a slipstream behind a semi. Where he moved we followed like a flock of furry birds.

We ran silently over the carefully tended grass toward the trees of the park. My senses were suddenly sharper than I could ever remember. I heard a small mouse scurry under the leaves as we approached. Birds ducked their heads and huddled down inside their nests. Even a great horned owl flew higher into the trees. We were a force of nature to be reckoned with as we moved through the woods. A panicked pounding of hooves sounded to the left. Nikoli turned toward it. I felt my body move left in a silent command that wasn't quite words. An image flashed in my head that the pack would split and cut off the prey. I was instructed to surge forward and overshoot the prey and meet it as the pack herded the deer toward me.

My feet barely touched the leaves and fallen logs of the deeper woods. I skirted rocks I couldn't see in the darkness and followed unknown paths effortlessly. My body seemed to know this place, or maybe it was Nikoli who knew the way.

A small clearing appeared and I knew that this is where the feast would take place. The pack would push the deer to me and I would take the lead animal down. The rest of the pack would attend to the other two. Yes, there were three total. I could smell them now and hear the breaking of branches in their frantic flight to be free of us. But they would not be free. I would see to that.

I waited patiently as the thundering hooves grew louder. Just a few moments more. I crouched on a fire-blackened log to spring from above as moonlight surged power through my veins. The power fed my hunger and made it grow strong and insistent. The hunger intensified the power and then rolled back on itself, like a snake swallowing its own tail.

“Tony!” The voice was a shout in my head. I struggled to keep my mind on the prey. “Tony, Bobby’s here with me. We’re back in Chicago. He has to see you right away! He needs your help. It’s urgent.”

My animal mind tried to place the name. I knew Sue’s voice and it was good she was here for the kill. Closer now. Just a few moments more.

Sue seemed to understand that I couldn't think. She tried to make it simpler. “It’s Bobby, Tony. The snake from the island.”

Oh yeah! Hunted with the python for birds. I know the snake. He’s pack. No time to respond. Musk — fear — the scents were overpowering. They’re here.

I leapt with all my might and grabbed the lead deer by the throat. It turned and screamed as the other two animals tried to get around our battle. But it was too late. The others were on them. I rode the stag to the ground, moving quickly to avoid taking a head shot with its hooves. It struggled to right itself but my teeth dug in deeper. Hot salty wetness filled my mouth. It was the finest thing I’d ever tasted in my life. I could feel Sue’s pleasure in the background as she too forgot where she was or what she wanted to say. There was nothing beyond the moment. Time slowed to crystalline sharpness and didn’t start again until the deer’s eyes looked up blankly into space.

Never before had my hunger been so great. I tore into the warm flesh. There were snarls and growls behind me. Another wolf tried to push me away from my kill, but I continued to fill my empty belly. I did hear my pack leader move right behind me.

“No, Alena! Let him be. It is his first kill. You enjoyed the same luxury.” I felt Nikoli’s hot breath right next to my ear as I tore and swallowed as fast as I could.

“But be very clear, young one. This will be the only time you will ever feed above your station.” He moved his face so that our eyes were almost touching. His lips pulled back in a toothy snarl. The magic inside him raked over my skin and drew a pained grunt from me.

“If you ever again attempt to feed before I have had my fill, it will be my great pleasure to sate my hunger with *your* flesh!”

## Chapter 2

A sharp pain in my side woke me. “*Prosypát’sia, Anton! Ee-dyóht snyeg. Mwee noozh-nah rabótat! Prosypát’sia!*”

Huh? Reality flooded back to my senses as I tried to make sense of the words. The smell of burned coffee, burned steel and fur chased away contented dreams of sweat-soaked skin and the scent of meat. A rush of air warned me before a booted foot found my body for a second kick. I rolled sideways and reached out my hands in a blinding flash. I grabbed the boot, pulled and twisted hard. I was rewarded with a surprised sound and a grunt as my assailant hit the ground. I was on my feet over him before my eyes fully opened.

It was just past dawn. The moon’s glow was becoming just a shadow as the sun turned the clouds an angry red. The lightly blowing snow raised the hairs on my naked skin. Falling flakes melted as they touched me. A part of my brain knew that I should be cold, but the snow swirling around me felt incredibly good. My nostrils flared to the icy wind. I could still smell the deer; still remember the moment when it became mine. The intensity of the memory made me shiver. My assailant started to roll over and spit out snow. He smelled like pack, but it was hard not to feed the hunger. Magic still flowed through me and made my eyes bleed red.

I recognized him slightly from the hunt but we hadn’t been introduced. He smelled of birch bark and some sort of moss. I looked around briefly. The bus had disappeared. Everyone was gone and had apparently left me and this other man alone in the woods, miles from home. Gee, what pals!

As he rose to a sitting position, he growled and struck out again with a kick. A weak flow of Sazi magic pressed against me. My answering growl came without warning. It was a deep-throated, angry sound. I avoided him easily and landed a heel right to his bearded chin. There was a satisfying echo as the back of his head smacked against the frozen ground from the blow. Then I planted my bare foot on his throat and pressed.

“*Stohp!*” he shouted as well as he was able with compressed vocal cords. At least I understood that word. I think the previous was Russian but couldn’t be sure.

“Who are you?” I asked. I was watching the rest of his body. His eyes and scent were angry. Blood trickled from his nose and disappeared into the black hair on his lip.

He began to struggle. I pressed more weight onto the neck, grabbed the fist he’d raised to hit me between the legs and twisted sharply. Bones and tendons stretched nearly to breaking. After a moment he gave up. His scent changed to a sharp hot and sour soup mingled with mildew. Afraid and amazed. Yeah, I seem to have that effect on people.

“*Men-yah zah-voot Yurgi Kroutikhin,*” he whispered hoarsely.

I shook my head in annoyance. “I really hope you speak English, buddy. Otherwise, I’m going to be forced to put you out until I figure out what’s going on.” My muscles tensed. I had to fight not to end this as my instinct was urging me to.

“I am called Yurgi Kroutikhin,” came the heavily accented words in a wheeze.

“Nice to meet you, Yurgi,” I put a little extra twist on the arm. His gasp of pain, and the resulting scent of worchestershire sauce, both pushed the moon away and pulled it closer for a moment. “Why the hell were you kicking me?”

He coughed and tried to draw air so I eased up on the foot a little. Only a little, though. Wouldn’t want him to get any ideas.

“I was trying to wake you, Anton. It began to snow. We must finish work and return before mid-day.”

I gritted my teeth. “First, I’m *Tony*, not Anton. I tolerate Nikoli calling me that because he’s the boss. You don’t get to. Next, the only thing I intend to do before mid-day is get dressed and get the hell back to town so I can have mind-bending sex with my wife.”

His eyes grew wide and the ammonia scent of his panic struck me like a blow. “No no! We must *khoronit* the deer. It is our duty.”

My brow furrowed. “Do *what* to the deer?”

His free hand twirled as he tried to find the English word. He snapped his fingers in frustration. “Khoronit! Uh . . . dig into the earth and . . .” he moved his hand in an imitation of pushing and patting.

“Bury?” I asked.

Relief flooded his face. “Yes! Bury! We two must bury the deer bones and skin. It is the Omega’s duty. I am fortunate that you are also now, Tooney. We will be quick like rabbits, yes?”

“Where are my clothes?”

He pointed with his free hand to a small bundle lying on the pine needles under a tree. “Yurgi, I’m going to let you loose now so I can get dressed. If you make one move toward me I’ll kill you. You understand ‘*kill*’, right?”

A clove-pride scent dusted my nose, mingled with the soured milk of disbelief. “I am Sazi. I will heal.”

I shook my head with a slight smile and cold eyes. “Heart and then head, Yurgi. *Kill*. I’ve done it before so no tricks.” It had taken me a long time to understand that death comes hard to the Sazi. I hit one in the chest with two barrels of a shotgun, only to have her get up and be waiting at my car. But a bullet or a sharp branch through the heart and another through the head before the first one can heal will put a Sazi down permanently. Permanent is my business, after all. At least, it used to be. No. *I still* am. Whether deer or people. For money or hunger. I am an assassin.

A flood of memory found Sue at the back of my mind. Shit, that’s right! I had to get back home asap. Bobby was waiting for me. I tried to reach her in my head, but I couldn’t quite touch her yet. *I’ll be home soon, Sue*. I knew she heard, but didn’t respond. There was a level of annoyance in my mind. Yeah, I didn’t plan on being out all night either.

Yurgi’s breathing had increased as I was lost in thought. His nostrils flared briefly as he scented the air. He gasped with what little oxygen I allowed him. “You do not lie! But no, you would not do this!” he exclaimed. The sour milk was now mingled with the ammonia and vinegary disapproval. Nasty combination of scents. “We are pack! Nikoli would never allow you to kill me, even with my lowly station.”

“We’re all alone out here, Yurgi. Nikoli would never find out. I’m really good at keeping secrets. Now, I’m going to let go. Just stay there until I reach my clothes. *Capisce?*”

I released Yurgi and he remained where he was. When I reached my clothes he raised to sitting and laughed bitterly. “You are a very foolish *shchenók*, Tooney.”

I hurriedly put on my thick black turtleneck and socks. “It’s T-ō-ny. And what’s a *shchenók?*”

A small smile stretched his beard. “A puppy. A cub. One who is naive. You have much to learn of our pack leader . . . T-ō-ny.”

“Yeah?” I finished zipping my jeans and slid my feet into sturdy black boots. “Well, maybe I’ll ask him when I see him.” I turned, found my bearings and started walking through the trees toward the road. I turned my head slightly to see Yurgi’s startled face. “Good luck with *khoronit*-ing the deer!”

When I reached the road, I listened carefully for any human movement. Fortunately, it was a Sunday morning in miserable weather. The hush was broken only by small animals scurrying under the snow. But I was well fed and didn’t feel the need to chase them down. I started off at a fast jog. When I was confident there was no one around, I increased the speed to Sazi level. I’ve been told that I have the ability to use my magic to make humans believe that I’m a harmless animal, or blind them to me entirely. But I don’t know how yet, so all I can do is avoid them. Part of me knew that I should have stayed to help Yurgi but frankly, Bobby beat out Yurgi in my mind and the thought of seeing Sue again beat them both.

She’s been in Boulder for almost two months now attending classes with Dr. Perdue—Betty—the Sazi psychiatrist. It takes a little work to help someone adapt reality to include the fantastic. Let’s face it, werewolves aren’t supposed to exist. I hadn’t seen or touched Sue for seven weeks. The thought of her summer forest scent mingled with sweat and desire raced through my body and tightened my gut, along with other things. My stomach wasn’t the only hunger I wanted to satisfy.

My speed increased until I caught the pungent fishy scent of Lake Michigan. I stayed away from the major interstates. There’d be too much traffic and I couldn’t move as fast. I hit 55th Street and headed west toward Canaryville. Gotta admit it’s a great, albeit humorous, name for wolf pack headquarters. Our apartment is in an exclusively Sazi neighborhood right near the old stockyards. The pervasive smell of old death keeps out the average tourists. For those remaining humans who venture too close, a general pallor of unease awaits. Something way down deep in the DNA makes humans recognize predators and stay away from them. It makes it easy for the Sazi to live and work right out in the open.

Eyes followed my movements as I neared the neighborhood. Residents are openly hostile to visitors. I wasn’t known by sight yet so people stood silently until my scent reached them. Once they knew I was pack they continued with shoveling, jogging, and other morning chores.

I was nearly home when I was stopped cold in my tracks. An invisible hand had closed around me until I couldn’t move.

*Come home, Anton.* The deep voice resonated in my head while pinpricks of power danced over my skin. It tugged at me, trying to pull me toward the honey-sweet sound. I wanted to feel more of the fire, the magic, that coursed through me. But it seemed wrong. I shook my head as I tried to think clearly. I looked up at the decaying brick building that housed my

completely modern and comfortable condo. I tried to get a fix on what the hell was happening. I scanned the windows looking for . . . something. Every outward sign showed a condemned building, from the boards over the windows to the layers of graffiti that had been carefully commissioned and painted by local gangs. It was a lie. This territory is Nikoli's. The gang members know they wouldn't survive a turf war. But again, the visuals keep out the curious.

My hand kept reaching for the knob but it was trembling. *Now, Anton!* Sweat painted my brow. Why couldn't I reach the latch? My muscles ached with the attempt.

*Tony?* Sue's voice was a small, tentative sound in the back of my mind. *Tony, who is tha . . . OW!* A sharp pain that wasn't mine coursed through my left calf and flooded my body with adrenaline. It sliced through the fist holding me. I bolted upstairs.

"Sue!" I called as I kicked in the front door of the apartment. Bobby Mbutu was kneeling next to Sue. His dark fingers were prying the mouth of a child about six from Sue's leg as she stood stock-still with gritted teeth. Sue smelled as tired and frustrated as I had ever known. Why hadn't I noticed it in my head?

Bobby looked up calmly as the door exploded inward.

"Forget your key, Giambrocco?"

I didn't answer right away. I was taking in the scene in front of me. A young girl was playing with Sue's most treasured possession — a battered plastic doll with red nylon hair and a green dress. A second older girl watched a blaring television. Bobby was using his other hand to hold a dark-haired boy of about eleven by the collar.

"What in the hell is going on?" I called over the din.

Sue shrugged her shoulders and then gave a sigh of relief as Bobby finally used his magic to lift her assailant into the air and open his mouth. She reached down to rub her calf. Her hand came away with spittle covering it.

"Babysitting," she yelled over the commercial as she limped toward the kitchen to clean her hand and leg.

Bobby continued to hold the child frozen in the air. He shook his head with annoyance as he watched Sue hobble from the room.

"Enough!"

With a tiny motion of his hand, all of the blinds in the living room snapped shut simultaneously. The television turned off and the other three children became living statues in the sudden silence. They slowly turned toward my dark-skinned South African friend with wide eyes. His energy wasn't the encompassing wave that Nikoli's had been. This was pin-point precision.

It was a scene right out of a B-grade horror movie. The limp forms of children slowly skimmed the carpet in whatever pose they were when the magic hit. Their eyes began to move frantically in fear when they realized that it wasn't a game. Bobby's eyes were cold. He stopped the children right in front of him and removed his contact lenses. His pupils became reptilian slits in a red iris. The longer he stared at them, the more anxious they became. It calmed me down a bit. I guess the kid had done something more stupid than I thought. I'd have just spanked him. I couldn't imagine what Bobby might do.

Sue came out of the kitchen, still favoring that leg. I wanted to reach for her and bury my face in her shoulder-length auburn hair. She used to have honey-blonde curls, but we'd both

made a change to match our new identities. It's odd. I can't seem to remember my life before I met her, but we've only known each other four months.

I stared at her like it was for the first time. Sue isn't gorgeous, but she's pretty. Her heart-shaped face compliments a well curved body. She'd dropped some weight after a recent coma, when we could only feed her through tubes. I was guessing she was a size twelve now, but I'd thought that when I'd first met her, so what do I know? Still, she was looking damn good and I let my eyes reflect the thought. She caught me watching and blushed. I still think it's cute when she does that.

I breathed in her scent as she walked toward me. Rain-kissed plants and warm rich earth from a forest in summer mingled with the cinnamon of her love. I would never get enough of her scent. It coursed through me like a drug, nearly shutting out coherent thought.

"Sue, let me see your leg." The words cut through the cloud of scent like a knife. Bobby's voice was the sharp command of a cop. Of course, Bobby *is* a cop. He's part of Wolven, the law enforcement branch of the Sazi. Call him double-o python. All agents of the organization have a license to kill. They're the nastiest of the nasty of each of the Sazi species. It's their duty to *permanently* remove from the gene pool any were-animal who breaks felony human laws or any of the big Sazi laws. Can't have a shape shifter locked up in jail during a full moon, now can we? The humans would find out we exist. It's strange to me how I've been human all my life but now I refer to the rest of humanity like I'm an outsider. I guess I am.

Sue obeyed after a moment of hesitation while we stared at each other lustfully. She limped over to Bobby and raised her leg to rest on the cushion next to him.

"Just relax." He moved his face closer to her leg. "This won't hurt."

"Hey!" I exclaimed as he suddenly licked the wound. He held up a hand in a sharp motion to stop me moving forward. I trusted Bobby but it was unnerving to see his tongue darting out and touching each indentation. When he reached the last tiny tooth print, he stuck out his tongue and waved it in the air over the wound. His whole upper body began moving fluidly from side to side like he was in a trance. After a tense few seconds he stopped, opened his eyes and glanced up. He spotted the charm bracelet that Sue always wears and touched it lightly with his fingers. I saw a small wisp of smoke as the silver scorched his skin.

He finally nodded and then turned to look at me. "Sue, Tony, you should both sit down and hear this too."

I sat down in the puffy brown leather recliner I'd bought. Another was waiting at the store for Sue to pick another color. She had said blue, but it was an awful shade, so I didn't have it delivered.

Sue seated herself on the overstuffed arm next to me. I reached up and slid a gentle finger along her arm. It made her shudder and close her eyes. Her hands balled tightly into fists to fight the need. When the scent of her desire reached my nose, it was all I could do to pull back my hand and return my attention to Bobby. Soon. Very soon.

Bobby did a fine job of ignoring our little struggle. He kept his gaze locked on the blonde biter. "Denis, we need to have a serious talk." He released the child from the magic and the boy dropped an inch or so to the carpeted floor. Tears were rolling down his terrified face. Ammonia filled the air from all of the children. I could feel Sue's discomfort for the boy. Honestly, I had little sympathy for the kid. I'd have gotten my teeth knocked out if I'd have bit a

stranger when I was that age. The longer Bobby made him wait, the more scared Denis got. He was like a cornered rabbit. His eyes moved rapidly from side to side but he seemed frozen in place.

Finally, he couldn't take any more and bolted from the room, crying. Bobby sighed and made a small movement of his hand. Once more, the frozen boy floated back into the room and turned in mid-air until he faced those strange red eyes. Bobby's natural scent of sweet musty jungle vines showed no sign of discomfort or anger.

"There's no use running, Denis. I know what you taste like now. I can find you anywhere you go." He released the boy again. Denis backed up until his spine was against the wall. He sat down into near-fetal position and began to suck his thumb. His hazel eyes were wide and showing too much white. Bobby released the other children. They dropped gently to the carpet but didn't move so much as a hair. Only their shallow breathing told me they were not truly statues. They didn't want to turn Bobby's attention on them for any reason. Couldn't blame them.

"What are you?" the boy asked in a whisper before tucking his thumb back between his lips.

"You're lucky, Denis," Bobby said in a stern voice. "I'm a python — a very special member of Wolven." The two older children looked at Bobby with new panic plain their faces. The dark-haired teen opened her mouth in a silent 'o'. A second wash of ammonia-laced hot and sour soup filled the air. Ordinary fear reminds me of the Chinese soup. I've been told I'm nuts by more than one Sazi. Still, they couldn't describe it any better.

Wolven is the Sazi equivalent of the bogeyman to children, I'm told. The kids hadn't known who Bobby was. They all flinched when he stood to his full 6'2" and reached down one nearly blue-black hand to touch the whimpering kid's head.

"I'm the chemist for Wolven, Denis. You're lucky I was here instead of one of the other agents. I can use my tongue to detect and analyze any organic or man-made chemical on earth — even the tiniest little bit — and know what it is instantly." He glanced at me and Sue.

"When I used my tongue where you bit Mrs. Giambrocco, I didn't find any traces of blood. That's why you're lucky, Denis." He raised the boy's face to meet his gaze. The thumb was apparently permanently affixed to his mouth. "Most Wolven agents wouldn't have taken the time to check."

"I know that Mrs. Giambrocco made you mad when she wouldn't let you change the tv channel. But you need to understand that she's human — and you're not. If you bite or scratch a human and they aren't wearing silver, they will become Sazi like us."

The thumb popped out of his mouth. "But that's *good*, isn't it? Mama says we're better than humans."

The hell you say! A growl rose from my chest before I could stop it. The children's fearful eyes turned from Bobby to me. I guess their noses aren't up to knowing who is Sazi and who is human yet.

Bobby shook his head. "No, Denis. We're *different*, not better. Let me explain how our law works, kids. Gather round." Three of the children quickly moved to sit down cross-legged in a semi-circle around Bobby. The older boy took Denis' hand and had to tug a little to move him closer. Now that I looked, there was a strong resemblance.

“Sonya, Vera, Alek — and Denis.” He looked at each one of them slowly and strongly. He needn’t have worried. He had their full attention. “It is against the law to scratch, bite or injure a human so that they bleed. The magic that makes us Sazi can get into their body if they bleed. Most humans who are attacked will die when the animal inside tries to come out to greet the moon.”

Bobby pointed at me. “Mr. Giambrocco was attacked by one of us. He is lucky to have lived. If he hadn’t already been a predator in the human world, he wouldn’t have survived. He was a hunter, so it was easier for him to be like us.”

The two older children looked at me with a new amount of respect. They suddenly liked me more. I tipped my head in acknowledgment. Nice to know it has value in both worlds.

“Sonya,” he continued to the girl of about six, “If Denis had drawn blood on Mrs. Giambrocco, what would have happened?”

She wasn’t as impressed by Bobby or me as her older counterparts. Innocence has its advantages.

“His *ah-tyets* and *maht* would have spanked him?” she asked tentatively. Her voice was a soft alto. I could tell it would end up a really sexy contralto by the time she was a teen. Sue elbowed me in the ribs without the kids noticing. I stifled my amusement. It wasn’t the time.

From Sue’s mind, I heard Sonya’s Russian as father and mother. Hmm. Didn’t know she spoke other languages.

Bobby shook his head. “Vera, do you know?”

The dark-haired young teen glanced at the boy and then turned her eyes back to Bobby. Her strong soprano voice was confident and a little too predatory. She smelled amused at the child’s mistake. She smirked as she spoke.

“The *Alpha* would punish him.” The Alpha is the pack leader, which is Nikoli.

The children around her gasped and Denis’ lip started to tremble again. Hot and sour soup filled the air again and made my jaw clench. It was too close to the moon to smell this much fear. I needed a steak. And soon.

“I don’t want to go to the Alpha’s dragon!” he wailed. “It’ll *eat* me!” Alek looked at Bobby with wide eyes and hugged Denis to him tightly.

That’s the second time I’ve heard about a dragon. Wow. I’ve got to meet this enforcer of Nikoli’s.

Bobby sighed deeply. He shook his head again. “Your parents have been careless in your schooling. Neither answer is correct. You need to understand that it’s not your parents, not your pack leader, but *Wolven* who would punish you for attacking a human.” The older children gasped a second time but the younger boy and girl just looked blank.

He looked around at all of them and then to us. “If Denis had drawn blood, *even if* Mrs. Giambrocco was wearing silver and wouldn’t have turned,” he said, pointing a shaking finger at each child in turn, “I would have found you guilty of grave damage and I would have killed you. Right here, without anyone’s permission.”

He waited until he knew that the words had full effect. I admit I was a little surprised. The children were apparently *very* surprised by the shock of scent that rose from them.

The wolf who turned me, Babs, only got knocked around a little. Well okay. She got knocked around *a lot*. Of course, I was trying to kill her at the time so she could claim self-defense. Denis had no such excuse.

Bobby was continuing on with the children hanging on every terrifying word. The stench of ammonia would take a full day to air from the apartment. It was making my eyes water.

“Do you understand, kids? It is *Wolven* that deals with breaking the laws of all Sazis. Your parents can punish you for breaking the rules of your family. The pack leader deals with enforcing the laws of your pack. But if you break the laws of *all* of our kind — the principles we live by to protect us from being discovered by the humans — then your parents or your pack leader must call *me*. It’s why you must always be careful to not harm anything but proper prey. You must NEVER let your temper, your fear, or even your *pride* make you do something as foolish as you did today.”

I glanced over at the kid. His breathing was fast and his scent was the soured milk scent of disbelief.

Vera looked over and then tipped her head toward him to catch his scent. Her nostrils flared delicately as she inhaled. “Denis, you *have* to believe him if he doesn’t smell like black pepper. Trust your nose.”

The boy tentatively moved forward and sniffed the air around Bobby, who waited with reptilian patience until he was done.

“Denis, even for biting I *should* punish you. You have caused Mrs. Giambrocco damage.”

Sonya furrowed her small brow and asked an innocent question in that so-adult voice. “She heal, won’t she?”

Ah yes. The standard line of the Sazi. Enough that it’s almost become a joke to me. A shrug of the shoulder at a broken bone or a crippling wound with the words “you’ll heal.” And they will. In almost a blink of an eye. That’s the annoying part.

Bobby shook his head. “Not like us, Sonya. That bite will leave a mark and a bruise that will last more than a week.”

The jaws of the two younger children dropped simultaneously and the air filled with the mildew smell of their amazement. Even the older two turned to look at us curiously. The dusty scent of Sue’s embarrassment reached me. I knew exactly how she felt. In this place *we* were the freaks. Oddities to be put on display to help children to learn the foreign world of humans.

I’m still amazed by it all — that their perspective of time is so incredibly different. The Sazi live their whole lives with the sure knowledge that nothing will actually *hurt* for more than a day. They will live for decades longer than a normal lifespan. Some will be around for centuries when the rest of the poor humans are rotting in the ground.

Denis actually looked shaken, not just scared. He turned to Sue with an expression of horror.

“I didn’t know I *damaged* you. I’m really, really sorry.” Tears welled up until his eyes glittered like polished gems. He finally understood what he’d done and knew there would be consequences.

He took a shuddering breath and squared his small shoulders. He was going to be a man about it. Attaboy. He stood up and turned to Bobby. “What will happen to me?”

Sorrow overwhelmed my nose — thick and foggy and laced with worry. I guess they didn't teach Sue everything in her classes in Colorado.

I heard her tentative whisper in my mind. *Would he really kill a child, Tony?*

I shrugged my shoulders. The law can be harsh in the world of predators. I just didn't know. I've seen Bobby do things that would make other people blanch, though. *It's a question of order over chaos, Sweetheart. The boy could endanger all of the Sazi. Bobby might have no choice.*

She closed her eyes to concentrate on hearing my reply. She stiffened for a moment as the words sunk home. Then she nodded her head numbly and bit on her lower lip. She looked about as uncomfortable as when we first met. The brief flash of our first meeting made me wonder about my old friend, Jocko. I hadn't seen him since I "died" four months ago.

"But," continued Bobby, bringing me out of my daze, "You're young, Denis, and *apparently* haven't been trained properly. No harm was done — this time. But I have to know what you've learned today, little ones."

Denis looked up and the cool air of hope filled the room. His words were very serious and grown-up. "Never, ever bite a human."

"Never bite *anyone*," replied Bobby. "A Sazi would have torn your throat out."

Denis nodded quickly. "Never bite." He thought for a moment and added, "Or scratch."

Bobby nodded and looked at the others. "And the rest of you?"

"Humans are just as good as us?" said Sonya with her head cocked and brows raised. When Bobby nodded, she continued with more confidence. "We're only different."

"Alek?"

Alek had apparently realized how little they knew and was annoyed. He shook his head and let out a frustrated sound. His hands had closed into fists.

"Tell our parents to find us a new teacher 'cause otherwise we're going to end up dragon food!" he snarled. A small smile turned my lips at nearly the same time as Bobby's.

"And you, Vera?" Bobby asked as his lid blinked up again over the red iris.

The teen couldn't seem to take her eyes off Bobby. With every upside down blink of his reptilian orbs, she flinched.

"Never do anything to make our parents or Alpha have to call *you*."

This time Bobby smiled, showing broad white teeth that didn't seem the least bit menacing. But both Vera and I knew better.

"Very good. Now, Vera, why don't you call your mother to come get you all. I think the Giambroccos have had enough excitement for today, hmm?"

Vera quickly went to the phone and called home. I glanced at Sue and then fought through the layers of haze in my brain to think a question into her head. *What happened here? Who left these kids with you?*

Her brow furrowed for a second and she closed her eyes. Then she shrugged and responded the same way. *They just showed up on the doorstep. The car pulled away from the curb before I could see who it was. But I couldn't just leave them in the snow! They knew my name and said I was supposed to watch them. They hadn't even had dinner yet, Tony. I couldn't just leave them outside.*

Great! That probably meant that all the steaks in the freezer were probably gone, too. I wasn't going to ask for more details until they were gone, but I was *going* to find out who dropped a bunch of werewolf kids at my house to stay the night.