

An Extract From:

***Black Dog***

by

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## Chapter One

With one fingertip, Natividad drew a pentagram on the window of the bus. It glimmered faintly, nearly invisible, light against light: protection against danger and the dark and all shadowed things.

Well, almost all. Some, anyway.

The glass of the window was cold enough to numb the tip of her finger. The cold was always a shock; she somehow never expected it, even after all these days of travel. It was cold inside the bus, but she knew it was much colder outside. Of course winter temperatures here fell way below zero, but she hadn't guessed what that would be *like*. She hadn't known that air could be so cold it actually hurt to breathe. She knew it now.

The countryside framed by her pentagram's pale glimmer was as foreign and comfortless as the cold. The mountains themselves were almost familiar, but Natividad recognized nothing else in this high northern country to which she and her brothers had come. Driven by enemies behind and hope ahead... though now that they were here, this didn't look much like a country of hope. But they had had nowhere else to go. No other choices.

Natividad glanced surreptitiously sideways, reassuring herself that, even in this cold and unfamiliar country, her brothers hadn't changed.

Her twin, Miguel, in the seat next to her, was reading a newspaper he'd scrounged somewhere. *That* was certainly ordinary. He turned the pages carefully in a vain attempt to avoid irritating Alejandro. Across the aisle, Alejandro was staring out the opposite window, pretending not to be annoyed by the rustling pages. Natividad saw the tension in his shoulders and back and knew how hard his dark shadow pressed him. Despite everything she could do to help her older brother, his temper, always close to the surface, had been strained hard – not only by the terror and rage and grief so recently past, but by the unavoidable awareness that they were running into danger almost greater than they'd escaped.

All the strangers on the bus didn't help, either. All along, wanting no one behind them, Alejandro had insisted that they sit together in the rear of the bus. Though it was nice to sit in the front so you could get off faster when the bus stopped, sitting in the back was alright if it helped Alejandro keep his shadow under tight control. Even if it was harder to get a good view of the road. Natividad looked out her window again. She could still see the pentagram she'd drawn, though by now it would be completely invisible to ordinary human sight.

Out there in the cold, mountains rose against the sky, white and gray and black: snow and naked trees and granite and the sky above all... The sky itself was different here, crystalline and transparent, seeming farther away than any Mexican sky. The sun seemed smaller here, too, than the one that burned across the dry mountains of Nuevo León: *this* sun poured out not heat, but a cold brilliant luminescence that the endless snow reflected back into the sky, until the whole world seemed made of light.

Beside Natividad, Miguel leaned sideways to look past her, curious to see what had caught her attention.

“Nothing,” Natividad said in English. She had insisted on speaking nothing but English since they had crossed the Rio Bravo. Miguel and even Alejandro had looked back across the river, toward the home they were leaving behind. She had not. She wanted to leave everything behind: all the grief and the terrible memories – let the dead past *drown* in that river; she would walk into another country and another life and *never* look back.

“It’s not *nothing*,” her twin answered. “It’s the Northeast Kingdom. It’s Dimilioc.” His wave took in all the land east and north of the highway.

“Just like all the other mountains,” said Natividad, deliberately flippant. But Miguel was right, and she knew it mattered. Since St Johnsbury, all the land to the east was Dimilioc territory. She said, “I bet the road out of Newport is paved with yellow bricks.”

Miguel grinned. “Except the road is lined with wolves instead of lions and tigers and bears, Dorothy.”

Natividad gave him a raised-eyebrow look. “‘Dorothy?’ Are you kidding? *I’m* the witch.”

“The good witch or—” Miguel stopped, though, as Alejandro gave them both a look. Alejandro did not like jokes about Dimilioc or about the part of Vermont that Americans called the Northeast Kingdom – almost a quarter of the state. Natividad knew why. Americans might be joking when they called this part of Vermont a “kingdom”, but she knew that there was too much truth to that joke for it to be funny.

Dimilioc really was a kind of independent kingdom, with Grayson Lanning its king – and everyone knew he did not like stray black dogs. They were all nervous, but Alejandro had more reason to be afraid than Miguel and far more reason than Natividad. Fear always strained his control. Natividad ducked her head apologetically. “Newport,” Alejandro said, his tone curt.

It was. Natividad had not even noticed the exit signs, but the bus was slowing for the turn off the highway. Newport: the town where all the bus routes finally ran out. Just visible past Alejandro’s shoulder, Lake Memphremagog glittered in late afternoon light. Natividad liked the lake – at least, she liked its name. It had *pizzazz*. She stretched to catch another glimpse of it, but then the bus turned away from the lake and rolled into the station and she lost sight of the bright water.

Newport was the town closest to Dimilioc that did not actually fall within the borders of the Northeast Kingdom. It was smaller than Natividad had expected. Clean, neat, pretty – all the towns this far north seemed to be clean and neat and pretty. Maybe that was the snow lying over everything, hiding all evidence of clutter and untidiness until the spring thaw should uncover it. If there was a thaw. Or a spring. It was hard to believe any spring could thaw this frozen country. As she got off the bus, Natividad pulled the hood of her coat up around her face and tried to pretend she was warm.

“You must get out of the cold,” Alejandro said abruptly. He closed one long hand around Natividad’s arm, collected Miguel with a glance, and led them across the street toward the hotel on the opposite corner. He scanned the streets warily as they moved, scenting the cold air for possible enemies.

Natividad made no effort to calm her brother. She hoped and believed they’d left all their enemies behind them – even Vonhausel would not dare intrude on Dimilioc territory – but *they* were intruding here, so how could Alejandro be calm? She didn’t argue about the hotel, either. It looked alright. It looked like it might be expensive. But everything in Newport was probably expensive, and her brother needed to feel like he was in control, and they would only be there one night, after all.

Miguel heaved their pack up over his shoulder and hurried to catch up. “We need to find a car–” he began.

“Not today,” snapped Alejandro. “It gets dark too early here. You can’t go alone to look at cars, and Natividad is tired and cold and needs to rest.”

Miguel, catching Alejandro’s tone and not needing Natividad’s warning glance, said meekly, “Maybe tonight I can find a newspaper with ads. Then I can figure out which cars we should look at tomorrow.” Alejandro nodded curtly, not much interested. The hotel *was* expensive, but they only needed one room. They got a room with two beds, but Alejandro wouldn’t sleep, of course – certainly not after dark. He stretched out on his stomach on the bed nearer the door, on top of the bedspread, his chin propped up on his hands, his eyes open and watchful.

“One night,” Natividad said, counting the money they had left. “I think we can afford one night – if we don’t have to pay too much for a car. We won’t need–” she stopped herself, barely, from saying that after tomorrow, one way or another, they probably wouldn’t have to worry about money. She said instead, “Try to find a car for less than two thousand dollars, Miguel, but we can pay more if we really need to.”

Miguel muttered a wordless acknowledgement, not looking up. There had been newspapers in the hotel’s lobby, and he had collected them all. Natividad read the stories while her twin looked at the ads for cars. Big headlines shouted about recent werewolf violence. The part about the weather included warnings about the dates of the approaching full moon as well as about expected snow. All the way north, in one hotel and bus station after another, the headlines had been like that.

Certainly the newspaper people were right about the great increase in “werewolf” violence, though the writers did not yet know enough to distinguish between true black dogs and mere *cambiadors*, the little moon-bound shifters. What ordinary people thought they knew about “werewolves” was still mostly wrong, even now, when the vampire magic that had fogged human perception for so long had thinned almost to nothing. The vampires had not been gone long enough, yet, for people to figure out the real shape of the world. Miguel said that human ignorance about the *sobrenatural* could not last very much longer. Natividad wasn’t sure. She thought people wouldn’t want to think about or believe in scary monsters that hunted in the dark.

“Your *maraña mágica*,” Alejandro said abruptly.

Natividad looked up in surprise. “You think it’s important? Here?” Even if Vonhauzel had managed to track them all the way north – which was impossible – but anyway, even *Vonhauzel* would hardly attack them here in this nice hotel so close to Dimilioc.

“It’s always important,” Alejandro snapped. “All the time.”

Natividad said, “Alright,” in her very meekest tone and slid off the bed. Before she got out her *maraña*, she drew a pentagram on the glass of the window, for safety and peace, to help calm her brother. But she drew a mandala on the floor, too: a simple crossed circle, just in case Alejandro was right and somebody *was* looking for them. Unwanted attention just sort of slid off a circle. Mamá had taught her–

Natividad stopped for a second, breathing deliberately. For just a heartbeat, she could almost have believed she really was back with Mamá, out behind the main house, where the great oak reached its heavy branches out over the ring of young limber pines, twenty-seven of them, each with its trunk only a little thicker than her own wrist. She could almost believe she stood amid rich light slanting through the oak leaves, dust motes sparkling in the sunlight pouring down around her.

Mamá had planted those pines when she and Papá had first built their house in Potosi, because there was strength in bending as well as in standing firm. She said Papá and Alejandro could have the rest of the mountain, but the circle was *her* workshop and she wanted no shadows to fall uninvited beneath the oak or between the pines– Natividad flinched from that memory. She would not remember the other shadows that had come there, at the end – she *refused* to remember that. She wanted to remember Mamá the way she had been before, long before, when the pines had been hardly taller than a little girl of five or six or seven. Mamá smiling and happy, teaching Natividad to draw circles in the gritty soil. Circles, and spirals, and mandalas strengthened with their interior crosses. She had said, “Spirals draw attention in, but circles close it out, Natividad. Attention slides off a circle. Remember that, if you ever have to hide. But then, of course you will remember, my beautiful child. You remember everything.” And she had reached out and touched Natividad’s cheek gently with the tips of her fingers. She had been smiling, but she had been sad.

“Hide from what?” Natividad had asked. The sadness worried her. She had not understood it. She remembered that now: the naivety of the child she had been, who understood already that the Pure always had to hide but thought that was just the way the world was and did not understand why that truth should make Mamá sad. Who did not understand yet how carefully Mamá had worked to hide them, their whole family. Or from what.

Or what would happen when they were found.

She *would not* allow herself to remember. She breathed deeply. Only after she had again locked the past in the past did she go on to borrow Alejandro’s knife, prick her finger, and anchor the mandala with a drop of her blood at each compass point. She did not remember Mamá showing her how to do that – she *would* not remember, and

did not, focusing fiercely on the immediate present. As she closed the circle with the last drop of blood, she murmured aloud, “May this cross guard this room and all within, against the dark and the dead and any who come with ill intent.” And then she added, “And this night let it guard us, too, against ill memory and dark dreams.” Her brothers both looked at her sharply, but Natividad pretended not to notice. The mandala closed with a sharp little shock of magic. She nodded firmly to show them that everything was fine.

“The *maraña*,” Alejandro reminded her, not commenting on her addition. He watched her, worried. He thought she couldn’t tell when he worried about her, but she always could.

“I know,” said Natividad. She slipped her *maraña mágica* out of her back pocket and held it up. Folded, it was about the size of a credit card. She snapped it open and spun it across the door from top to bottom. It clung there, a tangled net of light and shadows, trembling like a dew-spangled spider web, insubstantial as a handful of light but ready to confuse the steps of any enemy who tried to cross it. Natividad didn’t dare remind Alejandro about anything in case he thought she was nagging, but she remarked to the air, “If we call out for pizza, we’d better remember to take that down again, or we’ll be waiting a long time.”

Miguel looked up, suddenly alert. “Pizza?”

Natividad made a scornful sound, pretending to be offended. “You and pizza! Anybody would think you’d grown up Gringo.”

“It’s probably genetic,” Miguel said, pretending his dignity had been injured. “It’s not my fault I got the pizza gene and you got the tamale gene. Can we order pizza if we put jalapenos on it? Jalapenos and onions and ham and extra cheese.”

“It’s not very good cheese on those pizzas—”

“It wouldn’t be very good on anything else, but it’s perfect on *those pizzas*.”

“Order whatever you want,” Alejandro said from the other bed. He spoke in Spanish, visibly beginning to relax at last as this casual, ordinary bickering persuaded him that his sister felt safe and cheerful again. “Better than going out.” He rolled over, reached out to snag a pillow, and shut his eyes at last.

Natividad gave her twin a quick grin and an OK sign. Miguel raised a conspiratorial eyebrow and went back to his ads, careful not to rustle the papers.

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“I like this one,” Miguel announced in the morning, waving a slice of cold pizza illustratively in the air over the newspaper. “See? It’s old, but those Korean cars last a long time, and the ad says it’s got good tires for snow. It’s a little more than you said, but maybe we can bargain the price down. The phone number is the same as the hotel;

I mean the first three numbers, so I think the address is maybe not too far away. I bet we could get a map at the desk.”

Natividad had figured out how to use the coffee pot in the room and now she sat on her bed, drinking coffee and watching Miguel finish the pizza. The pizza looked disgusting, but the coffee was good. She would have liked to add cinnamon, but it was alright the way it was. The shower was running. Either Alejandro was feeling safe enough to leave off guarding the room for two minutes, or else he’d realized it was important to look as civilized as possible when they met the Dimilioc black dogs. Natividad was betting on the latter: she didn’t think Alejandro *ever* felt safe anymore. She said, “Newport isn’t very big, is it? You think we can walk?”

“I’ll have to call, find out where this is.” Miguel looked at the phone but didn’t reach for it. Natividad understood perfectly. Black dogs, especially when they were nervous, liked to feel like they made all the important decisions. Her twin would wait until he could ask Alejandro for permission to make that call. He finished the slice of pizza instead. Then he looked wistfully at the last piece in the box, but he didn’t touch it in case Alejandro might want it.

“Maybe we can stop somewhere for cinnamon rolls or something,” Natividad suggested.

Miguel made a face. “Those cinnamon rolls! Too much sugary goo.”

“I got the cinnamon roll gene,” Natividad said smugly. “All *you* got was the gene for pizza. *Cold* pizza.” She pretended to shudder. Then, since Alejandro had opened the bathroom door in a puff of steam, she went to see what things she might have clean. Things that would make her look civilized and grown up.

To her, the steam seemed very faintly scented with charcoal and ash. She touched Alejandro’s arm in passing, taking the edge off his tension and anger. Pausing, her brother looked down at her and smiled suddenly, the way he could: a swift hard-edged protective smile that said more clearly than words, *I won’t let anything bad happen to you*. “I know,” Natividad said. She patted his arm again and went on into the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

The water was hot and came down hard, stinging. The shampoo smelled of lemons and pine needles. Natividad used the hotel’s blow-dryer – really, American hotels were so thoughtful – and put her hair up, pinning it carefully so it would stay. She chose pink crystal earrings to match her pink blouse. Then she stood and looked at herself in the mirror for a long time, tilting her head one way and another, trying different expressions, trying to see if she looked grown up and confident. She thought she did. She was thinner, now. That made her face look different, more like Mamá’s. Only not really.

Turning abruptly, she went out into the main hotel room, and said, just a little too sharply, “Are we ready? Can we go now?”

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They bought Miguel's second-choice car. It was a little more expensive, but the woman who owned it was telling the truth when she said it was in good shape and would handle snow well. The owner of the first car had lied about those things. It was hard to lie to a black dog, and not so easy to lie to Natividad, either. That man hadn't understood how he'd given himself away, but he'd been too scared of Alejandro to protest when Natividad told him he should be ashamed of himself.

This woman was much nicer. Alejandro stood back, arms crossed over his chest, his attention on the peaceful streets, not looking at the woman because he was trying not to scare her while Miguel and Natividad handled the purchase. Buying the car took almost all the rest of their money, but it was worth it because the woman had delivered mail for twenty years and turned out to know all the roads. She was happy to go over the directions Miguel showed her.

"I'm retiring, but this was my work car. It's old, but it's a good one. It can handle the roads as long as the snow doesn't get too deep. It'll get you to Lewis, right enough. Got family there, do you?" The woman's eyebrows went up on that last. She didn't sound exactly *doubtful*, but Natividad thought that was just because she was polite.

"Papá was from there," Natividad assured her. "He met Mamá in Mexico."

"Of course." The woman's gaze lingered on Natividad's face. "Your mama was a beautiful woman, I can see." Then, possibly noticing Natividad suddenly blink hard, she turned briskly back to Miguel. "You'll get to Lewis alright, I expect. Good thing you didn't wait to come in right at Christmas, there'll be a lot more snow by then. But it's easy enough. You take state highway 105 east just like it says here, but then you jog south a mile or so on Derby Line Road. You're going to skirt along the western edge of Derby Lake, then take highway 111 east and a bit south. Let me draw you a map." She fished in her purse for a pad and pencil. "See, you'll go right through Island Pond and Brighton, that's all one town these days so don't let yourselves be confused by the signs."

"Yes, ma'am. I mean, no, ma'am," Miguel promised. "I won't."

"You sure you're old enough to drive, young man? Well, never mind. Look here, the highway goes off this way, but you'll take McConnell Pond Road north and then keep on it. It'll turn into Eagle Nest Road and then into Upper Tin Shack Road, but you just keep on and you'll get to Lewis alright." The woman hesitated, glancing at Natividad. "You know – you *do* know, that's all the Kingdom Forest, really? Lewis is right on the edge of the Forest. It's no place for..." she stopped again and finished, "Well, if you've family there, you'll be alright."

Natividad tried to guess what the woman had intended to say. No place for foreigners? Mexicans? Kids? Ordinary humans? She wondered how much a mail driver might have learned about Dimilioc in twenty years of delivering letters and packages to Lewis and Brighton and Island Pond and all those little towns and villages in Dimilioc's territory.

"Thanks for the directions," Miguel said, his tone bland. He opened the back door of the car and threw in their pack, then shut the door again and looked at Natividad. She

began to count out the bills. Everyone was distracted by the sight of all that money. At least, Natividad thought afterward that that was why none of them, not even Alejandro, realized the black dogs were there until they attacked.

There were two of them, though in the first instant of the attack Natividad thought there were more because they took up so much space and moved so fast. They were huge, more like mastiffs than wolves, with broad heads and heavy shoulders, and blunt muzzles set with jet black fangs. To experienced eyes, they didn't look like any natural animal at all – they were much too big, their eyes blazed fiery gold and red, and the snow exploded into steam with each bounding footfall as they rushed forward. Black dogs usually didn't work together very well, but these separated as they rushed forward, the larger attacking Alejandro and the smaller lunging up and over a parked car to get to Natividad. She saw, in that one frozen moment, how his long black claws, almost bearlike, left gouges and slashes not just in the paintwork, but even in the metal itself.

Without thinking, she ducked backward into the car they had just bought, slammed the door, and locked it – she knew in her mind how little protection the fragile metal and glass could provide, but it might slow the black dog down a *little*. She drew a pentagram on the car window with a shaking hand, whispering words of warding – that was better protection than the car itself, and the black dog veered away, screaming with frustration and hatred, his voice rising to an inhuman keen that ended in a hiss. Rearing up on his hind legs, he swayed back and forth, torn between bloodlust and the dread of Pure magic.

Miguel knew better than to stay close to Natividad during a black dog attack. He looked horrified, but he also jerked the woman who had sold them the car almost off her feet in his rush to get them both away from Natividad's attacker and back to the dubious safety of her house. Natividad was as horrified as her twin looked: *Miguel* couldn't ward the house, and that wooden door would be no protection at all. The black dog dropped back to all fours and rushed after them, and she could see he would catch them before they reached the house. He would kill Miguel and the woman, and then come back to deal with Natividad at his leisure. The other one would kill Alejandro and together they would get her out of the car somehow–

Alejandro caught the black dog before he had gone three strides. Alejandro, Natividad realized instantly, was *glad* to fight – fiercely glad of the chance to let go of all his hard control, all the tight-held fury and frustration of the journey, all the grief and rage he had carried from Nuevo León. His shadow had come up fast and hard, bringing with it the *cambio de cuerpo*, the change of body, in plenty of time to meet the attack. Alejandro was lost in the battle-lust of his black dog shadow – but he had not for an instant forgotten about his sister or brother.

He had not stayed to meet his own attacker. He must have ducked and gotten away, because now he leaped onto the hood of Natividad's car, and then the roof – the thin metal boomed and deformed under the impact – and then flung himself from that height down upon the black dog pursuing Miguel. Alejandro did not flinch from Natividad's magic, but their other attacker, coming after him, was forced to take precious seconds to go around the car rather than over, and in that time Alejandro tore into the smaller one, who had plainly not looked for attack from the rear. Alejandro's

claws tore across his spine, and his massive jaws crushed and tore the black dog's neck. The creature cried out, collapsing, dying, his body contorting and twisting back into human shape, horribly piecemeal so that half his body and the lower part of his face were still black dog when the rest was human. Black ichor and red blood spattered the snow, and the black dog's shadow, torn free from his body, shredded into the cold air, dispersing, gone.

Alejandro did not pause to roar his triumph, but whirled to meet their remaining attacker. Alejandro's jaws dripped with ichor, fire flickered behind his black fangs, the powerful muscles of his shoulders bunched and rippled as he lowered his massive head. His snarl was a terrible, ripping sound of threat and bloodlust.

His opponent hurled himself forward, shrieking his rage and hatred.

Alejandro leaped away sideways, then pivoted and met him after all. Natividad thought she could almost feel the shock of their collision, even from inside the car. Then there was a *real* impact, as Alejandro flung his enemy into the side of the vehicle. The car's back door *crumpled* inward. Natividad screamed, a small, embarrassing sound, and pressed her hands over her mouth, shrinking back. But her magic flared as the black dog hit the warded car and the black dog shrieked again, this time in pain as well as fury. In that instant, while he struggled to get clear, Alejandro tore into him in deadly earnest. There was a fast series of blows Natividad couldn't follow, and then black ichor sprayed, smoking, against the windows of the car. Both black dogs vanished below the level of her sight, and only one rose again.

Natividad opened the door on the opposite side of the car, very carefully and slowly. She wanted to hide in the car forever and never get out again, but of course she couldn't. Alejandro needed her. She knew it. That was why she had the courage to get out. He snarled at her as she came around the front of the vehicle, a long ugly sound with a wicked hiss in it.

"Hush," said Natividad. She put a hand on her brother's massive shoulder, feeling the muscles rock-hard under his shaggy pelt. "Hush. We're alright. *Somos bien*. There aren't any more, isn't that right? Only the two and you killed them both. Isn't that right? We're safe. It's alright now." She thought he understood her. He lost language when his black dog came up, but she thought he understood her anyway. She looked past him, checking on Miguel. Her twin was halfway back to the car, bringing the woman with him. She didn't try to get away from him. She looked stunned. Natividad knew how she felt.

"We're alright," Natividad said to Miguel, then suddenly found herself almost in tears, which was ridiculous because *now* everything was *fine*. She leaned shakily against the car, rubbing a hand hard across her mouth. The bodies crumpled in the snow looked completely human now. The black ichor had all burned away, leaving only red spatters across the snow and the car and everything.

Alejandro's massive head turned from side to side, his nostrils flaring as he scented the air for more enemies. But at last he shifted, slowly, and with some unpleasant fits and starts, back toward his human form. It took several minutes, during which Miguel, with cool practicality, dragged both bodies away behind a hedge and began

kicking snow over the worst of the blood. It was already bitterly cold. Natividad had almost forgotten, until she saw the blood freezing into crystals in the snow, how cold it was. Shivering, glad of her mittens, she got a handful of snow and began to scrub the blood off the car. She glanced at Miguel and then at the woman who had sold them the car, wondering what they could do about her. She would obviously call the police as soon as they were gone...

“Now I believe your father was from Lewis,” the woman said, her voice shaky but emphatic. She stared at the blood, cast a horrified glance at the half-concealed bodies, and *didn't* look at Alejandro at all, which must have taken quite an effort. “I sure *do*. Oh, my God. I never... My *God*, in broad daylight... *Jesus Christ*.”

Alejandro straightened at last, looking almost entirely human. He stared at the woman. She met his gaze for a moment with horrified wonder, but looked away again before Miguel, once more at her side, needed to warn her about that. She said rapidly, “I don't know anything, I don't *want* to know anything, I don't *care* what you people do, anyway *they* attacked *you*, not that it's any of my business, alright? Take the car, just take it, that's fine, I don't care, somebody else can find the bodies, it won't be the first time lately, alright?”

“Alejandro...” Natividad began.

“You won't call the police,” said Miguel. Though he spoke to the woman, his raised-eyebrow look was for Natividad.

“No. No! I swear I won't! I swear!”

The woman was starting to cry, which was kind of awful. Natividad said quickly, “She's telling the truth, you know. She really is. You must be able to tell that as well as I can, 'Jandro.” That was why her twin had made the woman deny it, of course: so Natividad and Alejandro could hear the truth in her voice. She patted her brother anxiously on the arm. The human shape of his arm was reassuring, but his muscles were still hard with tension.

“We can leave right now, get out of town immediately,” Miguel put in smoothly.

“Anyway, I bet the police here don't *want* to interfere with Dimilioc. Whatever they know or don't know or have figured out since the war, you know there's got to be a long, long tradition in this town of staying way out of Dimilioc business.”

Alejandro rubbed his hands across his face. The anger was ebbing at last, or at least he was getting it under control. He dropped his hands, stared at Natividad for a moment, and then said, his voice gritty with the remnants of black dog rage, “*Me de igual. Está bien*.”

“Right,” said Natividad, relieved. “Right. *Bien*.” She patted his shoulder.

Natividad thought the woman might change her mind and call the police after all as soon as they were gone, but she didn't say so. Anyway, Miguel was right, of course. The people of Newport, including the police, undoubtedly did have a long tradition of

staying out of Dimilioc business, so probably there would be no trouble. Or not from the *police*. Natividad wished she knew whether those black dogs could possibly have belonged to Vonhausel. But Vonhausel shouldn't have dared trespass on Dimilioc territory. She looked at Miguel.

"They can't be Vonhausel's," her twin said, answering her exact fear. "Right on the edge of the Kingdom Forest? I don't believe it. They were strays." But despite his firm tone, Miguel was frowning. He said abruptly, "Dimilioc should have tighter control than this. Strays, here? I wonder how strong Dimilioc actually *is*, now..." But then, as Alejandro shifted his weight, Miguel fell abruptly silent.

Natividad said nothing. She didn't want Alejandro to know how scared she still was. Then he would be angry again, and his shadow would press at him, and she didn't dare cost him even a shred of his control. They had this good car now, and soon they would be at Dimilioc, and then her brother would need every bit of his control. So, Natividad tried to think of cheerful things – hot chocolate, say. Except then she thought of Mamá's kitchen, and Mamá, and that was worse. So, then she tried to think of nothing at all.

## Chapter Two

The car finally got irretrievably stuck a few miles north of Lewis, on a nameless road that twisted up the sides of steep rocky hills and then chopped its way back down again.

Miguel was much better with cars and driving than either Alejandro or Natividad, and someone had to drive, but the road got worse and worse, and Natividad was not surprised when her twin finally lost control on one particularly steep curvy bit. When the car skidded, Alejandro put out an arm to brace her, and Miguel took his foot off the gas, and the car slid gently sideways off the road and tucked itself into a snowdrift at the base of a granite ridge. The gentle impact was little worse than when the bus had hit potholes in parking lots on their way north. Natividad uttered a small scream, mostly to tease her twin. Miguel winced, embarrassed. “Sorry,” he said to both of them. “Sorry. It’s not like normal driving. I thought I slowed down enough.”

“*Está bien,*” Alejandro reassured his brother. “It doesn’t matter.”

He didn’t sound angry at all. Natividad guessed her older brother might even be glad that the car had run off the road. He might not mind if there was one delay and then another, so that the moment they came to the heart of Dimilioc remained a moment in the future and not yet *this* moment. She would understand that. *She* was Pure, so she was safe – pretty safe – and Miguel was only human. But Alejandro – black dogs were so *territorial*. Miguel thought it would be OK, but Natividad thought her twin might be too sure of his logical analysis of what Grayson Lanning *ought* to do to really believe he might do something else.

“So, I guess we’ll walk the rest of the way,” Miguel said, once they were all sure the car was stuck. He patted the steering wheel wistfully. “Maybe we can get the car back later.” He reached into the back seat for their pack, glancing over his shoulder at Natividad. “It can’t be so far now. Three or four miles, maybe. And it’s not that cold.” This was optimistic. It was very cold. No part of Nuevo León ever got so cold, not even the mountains. Here, their breath trailed white and frozen through the brilliant air, puffs of living steam against the stark black branches of the trees. And there was a great deal of snow here. Natividad could not remember snow ever falling at home in Potosi, far less at Hualahuises where Mamá’s family had lived.

They pushed their way through knee-deep snow all afternoon. The whole world was white and black: the occasional green of needled pine and the flash of red as a bird flew by only served to accent the bleakness of the winter forest. Natividad could not imagine how the bird could live in this frozen world, where there seemed neither fruit nor seed nor insect nor anything else that might sustain living creatures. She thought this must be a hard country for bird or beast. A hard country for people, too. Even for black dogs.

Yet this cold northern world was not perfectly silent. Pine needles rattled in the occasional breeze; now and then a clump of snow fell softly from a branch. Somewhere not far away a bird called sharply, unmusically. Perhaps the red one,

perhaps another; Natividad did not know the birds of this country. They had occasionally seen others through the afternoon: little ones of gray and buff and white; once a small flock of large black ones, like crows but bigger, which might have been ravens.

She stumbled over a snow-covered rock, and Alejandro touched her arm, stopping her. "You are alright?" he asked her. "Not too tired?"

"I'm fine," Natividad said, waving away any concern, but she could tell from the way that Alejandro looked at her that he didn't believe her. She smiled at him reassuringly, but the smile took a deliberate effort. She *was* tired. And the cold was awful. But she didn't want to make her brothers stop for her sake. Miguel, hovering protectively at her elbow, looked alright, but Miguel had spent his whole life trying to keep up with their older brother. He was not tall, but he was sturdy and strong for an ordinary human, and the cold did not seem to bother him as much as it bothered her.

Alejandro himself, of course, did not really feel the cold. Black dogs didn't. It wasn't fair. Natividad gave Alejandro a look in which she tried to combine scornful amusement and impatience. She said, again, "I'm fine." Her breath, like Alejandro's, hung in the air, a visible echo of her words.

"She's fine," Miguel said, putting an arm around her shoulders.

Natividad leaned against her twin, her smile suddenly genuine. "See?"

Alejandro was not convinced. "We could stop, rest. We have not come very far. I think we still have a long way to walk. You should rest. We could make a fire. You have those *cerillos*? Matches?" He looked at Miguel. "We could boil water, have coffee. Eat something. Then you would have not so much to carry."

Miguel grinned, a flash of white teeth in his dark face. His smile was their father's. Just recently, as Miguel had shot up in height and lost the plump softness of childhood, Natividad had begun to see echoes of their American father's bony features emerging in her twin's face. "I'm fine, too," Miguel said. "But I wouldn't mind carrying some of this weight on the inside instead of the outside."

Miguel, though much less strong than Alejandro, was the only one of them carrying a real burden. Natividad carried a shoulder bag with matches and a thermal blanket and some food, and her brothers had insisted on her carrying their small remaining cache of American money. Her twin carried everything else: the little pot to boil water; mugs and powdered cocoa; jerky and nuts. Extra clothes, too – especially for Natividad, of course, which was a little embarrassing, but only a little. It wasn't *her* fault her brothers didn't care about clothes.

Since they had known their car might not be able to get all the way to Dimilioc, they had brought the things she and Miguel might need if the cold got too bad. More than that, they had not wanted to abandon every last trace of their past. Buried in the middle of Miguel's pack, Natividad knew, was Mamá's special wooden flute, wrapped up in Natividad's favorite dress, the one with all the ruffles.

They hadn't had to argue who would carry the pack. Last year, when she and Miguel had been only fourteen, he might have argued. Even Natividad herself might have argued. She might have thought Alejandro should carry the pack because he was the biggest and had the black dog strength. But this year, they all understood that Alejandro could not carry any burden because he needed his hands free.

Alejandro carried only a knife: the silver one she had blooded for him. If worse came to worst, he would fight. If he fought well enough, if Natividad had time to use her *maraña*, then maybe she and Miguel would be able to get away. Lewis was not so far behind them, and if they could get another car, maybe they would be able to get all the way off Dimilioc territory.

The truth was, if worse came to worst, probably they would all die. But that had been so since the day Mamá and Papá had been killed. Even before that, in fact, though they had not known that when they were younger. So short a time ago, when they had all been children, before the war between black dogs and the blood kin had weakened Dimilioc, and Vonhausel had renewed his own war with Papá... Natividad shut those memories away with a sharp effort.

"I'm not too tired," she said. "I can go on." She looked at her watch, a cheap one with a black plastic strap and a pink face, and a white kitten to point out the hours and minutes. She put back the hood of her coat and looked at the sky, where the sun lay already low above the horizon. So comfortless and distant, that sun. She could almost believe cold radiated from it, and not warmth at all.

Alejandro said, "No. You two should eat something. Is that not what you said, Natividad? People need to eat more in the cold. *You* told us that."

"You did say that," said Miguel, so placidly that Natividad could not argue. Her twin was very hard to argue with. "Of course you should eat something. Some jerky, maybe. I'll take one of those nut bars with the chocolate, if you've got any more. And we should drink some water."

Natividad shrugged. "*Matón*," she said, but without heat. Then, remembering her rule about English, she corrected herself: "Bully." Tucking back several wisps of hair that had worked out of her careful pins, she began to search through her light pack for something to eat. Miguel walked a little aside from the trail they'd been following, kicking knee-high snow out of his way, and swept more snow off a fallen tree so she could sit down. "I really don't need to rest," Natividad protested, but then shrugged. "But I suppose I wouldn't *mind* coffee." She followed him, peeling the wrapping away from one of her nut bars and handing her twin another.

"Well, look at this," said a new voice, sharp and quick and nasally American. "Black pups trespassing. Do you know, when we got the call, I walked out in the middle of breakfast? If I'd realized it was a pack of *puppies*, I'd not have troubled myself." Natividad jumped and spun around fast. Miguel caught her arm to steady her and Alejandro took several quick steps to put himself between them and the newcomer. Natividad touched her pocket, but didn't grab her *maraña mágica*, not yet: she didn't want the newcomer to guess she had it. If they *did* have to run, she wanted it to take him by surprise.

Alejandro moved a step forward, toward the threat. He stared directly into the newcomer's face for a breath, which between black dogs was a challenge. Then, with an effort Natividad could see, that she thought she could almost feel in her own body, he lowered his eyes.

The American was taller than Alejandro, but seemed hardly older at all. Surely he couldn't be as young as he appeared, but the way he stood and moved and looked, no one would have dismissed him as a boy anyway. He stood with his weight forward, relaxed, but holding himself with the kind of balance that meant he could move fast in any direction.

His was a very American face: bony and narrow, with a thin, unsmiling mouth crooked now with disdain, as though nothing he looked at pleased him and he didn't expect it to. His hard stare implied arrogance; the set of his mouth suggested impatience and an inflexible temper. Despite his youth, it was the face of someone already long experienced with killing and death, someone who would not be easily touched by anger or fear or grief. It was the face of the Dimilioc executioner, who killed without mercy or regret.

She knew his name. Everyone did – everyone who knew anything about black dogs. This was Ezekiel Korte, old Thos Korte's nephew: the youngest man ever to be made Dimilioc's executioner. Stray black dogs always feared the Dimilioc executioner. Even in Mexico, a thousand miles south, black dogs whispered his name and looked over their shoulders when they broke Dimilioc law, afraid that someday they would find the executioner behind them – and for the past six years, when they did, it was this face they had seen before they died.

The young Dimilioc executioner was dressed with a black dog's indifference to cold: narrow black pants that tucked into boots, a blue shirt, a black leather jacket clearly chosen more for its looks than its warmth. Other than his shirt, there was no color to him. His hair was the color of bleached straw. His pale blue eyes, many shades lighter than the shirt, seemed to Natividad to be the color of the winter itself. She was immediately afraid of him, but she also found that she was sorry for him, which she hadn't expected at all. He had drawn danger and disdain around himself as closely as that leather jacket, but what she thought was that she had never in her life seen anyone who seemed more *alone*.

Alejandro took another step forward and then dropped to one knee in the snow, but he did not reach for the knife he carried. Natividad was very glad of his restraint. She could see her brother was trying to strike a balance between respectful acknowledgement of the executioner's superior strength and his own pride – *black pup*, the young executioner had said, and him only a few years older than Alejandro himself. She knew it would be harder for Alejandro to defer to Ezekiel Korte than to one of the older Dimilioc black dogs. Black *wolves*. Papá had said the Dimilioc black dogs called themselves wolves. She wished desperately that Papá was here now. Or Mamá, even more. Though if their parents had lived, none of them would have come here.

“Well,” said the Dimilioc executioner, looking them over with leisurely derision, “It's a little late for courtesy, isn't it? What is this? One black pup and a human boy and a

girl Pure as the white snow? One doesn't expect to find such a mixed pack of strays in the winter woods. Still less walking on foot straight into Dimilioc territory. There are quicker ways to find death, if that's what you seek."

"We ask to speak to Grayson Lanning. We ask for a proper audience. Is it your place to refuse?" Alejandro said. Natividad could hear the edge of strain in his voice, but she hoped a stranger would not.

Ezekiel tilted his head to one side, smiling. "Oh, it is."

Alejandro hesitated. Behind him, Miguel said, "Of course it is, but, Ezekiel Korte, would the Master of Dimilioc thank you for exercising your prerogative?"

The young man's wintery eyes went to Miguel. "You know me, do you?"

"Everyone knows you."

"Black dogs. Not humans, generally." Ezekiel's pale gaze shifted back to Alejandro. "Your brother, is he? And the girl's your sister, I expect. She's pretty."

Alejandro stiffened at this provocation, delivered so indifferently it was almost an insult. Natividad shook off Miguel's restraining hand and went forward to touch Alejandro's shoulder, trying to calm him. She knew – they all knew – that no Dimilioc wolf would attack *her*. If Ezekiel Korte attacked anyone, it would certainly be Alejandro.

Ezekiel's pale eyes remained steady on Alejandro's face. He said softly, "You think you can fight me? Give your brother and sister time to run?"

"She's Pure," Alejandro said sharply. Too sharply, despite Natividad's touch. He obviously knew it, because he took a breath, then, and lowered his head. "I don't want to fight you, but why should she have to run? She is Pure."

"I see she is. But she's with you. And you're trespassing. Aren't you?" The young executioner's gaze shifted to Natividad, then to Miguel and finally back to Alejandro. "You think she can run in this cold? The Pure are just as susceptible to cold as ordinary humans. You got your car stuck at the bottom of some hill, I suppose. It's a long way back to Lewis from here. Too far for children on foot – especially children who don't cast real shadows."

"I'm fast," Natividad said sharply. It was dangerous to show a black dog fear. She was sharp instead, so she might seem less like prey. "We're *not* children, and I'm fast, and strong. You might be surprised."

Ezekiel's pale eyebrows rose. He laughed, briefly, but with real humor.

Alejandro's muscles tightened under Natividad's hand, but he kept a tight leash on his rising anger. "Fighting you is not my first choice. *Usted eliges* – it is your choice. What we want is to speak to Grayson Lanning. Not a challenge – *not* a challenge, or would we have walked openly into Dimilioc territory?"

“Perhaps not,” murmured Ezekiel. “No, perhaps not. And you’re not up to my weight – though perhaps you’re just old enough to think you are. You’re what – sixteen?”

“*Eighteen*,” Alejandro snapped, then visibly caught himself. Natividad tried not to wince. She could see Ezekiel had been deliberately insulting, and her brother had let his temper slip. Just a little, but enough to show that no, he was not up to Ezekiel’s weight. Which, of course, they had all already known.

Ezekiel’s cold gaze rested on Alejandro for a moment longer. Then he looked at Natividad. “You’re younger than he is, aren’t you? You *are* pretty. But can you run?” He shifted his weight, stepped forward, focused on her with clearly predatory intent. Just that fast, Alejandro was on his feet, flinging Natividad back, his knife in his hand, his shadow rising behind him and around him in response to his sudden blaze of fear and anger. The cold air smelled of ash and burning.

Her brother couldn’t win a fight with the Dimilioc executioner. Natividad knew that. But if he could injure him with silver, there was a better chance she and Miguel could get away. They had all agreed to that, but she hadn’t thought they would have to actually fight – Miguel had been so sure they would not have to fight. Though her heart raced with sudden fear, she still thought Ezekiel didn’t mean it. But Alejandro was *ready* to fight, even if he knew he couldn’t win. The silver in the blade sparked against his fingers, but it did not burn him. If he cut Ezekiel, though, that cut would burn, and resist ordinary black dog healing.

“You *would* fight,” Ezekiel said, easing back. He was smiling again: a thin, dangerous smile. “I thought you would. But with a knife?”

“It is your choice,” Alejandro repeated. “If I must fight you, I will use a knife, yes. Because I would need the advantage. But I do not want to fight you.”

“Don’t you? Down, then. *Down* – and drop that knife.”

Alejandro did not move.

“Do it,” muttered Miguel, his voice low. The executioner had frightened him, too, Natividad could hear it in his voice. But he whispered to their brother, urgently, “It’s a test, I’m sure it’s a test. Do what he says.”

Alejandro’s mouth tightened. But after a moment, he turned and threw the knife, a sharp motion that left the slender blade buried in the smooth bark of a tree twenty feet away, chest high. Natividad understood: if he had to fight the Dimilioc executioner now, maybe he could recover it, use it. Ezekiel couldn’t: it wasn’t blooded for *him*. Then Alejandro turned back to face Ezekiel and dropped again to one knee. Ezekiel smiled, a mocking expression. His own shadow had gathered around him, heavy and dense, clinging to his pale skin, almost as obvious to her as it would be to another black dog. It smelled of ozone and bitter ash and burnt clay. But he did not go into the *cambio de cuerpo*, and after a lingering moment, his shadow ebbed back down to lie again on the white snow.

Ezekiel took a step forward. Another step, wary. That was a compliment, sort of: that Dimilioc's executioner approached Alejandro with caution. The American eased forward a third step. Alejandro shuddered. Natividad knew her brother was on the edge of leaping up, backing away, letting his shadow bring the *cambio de cuerpo*. Miguel caught Natividad's arm, pulling her back, leaving Alejandro alone. She yielded, reluctantly, and only because she knew that their presence would only make Ezekiel's close approach harder for Alejandro to bear.

He did not move. Natividad was so proud of him. Her brother stayed still, even when Ezekiel reached out slowly and set one hand on his shoulder, close to his throat. Black-shadow claws tipped the young man's fingers. It was naked aggression, that touch. It was a threat, and an arrogant show of control over his own shadow.

"I could tear out your throat right now," Ezekiel said softly. "Could you stop me?"

Alejandro said, harshly, "No."

"You're in a bad position. Why did you let me put you in such a bad position?"

"Because the only choice I saw was fighting you, now. We didn't come here to fight."

"No. Of course not. You want to talk to Grayson." Ezekiel stood for a moment, staring down at him, and then lifted his hand and eased back a step. "You have something resembling control, it seems. Maybe he'll want to talk to you." He backed another step, glanced past Alejandro toward Natividad, and added, "It's another few miles to the house. Can your sister walk so far?"

"Of course I can!" snapped Natividad, insulted. She strode forward again, laying her own hand on Alejandro's shoulder, exactly where Ezekiel had touched him. His black dog shadow did not take *her* touch as a threat. Their mother had worked the *Aplacando* on her black dog son as soon as he was born. To him, the touch of the Pure, especially Natividad's touch, was strengthening, reassuring... calming.

Alejandro took a long breath, glanced up warily, and got to his feet.

There was no sign that Ezekiel took that movement as a challenge. The young American only raked his wintry gaze across them all. Then he turned his back and walked away, leaving the road to walk directly into the stark forest. He did not turn his head to see Natividad detour briefly to recover the knife, but she thought he must know she had. Probably he didn't mind if *she* had it. She kept it – that was probably best, because Ezekiel would no doubt care a lot more if Alejandro took it again.

The countryside was rugged. The snow, mostly knee high, was in places up to Natividad's hips. It was hard to wade through. Natividad had discovered long since that snow was not as light and fluffy as she had always imagined: it was brittle and hard on the top, so one broke through with every step; and it was heavy to push aside. A black dog like Alejandro or Ezekiel could wrap himself in his shadow and walk, weightless, along the top of the snow. But they didn't. Alejandro walked in front, and then Miguel, breaking a trail for Natividad. They had done that all along, but she was

surprised to find that Ezekiel Korte also, without comment, walked heavily through the snow, helping make a trail.

Another red bird clung to a branch overhead, scolding them in sharp little chirps. Its mate, brown touched only lightly with red, joined it. Farther away, a trio of deer stood motionless and watched them pass. There was far less clamor of life than in the oak forest near Potosi, or even the dry scrub around Hualahuises where the coyotes and javalinas lived. But at least the frozen forest no longer seemed completely barren. This seemed, in an odd way, a sort of reassurance. An omen – as though life might be possible here also for black dogs out of the south and their human kin. She wanted to point the deer out to Miguel, but none of them could say anything that Ezekiel would not overhear, and she was afraid he might think her silly. So they walked in silence.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Dimilioc house was a great sprawling mansion of white stone and red brick, nothing that invited burning, which was a sensible precaution for a black dog's house. Natividad thought that three of their mother's house could have tucked themselves into just the first floor of one wing of this house, and there were two wings and three stories. There was no landscaped garden, only a sweep of clear snow-covered ground that ran out to the edge of the forest. Near the house, low stone walls edged the road. There were no tracks through the snow, but here and there were light scuff marks that might have been made by the weightless steps of black dogs.

Four men waited on the wide porch of the house, framed by red brick pillars and the leafless stems of some tough vine that clung to the brickwork. Natividad clung tightly to Alejandro, not for her own reassurance, but to help him keep his temper. She held Miguel's hand, too, but that *was* for herself.

Ezekiel Korte lengthened his stride and went up the stairs onto the porch, with a short, ironic nod for one of the men there, unmistakably disclaiming any continuing responsibility. He might as well have said aloud, "That's my part done; now this is your problem."

Natividad knew the man to whom Ezekiel nodded must be the Master of Dimilioc. Grayson Lanning. She would have known him anyway by the density and strength of his shadow, by the way it had eyes that flickered with fire. She had thought Papá strong, but even Papá's shadow had not had eyes like that, through which one could glimpse smoke and burning.

Grayson Lanning was not as tall as Ezekiel, but broader. Not as old as Natividad had expected: probably not yet even forty. But authoritative, even so. To a merely human eye, he would have looked like... a banker, maybe, or the director of a wealthy company, or maybe – and this was a little more accurate – the head of a ruthless drug cartel. Natividad knew exactly what he was: an extremely dominant black dog with a dangerous temper and a murderously strong shadow.

The Dimilioc Master's eyes were deep-set and dark, his brows heavy, his mouth straight and humorless as an axe cut. Where Ezekiel Korte was lithe and light as a dancer, Grayson Lanning was rugged, broad, strong-boned, and powerful. Natividad didn't have to remind herself to drop her eyes when he stared at her. The scent of charred wood and smoldering coal that surrounded him was, to her senses, very strong. It enshrouded the entire house. If any ordinary humans were in that house, she could not tell. She was almost sure no one else Pure was in there. She already knew that all the men on the porch were black dogs. No. Not black *dogs* at all. Dimilioc black wolves.

Alejandro glanced sideways at her. She pressed his hand hard, trying to steady him. Then she let go, because her brother would have to face the Dimilioc wolves without her help. She was sure he could. She could feel her own heart beating quickly and lightly, like the heart of a bird. Her brother would be able to hear it, probably. She smiled at him anyway, a bright, brave smile that denied fear. On her other side, Miguel did not smile. He looked very solemn.

Alejandro took one step forward, putting himself out in front of Natividad and Miguel, and went to his knees. To both knees. Natividad knew why: he was acknowledging that now it was impossible either to run or to fight. She dropped to her knees as well, knowing the Dimilioc wolves would expect that from all of them. Beside her, Miguel swung the pack down to the ground and also knelt. Alejandro did not glance back at them, but lifted his eyes and looked into Grayson Lanning's face. Then he deliberately lowered his gaze to the ground.

"Well," said the Dimilioc Master, speaking to Ezekiel Korte, "When I sent you out after our trespassers, I did not expect you to bring them to back to our very doorstep. Certainly not alive. I gather you believed I would benefit from meeting them personally?" His voice was heavy, a deep gritty bass that was almost a growl.

"They thought so," Ezekiel answered, his tone faintly amused. "They'd left their car stuck someplace and were walking in on foot. Along the road, obvious as you please. Asked for you by name." He leaned his hip on the porch rail and crossed his arms over his chest, looking cool and not very much concerned, for all the world like any posturing teenager. But he was not just any teenager, and he was not posturing.

"The boy's human, but that girl's Pure," one of the older men said. Dark and heavysset. Old, at least fifty, but still strong. That would be Harrison Lanning, Grayson's older brother. He was frowning, but did not look actually hostile. The other dark one, about Ezekiel's age, that one must be Harrison's son, Ethan Lanning. He had the look of the Lannings and he was the right age. *He* looked hostile – the only Dimilioc wolf to seem truly antagonistic rather than merely scornful. Natividad wasn't sure she blamed him, though. It must be hard to be just ordinary when you lived in the same house as Ezekiel Korte.

"Yes, Harrison, we all know she is Pure," said the oldest of the men, fair and light boned. That would be Zachariah Korte, Ezekiel's uncle. He certainly had the same supercilious tilt to his head.

Grayson studied Natividad. "She may be Pure, but she's a child."

Natividad looked the leader of the Dimilioc in the face. As he had addressed her, she could answer. She said, as meekly as she knew how, “Fifteen, sir, though I have cousins my age who are married, so I don’t think I’m a child.”

Heavy brows lifted. “No? Well, perhaps you are right. And you believe your Purity will protect you. What do you think will protect your brothers? Especially that one?” He nodded toward Alejandro. “A black dog openly trespassing on our very doorstep.” Natividad’s brows drew together. She opened her mouth to say, “We came in right along your road, didn’t we? You didn’t exactly plaster “No Trespassing” signs along the way, did you?” But Alejandro put in quickly, before she could say anything, “We all thought at least Natividad would be safe, and probably Miguel, and if we were wrong, sir, it’s my fault. I argued them into coming to you, so it’s my fault and not theirs.”

Grayson lifted a skeptical eyebrow.

Alejandro said as sharply as he dared, “It is! Because of what our father said about Dimilioc and about you. He said Dimilioc was lucky you were Master, he said Thos Korte might have started the war, but you could finish it; he said you would fight the war *cueste lo que cueste*. He said, when the vampire miasma failed, Thos Korte would have failed too; he would have let the vampires regain their strength, he would have been afraid to lose the miasma, afraid of what ordinary human people would do when they became able to see us all. But you would pursue the war to the end, no matter what it cost...” He faltered and stopped.

Natividad knew her brother had been silenced by the stark memory of exactly what the true cost of Dimilioc’s war had been: emboldened strays hunting as they pleased; and worse, far worse, Papá’s own bitterest enemy tracking him down at last. She wanted to touch Alejandro’s hand, say something to help him, but she could think of nothing to say.

Then Alejandro drew a hard breath and said, “Papá said you were a good Master and an honorable man. So, I said we should come. So, our offense is my fault, sir, and if you punish our insolence, you should punish me and not my brother and sister. No matter how many of our cousins married young, Natividad *is* only fifteen and that’s a child. And Miguel – he’s not a black dog and he’s no older than she is, and anyway, what would she do without a brother to protect her? You must not punish them.”

“Your father?”

Alejandro had, of course, deliberately provoked Grayson to ask that question, but now he wasn’t quick to answer. A whole lifetime of silence was hard to overcome.

“Edward Toland, sir,” Miguel said. Very respectfully.

Grayson’s heavy brows rose. “Edward. Well. I wouldn’t have guessed that at all.” He paused, studying Miguel, and then went on, “Though perhaps I see a similarity. A subtle likeness, but now I look for it, I might believe that you come from the Toland bloodline.”

“Yes, sir. We do,” Miguel assured him.

Grayson examined them all, one after another. “You all have the same mother? A Pure woman? Do I understand that correctly?”

“Yes. Yes, sir.”

“How very imprudent of Edward. Thos would not have liked that at all. No wonder he hid himself and his family so carefully. Well... Well, he is now dead, I imagine? During the war?”

Natividad looked down, swallowing. Her dark grief was nothing she wanted to show strangers; it was too ready to tear open, a chasm that could swallow her whole. She was grateful when Miguel answered because that meant she didn't have to. “After the war, when the black dogs began hunting so boldly,” her twin explained. “Papá hid from Dimilioc well enough before, but not... after the war...” Miguel stopped, taking a hard breath, not as unaffected as he tried to seem.

“Yes, I understand. There are many more stray black dogs in Mexico than here, of course.” Grayson's hard gaze moved to Natividad, then to Alejandro. He said to Alejandro, “Thus, your decision to cross the border.”

“Yes, sir,” said Alejandro. He didn't look at Miguel. He said, “We needed to get Natividad somewhere safe. We couldn't protect her – I could not. Our father's enemies, they would not stop.”

“Your father's enemies,” Grayson Lanning repeated, his voice expressionless.

Alejandro had argued that they shouldn't explain the real reason they'd had to leave Mexico, in case the Dimilioc Master wondered whether he really needed another enemy. But Miguel had said they had better not start at Dimilioc with a lie and Natividad had sided with her twin. So now Alejandro said, still not looking at Miguel, pretending everything had always been his idea, “Vonhausel.”

“That old enmity,” said Zachariah. His tone was dry and unamused. “Yes, I recall that quarrel vividly. So, it did not die even after both Edward and Malvern Vonhausel were cast out.”

“No, sir,” said Alejandro. He started to say something else, but Miguel, interrupting, said quickly and earnestly, “At first I think Papá thought he might track Vonhausel down and kill him, but then I guess Vonhausel got too strong, and Papá met Mamá, and after that Mamá kept us hidden, but I guess maybe there was a lot of magic loose during the war, and somehow Vonhausel learned where we were—”

Alejandro said, overriding Miguel's lighter voice, “I cannot protect my sister from Malvern Vonhausel. But Dimilioc can surely protect her. If you will. Master.”

Grayson regarded him thoughtfully. “Well, that is likely true. But am I seriously meant to believe that at some point before he died, Edward Toland actually advised

you to appeal to Dimilioc for protection?” A slight incredulity had come into the Master’s voice.

Alejandro answered, “Yes, sir. He told... He told us about Dimilioc. He said that the only black dogs who do not live in fear belong to Dimilioc and call themselves wolves. He told us that Dimilioc black wolves live together with humans and with the Pure. That Dimilioc wolves use the *Aplacando*, the Calming, and cherish the Pure. We know... Everyone knows Dimilioc has always killed any black dog who dares hunt the Pure.” Alejandro paused, then went on, “And then we heard that Thos Korte was dead and you were Master. Papá said if we had to... to leave Mexico, we should come to you.”

What Papá had actually said was, “Don’t stand and fight, hear me?”

He had been speaking to Alejandro; it would not have occurred to Natividad or even Miguel to stand and fight. And he had not exactly been speaking. He had been snarling, the change half on him. They had known by then that Vonhausel had come, that he was close. That they would not be able to fight. The dry forest around Potosi was already burning, the oaks smoldering into slow flames and the pines going up like torches. Black smoke had veiled the whole sky.

Mamá had been trying to show Natividad a special way to hide, always hard for the Pure. Natividad had been trying to learn it, crying with fear and trying not to beg to stay with Miguel. She had known if she stayed too close to her brother, she might draw black dogs to them both. She had had to hide by herself, at the base of the live oak, concealed by its living shadow, and Mamá... Natividad wouldn’t think about that.

But she couldn’t help but remember how desperate and furious Papá had sounded when he’d ordered Alejandro: “Get clear of this, don’t fight, lead those bastards off of us, as many as you can get to follow you. Come back if you can, find your brother and sister, take them north. Dimilioc’s the only chance you’ll have, understand me? You’ll have to throw the dice. Grayson Lanning has got to be better than old Thos, he could hardly be worse, and Toland is a name he’ll recognize.”

Alejandro said only, “He told me Dimilioc would remember his name. He said you might take us in.”

“Is that what your father told you?” Grayson was silent for a moment. He did not seem to expect a response, but at length went on, quietly, his deep voice dropping into a still lower register, “It’s been, what? Twenty years, since your father quarreled with Vonhausel and then, like a lunatic, with Thos Korte. At least twenty years. I find it interesting that your father, though exiled from Dimilioc, nevertheless found himself a Pure woman. That he even married her. I find it incredible that he lived long enough to have children your age and yet never once brought himself to our attention.”

Alejandro apparently could think of no response to make to this. Natividad certainly couldn’t. Not even Miguel seemed to have anything to say.

“And now you are here. Possibly with Malvern Vonhausel snapping at your heels. Well. And you think Dimilioc should lay claim to your father’s old quarrel?”

Here it was, this moment, which held either life or death, which held their futures and all their lives. Natividad wished she could answer. Or Miguel, who could always find words that were smooth and polite and persuasive. But the Dimilioc Master would expect Alejandro to answer before his younger human brother or Pure sister.

So it was Alejandro who took a breath, met Grayson’s eyes, and answered, “Dimilioc hunts down *descontrolados* black dogs and sends them into the fell dark; Dimilioc clears moon-bound shifters out of the sunlit world and protects the Pure. Twenty years ago, Vonhausel did not dare challenge Dimilioc. Now the war is done, if there still exists any civilized House of black wolves he will not dare challenge, it is this one. So, I brought my sister here. Will you not take her in?”

The Dimilioc Master did not answer. He regarded Alejandro with narrow-eyed intensity.

Alejandro lowered his gaze, but from the angle of his head, Natividad knew he continued to watch Grayson covertly. He said suddenly, “Was the cost of the war with the vampires so high?” Alejandro looked from man to man on the porch: Grayson and Harrison and Ethan Lanning; Zachariah and Ezekiel Korte. “Is *this* all your strength?” Grayson said nothing.

“You are weak,” Alejandro said harshly. “Dimilioc is *weak*. All the *callejeros* were hiding before, they were quiet, but now why should they hide their shadows? Never mind Vonhausel: if even ordinary stray black dogs look north now, who is here to stop them?”

“I expect we’d manage somehow,” murmured Ezekiel, cool and mocking and totally unimpressed.

“Oh, yes, will you? Should black dogs fear the Dimilioc *verdugo*?” Alejandro asked him. “The Dimilioc executioner, who can find you anywhere and will step silently out of the night to tear out your heart – every black dog fears the *verdugo*! But even the executioner himself cannot fight ten black dogs at once... or twenty... or fifty.”

“You might be surprised,” said Ezekiel, smiling a little.

Alejandro shook his head. “It’s fear that defended Dimilioc. It was fear of you that kept the *callejeros* quiet in the world. But now Gehorsam is gone from Germany, and nearly all the Lumondiere wolves dead in France, so we hear, and who knows about the Dacha? Or the cartels in Syria and Saudi Arabia; not that *they* are a loss, but they were strong and now they are gone. If not even Dimilioc remains strong enough to make all the *norteamericano* black dogs afraid, then the *callejeros* will hunt the Pure, and never mind what Malvern Vonhausel will do! Any black dog with strength enough to force another to follow him will come to pull you down. If you have only five wolves to meet them, they will do it—”

Grayson gave Alejandro a burning look, and Alejandro stopped. The Dimilioc Master said, his tone harsh, “I assure you, pup, black dogs everywhere are still wise to fear Dimilioc.”

Alejandro lowered his eyes, but Miguel, less impressed by black dog aggression, said, “If Dimilioc can’t hold against stray black dogs, that would be... Look, you *have* to hold. If Dimilioc was gone, even the weakest of the black dogs would hunt as they please. There would be another war, this one between black dogs and humans, and no one would win that one either, but black dogs would lose it.”

Grayson transferred his burning look to Miguel.

Miguel didn’t seem to notice. He said earnestly, “Dimilioc needs to be stronger, whether Vonhausel comes or does not come. You don’t have *time* to breed more black wolves of Dimilioc bloodlines. You need us as much as we need you! Toland used to be Dimilioc. We could be again. Alejandro is strong right now – Papá trained him all his life—”

“Enough!” snapped Alejandro. But he said to Grayson, “But that is true. That is all true. We came to ask Dimilioc to take us in. If you *can* protect my sister and brother, then we will strengthen Dimilioc.”

Grayson Lanning tilted his head, amusement and something else in his hard face. “You amaze me.”

“I will be loyal to Dimilioc,” Alejandro insisted. “We all will be. Six wolves would be stronger than five. Enough, maybe. Miguel will make himself useful to you – and, after all, our sister is Pure.”

Ethan Lanning said with contempt, “Pimping your sister, are you, pup?”

Only Natividad’s grab at his arm kept Alejandro in his place. She was furious and didn’t mind letting it show, because meekness was all very well, but there were *limits*. She said sharply to Grayson, ignoring Ethan, “I *told* Alejandro he should say that. It’s obvious anyway. Did you think it was an *accident* I said that about my married cousins? I’m not a *puta*; I won’t lie down with them all. But if you take us into Dimilioc, I’ll take any one of your wolves you say.” She jerked her head scornfully at Ethan. “Even him.”

Ethan Lanning flushed and snarled, his shadow rising fast through him so that his jaw distorted and his claws slid out of his hands, which Natividad affected not to notice. But, with impressive control, he stopped the change there, his shadow subsiding, at no more than a look from his father.

“If we kill your brothers and keep you?” Harrison said to Natividad. He glowered at her, though she couldn’t tell whether that was because he was angry with her, or irritated with his son, or whether that was only his normal manner.

She tossed her head, glaring back at him. “Then I’ll hate you all. You don’t want that.”

“We don’t,” Grayson agreed, his rough voice cutting across Harrison’s response. The Dimilioc Master walked down the steps and put one thick finger under Natividad’s chin, tipping her face up. She met his eyes, though she knew perfectly well how dangerous that was. She could see Alejandro staring at her, willing her to be meek and submissive. But *she* wasn’t a black dog. *She* didn’t have to drop her gaze. Nor did the Master of the Dimilioc wolves seem offended. After a moment, he let her go.

He looked carefully at Alejandro, and then at Miguel. To Miguel, Grayson said, “You also want to come into Dimilioc? Human as you are?”

Miguel gave Alejandro a wary glance. “It was the only thing any of us could think of to do, after Vonhausel killed our parents. We... We hid. Papá wouldn’t let us fight...” he cut that thought off.

“If you had fought, you would be dead, too,” Grayson said, his deep voice quiet. “Especially you, boy. Our human kin don’t belong in black dog battles.” He paused. Then he said to Ezekiel, much more curtly, “Take them downstairs. When they have been secured, come up, and we will talk about this. Ethan, go get their car. If you can’t get it up the road, at least get it out of sight.” The Master himself went back into the house without a backward look. Zachariah Korte and Harrison Lanning followed him, and Ethan shot them a contemptuous look and strode away toward the forest. Then only Ezekiel remained, watching them where they still knelt. He was smiling, but his pale eyes were cool and watchful.

“That was not precisely what I expected, when I brought you here,” he commented. Miguel looked Ezekiel in the face as he got to his feet. “Why not?” he asked. “I’d have thought it was obvious.”

Even if Miguel had been careful not to meet the young executioner’s eyes, he might have put that better. There was no challenge in his tone: as always, he was simply curious. Nevertheless, Natividad wasn’t surprised when Alejandro stood up quickly, in case the Dimilioc executioner took offense at Miguel’s familiarity.

But Ezekiel showed no sign of affront. He said merely, his tone dry, “Perhaps it should have been.” Then he offered Natividad a hand to help her rise. Alejandro moved to stop her taking it, then caught himself. She smiled tiredly at her brother, but she took Ezekiel’s hand without hesitation. His thin smile as he offered it told her that he expected her to be afraid of him and she wanted to show him she wasn’t. And she wasn’t, really. Not *really*.

Ezekiel’s hand was warm and firm, his grip strong. He met her gaze as he lifted her to her feet. He was not smiling now. She could not read the expression in his eyes. Alejandro put a hand under her elbow, easing her back, away from the Dimilioc executioner. “You’re tired...”

Natividad let go of Ezekiel’s hand, allowing her brother to draw her back. She knew Alejandro had been pushed far enough already, so she agreed cheerfully, “Tired and stiff! I think *every* muscle I own is going to be stiff.” But then she looked straight up into Ezekiel’s eyes, not smiling, and asked, because she thought he might answer, “What’s downstairs?”

“Nothing too alarming,” Ezekiel said, still dry. “You can relax.” She could tell he was telling the truth, though there was a slight emphasis on the *you* that she wasn’t sure she liked. But when he stepped back, waving them all up the porch stairs so they had to go past him and let him come at their backs, she went. Especially because, under the circumstances, she didn’t think they had much choice.

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