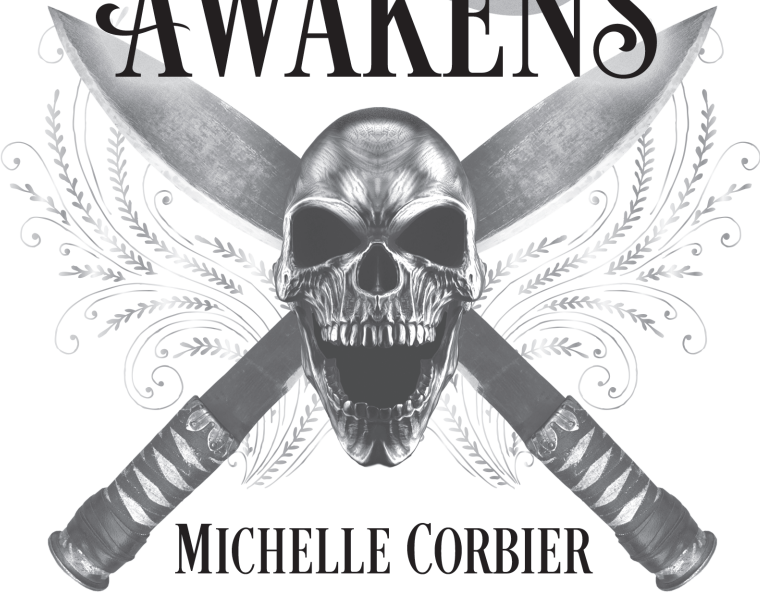
MWINDAJI SERIES • BOOK ONE

DARK BLOOD AWAKENS



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For Jean-Michel, all my love.

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"In traditional West Africa, humans and spirits have always stood side by side occasionally reaching over to tap one another on the shoulder, as if to remind each other of their mutual existence. Whatever tenuous line is drawn between them is porous; humans must hold their ground as spirits—malicious, capricious and sometimes benevolent—wander."

Shhhh! There Are Spirits Lurking… Cultures of West Africa, May 20, 2019

CHAPTER 1

March 2010

From the parked RV's windows, Makeda peeked between the blackout curtains, searching across the grassy expanse. A pale, yellow moon hung high in the Carolina sky.

Headstones winked at her through the darkness, between trees dripping with Spanish moss. Their polished ghost-white surfaces contrasted with the surrounding foliage. Even with binoculars, moonlight proved insufficient for her to decipher their writings. Salty Atlantic wind and water had etched away their epitaphs.

"I'm leaving," Peter said, grabbing a machete and lance.

"Wait for me." Makeda slipped into a light jacket and scrambled to the side door of the RV.

"No, stay and look after Thomas." He gazed down at his brother and grimaced. "His wound looks bad."

"That's simply an excuse to keep me here." Makeda huffed, folding her arms over her chest.

Peter grinned. "You're smarter than you look. Stay put—and make sure Thomas is okay." He hustled out the door before she could reply.

She stared after him until he disappeared between the trees. Time passed as she gazed into the darkness.

Thomas moaned and rolled over on the couch.

Makeda shut and locked the door but peeked outside

around the plastic blinds. If she recalled correctly, the graveyard was over two hundred years old. In middle school, her class toured the North Carolina lighthouses. Old Baldy, established in 1794, had been her favorite. Neither the largest or most attractive of the lighthouses, she loved its history and surrounding area of Cape Fear—nicknamed the Graveyard of the Atlantic.

Like ancient relatives, the gravestones remained ever present. Silenced, but vigilant, standing at attention. She imagined they desired to speak, to impart secrets and reveal mysteries regarding the lighthouse. If they could talk, would they guide her to safety or lead her to their inevitable fate? With effort, she pulled herself away from Cape Fear's dead and returned to her patient.

She tried not to grumble about playing nursemaid to her brother. After all, as a registered nurse; it made sense for her to care for Thomas. But the real reason they left her behind was to keep her away from the fighting.

While Thomas slept, Makeda adjusted his bandages. As she bent over his knee, her shoulder twitched. She startled and inadvertently squeezed the dressings. Had she heard a scream?

"Ouch," Thomas said. "Why'd you do that?" He winced and rubbed his knee.

She automatically swatted his hand away from the wound. "Don't mess with the dressing."

Reclined on several pillows, Thomas pushed himself up along the couch. "It's too tight, and it itches."

"That's the stitches. Leave 'em alone." She loosened the dressings and gazed into his groggy face. "Did you hear a scream?"

"No." He yawned and scratched his shaking head.

When he reached for his knee again, she smacked his hand harder. "Stop it, or I'll have to redo the stitches. You sure you didn't hear a scream?"

"What's wrong with you? Why are you being so—"

A loud wail interrupted his question. He jerked upright, gawking at Makeda, who returned his gaze. They stared at each other for a second before she jumped off the couch and ran to the back of the RV.

Careening his head in her direction, Thomas asked, "What're you doing?"

"Peter or another mwindaji might be in trouble. I'm going out there." She packed several weapons inside a backpack, then slung it over her shoulders.

"You're supposed to stay here." Thomas hobbled off the couch. While trying to catch up with her, he knocked a game controller off his lap and onto the floor.

She glanced at him, then the door. "I'm not going to sit here when the team could be in trouble."

As she hurried by, he reached out and grabbed her arm. "Wait. I'll go with you."

Accident-prone—and a little goofy—Thomas would slow her down. Makeda gave his arm a brief squeeze. "I'll be fine. Stay here, and off that knee."

Before dashing out of the RV, she handed him several guns and ammunition. In her left hand, Makeda clutched a gun. In her right hand, she wielded a machete.

Outside, heavy salty air stung her nostrils. On the other side of the grove of trees, she knew, stood Old Baldy. As she approached the woods, headstones loomed large, welcoming her to their hallowed grounds. What secrets did these troubled lands possess?

She raced past grave markers. Like a train whistling through a tunnel, scenery flickered across her mind. She swooned, became disoriented, and paused. For a moment, she leaned against a tree, blinking rapidly, as if to capture the visions swirling around her mind. *Why does this seem familiar?*

There was no time to tarry. She shook off her déjà vu and sought out the origin of the scream. Was Peter in trouble?

As if on cue, another cry echoed around the woods. This time she pinpointed its location. Charging across a grassy expanse, she neared another tree line. Her pace slowed, and she treaded cautiously. Werewolves were in the area.

The mwindaji had tracked a group of six werewolves to Bald Head Island. An anonymous tip led them to a fete where the lycans gathered at an inn beside the harbor. During the ensuing battle, Thomas had been injured, and the hunters split up. She and Thomas had been relegated to the security of the camper while the other mwindaji chased after the fleeing monsters.

Roots and brambles threatened her progress. As she inched through the thicket, she touched a cedar tree. Makeda remembered a story her great-grandmother had told her about how trees could speak—if you listened. Right now, she didn't have time to communicate with the vegetation except to say "hi-bye."

Careful to step over tree stumps, she spied a clearing about two hundred yards away. She spotted Peter engaged in hand-to-hand combat with a towering werewolf. Because her brother stood over six feet tall, Makeda calculated the monster to be about eight feet. Standing on its hind legs, the werewolf gained an advantage.

His shirt sleeve bloodied and frayed, Peter didn't fare well. Makeda couldn't see his gun anywhere, but he swung a

machete widely, managing to keep the werewolf at bay. Peter gripped the machete in his left hand, though Makeda knew him to be right-handed. Neither he nor the lycan detected her approach.

At the edge of the clearing, Makeda leveled her gun and aimed. Before she could lob a shot, a movement rustled on her right side. She dropped to a squat as a cool wisp of air eddied above her head. Peripherally, she saw a large, hairy arm swipe past. Werewolf.

Jumping down from a tree branch, the lycan landed not three feet away on all fours. When its feet met the earth, Makeda fired two shots into its hairy torso. After a brief shriek, the werewolf crashed to the ground.

Without glancing upon it for another second, Makeda sprouted to a standing position. Her gaze reverted to the scene of her brother.

In a large arc, Peter swiped repeatedly at the werewolf. None of his strikes met the target. He was drenched in sweat, and his right arm hung limply at his side. Blood soaked his tattered shirt, trickling down his arm from exposed muscle tissues. Moonlight glinted off what she believed to be his humerus bone.

With her weapon leveled at the werewolf, Makeda advanced upon their position. Two shots ripped into the monster, emitting small popping noises. Bullet one struck its left lateral shoulder, and the second shattered its throat. Choking and sputtering, the werewolf grabbed its neck, where those sharp claws added to the trauma around its throat. Blood gurgled, flowing down its hairy chest.

Still holding the machete, Peter stumbled away from the injured beast.

Collapsing to the ground, the werewolf bled out as Makeda embraced Peter. She switched from hunter to nurse and reached into her backpack for supplies.

Peter searched the ground around them as she evaluated his wounds. "What're you doing here?"

"You're welcome," she said. After retrieving gauze, she let her backpack slip to the ground and treated his wound. "What are you looking for?"

"My gun." He must have spotted it because he started to pull away.

"Hold still. Let me finish this tourniquet, and then you can get your gun." Hastily, she tied the cloth around his arm. Once she secured the dressing, she let him retrieve his weapon. "Where are the others?"

Peter angled his head toward the aged lighthouse.

Her left brow arched. "You can't be serious."

He shrugged. "The monsters went in there, so they followed." As he set off toward Old Baldy, she fell in step beside him.

In constant movement, her eyes scanned the area. Whether because of the headstones or the full moon, a shiver thrilled up her spine. Her shoulders tensed. Makeda detected something different but couldn't discern the source.

Her nostrils twitched at an unusual scent. Adjusting to the dark, her pupils dilated like camera lenses. She pushed those sensations aside and concentrated on their present situation.

"Where's—" Before she completed her sentence, three men exited the lighthouse.

With a shotgun looped over his arm, the oldest man carried several weapons across his back, and others in his hands. Two younger men hauled a plastic tarp between them. As the trio approached, a dirt-caked hand fell loose. With a booted

foot, one of the young men kicked the hand back onto the drop cloth.

Makeda's lips rose into a smile, but the older man's brows crinkled in return. Watching his stern gaze, Makeda detected a forthcoming argument.

Without removing his eyes from her face, he said, "Take the bodies to the RV."

"Right, chief," her cousin Brian said, adjusting his grip on the tarp.

The old man's attention returned to her. "What are you doing here? You were told to stay in the RV with Thomas. If you're gonna work with us, you have to obey orders."

"Makeda came to help me," Peter said, turning to the side, revealing his injured arm. "She probably saved my life."

Probably. She watched the old man examine Peter's arm. The old man's brows straightened, and in a quick motion he reached out and hugged her. Initially surprised, her body stiffened, but in seconds she relaxed and hugged him back.

After giving her a big kiss on the cheek, he said, "I know you can help, but I worry. If something happened to you, your mama couldn't take it."

He collected Peter's machete and placed his arm around her shoulders. "Let's go."

Their journey to the RV took them near the werewolf she shot in the woods. A quick glance showed it had reverted into a man. As Makeda passed the body, she looked down. A vision of his haunted, pained face followed her back to the camper. Those deep brown eyes, wide nose, and full lips. It seemed incongruous to kill something resembling herself—someone human.

The ongoing battle between the mwindaji and monsters left her conflicted. This war had raged for over a millennium.

Big Mama, her great-grandmother, had explained the history of the mwindaji, and how the conflict began. Makeda wished she could remember more of those childhood stories. Recall the sorcery Big Mama taught her. Now, she couldn't do more than kasi kasi.

Would the war ever end? She shuddered.

Probably assuming she was cold, the old man hugged her tighter. Her tremors came not from the temperature though, but uncertainty. Gritting her teeth, she hid her unease. If their mwindaji leader had any doubts about her commitment, he'd dismiss her from the team.

Breezes along the cape increased in intensity as winds rolled in off the Atlantic. Their steps quickened. Once they reached the RV, he held the door open for her. Warmth greeted them. Her shoulders relaxed as the vision of the werewolf vanished from her mind.

Standing at the opened door, the old man said, "Store the bodies in the RV hidey-hole and then collect the other two. I'll call the other mwindaji and tell them to meet us at the dock. We'll drop the bodies out to sea. Let's go, guys. Time to hustle."

Inside the RV, with Thomas's help, Makeda tended to Peter's injuries. Thomas cleansed the skin while she debrided dead muscle tissue from around the lacerations. As she stitched the wound, Makeda thought back to the initial scream she had heard.

It seemed like a shout came from inside her head. Perhaps the bracing sea air heightened her perceptions. Her hand trembled as she completed a running stitch.

Hold it together, girl. Weakness wouldn't be tolerated in a mwindaji, especially if the hunter was their leader's daughter.

CHAPTER 2

Cadmium-tipped flames danced across the fireplace. Chilly Kentucky spring weather led Korlemo to sit before the hearth. His long legs stretched forward along a Persian rug as he watched blazing embers prance inside the fireplace, throwing fiery colors across the walls of his study. High ceilings drew the heat upward. Ornate furniture gave heady rich detail to the room.

His fingers traced the outline of his decanter, half-full of Kentucky bourbon. It had become his preferred drink since he had settled in the Bluegrass State, replacing the red wines of the Rhône Valley. Though pleasant, bourbon in no way resembled the rich bouquet of the wines he consumed in southern France.

More than fifty years had passed since he made Kentucky his home. He'd learned the importance of adaptation long ago. Over a millennium, he had conformed to different customs, acclimated to the changing mores of the people his tribe called bindimèn, colloquially called humans.

Korlemo snorted. Evolution was the nature of champions. Survival required guile, strength, and cruelty. Traits he mastered, surpassing bindimèn. He stood and brushed up against the side table, causing his goblet to wobble.

Herman rushed up from his seat to steady the vessel—apparently concerned liquor would stain the prized Persian rug. After carefully placing the glass on a sideboard, he returned to his seat. With a smile, he looked up into Korlemo's face.

If he expected a thank-you, he would be disappointed. Uninterested in Herman's domestic concerns, Korlemo paced the room.

"Where's the zauber?"

"I'm not sure," Herman stuttered.

"What time did you tell her to arrive?"

"Eight o'clock. She probably got lost on the back roads. The streets aren't well lit once you leave Ramsey city limits. I'll mention it at the next city council meeting."

Korlemo's narrowed eyes brooded toward Herman. "Someone should have picked her up. I need answers and should not be expected to wait all night. These dreams have disturbed my peace for too long."

"I'm sure she'll be here any moment," Herman said as the left side of his face twitched. "Would you like me to call Dayo? She could—"

"No. This does not concern my wife."

With long strides, Korlemo marched in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows framed by heavy burgundy drapes. Shadows stretched across the manicured lawn. Disregarding the star-laden evening sky, he instead searched the inky black night, peering hungrily into the dense surrounding woods.

He scanned the oak trees lining the edge of the property. Razor-sharp, his acute vision spied an opossum scampering along the forest floor. An owl scavenged among the trees. His mobowou sense detected the odor of rotting flesh. Probably a kill from one of the foxes in the area.

The scenery failed to distract his mind or quiet the unease mushrooming inside him. Over the past month, violent images of his death had impeded sleep. At first, he had attributed the dreams to the current unrest in their community. However, the frequency of the visions had increased. Now, they were more

distinct and alarming. He believed the images were an omen. A warning. Of what, he couldn't fathom.

Tormented by the escalating, threatening nature of those dreams, Korlemo had consulted a witch and a diviner, but neither could interpret his dreams. To appease his distress, Herman arranged for a zauber—a sorceress possessing the knowledge of a witch and the vision of a diviner—to come and assure Korlemo all was well. Once he received an interpretation of the dreams, Korlemo knew his mind would be at rest—if the zauber ever arrived.

Whirling around from the window, he stomped over to where Herman sat in a wingback chair drinking wine. He slammed his hand down on the top of the chair and glowered upon his friend. "Where is she? I will not wait any longer. Go find her."

Herman's saucer-shaped eyes gawked. His face twitched, causing his left eye to blink repeatedly. With shaking hands, Herman patted Korlemo's arm. "I'll find out where she is. Don't get upset." He withdrew.

Pieces of the dreams flittered across Korlemo's mind. The more he thought about them, the angrier he became. He stomped around the study, marching before the bookshelves, then hovering over his large wooden desk. Someone was warning him. *But who, and why?*

All mobowou had enemies, especially those as powerful as himself. He struck the desk, creating a dimple in the soft wood. He never left an enemy alive. How could anyone consider threatening him?

Restless, he paraded around the study several more times, opening and closing his large hands while reconsidering his dreams. Before he completed another circuit, Herman reentered the room with a woman. Before the door shut, Herman

stuck his head out and addressed someone unseen. While he waited, Korlemo scrutinized the woman.

She stood beside the door, surveying the study. Her thin gray braids curled into a bun centered at the nape of her neck. The impression Korlemo garnered from her appearance was not positive. He scowled.

Herman closed and secured the door. He motioned for the woman to proceed farther into the study, directing her toward couches in the middle of the room.

Square wire-framed glasses perched at the edge of her nose. Despite the lenses, she squinted. Her eyebrows had been plucked to almost nonexistence. Age had gnarled her unadorned fingers.

Korlemo made no attempt to hide the disgust scribbled across his face. If she detected his displeasure, she hid it. Her countenance remained neutral.

With a small grin, Herman escorted the woman up to him. "Mrs. Jackson, this is Dr. Winters."

As the distance between them decreased, so did her squinting. Her gaze widened. Neither he nor Mrs. Jackson attempted to shake hands. They studied each other.

Korlemo wondered if she suffered from poor vision or if she was confused by the surroundings. If the former, he hoped being nearsighted would not impede her abilities as a sorceress.

Herman suggested Mrs. Jackson take a seat on the long honey-brown leather couch.

She thanked him and sat. A long bead and shell necklace encircled her neck. Adjusting it and the multiple sweaters hanging low over her wide-legged slacks, she perched on the edge of the couch, back straight, face flat.

Responding to a knock at the door, Herman retrieved a tray from a servant waiting there. On the table between the

couches, he placed a salver containing a carafe and plate of hors d'oeuvres. He poured steamy liquid into a dainty cup and handed it to her.

Though she accepted the beverage, she didn't drink. Instead, she placed it on a table and surveyed the room.

"Thank you for coming, Mrs. Jackson," Herman said. "I hope your trip wasn't too inconvenient."

"I apologize for the delay, but your directions—" She paused. Tilting her head back, she sniffed the air. "It was difficult to see the turnoff in the dark."

"Yes, yes. Completely understandable. We're glad you finally made it."

She gave Herman a lengthy evaluation. After a minute, she shook her head and regarded Korlemo. Fingering her shell necklace, she stared.

On the opposite end of the sofa, Herman sat down. "Well, perhaps we should get started. It's already late, and I'm sure you'd like to be on your way."

Drumming his fingers along the desk, Korlemo watched and assessed her actions.

"This isn't right," she said, peering closer.

The old cow frowned, folding her arms over her large bosom. Korlemo's posture stiffened. He leaned forward, senses heightened.

"What's wrong?" Herman asked.

Creases furrowed her forehead. She didn't answer but again smelled the air.

"You understood what we required before you arrived. Dr. Winters would like his dreams interpreted. You'll be paid well for your work."

From his desk, Korlemo observed and remained silent. If she was a zauber, he would know from her response.

Mrs. Jackson glared at Herman. "You lie."

A twitch wrinkled Herman's face. "What? What do you mean?"

Her pinched nose continued sniffing. Again, her gaze fastened upon Korlemo. Her bent brows rose, and her eyelids peeled back. An arthritic finger pointed at him. "You are not a doctor."

A smirk crossed his mouth. She recognized him. *Good.* She was what he needed. Sauntering over to the couch, he loomed over her. "What *am* I?"

Without hesitation, she stood, mere inches away from him, her face only reaching his chest. Her examination began with his feet. When her perusal arrived at his chest, she trembled. Beginning at the top of her head, tremors consumed her entire body.

"No. It can't be. You—you can't be." She stepped backward, bumped against the couch, and collapsed onto her buttocks.

His lips crept up the sides of his face. "But I can. And I am."

Her head snapped right toward Herman. "You liar. You didn't tell me who this—what he is." Her body shook. She clasped her fingers together and rested them on her lap. Her shoulders slumped.

Herman stammered. "I … It doesn't matter. We need you to interpret a dream."

"Do not be afraid, old woman," Korlemo said. "If you do as I ask, no harm will come to you."

Avoiding his gaze, Mrs. Jackson stared at her hands as her tremulousness decreased.

Herman scooted along the couch toward her. "Don't worry. Dr. Winters simply wants you to interpret his dream."

Her finger shot out toward Korlemo, but she glared at

Herman. "That is not a doctor."

Korlemo bared his canines. "Who I am is unimportant. You are here to interpret my dreams."

"I will not." She lifted her chin and gazed toward the fireplace.

"Will you not even look at me?" Korlemo asked, leaning toward her. "I will not entrance you."

Though her shaking stopped, she inclined away from him, resting back against the couch cushions.

"Do you refuse?" Korlemo's fingers elongated as he reached forward and grasped her chin. He angled her head upward to face him.

She trembled and shut her eyes.

"Interpret his dreams and you'll get paid more money than you could ever imagine," Herman squeaked.

Korlemo's sharp nails dug into her cheeks. His grip tightened around her chin, leaving impressions on her weathered skin.

"If you refuse, you *will* die."

Her shaking ceased and her countenance cleared. "*Mawu, mbabire*," she whispered in an aside. For a second, she chanced a glance into his face. "I will die either way."

Chuckling, he released her face and sauntered over to the hearth. "Tell me the meaning of my dreams, and I promise you will live."

With a deep sigh, she rose, touching the impressions along her cheeks from his fingernails. "You won't let me live. You're a mobowou, a vampire. An abomination. You'll kill me to keep your secret. I can't leave and your existence remain unknown."

He grinned, ignoring her comment. Firelight cast a shadow across his profile. He fixed her with his gaze, then recounted his most recent dream.

"The visions begin differently each night, but the endings are similar. They start in the center of a luscious garden with a large tree. The tree is old and barren. It displeases me, and I decide to chop it down. As I cut the tree, it weeps. Wherever tears fall, saplings grow—some flower. I reach down to touch a sapling, and a flower cuts my hand. My palm fills with blood. I cannot stop the bleeding. More saplings grow until I am surrounded by flowers. I try to flee, but the stalk of the flower that cut my hand grabs my ankle, yanking me to the ground. I thrash around but cannot break free. Saplings cover me, choking me. Before I awake, a face forms on the tree trunk. It leers at me."

Standing beside the mantel, Korlemo paused, awaiting her response.

For a couple minutes, the only sound came from logs crackling in the fireplace. Korlemo regarded Herman, who seemed to be holding his breath, not moving or twitching.

Instead of responding to the recitation of Korlemo's dream, Mrs. Jackson glanced around the room. Korlemo wondered if she was considering an escape, which he knew would be futile. Fortunately, she seemed to have no intention of going anywhere.

She bolted toward him, clasping his hand with a surprising ferocity. Though startled by her brazenness, he relented and allowed her to grasp his hand. With his hand secured between both of hers, Mrs. Jackson studied his chest, slowly gazing up toward his neck, still avoiding his face.

While he had no intention of enrapturing her, she clearly understood he could. However, Korlemo needed answers, solutions he knew a zauber could provide.

For several minutes, Mrs. Jackson held his hand before tossing it aside. She retreated a step and chanced a sly glance

into his face. Then, she laughed.

Because it sounded awkward in the previously silent room, at first Korlemo did not appreciate what was happening. But her mirth continued for several minutes before she started to cry.

Korlemo's chest heaved and his nostrils flared. His breathing deepened. He shot a grimace toward Herman, who in turn rose from his seat. His friend shook Mrs. Jackson about the shoulders. She slunk from Herman's grasp. In time, she regained control of her emotions. Her teary face curled into a mocking smile.

Furious, with a fluidity that probably appeared to her instantaneous, Korlemo strode up to her. His breath was ragged. He knew his eyes burned hellfire red. "You mock me at your peril."

Once Mrs. Jackson stopped laughing, she wiped her eyes. Throwing back her shoulders, she beamed into his face. "You will die."

His brows zigzagged a question across his forehead. "What do you mean? I cannot die."

"In your dream, the flowered sapling represents a woman. This woman will wound you. Then, she will kill you."

In a flash, his arm shot forward. Like tentacles, his fingers clutched her throat. He snapped her neck before she swallowed her words. The zauber's head slumped backward like a wilted plant.

Korlemo's eyes blazed. He squeezed until her suffused face purpled, and her neck pulverized like a squashed tomato. Blood spurted along the chiseled hardwood floors from where his clawed fingernails punctured her carotids.

Allowing her body to slump to the ground, Korlemo licked blood from his fingers. *Fool.* He stepped over her corpse.

Herman should be happy no blood stained the Persian rug. Not bothering to look back, he said, "Clean that up."

Servants entered the study at Herman's direction. Two removed the dead zauber, while others cleaned syrupy blood off the floor.

"Play for me," Korlemo ordered, standing before the windows overlooking the backyard.

His comment was not directed at anyone specifically, but he noticed Herman direct a young woman to rise from her knees. His friend guided her to a grand piano near the wall farthest away from the fireplace.

Yielding to his demands, the young woman sat at the piano, her moon-shaped eyes questioning his orders. Herman placed a sheet of music before her. Searching at first, with time she found her way along the ivories. She induced the fine instrument to play Chopin. Music drifted around the room, ascending toward the cathedral ceiling.

Once his shoulders relaxed, Korlemo's elongated frame retracted to its prior form. His canines receded. Minutes later, he moved away from the windows and regained his seat before the fireplace. His bloodied hands reached for the decanter.

Sipping bourbon, he called out to Herman. "Get me another zauber."

"Yes, Korlemo."

"And a towel."

A clean glass was brought to him and filled with more bourbon. One of the servants provided a rag, and Korlemo cleaned his hands. After several sips, he ordered the young woman playing the piano to leave. She fled without a glance in his direction.

Ocher-hued flames flickered before his eyes. He surmised the zauber had cursed him with that erroneous prediction because she knew he would kill her.

With a chuckle, he sipped his liquor. He knew he could not die. Not according to the ka'trete between him and Zorulo. He had negotiated his soul in exchange for immortality.

Staring into the blaze, he thought back to that cloudy, overcast day. The encampment where his warriors returned his mortally wounded body. In the tent where he lay dying, there had been a different zauber beside him. At his command, she had summoned a dubwana, Zorulo. With that demon's help, Korlemo achieved everything he had ever desired—revenge, success, and power.

Notwithstanding her allegiance to him, Korlemo eventually had ordered the zauber killed. To preserve his secrets, he had told himself. In truth, she had also displeased him.

A millennium had passed. The irony of now summoning another zauber was not lost upon him. For the first time in at least a hundred years, he became apprehensive. His fingers tapped against his glass.

He remained seated before the fire long after the last blued embers cooled, contemplating the steps he must take to ensure his longevity. If Herman could not find him a reliable zauber …

Sighing, he rose. Perhaps he had remained in Kentucky too long.