

Chapter 1



The sun was low in the morning sky, yet already the heat was stifling. Denizens of the night had retreated to their dens, burrows, and nests, away from the glaring sun and the promise of even worse heat. Small herds of elk, having grazed when the grass was still shiny with dew, clustered together under widely separated trees, monopolizing the only shade around. Not even a heat-crazed panther could shift them from the meager cover. As the sun climbed higher, only two kinds of creatures were moving in the heat: flies and humans. Neither could afford to remain idle while there was food to find.

Five humans, lean and brown, lightly clad in buckskins, silently crossed the empty savanna in single file. Widely spaced to cover the maximum amount of ground, they swept the grass on either side with their eyes, the butts of their spears, and sticks. Anything that moved was fair game.

Leading the group was Oto, father of the three children. He'd seen thirty-eight seasons on the plain, and his face was seamed with cracks, like a lake bed baked hard by the dry season. Oto's light brown hair had thinned to the point where his scalp showed through and was now burned as brown as the rest of him. Streaks of white stained his beard. Though old for a plainsman, Oto's eyes were still sharp and his hunting sense legendary.

Ten paces behind Oto walked Amero, his eldest son. At thirteen, Amero's chin was beardless, and his voice still had a child's squeak. Not yet a man, custom denied Amero a man's weapon. The boy used a boy's tool, a long springy pole suitable for probing rabbit burrows and gigging fat frogs. Amero was sweating under his buckskins. He would have loved to strip down to his loincloth, but the path was dotted with thorny scrub and knife-grass, either of which could shred flesh to the bone in an hour's forage. Sighing, Amero hung his hands on the pole across his shoulders and concentrated on keeping his father in view.

Eleven steps back, his mother, Kinar, hefted her baby off her aching hip. Menni was almost two, a strapping boy-child. He nodded against his mother's shoulder, his legs dangling and his hands draped around her neck. Kinar longed to put him down, but she knew Menni could never keep up with Oto's swift pace.

Last in line was Nianki, the oldest child and the last surviving daughter. Kinar had borne Oto seven children, but they were a lucky family. She knew other women who'd birthed more babies yet had none left to show for it. That Nianki and Amero had survived to such advanced age was a tribute to Oto's skills as a hunter and her own wisdom in foraging.

Nianki was a strong girl who could run half a day without stopping, climb any tree, and snatch a black viper from its sunning rock faster than it could strike, but she was no help to her mother. There was no point in handing her the baby. Inside ten paces Menni would start to cry, and Nianki's usual solution was to slap him.

Kinar had tried to pass on to her daughter the knowledge she'd acquired in thirty-one summers—when to pick berries so they didn't cause a gut-ache, the way to tell poisonous mushrooms from the delectable kind, how to soothe cuts with the sap of soft-tongue plant, and how to harvest honey from a wild beehive without getting stung. Nianki preferred to run after her father and be a hunter. Oto would not allow a female to carry a spear, so Nianki had made her own weapon, a throwing club with a sharp flint head.

Nianki didn't notice her mother's glances back at her. The girl's eyes were on their surroundings, constantly scanning for danger or prey.

The earth was still dry from winter. Hard red clay showed through the tufts of grass. The last rain had been three days ago, a brief shower accompanied by much lightning. It softened only the surface of the soil, which dried quickly. Here and there Nianki saw random footprints of animals who'd crossed the trail while the clay was wet—a rabbit, an elk, the flat, wide prints of a young bear. A flurry of circular dents in the soil told of the passing of a party of centaurs. Oto got along with centaurs, but he always gave them wide berth. He

said you never knew what a centaur might do or say—they were wild creatures, not human at all.

Beside the elk prints she spotted another set of tracks. They were smaller, and of unusual shape. Nianki dropped to one knee to study the unfamiliar spoor.

The prints were long and narrow, with a short pad and strangely long toes. She traced the dried impression with her finger, then sniffed it. A faint odor, pungent like rotten meat. These were the footprints of a predator.

Soundlessly, Oto appeared out of the bush on her right. “Why are you stopped?” he said, resting the butt of his spear on his right foot. It was a lifelong habit that had left a callus on his foot that fit the shaft like a socket.

She pointed to the tracks. “I don’t know this animal, Oto.”

“What can you tell about it?”

Her brows met over her nose as Nianki frowned. “It smells of dead meat. I think, a hunter.”

“Not a scavenger?”

“It followed a live elk.” She indicated the other tracks with a sweep of her hand. “A lone bull. I think this beast culled him from the herd.”

Oto knelt and studied the tracks with a practiced eye. “Yes. The bull was running, but not hard. A single animal was dogging him, driving him—” He lifted his sun-darkened face to the southern horizon. In the distance was the highest relief on the plain in all directions, a pile of upthrust boulders. A hundred wolves could hide in the rocky crevices.

“Ambush,” Oto said.

“A pack?”

Her father nodded.

“Have you seen animals hunt like this before?”

“No. Only men.”

Kinar and Amero had noticed something amiss and doubled back to find Oto and Nianki. The baby stirred and began to fuss. Kinar rocked him gently and made soothing noises in her throat.

“What is it?” Amero asked.

“Animals Oto doesn’t know. A hunting pack.”

Amero scanned the bush nervously. “Are they still around?”

Oto stood. "The elk have bedded for the day. They would not do so if there were a hunting pack near."

Nianki stood. "We should go back," she declared.

Oto folded his arms. "We've left last night's camp. Game has fled, and Kinar has picked the land clean. Going back means going hungry."

"I don't like this," Nianki said.

"Nor do I," added Kinar worriedly.

Mother and daughter seldom agreed, and their sudden cooperation was unnerving. Amero shifted uneasily. "Perhaps we ought to go back?" he ventured.

"You're not the hunter," Oto replied sternly. His dark eyes rebuked all of them. "We go ahead. To go back is to go hungry."

"To go ahead may mean danger!" Nianki insisted, stamping her foot. Kinar hugged the baby closer and backed away from her. Father and daughter had fought before, and over less than this.

Surprisingly, Oto chose to talk rather than use his fists. "No hunting pack would attack a whole family. We are too many and too wise. These beasts, whatever they are, are hunters like us. They like easy prey. They cull slow-witted bulls or weak calves. They don't stalk the strong."

Amero stared. He'd never heard Oto speak so many words at one time. As he looked from his father to his defiant sister, it suddenly occurred to him that Nianki was as tall as their father. Next to her, Oto seemed a gnarled old tree bending to the wind of a fresh storm. Amero wondered if his father's thoughts were the same as his: This time, if he dared strike Nianki, she might strike back, and her blows could cause more hurt to him than his to her.

Menni burped loudly and began to cry. This broke the awkward silence. Oto handed his spear to Nianki and took his son from Kinar's arms. He held Menni at arm's length in scarred, callused hands.

"Last child," he said in an odd, hollow voice. "I give you my protection."

He balanced the boy on his hip and used his free hand to lift a dark, shriveled object that hung around his neck on a thong. It was the dried paw of a panther, black as a moonless sky. Many seasons ago the panther had crept into their camp

and killed Oto's firstborn son, Ibani, while the boy slept. Oto had slain the panther after an epic chase of forty days. Since that day, the spirit of the panther had been bound to Oto and done his bidding, warding off evil.

Oto tied a knot in the thong to shorten it and hung the talisman around Menni's neck. Kinar's face glowed with happiness. She took Menni back and held him close, no longer fretted by his size or weight.

Nianki paced past them, resuming the trek to the next night's camp. Amero started after her but stopped when Oto gruffly ordered them to halt.

"Spear."

Nianki hefted the weapon and tossed it sideways to her father. He caught it easily with one hand.

"I'll make the path," Nianki announced. "Come."

Amero watched in silence as she strode away. Oto waited until Nianki was ten paces ahead, as custom prescribed, then resumed the march. Kinar and the baby followed him, leaving Amero to bring up the rear.

Amero looked back at the mysterious footprints. Little was left of them. The clay had cracked under Oto's heel. A fresh breeze stirred the taller grasses, carrying with it the sighs of spirits. Amero blinked. Was the panther ghost passing nearby, seeking its new charge?

He turned and hurried after his family, the end of his long stick trailing in the dust behind him.

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Precious little game could be found on the high savanna that day. Even rabbits were scarce, as though another hunting party had passed down the trail ahead of them. Kinar found some wild onions and a handful of sticky tuber-roots. The onions were bitter and the tubers too sweet, so their midday meal was both skimpy and unpleasant. Oto finished quickly and resumed the lead position. Nianki fell back again.

When they drew near Mossback Creek, Oto, in the lead, suddenly made the quick, downward, chopping gesture that meant "take cover." All of them dropped to the ground silently. Not even the baby made so much as a whimper.

Nianki left her mother and brothers in the cover afforded by the scrubby bushes and crawled up the slight rise to where Oto lay motionless. As she crested the hill on her belly she could finally see what had caused the alert. The savanna was no longer empty. Two people crouched on the bank of Mossback Creek.

They appeared to be excited about something, pointing to the creek. The errant breeze brought only snatches of their voices to Nianki's ears, but she could understand none of their words.

"What is it?"

Nianki flinched as Amero's whisper sounded from below her left shoulder. Instantly she froze as the two strangers rose to their feet and looked in their direction.

Amero gasped at the strangers' appearance, and Nianki's left hand moved over to pinch his arm, signaling silence. The strangers appeared not to see them and went back to their study of the creek. After much talking and gesturing, the pair shook their heads, crossed the creek, and headed away from the hidden plainmen.

Oto waited until the two were far distant, then got to his feet. Nianki and Amero followed suit.

"Who were they?" Amero asked excitedly as they rejoined Kinar and the baby. "Did you see their faces? They were black! Dark as the night sky!" He touched his own skin, burned brown by the fierce sun, and repeated, "Dark as the night sky!"

"Why did you leave your mother and the baby?" Oto demanded.

Amero's enthusiasm faded in the face of his father's obvious anger. He hung his head, saying nothing, knowing there was no reason he could give that would satisfy Oto.

Nianki shook her head at her brother's foolishness. He had been wrong to leave Kinar. His whispered question had nearly betrayed their presence to the strangers. Amero was always asking questions, wanting to know things. He could not be content to do a thing because he was told it was right, or because it had been done a certain way for as long as anyone remembered. He always wanted to know why. It was not a trait that endeared him to their father.

Oto was still glaring at his eldest son. Nianki spoke, distracting her father. "Have you seen men like that before?"

With a final shake of his head, Oto turned toward the creek.

"No," was his curt response.

"Then why did we hide?" Nianki demanded of his back. "They might've known where we could find game. We could've asked about those strange prints we saw earlier."

Oto said nothing, but just kept on walking. Nianki shook her head in disgust.

"Oto is wise."

Nianki turned to look at her mother.

Kinar added, "He's kept us alive by being cautious."

"There were only two of them."

Kinar clucked her tongue in that annoying way of hers, hefted Menni higher on her hip, and followed after her mate.

Amero had gone to the top of the slight rise and was staring in the direction the two strangers had taken. As she drew near, Nianki cuffed him on the head.

"Stupid," she said, though without malice.

He ignored the blow and continued to gaze into the distance. "Who knew there were people like that?" he said. "Their skin was black as the night sky. It was so strange."

Amero's hair, like Nianki's, was light brown, straight as a spear, and reached to the middle of his back. They wore their hair tied back with a leather thong. The strangers' hair had been close to their heads, and so tightly curled it didn't move when the wind blew.

"I wonder—"

"Enough," Nianki ordered. When Amero began a sentence with those two words, there was no telling where it could lead, nor how long it would take the boy to get there. She gave him a rough shove. "Stop mooning and start walking. I'm thirsty."

Unfortunately, when they joined their parents and Menni, they found the creek had been fouled. Both banks were churned up with many footprints—the same narrow prints they'd encountered that morning.

The torn carcass of a red deer lay in the water, its fleshless face pointed skyward. Clouds of flies rose from the

bloated hide when Oto's shadow fell across it. By the smell, it had been dead for some days. Amero recoiled from the rank odor and plucked a green grass stem to hold over his nose. At her request, he pulled one for his mother too.

"I guess this is what the strangers were so excited about. No wonder they didn't drink," Nianki said. "Never saw animals dirty a stream like this. Why would they do it?"

Oto frowned. "Marking territory. This means, 'all others, keep out.'"

"Fair warning. We should listen."

In answer, Oto crossed the water twenty paces upstream from the deer carcass. Reluctantly, the rest of the family followed. The normally cold creek water was tepid from the long day's heat, but it still tasted good.

The east bank proved as empty of game as the west bank. Even birds had abandoned the plain. The poor hunting, prolonged silence, and empty vistas wore on their nerves. Without realizing it, they closed ranks, the gaps between them shrinking.

The sun was halfway to its rest when the smoky blue peaks of the mountains first appeared on the horizon. They resembled thunderclouds piled up in the eastern sky and were much farther away than they looked.

Amero took his turn making the path. Being slower than Nianki and having less stamina than his father, Amero's pace was almost leisurely. He picked his way through the grass, swinging his stick in a wide arc to expose gopher holes and dislodge vipers. His stomach grumbled loudly. To assuage his empty belly, Amero chewed a grass stem. It didn't help much.

Ye-ye-ye.

He stopped dead, his stick falling to the ground. It had been quiet so long that the distant call sounded like thunder. Amero knew all the songs, screams, and chatter of the plain. He'd never heard this noise before.

A hand fell on his shoulder. He jumped, alarmed. Oto could move like mist when he chose.

"Hear?" he whispered close to Amero's ear. The boy nodded. "Stay," hissed Oto and made a gesture behind his back. Nianki glided off to the right, into the sun-gilt grass.

Kinar and the baby stood close behind Amero. Menni

knew enough to be quiet. He buried his face in his mother's neck and clutched the panther talisman with dirty fingers.

Ye-ye-ye.

There was a scattering of dwarf elms about a hundred paces in front of Amero. The strange yelping came from there.

Oto angled off to the left, crouching, with his spear held high. He hadn't gone a dozen steps before the sour smell of meat-eating predators reach his nostrils. Near, maybe fifty paces, and moving—moving to his right. The old hunter glanced in Nianki's direction. She was just visible, walking upright through the dry weeds.

Nianki smelled nothing. The wind was on her right cheek, blowing toward Amero and Oto. She slipped the thong off her wrist so she could hurl her ax if necessary.

Something flickered through the grass ahead, a gray shape against the faded green of the dry foliage. She raised the ax and waited.

Ye-ye-ye.

Close—very close! Impatient, she charged forward, axe held high. She reached an area of trampled grass from which a trail led off to the left. Tufts of long gray hair stuck to the sharp grass. Nianki plucked a few and sniffed. Not wolf, not cat. What then?

Oto heard movement as well. He planted his left foot and hurled his spear at a target he sensed rather than saw. The keen flint head hit and buried itself solidly in something. He could see the spear shaft bob in tiny circles—his prey was still breathing.

He rushed forward, drawing his obsidian knife. As he parted the greenery, he saw a shaggy brown coat and a pair of stout yellow tusks. Wild boar? He'd speared a pig?

When he killed the great panther, Oto's limbs had felt labored and slow, as if he were swimming in mud. Kills were like that sometimes. The spirit of a beast sometimes put a spell on the hunter to ward off a death-thrust, to spoil his aim. When Oto recognized the creature he'd killed was only a boar, the same sort of spell of slowness descended on him. Then he saw tooth marks on the snout and throat of the pig.

It had been dragged in front of him as a decoy. He'd wasted his cast on bait.

Fiery pain ripped into his leg. Oto's lethargy vanished at the sight of his own blood coursing down his calf. Over his shoulder he could just make out a large gray beast, vaguely wolf-like in form, clamping onto his right leg. Oto roared in outrage and reached for his spear. Before his hand could close on the smooth wooden shaft another gray mass hurtled through the air and seized his wrist. Oto was jerked off his feet, falling facedown in the grass. Sharp fangs closed on his other arm, and he was dragged away, roots and rocks tearing at his face.

Oto's cry spurred Nianki to a run. She tore through the grass toward her father. The hot odor of fresh blood filled the air. So too did the call *ye-ye-ye*, vented from a dozen or more beastly throats. Four-footed forms passed on either side of her. Nianki turned and brought her axe down on the hindquarters of a galloping animal. It shrieked and fell in the grass. She overran it and had to leap to avoid its snapping jaws.

"Yeee! Yeee!" it howled. Opening its long muzzle the wounded beast showed heavy, pointed teeth and a black tongue.

Bite this! she thought, whirling to hurl her ax at the creature's head. There was a crunch of splintering bone, and the thing ceased howling.

There was no time to examine her kill. Nianki ran toward her father's last shout. She found a dead boar with Oto's spear in it. The grass was trampled flat all around and blood stained the leaves. There were signs something heavy had been dragged away.

A new scream—Kinar! The pack had doubled back!

Nianki jerked the spear from the pig's carcass and ran toward her mother. She burst onto a horrible scene—Kinar and Amero back to back, Menni clutched tightly in his mother's arms. Amero's flimsy stick whipped in a desperate arc, holding off five shaggy gray monsters. They resembled wolves, having four legs, long canine snouts, pricked ears, and bushy tails, but there was something alien about their bodies. Their shoulders were massive and muscular, the

forelegs too long, and all four paws gripped the earth like hands.

“Nianki! Help!” Amero cried. One of the animals had gotten hold of his stick. Two more took it in their teeth, and it was torn from his grasp.

Nianki speared the nearest beast through the throat. It screamed like a man, rolling and flailing in the dust. Another of the strange animals tried to seize the spear shaft in its jaws, but a blow from Nianki’s ax discouraged him.

“We’ve got to get away!” she gasped.

“Where?” her mother shrieked.

The only possible shelter in sight was the elm grove. “The trees! And pray to all the spirits these beasts can’t climb!”

Amero pushed his mother ahead, guarding her back. Nianki cut a path through the circling pack, jabbing at them with the bloody spear head. For several terrifying moments the creatures refused to yield. Then, without warning, they vanished into the untrampled grass. Panting heavily, Nianki urged her family on.

“Hurry! They’re not leaving—just regrouping!”

“Give me the baby,” Amero said to Kinar, pulling Menni away. The little boy cried furiously. “I can run faster with him than you can.”

Tears streaming down her face, Kinar agreed. The elm grove was sixty paces away. She forgot her sore feet and empty belly and ran for all she was worth. Despite his claim, she soon outstripped Amero. He called to Kinar, warning her not to get too far ahead. She paused, turned back to answer him, and was hit at the knees and neck by a pair of the gray predators. In an instant she was gone, dragged into the weeds.

“Mama! Mama!” Amero began the cry and Menni took it up. Raggedly, the older boy jogged to the spot where his mother had been. Another beast appeared in front of him. Amero recoiled, turning away to shield Menni. Instead of sharp fangs, he felt the shaft of his father’s spear scrape along his ribs as Nianki impaled the leaping beast.

“Mama!” he gasped, eyes wide with horror.

“I know,” said Nianki grimly. “Get Menni to the trees. Hurry!”

The first elm he reached was nothing more than a sapling, incapable of holding the toddler's weight, much less his own. A larger specimen stood a few yards away. The beasts were yelping behind him, and fear of them gave Amero strength. With Menni in his arms, he leaped up the trunk to the lowest branch. It cracked under the strain. He pushed Menni against the trunk and said, "Hold on there! Hold on hard!"

"Mama! Mama!" the child wailed, but he held on.

The broken branch giving way beneath him, Amero slid to the ground. Rough bark tore at his hands and knees. Menni clung to the trunk above him. Unless the pack could climb or leap, he was safe for now.

Amero spun around and saw Nianki fighting three of the creatures. They had surrounded her and now took turns darting in, trying to get their teeth in her. She crushed one's skull with her axe, but she lost her grip on the weapon in the process. A fourth beast appeared and leaped at her exposed back. Down she went, and Oto's spear flew away.

"Nianki!"

Amero took one step in her direction, but was promptly cut off by two of the animals. Their black lips curled, blood-flecked saliva drooled from their gaping mouths. Defenseless, Amero backed away. The closest empty tree was a good twenty paces behind him. If he turned his back, the beasts would be on him before he could make it that far.

"Ha!" he shouted, stamping his foot. "Go! Go!"

The nearer animal halted its advance and made its *ye-ye* call. Amero had the insane idea the creature was laughing at him! He picked up a stone and hefted it significantly. The pair of predators spread apart. They were making it harder for him to hit them, Amero realized in astonishment. What sort of beasts were these, who showed such careful cunning?

"Ha!" he shouted again, and feigned throwing the stone. The nearer beast sprang aside. Once he was farther away, Amero threw the rock with all his might at the other. It struck the monster on the nose, and Amero took off running.

He tried not to hear the swish of long gray limbs in the grass behind him. He ran faster than he'd ever run in his life, his toes barely touching the ground. His goal was a stout gnarled tree, with a trunk as thick as his waist. A low branch beckoned

as a handhold. Only five steps to go. Hot breath on his heels, the fetid smell of the creatures' breath. Four steps. Something touched his buckskin-clad leg, and he put on a burst of speed he didn't know he possessed. Three paces to go. Claws raked down his right leg, ripping his chaps, and grasped at his bare heel. Amero kicked free and coiled his legs to leap. One step. He launched himself at the branch and snagged it with both hands. Paws with sharp, grasping digits grabbed at his dangling legs. Amero swung his feet up and wrapped his legs around the tree. With a supreme heave, he rolled over on a stout branch less than two paces off the ground.

Panting, two of the pack circled beneath him, waiting to see if he would lose his grip and fall. When he didn't, they trotted away, lolling tongues pink with clay dust. Amero heard Menni whimpering from his perch but the intervening trees blocked his view of the child. Once Amero managed to catch his breath, he climbed higher in the elm and searched for his mother, Oto, or Nianki. The air was still, and he could see nothing but grass.

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After being knocked to the ground, Nianki had managed to gather her legs under her. Pain raced through her left forearm as the jaws of one of the creatures snapped shut there. Agony gave way to anger in an instant. Instead of trying to pry the animal's mouth open, she resolved to cause it as much damage as possible. In short order she had gouged its eyes and kicked it repeatedly in the ribs. It slackened its bite, and only then did Nianki go for its jaws. She pried its long yellow fangs apart until its jaw snapped. Yelling at the top of her lungs, she grasped the monster by its hind feet and swung it in a wide circle, releasing the limp body, which tumbled into the tall grass.

Blood seeped steadily from deep wounds in her arm. Nianki held the injured limb tight to her chest and ran into the bush. She knew she had no hope of outrunning the pack, but she had killed several, and others had gone off in pursuit of Amero and the baby. If there were just one or two left, she might be able to turn the tables on them.

Her vision blurred. The hammering pain in her arm was spreading. Staggering with effort, Nianki skidded down a slight draw. In the rainy season there was a swift stream at the bottom of this hill. At this time of year it would be a dry wash, but where water passed, there would be rocks, and rocks were the tools Nianki needed.

She slammed into the thin trunk of a weeping willow and clung to it, gasping. She could hear animals crashing through the underbrush on both sides of the ravine. Were there two of them? More?

She slid off the tree trunk and pressed onward. A soft sand bank gave way to a bed of pebbles. Several boulders, washed smooth by the brook, rose from the dry stream bed. Nianki found two fist-sized stones, and with one in each hand, climbed atop the biggest boulder. She had hardly reached its summit before the beasts came yelping through the bush, their strange cry echoing in the still, hot air. There were three.

“Come!” Nianki yelled, forcing deep drafts of air into her aching chest. “I have stones enough for all of you!”

The monster on her left leaped. She brought both hands together and cracked the creature’s skull between the rocks. Its blood and saliva sprayed her face. As it fell heavily at her feet, its claws and teeth tore the tough buckskin of her shirt. The beast rolled off the boulder and fell lifeless to the stream bed.

A second animal approached more stealthily and succeeded in biting her on the back of her right thigh. Nianki screamed in pain and pounded her attacker’s jaws. Each strike cost it teeth, and the monster let go before she crushed its skull as she had the others. Nianki lost her footing—the boulder was slick with blood—and fell on her back. For a moment, all she saw was bright blue sky. The click of claws on rock followed, and the third animal seized her by the throat.

The beaded collar of her shirt saved her from death. The beast’s fangs could not penetrate completely the closely studied bear-tooth beadwork. Nianki pulled a knee up and tried to lever the creature off, but it gripped her shoulders tightly with its fingerlike claws.

She could feel her pulse thundering in her head and knew she was bleeding from the throat. Her left hand opened, releasing a rock. She had no strength left to hold it. With all the life that remained in her body, Nianki brought the stone in her right hand down on her attacker's forehead. The savage creature's response was to tighten the grip on her neck. Fangs penetrated her flesh more deeply. She hit the beast again, and was about to try one last time when she felt the animal stiffen and shudder.

Nianki pried the jaws apart and let the furry gray body fall to the side. She tried to rise, but her strength was spent. The world went dark before her eyes, and she collapsed across the smooth granite in a spreading pool of her own blood.