



fire maiden

By
Tina Gerow

Triskelion Publishing
www.triskelionpublishing.com

Triskelion Publishing
15327 W. Becker Lane
Surprise, AZ 85379

Copyright© 2005 Tina Gerow

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including photocopying, recording or by any information retrieval and storage system without permission of the publisher except, where permitted by law.

ISBN 1-933874-71-6

Publisher's Note. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, and places and incidents are a product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to a person or persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is purely coincidental.

Dedications

To Kristi Studts, my publisher and editor, who not only took a chance on a brand new author, but then saw the same promise in a strange story about a bunch of gargoyles and various supernatural beasts that I did. You're the best!

Special thanks to my husband and son for putting up with my ability to tune out the world when I write. And to the Butterscotch Martini Critique Group - thanks for all the support and great brainstorming!

Stone Maiden Prophecy

Raise the son of your blood, and he will champion for good. Raise the daughter of your destiny, and she will swallow the world in darkness. If you cease to exist before your fated time, the son of your blood will avenge you with great rivers of dark blood and the heavens will shine on him.

An ancient force for evil who would betray his kind to swing the pendulum towards good...

Should the secret seed be revealed before the appointed time, the destruction will be two fold.

Convert the secret seed of darkness before the child of blood is birthed and evil shall reign.

Dark Redeemer, the one you seek equals your power, and it will eventually come down to a choice between yourself and the one you hold most dear.

Chapter One
Present Day
McKade, Texas USA

Dagan ran through the darkness, weaving in and out of trees and praying he wouldn't trip on some copse of underbrush before he could either find the ranch or outrun the mysterious creatures that pursued him. Branches ripped at his face like an angry woman's nails and the stench of his own blood hung heavy in the night air. Wavy black hair latticed over his face, obscuring his vision and he brushed it away impatiently, not sure if it was wet with blood or sweat. He angled his broad shoulders to fit through a gap between several large trees and cursed his six-foot plus frame when he banged his head against a low-hanging branch.

His heartbeat pounded in time with his footfalls—a quick staccato beat so fast he thought his heart might burst. The darkness closed around him like a shroud, pressing against his chest until he gasped for each sparse breath. He'd long ago lost his weapons when the creatures had ambushed him. He ground his teeth at the thought he'd allowed anything to sneak up on him, but now was not the time for regrets.

His stamina waned from fighting off repeated attacks. His neck and left shoulder ached where he'd already been bitten and scratched, but thoughts of seeing *her* again drove him on.

A sound, which he could only describe as a cackle, echoed around him. He knew they were closing in. A quick look behind him showed only darkened trees. *I vow before God, they'll never take me!* The sudden glare of moonlight flooded over him, and he realized he'd stumbled out into a small clearing in the trees.

Pain slashed through his side like burning acid, and he stumbled under the onslaught. A few moments later, he found himself on his knees, holding his left arm clutched against his stomach, since it no longer seemed to work on its own. He knew once he started to lose consciousness, even for a few moments at a time, the end was very near.

"Don't kill him," one of the dark shapes whispered. "Mother needs him alive."

White-hot pain flared down the length of his back, and he pitched forward, face first, hitting his right eye against a rock. Pain blossomed along his cheekbone and small dots danced in front of his eyes. He ignored it and groped in the dirt for the rock, which he gripped like a lifeline, refusing to give up before he'd found *her*.

He chanted her name over and over in his mind like a mantra. Closing his eyes, her lovely face set in her ever-present smirk flashed inside his mind's eye, giving him strength. *I won't fail you this time. I promise.*

"He cannot sustain much more blood-loss. Mother will be very angry if he dies."

"I'm not killing him. I just want a taste. Just a small taste."

"You never stop at just a taste!"

The shapes argued among themselves, pushing and shoving each other. He huddled among the damp leaves and underbrush, realizing somewhere inside his hazy mind that there were three distinct voices. Beyond that, he could tell little—not even if they were female or male. Yet he knew without a doubt, they were supernatural. The poison they'd injected with their bites flowed through his veins in a burning rush. His gifts from God made him hard to kill, especially by supernatural means, but that didn't mean they didn't take their toll on his essentially human body.

"All right. Not a taste. Then how about we have sex with him? He can provide us each some sustenance before he passes out."

Not even that gave him insight into the gender of his attackers. Many monsters were oblivious to the sex of their victim and would freely partake of whatever happened to be available.

Dagan gritted his teeth against the pain. He had to get out of here. He pried open one eye, since the other was swollen shut from the impact against the rock. He took a deep breath and then all at once, pushed to his feet and struck out with his makeshift weapon, smiling into the night as he heard a large crunch and then a keening scream. Strong bony hands edged in sharp talons grabbed for him, but he fought like a dying animal away from their grasp until he was running again.

Kefira Knight twisted her wavy red hair around her fingers as she looked out the top window of Logan McAllister's ranch house. A familiar thrill raced through her as the full moon bathed the back yard in silver light. It had been a long time since she'd been able to run through her sword katas by moonlight. Performing the repetitive sword and body movement exercises always calmed her, reminding her of happier days. Besides, keeping herself in top fighting form took more work these days since she and her sisters no longer fought evil 24/7. She stood only five foot five, so she was careful to keep active, every extra pound really showed—especially since she was curvy to begin with.

A cloud floated across the full moon, reminding her as it always did, of Dagan, and of the night he first held her underneath a very similar moon. She sighed as her body reacted to the very intense memory of Dagan's strong arms bracketed around her while his long blunt fingers threaded through her hair and his talented mouth devoured hers. Then her thoughts took a deadly turn as she thought of the next morning when he'd dumped her like a piece of rotten fruit. Fast on its heels came memories of the fateful day she murdered their child.

She ground her teeth together to keep from throwing something and slammed her fist against the window frame. "I hope you're in fryin' in hell, Dagan. And if someone dropped you on my doorstep bleeding, I'd sell tickets to watch the vultures come finish you off!"

She gave her brain a conscious shove to move Dagan out of her mind. Again. Then she sat down on the corner of the bed to lace up her tennis shoes. Finished, she stood to capture her unruly cascade of shocking red hair back into a ponytail, then leaned over and pulled the ancient broadsword, she'd dubbed Lileth, from under her bed.

"Going out to practice?"

"Mmm-hmm." She looked up at Ariel, who stood just inside the doorway, absently caressing circles over her swollen belly. Even pregnant, her sister looked radiant, beautiful and in control. Ariel always remained in control, while Kefira needed claws to keep a tenuous grip on her own emotions. She sighed, shifting her thoughts back to her sister. "I still can't get used to the idea I'm going to be an aunt."

Ariel laughed and eased herself down onto the corner of the bed, her hand still resting protectively over her unborn son. "*You* can't get used to it? I'm the one who's going to be a mother. How scary is that?" The expression on her face didn't show fear—only contentment.

Kefira tamped down the quick spurt of envy, wishing she could let her own emotions run free. It was something she'd always craved and never once experienced. If she didn't

keep a tight lock on things... It didn't matter, she was destined to be the repressed, tight-ass in the family.

"Logan may even survive if he stops hiding your Ding Dongs."

"Hey—you don't touch a pregnant woman's chocolate and live to tell about it."

Kefira balanced the broadsword in her hand, enjoying the weight. A familiar rush of adrenaline flowed through her. "You know it's for your own good. I can't even believe you eat those things." She stared at the tip of the blade, watching it catch the light. "Besides, I've never seen any man so enamored of his wife and child. He's okay...for a human."

"I guess we'll keep him, then." Ariel's Kerry blue eyes glinted mischievously. "So...bad nightmares last night?"

Kefira shook her head and turned her back to her sister, pretending to search for something on top of her chest of drawers. The centuries-old dream replayed inside her head like a movie stuck on repeat.

"I've broken my vows to God. I must make atonement."

Hurt arrowed through her. Dagan's first words after leaving her bed were regrets...not exactly what she'd hoped for. "Weren't you listening to Gabriel last night? We've all been released from our vows, you included. I don't recall him saying everyone except the Paladin!"

"Is that why you slept with me? Suddenly your vows were removed so you had time for a celebratory fuck?"

Crimson flooded her face and her temper sparked with anger and hurt. "How dare you ever say that to me? I respected your vows all these years. I wasn't the one stupid enough to promise celibacy! Nine hundred years is too long to exercise iron willpower."

His face turned to granite, his eyes hard and glittering. "All this time you've resented my willpower, calling it a weakness because you don't have it in you to understand. It's beyond your comprehension. And you weren't respecting my vows very much last night, were you?" He stepped forward to tower over her. "I had one moment, where my desire overrode my responsibilities and you took advantage of it and made me ruin centuries of restraint. I wouldn't blame God if She struck me down where I stand for my betrayal."

She refused to step back, but glared up at him. "You're no better than Adam placing all the blame on Eve, when you were a fully participating party last night – several times over. You can take your blame and go to Hell! It's no more than you deserve, you pompous ass!"

"Kefira? The dreams?"

Ariel's voice broke Kefira away from her memories. Even while awake, she lived the dream anew each year like clockwork. She closed her eyes, fighting for calm before answering. "What dreams?" She knew Ariel would see through the lie, but she hoped her sister would get the hint and drop the subject.

"No such luck, Fi." Ariel's voice sounded inside her head, calm and soothing, only serving to irritate Kefira further. "Everyone but Logan heard your nightmares last night. I'm here if you want to talk."

Kefira's temper sparked, blood pounded inside her head and she fisted her hand around the hilt of her sword. Her tenuous grip on her anger strained and she whirled to face Ariel. "If I wanted to talk about it, I'd freakin' talk about it." As soon as the words escaped, she wished she could call them back. Ariel didn't deserve her ire. Only *he* did. And she would never see him again, so she'd just have to bury her pain so deep it would never resurface to bother her.

"I'm sorry, okay?" Taking a deep breath, she met her sister's steady gaze, the same gaze that seemed to look deep inside her soul. She turned away to avoid that possibility. "A few hours of weapons practice will help me get out some aggressions and I'll be good as new." She picked up her brush off her chest of drawers to run her thumb over the bristles before turning back to face her sister.

The furrow between Ariel's brows showed she didn't buy Kefira's excuse. "Fi." She stood and placed a comforting arm on Kefira's shoulder. "I know today is the anniversary of...the day we were released from service. I know how hard it must be..."

Kefira waved her hands in front of her face as if she could ward off the words and the images they brought. "Please don't get all gushy on me. So, I've had some disturbing dreams. People do that sometimes. Right?" She twisted her full lips into a smirk. "Maybe I should bribe Alonna to send me some better ones." Her attempt at levity fell flat, Ariel's concerned look still burned into her.

"Isn't there anything we can do to help you?" Ariel absently pressed her hand to the small of her back and winced.

Kefira chided herself for getting so caught up in her own problems, she hadn't noticed Ariel's discomfort earlier. "Sit down before Logan comes in here threatening to lock you in your room again. You're still baking my nephew in there." She placed a comforting hand on Ariel's stomach before helping her sit. "I know all of you want to help. But the only thing that will get rid these yearly nightmares is if Dagan's genitals become shish-kebobs on my broadsword."

"Maybe this dream is more figurative than literal. Did you ever think of that?"

"Since when are you the fortune teller?"

Ariel snorted and took a breath to add something, but Kefira shook her head. "I just need to work through this on my own. Okay?"

Ariel opened her mouth to object, but finally she sighed and nodded.

Kefira jogged down the steps, enjoying the texture of the smooth dark cherry railing under her fingertips. Since they were still protecting Logan and now Logan and Ariel's child, they'd decided to lease out their own house and move into Logan's ranch. Besides, it would take an act of God and several moving companies to transfer Logan's office complete with songwriting awards, several custom-made guitars and an entire forest's worth of sheet music to somewhere new. Especially since Logan wouldn't let anyone touch his precious belongings.

This ranch house had been his mother's before she'd been killed by rogue vampires. After he'd made it big as a country music songwriter, he'd bought the place back, almost as if he kept alive a part of his mother by caring for the place.

Kefira smiled. Logan had turned out to be a pretty decent brother-in-law. And nice to look at too. Lost in thought, she almost plowed him over when he appeared at the bottom of the stairs in front of her.

"Where's the vamp infestation? I assume you'd only run that fast if you thought you'd get to chop things up." Logan's mischievous grin and the glint in his blue-gray eyes made her laugh in spite of her mood.

"No vamps. Unless you've heard of some around here." She laughed at the hopeful note in her own voice.

Logan glanced toward her sword and raised his sandy-blond eyebrows in question.

"Okay, so I'm going to pretend to chop stuff up. Doing katas should relieve some tension. If you find any worthy targets, send them my way."

"You got it. You seen the Ding Dong queen?" He held up a white box decorated with pictures of the chocolate treats.

"I'll only rat her out if I get her contraband." When Logan handed her the box, she thrust her chin toward the upper floor. "Hiding out in my room last time I saw her." She opened the box of cupcakes and handed one to Logan. "Bargaining chip. You'd better take at least one with you as bait."

"Ariel, Logan is on his way up and I rescued your box of Ding Dongs. I'll put them in the bottom cabinet of the grandfather clock on my way out."

"Thanks, Fi. I owe you!"

Unaware of the exchange, Logan reached out and yanked gently on a strand of her hair. "Thanks, Red. You're all right."

Enjoying their usual teasing, she said, "I'm just getting in good with you so you'll introduce me to Keith Urban." Ever since the Country Music Awards when she'd heard Keith sing, she'd been dying to get an up close and personal meeting. But then again, so was every woman who still drew breath.

"If you keep eating all of Ariel's confiscated Ding Dong's, I won't be able to wedge you on the plane to go meet him." Logan lunged out of the path of her playful punch, laughing before bounding up the stairs in search of his wife.

She chuckled to herself as she deposited the box of Ding Dongs in the bottom cabinet of the grandfather clock as promised. "If Ariel doesn't retrieve them by the time I get back, I'm stealing a few," she told the empty room. "If katas don't help, who knows, maybe chocolate will."

She turned the knob on the back door and pulled it open. Before she could take even one step outside, a man covered in blood stumbled up the steps and lurched into her arms, a dead weight.

"I need all of you downstairs! We're under attack!" She hauled the unconscious man inside and kicked the door closed before gently laying him on the ground. He groaned and rolled onto his back.

"Oh, son of a bitch! Dagan..."

Dagan awoke to painful needles of sunlight piercing through his closed eyelids. He groaned and lifted his arm to shield his face, then hissed as pain radiated the length of his arm and all down his back.

"Lie still, Dagan, before you hurt yourself even worse, if that's possible."

Mercifully, a warm damp washcloth settled over his eyes as his weary brain registered Dara's voice, the healer of Kefira's clan.

He tried to speak, twice, but his voice didn't want to cooperate. Stubbornly, he tried again. "Kefira?" His voice came out nothing but a croak.

"She's here and she's fine." Dara's normally comforting voice held thin threads of anger. "Although I'd make sure you're completely healed before seeing her. Or any of the others for that matter. She seems to want to turn pieces of you into a shish-kebob."

Her firm hand slipped under the back of his neck raising his head as a cup pressed to his lips. He sipped, and room temperature water coated his leathery tongue and parched throat. She allowed him several more sips before gently settling his head back against the pillow. Her footsteps sounded across the room and then the whoosh of closing drapes.

"I'm going to remove the washcloth so I can check your pupils."

He braced himself for the blinding pain, but when she removed the cloth and he gingerly opened his good eye, the semi-dark room caused no discomfort. Then Dara filled his vision. She looked just as he remembered her, a waterfall of straight blonde hair wisping around a porcelain face. But her normally kind green eyes held only icy coolness.

"As usual, you're recovering quickly. Too bad, I thought this time might be the end of you."

"Are you the only one who could be trusted not to kill me?" His voice sounded rusty inside his own ears.

She pursed her lips and considered him. "Pretty much. Well, maybe. At least not until you're healed." She took out a tube of ointment and spread it over his arm, to replace what he'd rubbed off when he moved. "What did this to you?"

"Not sure," he rasped until she offered him another drink of water. "I never saw them clearly. Attacked me in the dark. Three of them...male, female...don't know."

A crease formed between her brows as she assimilated the information. "No other impressions?"

"Sometimes succubus, sometimes vampire, could be ghoul, were-animal or even wraith. I couldn't tell. Maybe I'm losing my touch." He laughed, then the scratch in his throat turned to shards of broken glass as he coughed.

She worried her lower lip with her teeth before answering. "Somehow I doubt that. Maybe it's some creature that masks what it truly is. I'll discuss it with the others and then I'll be back up to feed you some soup."

He swallowed hard twice preparing to speak. "Could I see Kefira?"

Her green eyes iced over again and narrowed to angry slits. "Why?" If that one word had been a bullet, it would've pierced him through the heart.

"Don't deserve it, but to beg forgiveness."

She stood and walked across the room, resting her hand on the doorknob before turning back to face him. "Seriously? It'll take a lot more than begging, Dagan." Then she left, slamming the door behind her, causing him to wince when the noise radiated through his aching skull.

That's exactly what I'm afraid of.

Kefira stood at the fireplace gripping a crystal candlestick from the mantle so hard, she thought it might shatter. Logan stepped up behind her, taking the delicate glass from her hand, replacing it with a gaudy green and orange vase.

"Here, if you have to throw something, use the vase, it was a gift from my aunt, and putting it out of its misery would do me a great service. But the candlesticks were my mother's."

She smiled grimly at him. Her brother-in-law knew her well. "Sorry."

He tugged gently on her hair. "Don't worry, Red. I know it's your way of dealing with anger. But I'm going to start putting post-its on the things you can break—or heading to the dollar store to buy you cheap ammunition."

Kefira winced, the truth hurt. The vice she used to control her emotions seemed to slip a notch. She ran her thumb over the gaudy vase and considered smashing it just for enjoyment. The vase was truly dreadful. Her lips curved as she thought about how much fun it would be to smash it.

Dara walked down the stairs, interrupting their conversation.

"Well?" Kefira asked before she could stop the words.

Dara snorted, shocking her. Dara never snorted. She was too refined for that. "He'll live."

"That's a shame."

Dara tucked a wisp of long blonde hair behind her ear and stepped off the last stair to face them. "I'm more worried about you, Fi."

She reached out to touch her, but when Fi winced away, she dropped her hand. "No mushy stuff. You know that bugs the crap out of me."

Logan placed a comforting hand on Kefira's shoulder, stubbornly refusing to move it even when she growled at him. Any attempts to shrug off his arm were futile when Logan did the brawny male thing, so she ignored it—especially the strength that emanated from the warmth of the contact.

Logan's words interrupted her turbulent thoughts. "Did he tell you what happened?"

Dara's brow creased, a clear sign she was still working through the information herself. "Three beings attacked him in the dark—he's pretty slashed up. He's got some type of poison in his system, but I'm not sure what kind. If he didn't have supernatural healing abilities, he'd be dead. He's lost a lot of blood."

True to Dara's order of priorities, she'd switched back to the health of her patient rather than what attacked him. Kefira's fingers tightened around the vase, but she resisted the urge to crush it. A sudden vision of her crushing his betraying skull between her palms like a tomato made her smile. "What about the things that attacked him?" Her voice came out more terse than she wanted and she instantly regretted taking it out on her sister. But that never seemed to stop her angry comments. *My ability to think before I speak just isn't very well developed.*

She was glad Dara didn't seem to notice the internal struggle. "He couldn't tell if they were male or female. I asked him if he had any other impressions and he said they seemed vampire, succubus, were-animal and possibly ghoul and wraith. But that just doesn't make sense."

Logan shuddered at the mention of the succubus and Kefira couldn't help but laugh. "Don't worry Logan," she said taking the opportunity to escape from the comforting arm. "We'll keep you clear. Besides, since you survived, you now have a resistance to the succubus poison."

"That doesn't mean I want to give it another go." He dropped a hand to his upper thigh where the succubus bit him before realizing he was in mixed company. "Sorry."

Dara chuckled. "Totally understandable. Anyway, I think we should have a family meeting to discuss this." She turned to Kefira, her lovely green eyes guarded. "He asked to see you, Fi."

Kefira's skin suddenly broke out in a clammy sweat and a wave of dizziness flowed through her followed by nausea. She shook her head so violently, her vision wobbled, but it didn't dislodge the sudden fist of pain squeezing her heart. Panic threatened to overwhelm her. *Oh, dear God. What if he finds out I killed our child?* She looked around the room seeing accusing stares where she knew there were none. Even though her sisters had been there, none of them blamed her. She just wished she could do the same.

"No freakin' way." Before she even realized her intent, Logan's aunt's hideous vase hurtled across the room to smash against the far wall.

Just as dusk lost its life to full night, Jeslyn Kent, Queen of the Succubus clan, opened the door of her second story balcony and stepped out. The darkness enveloped her, reminding her of the sensuous caress of her favorite lingerie against her skin. She purred deep in the back of her throat. Hunger tore through her and her nipples throbbed at the feast waiting in her bed. She'd picked up a drunken cowboy outside the Bad Ass Café earlier while doing some reconnaissance. Moisture flooded between her thighs in anticipation.

He'd flirted, teased and then practically begged her to take him home. Six feet plus of all golden muscles and dark chocolate eyes had made him an absolute feast.

She couldn't wait to drain her new prize over the next week. Besides, she had some time to kill. It always took them a few days to realize they couldn't refuse the compulsion for sex. By then, she should know more about this hick father of the child of blood. Her spies had given her the first information, but they weren't in a position without giving themselves away to learn much more concerning the prophesy.

She carefully closed the balcony doors so as not to wake her prey from his drunken stupor. She enjoyed letting them think they were in control—until it was too late for them to turn back. Too bad none of them were half the man Nicholas had been.

She sighed, the sound carrying on the light Texas breeze. "Nicholas, how could you fail me?"

She'd asked the same question at least a thousand times since sensing her mate's death six months earlier. But even now, no ready answer came to her. Contrary to popular myth, even as a succubus, she possessed feelings—or at least a close approximation of them. After all, she'd helped Nicholas create offspring, and even held a certain fondness for him. Or perhaps it was just a familiarity.

No matter, the new race they'd created, half succubus, half vampire, would be their joint legacy. Their children would help her turn the prophesy toward the Dark One and Jeslyn would be left to rule the world as she chose. She wished Nicholas would be around to see to the actual implementation of this part of the prophesy.

Jeslyn could admit that she enjoyed the intricately dark sex rituals that allowed their offspring to live, but had hoped to leave the training and strategy to Nicholas. Unfortunately, she'd promised her loyalty to the Dark One—a requirement of him gifting their offspring with animation—and if she weren't careful, she'd soon share her mate's fate. The Dark One didn't take failure lightly.

Leaning her forearms on the railing, she searched the gently swaying Sugar Maples for any signs of movement, her night vision better than any cat's. Soft giggling carried on the breeze, ruining any attempt at a stealthy approach. It allowed her to find them among the darkened greenery. Three figures emerged from the tree line and began to scale the side of the house, their bare hands and feet finding supernatural purchase against the rough stucco wall.

They pulled themselves up onto the balcony to stand before her.

She crossed her arms over her chest, enjoying the way her silk robe rubbed against her sensitive skin. "You're late, my children."

All three were stunning beauties, almost exotic in their differences. She'd wanted them to be more exquisite versions of the gargoyles themselves, since they were the enemy. So, each of her daughters shared similar coloring with their gargoyle counterpart, as well as sharing their battle specialty. Of course, her fourth child remained in stasis, but he would soon claim his place within the prophesy.

Sarah stepped forward, her fiery hair flowing around her in riotous waves. "Dagan has returned, Mother. We saw him at the McAllister ranch today. They've taken him in."

Jeslyn growled low in her throat, before backhanding Sarah, sending her flying back against the stone railing. She'd have to alter her plans. How...inconvenient. "Why didn't you stop him before he got to the ranch?"

Her sisters remained mute, but Sarah stood, refusing to wipe the blood from her cut lip. She crossed her arms over her ample chest before calmly answering. "He...eluded us. I know father claimed him human, but as a Paladin of the Brotherhood, he had to have been granted special powers. He slipped through all our traps and when Rebecca tried to use her thrall, he wasn't affected at all."

"The poison didn't work as it should," Naomi added. "He's got some sort of healing power that dilutes its affects." She took two quick steps back out of Jeslyn's reach, not that it would save her if Jeslyn decided to exact punishment.

"There's nothing wrong with my thrall, Sarah." Rebecca tucked her long chestnut hair behind her ear, a nervous gesture Jeslyn already recognized, even though her girls were a mere nine months old in human terms. "Besides, *you* should have thrallled him—he has a thing for redheads."

Sarah placed a hand gingerly against her temple. "I'm still healing from when he hit me with that rock. You two should've done something besides fighting over him!"

Jeslyn held up her hands to stop the impending argument even as she remembered how Dagan used to love to brush her long ebony hair. He'd been an interesting distraction for her purposes at the time. It had been easy enough to seduce the son to get to the father. How was she to know he'd end up a powerful ally for good all these years later? The crusades should have killed him. After all, he'd had no hardened battle experience as a pampered first son. She shrugged, returning to the matter at hand.

Her daughters continued to bicker, oblivious to her reflections about Dagan. None of them knew her past and she saw no need to inform them. She felt sympathy for human parents, if they had to deal with anything like this on a regular basis. And *their* children had to live with them for eighteen years to mature. Jeslyn shuddered. She'd only had to endure hers inside her house for the first three months, until they'd learned enough of their succubus powers to unleash upon the unsuspecting men of the world.

"Enough." She shot a stern look at each woman in turn. "Bickering will get us nowhere. If the Paladin is not affected, then we'll have to concentrate on the human—Logan McAllister. He's the weak link. The gargoyles, the Paladin and the vampire will all recognize our thrall—even with your enhanced powers. But the human will not." She growled at the necessity of changing her plans, but then she'd always been a master at adapting. This time would be no different. Her fingers itched to close around one of her daughter's throats, but it wouldn't do to damage them before her coming plans. "Do you know where the Paladin is staying?"

"They took him inside the main house and since you warned us not to get near enough for them to sense us, we couldn't follow," Sarah supplied. "But how is getting to McAllister going to get us closer to Kefira and Dagan? If he dies before his time, the child of blood will avenge him."

Jeslyn glowered at her girls, then smiled when they cowered away from her. A healthy fear would keep them listening to reason. "We don't kill him, only use him as leverage. His wife carries the child of blood. They won't risk her in battle until she whelps. And the Dark Redeemer will stay close as the protector of the child. The weapons master is Kefira. She'll be the one to fight first. We need to remove the need for the healer to help and if Logan is hurt, she'll be concentrated there. However, in the end, we'll have to use whatever opportunities the Dark One presents us with."

She tapped a manicured nail against her chin as a smile crept across her face. "I will set the stage tomorrow. Then I think it's time you girls cut your teeth on some of the McAllister cowhands. Don't drain them too far, only enough to keep them coming back every few nights. If we can gain their loyalty, then we'll have access to information, to the bunkhouse, the ranch...and to Dagan." She licked her lips wishing she would be the one to drain all of the cowhands herself. *Don't be selfish, your daughters need their energy.* She sighed. *This must be another of those parental sacrifices the humans were always whining about.*

"But make sure to stay away from Dagan. Now that you bungled your attempt to capture him, he will be on guard. If he can sense you, he's almost as dangerous to us as the gargoyles or the vampire." *But much more tasty if my memory serves true.*

Chapter Two

Dagan hung in a hazy state between dreams and waking. The pain waited for him in consciousness, so he fought to sink back into the dark depths of sleep and unawareness. The insistent scent of cinnamon tickled his senses, pulling him up toward the pain like a large helium balloon until each ache within his battered body protested with insistent stabs of discomfort. He groaned and resisted the impulse to move, knowing it would only make it worse.

"Good morning, Dagan." The Archangel Gabriel's rich voice washed over him, dulling some of the anguish.

Through willpower alone, he placed his right hand over his heart in a fist, yet couldn't force his throbbing head to nod. "Gabriel." His greeting sounded dry and gravelly in his own ears. He cracked open one eye, the only one that would, just enough to make sure the ice picks wouldn't go back to work inside his brain from the light. Even though Gabriel's halo of light shone brighter than the Texas sunshine, it didn't pierce him with pain, so he opened his good eye fully.

Gabriel sat before him, hovering in mid-air as if sitting on a bedside chair. His long blonde hair flowed around his broad shoulders. Standing, the angel stood six foot eight, and was built like a woman's wet dream according to Odeda. Dagan had never been an insecure man, but even he could tell that God made the Archangel the epitome of male beauty.

"Well, you made it this far, but almost killed yourself in the process."

Dagan mentally nodded in agreement, but didn't dare do it physically.

"Before I decide if you're worthy of my healing, tell me why you're here."

Closing his eyes, Dagan steeled himself for the pain of a long conversation. He swallowed hard before trying to speak. "Here for Kefira. Don't deserve the healing. Move me to the barn, I will heal in time."

Gabriel made a noise of pure frustration. "As I deal with the men in my charge, I truly do understand why women-kind are so frustrated."

Dagan opened his good eye to look at Gabriel, irritation burning at the back of his throat. He'd taken Gabriel's advice to heart back in Romania, that he was no longer worthy of Kefira and that he'd have to earn the right to even have her in his life peripherally again. Not with the angel's permission—but Kefira's. Soul searching had helped him work through anger and resentments from his long lifetime as well as the events and emotions that led up to the scene with Kefira. Now he'd finally found her and Gabriel told him he was on the wrong path again?

Gabriel nodded as if he'd read Dagan's mind—and he probably had. "Don't get me wrong. You found her without my help and you've shed much of your pain and anger from the past. I think you finally understand that God never asked you for that vow of celibacy—you took that on your own. She never meant for man to forego the gift of sex, men made that mistake all on their own. However, everyone deserves healing and forgiveness. Don't be the resident *drama royalty*, I have Alonna for that!" The angel reached out both hands and laid one on Dagan's forehead and the other on his bare chest. "Noble warrior, you must be whole for the prophesy ahead."

Warmth and tingling spread outward from the angel's hands and deep into Dagan's body. Each spark of energy followed the paths of his wounds, knitting and healing until his

strength returned like a strong ocean tide. When Gabriel took his hands away, Dagan sat up. The world tipped sideways and nausea knotted his stomach as he found himself collapsed back against his cot.

Gabriel frowned down at him and Dagan blinked rapidly to get the two Gabriel's to merge into one.

"Apparently, She has reasons for not allowing me to fully heal you. We will have to trust in Her path."

Dagan nodded, accepting the decision, since he hadn't thought himself deserving of any of it. But when he swallowed with much less pain than before, he appreciated the small amount of healing he'd received. "Thank you, Gabriel. I'll try not to be a...what was that you called me again?"

Gabriel chuckled. "Drama royalty. I heard it from some other charges of mine and I guess it's crept into my vocabulary."

Dagan shook his head at Gabriel's mixed up colloquialism and slowly pushed himself up to a sitting position. "Any advice on where to go from here? Especially since I seem to be stumbling along the wrong road again."

"Besides a shower? You look awful. I've put some of Logan's clothes in the closet, you two are about the same size." Dagan ignored the comment about how terrible he looked, knowing the angel would continue in a moment. "After that, my advice is to talk to the group, see if they'll forgive you. It may not be easy, however. Their loyalty and their anger runs deep."

Dagan gingerly ran a hand over his battered face assessing the amount of damage still in place. His broken nose was now healed, but still sore and many of the deep gashes bisecting his face, only small scratches. Closing his eyes, he concentrated, opening his Paladin healing powers and waited while the familiar tingling sensation traveled over him. After a new wave of nausea passed, he opened both eyes, thanks to Gabriel's healing, since his hadn't improved things much. But it hadn't hurt to try.

"Oh, and Dagan. I brought you a small piece of the prophesy since I couldn't trust Alonna to be very nice just yet."

"Damn." He dropped his head into his hands. "Women of any size have memories like elephants and a vindictive streak to rival the Nile, don't they?"

Gabriel's halo of light brightened as it always did when he was amused. Dagan just wished he wasn't the source of amusement. He glanced up, his curiosity peaked.

"Anyway, your piece of prophesy is this: 'The Noble Ancient Warrior must cleanse the child of blood once his soul has been healed by Fire. If his soul remains scarred, only the child of destiny will survive the purge.' Memorize it so when you share it, it will be accurate."

Dagan ground his teeth in frustration. "I hate these things. I have no idea what that hell any of that means."

Gabriel only smiled. "All will reveal itself in time, Noble Warrior."

Dagan sighed and tried again. "I'm a little behind on the current events. Where is the child of blood?"

"You'll find out all you need to know from the gargoyles and the others."

"Others?" He stood facing Gabriel. "And wait, you said I can share the prophesy? Isn't that usually a bad idea?"

The halo of light brightened again, annoying Dagan. "Usually, but Alonna insisted this piece must be shared. There will be other parts only for your ears. Besides, I don't think they'll even give you time to get back into their good graces if you don't portray yourself as essential to the prophesy and the survival of the child."

"And the others you mentioned?"

"James, the Dark Redeemer and Logan, the father of the child of blood. Besides Kefira, winning over the trust of the two males in the group may be the hardest."

"Terrific, just what I wanted – a male territorial dispute. Are we marking our territory? Or just taking measurements?"

Kefira had lost the soothing moonlight along with her sense of peace and well-being. All the pain and frustration from five years ago returned in force to haunt her. All the time she'd spent getting past him, and he had to show up and rip open old wounds. She placed a hand over her gently rounded stomach and sighed as a tidal wave of loss and grief opened up around her.

"Stop it!" she chided herself. "This isn't going to do any good." She growled and resisted the urge to break something. It always made her feel better. She figured a less destructive way to diffuse her temper would be some kata practice in the soft Texas dawn.

She grabbed Lileth and headed for the back yard. Once there, she relaxed her mind and closed her eyes. When all thoughts cleared, her body flowed into the kata like water into an empty streambed. The movements were as familiar to her as breathing and they always brought a measure of comfort and peace.

The stabbing reminder of Dagan's betrayal and the eventual consequences proved no match for a routine she'd performed for centuries. Beating Dagan's memory, just like any bad habit, took persistence and ritual. Mind over matter. Slowly, her muscles warmed and loosened, the gentle Texas breeze caressing her skin and bringing the scent of cow and rich dark earth. The familiar sounds of the ranch flowed around her, punctuated by her verbal "hai" as her blows connected with her phantom adversaries – or in this case, multiple versions of imaginary Dagens.

She allowed all the stress and tension to funnel through her weapon and out with each "blow" delivered. Every image of Dagan she vanquished eased the tension in her chest and loosened the knots inside her stomach, until finally, she flowed through the katas, her inner sense of peace filling her and lifting her spirits. Her eyes still firmly closed, she couldn't resist calling out. "I've survived again without letting you beat me, you bastard!"

Her next sword thrust stopped hard as if she'd hit a tree. The force reverberated back up through her arms and she opened her eyes to see what obstacle she'd hit. The sight stole the breath from her lungs and delivered a sucker punch to the gut.

"Dagan..."

Dagan held the flat of the blade between his two muscled palms. The razor edge rested but a hair's breadth from his nose, his muscles straining. Kefira stood in jeans and a simple top looking just as lovely as he remembered, her fiery hair pulled back into a ponytail, her creamy skin pale in the moonlight. Disappointment sliced through him that she'd captured her hair. He loved it when the red mass rioted around her in untamed waves. Her slate blue

eyes were wide, sucking him in as they so often had, punctuated by a sea of golden freckles, which always fascinated him. The sight of her after all this time brought back the guilt for the pain he'd caused her, as well as all the feelings he'd harbored secretly for her for so many centuries—until that night they both gave in.

She blinked a few times, her shock a palpable force between them. The surprise flowed away leaving a quick flash of pain before her mask of anger slipped easily into place. She wrenched the sword from his grasp and stepped hastily back, stumbling over her own feet in the process, her face flushing crimson.

"What the hell are you doing down here? Dara said you wouldn't recover for at least a week."

The shock of seeing her left him speechless for a few moments, which only seemed to incite her temper further. "Gabriel healed me partially and I used one of my own healing spells." He continued to drink in the sight of her like a man gone too long without life-giving water. "I didn't mean to startle you, but your kata switched directions before I could get out of the way."

She squared her shoulders and raised her chin. "You shouldn't have wasted the spell, then. You could've saved us both a lot of trouble and just swallowed poison."

The words lanced him more cleanly than her blade would have. "So kill me, Kefira." He held his arms wide. "End my life. It's yours if you want it. I've come to ask for your forgiveness, but I can't expect you to give it. You gave your trust and yourself to me and I failed you." He meant his words. If she chose to kill him, he'd let her. He'd been lucky to catch her original blow—especially in his injured condition. He wouldn't count on that luck twice, and didn't deserve it.

"Oh please, quit turning this into an epic romance. It's not like I was a virgin. You wanted a one-nighter. Big deal." She looked at her sword as if seriously considering using it. He'd lived for nine centuries and had faced fiercer opponents, but never had one of his enemies looked at him with as much hatred as this woman he loved more than life itself. He saw only a flicker of movement before the tip of the sword rested against his throat—the cold steel pressure reminding him not to swallow or he'd slice his Adam's apple.

"You want to cut me up? Go ahead." This didn't seem like a good time to point out that he never considered her a one-nighter. Especially after how he'd treated her the next morning when guilt had swamped him over breaking his celibacy vows.

After what seemed an eternity, she dropped the sword to her side. Her gaze bored into him. "Nah. Thanks, anyway. I'd have to clean the blood off my sword and you're not worth it."

He relaxed for a split second, but then she stepped forward and sucker punched him squarely in the gut. A moment of disorienting pain hit, and he doubled over as air whooshed from his lungs. He stood there hunched over, one hand cradling his stomach, the other resting on his knee as he tried to relearn how to breathe.

"Why the hell did you come here?"

He forced himself to straighten, ignoring his protesting stomach. When he opened his mouth to reply, the back door of the ranch house banged open and Dara hurried down the steps toward him, her beautiful features suffused with anger. "Did someone give you

permission to get out of bed? Because I sure don't remember doing it." She placed her hands on her slim hips, and managed to look lovely and cute while glaring daggers up at him.

He hid a smile, not willing to risk another injury so soon by provoking her. He held his hands out at his side like he would when working with a skittish horse. "Dara, I'm sorry I didn't check with you. Gabriel partially healed me and suggested a short walk would work out the stiffness the shower didn't."

"He did, *did he*? Well, I'll be sure Gabriel is around to change your bedpan when you can't get your tired butt up out of bed. Damned meddling archangel." Her brows were still furrowed in anger, but underneath, he saw the concern for his welfare from the woman he'd known for centuries. This was the Dara he knew from days of old, the fierce protector of her patients. He'd always admired her sudden fire over those in her care, when most of the time, she represented only icy calmness.

"I'm sorry, Dara. I'll go back to my room now."

Kefira's eyes flashed, and she opened her mouth to unleash her fury when Dara placed a hand on her arm and cut her off.

"Actually, Dagan, since you're well enough to walk around the yard against my better judgment, everyone is waiting inside to talk to you." She worried her bottom lip with her teeth. "Try not to end up back in bed injured worse than before, will you?"

He grinned. "I'll try, Dara. Thanks."

Kefira shrugged off Dara's hand, her cheeks flushed scarlet, her eyes flashing dangerously. "It was one thing to allow him to stay when he was on his deathbed. Now that he can walk there's no reason for his sorry ass to be here."

"I've been given part of the prophesy, Fi." His voice was soft and quiet, a deep contrast to her anger.

Her fists clenched, her blue eyes narrowed as she moved suddenly in front of him. She tilted her head and angled her chin. "Don't ever call me that again. You've no right. In fact, you have no right to call me anything at all."

Stepping between them, Dara instinctively cut the link in the tension. "Fi, let's go inside and hear him out. If he has links to the prophesy, it could affect us all. We have to know."

"I think he's full of crap." Kefira bristled, but then turned on her heel and stalked toward the house without a word.

Dagan watched her go, half tempted to turn and walk away and let her get on with her life.

Placing a gentle hand on his arm, Dara looked up at him, an obvious war of loyalty going on in the green depths of her eyes. "Even if you left now, you can't change what the prophesy holds."

He saw compassion in her gaze for the first time since he'd fallen onto their doorstep.

"And here, you may be able to help her heal." She seemed to stop and choose her words carefully. "Her pain goes deeper than just one morning in Romania."

Before he could ask what she'd meant, she too turned and walked toward the ranch house, leaving him standing alone.

Dagan walked up the steps and reached for the doorknob until the sound of voices stopped him.

"Did you kill him out in the yard? That's the only reason I can see for you forgetting your sword." Odeda's voice held amusement he knew meant to raise Kefira's hackles. Odeda loved to stir things.

"She's got you there, Kefira." Dara's voice this time. "Just let it go. Hold onto your mouth and let Logan handle this. I'm sure Dagan will be along in a minute."

Figuring that was his cue to enter, he twisted the doorknob and stepped inside.

The immediate warmth and welcoming ambiance of the ranch house unsettled him. Even with the strained tension in the air from its occupants, the room managed to be restful and homey. Something Dagan hadn't experienced since he'd left his ancestral home long ago.

Odeda and Dara sat on either side of Ariel on a plump hunter green couch, facing the fireplace where Kefira stood stiff, her arms crossed, her gaze murderous. To Kefira's right stood the dark vampire who broke Ariel's heart in England back in the 1800's. Dagan hid his surprise at a vampire walking by day. Where there was a prophesy involved, everything was fair game.

A wave of exhaustion hit and Dagan's legs turned to overcooked noodles. He took a deep breath and fought to remain upright. Now would not be a good time to collapse on their doorstep again. Sweat broke out on his brow, bringing a clammy, sick churning to the pit of his stomach, but he ignored it.

Motion to his side caught his attention and he looked over to see a rugged man dressed in jeans and boots start toward him. His manner easy and comfortable, he exuded the confidence of a man on his own land. A confidence Dagan hadn't experienced since his family betrayed him and sent him off to the damned crusades. Maybe Dagan hadn't worked through everything in his past quite yet. He bit down a curse and turned his attention back to the approaching stranger.

"Logan..." the vampire addressed the newcomer.

The man merely held up a hand to silence the protest and continued his slow purposeful walk until he stood in front of Dagan. They were almost toe to toe—enough of an invasion of personal male space to speak of a challenge, yet still leaving enough to show intent to negotiate. Dagan liked this blond stranger already. Acting on instinct, he held out his hand and after a pregnant pause, Logan took it. They shook, a firm dry grip Dagan immediately respected.

"Logan..." Ariel began in a warning tone. Logan merely turned a deadly calm gaze toward her until she closed her mouth and crossed her arms in front of her, the look in her eye turning as murderous as Kefira's.

Looks like I'm not the only man in the doghouse today.

"I'm Logan McAllister, Ariel's husband and the father of the child of blood. What can we do for you?"

Dagan smiled at the formal statement mixed with soft Texas hospitality. He rocked back on his heels as a wave of disorientation struck. He gritted his teeth and carefully formulated his response. He knew he had to step carefully or risk hurting Kefira further, as well as the rest of what he considered his extended family. "I'm Dagan Grayson, 4th Earl of Dunmoor, Knight of the Brotherhood and official protector of Ariel's clan of gargoyles."

Logan nodded as if digesting this new information. He took his time before answering, studying Dagan in his unhurried way. When he finally spoke, his voice held no judgment,

only a matter of fact statement. "You're late. Ariel's clan has been protecting themselves for years, rather successfully. So, why do they need you now?"

Dagan resisted the urge to wince as the statement hit an already deep well of guilt. He looked up and noticed Logan watching him carefully. "I plan on making up for that. I've let them down, and I'll spend the rest of my life making good on that lapse—to both the clan and Kefira herself if they'll let me. I've vowed before God."

Kefira growled in the corner and was quickly shushed by her sisters.

Logan stroked his chin with his fingers before piercing Dagan with a deceptively soft gaze. "I'm not much for those kind of vows." He gestured to the group behind him with a lazy raise of his chin. "I'd give my life for any of these people, Kefira included, without a second thought. Not because I've 'vowed' anything, or even because I married Ariel, but simply because they're now my family. And any of them wouldn't hesitate to do the same for me. So, again...why do they suddenly need you?"

Logan's blue-gray gaze pinned Dagan in place. The two of them would get along well. They both understood loyalty and honor. A sharp pain of conscience pricked at him as he remembered he hadn't shown very much loyalty and honor the last morning he'd seen Kefira. He shoved the unwelcome thought away. "I may need them more than they need me to be quite honest. However, it seems I'm embroiled in the prophesy that affects your family. It may be safer for everyone including your child to have all of us on the same side." Through sheer willpower, he continued to breathe through the dizziness and nausea flowing through him. Icy drops of sweat trickled between his shoulder blades from the effort.

The cowboy continued to study him for what seemed like hours or at least several minutes. Finally, he spoke in his slow and easy manner. "Exactly what is the prophesy that you're embroiled in? Did Alonna tell you it could be shared?"

"Gabriel actually gave it to me. It seems Alonna is still rather upset with me."

Logan winced and placed a hand on his upper thigh before quickly removing it. Dagan burned with curiosity, but now didn't seem like a good time to ask.

"Anyway, I was told that it's all right to share this piece with everyone." All eyes turned toward him expectantly. "'The Noble Ancient Warrior must cleanse the child of blood once his soul has been healed by Fire. If his soul remains scarred, only the child of destiny will survive the purge.'"

The words hung heavy in the air until everyone swiveled to face Kefira.

"What?" she demanded, glaring at the entire room.

"You're the one who comes to mind when the word 'Fire' is mentioned, especially in prophesy," Odeda supplied matter-of-factly. "You know? Red head? Big mouth? Short fuse?"

"The only way I'm going to heal that bastard," she pointed an accusing finger at Dagan, "is by sending him to hell where he belongs."

Logan leaned down eye level with Kefira. "We'll work it out, Fi. Don't worry." She seemed ready to argue further, but with an additional hand on her arm from James, she reverted to glaring.

Logan turned back to face Dagan. "You still look pretty beat up, and you'll need a place to bunk. We have the room. But I think Kefira might be more comfortable if you sleep in the bunkhouse." He watched him intently, but Dagan offered no argument.

Dara stepped forward. "I need to examine him. He's still clammy and showing signs of the poison. Until I'm sure he's out of danger, he needs to stay in the room upstairs. Only then can he be moved to the bunkhouse."

He knew he shouldn't have been shocked Dara noticed his distress, but he was.

"Besides, if he still has poison in his system, the beings who injected him will be able to hone in on him like a beacon." This from the tall, dark vampire who pointedly looked everywhere but at Dagan. "Better to keep him here among the strongest of us than in the bunkhouse among the humans."

Logan nodded and Kefira turned away toward the fireplace.

A larger wave of dizziness and nausea flowed through him and he stayed upright by sheer willpower alone. Sweat broke out on his forehead and neck and he blinked rapidly to keep the room in focus as the discussion went on around him as if he weren't there.

After a few tries, Ariel pushed her very pregnant self off the couch and stalked forward. She glared first at him and then at her husband. "What the hell do you think you're doing? You don't even know him." She pointed an accusing finger at Dagan.

Logan laid a comforting hand on his wife's shoulder, which she continued to hold rigid and unrelenting. His voice was soothing, as if he were gentling a horse. "He's part of the prophecy, Ariel. And if I have to give room and board to the devil himself to protect our son, I'll do it." He ran a thumb over her cheek and she closed her eyes and leaned in to it. "And as much as I know he hurt Kefira, I also know men are stupid, just like I was. And all of you admitted that he protected you for centuries. If you'd condemned me for one mistake, I wouldn't be here now. I'm just saying not to send him packing for the sake of the baby."

Again, she looked back and forth between them, then visibly relaxed her shoulders under Logan's hand. She smiled up at her husband, a sheepish smile warring with the obvious love and devotion on her face. "You're right. I'm sorry."

Dagan experienced twin lances of happiness for Ariel and envy that Kefira no longer looked at him the same way Ariel gazed up at her husband now. He had no one to blame for that but himself. Ariel stepped toward him, her eyes studying his. For a moment, he lost himself in the familiarity of this woman he'd fought along side for almost nine centuries. Surprised, he realized how much he had missed it—the easy camaraderie, the sense of belonging.

He smiled back at her, but then her eyes narrowed. "Logan's right. But..." She held up a finger for emphasis. "Don't think things will just fall back to the way they were. You've lost our trust and it will be difficult to win back."

Dagan swallowed, all his recent losses overwhelming him. "I'll keep trying until I do." Her lovely face wavered and fought to stay focused. Strong arms held him upright and knew it must be Logan.

Dara stepped forward, once again the woman he remembered. "He's about to pass out. James, Logan, help me get him upstairs. Then I'm going to have a long discussion with Gabriel."

Her cool fingers were heaven against the fevered skin of his forehead. He opened his eyes, surprised to find he had closed them. When Kefira's face filled his vision and not Dara, he knew he must be delirious. Then he realized he lay on the floor staring up at a circle of concerned faces. "How did I get down here?"

Dara gently pulled Kefira back from his line of vision so she could place a warm wet washcloth over his eyes. “Don’t talk, Dagan. We’ll get you back upstairs so you can finish healing. And next time Gabriel gives you directions—ignore him.”

Chapter Three

Kefira balled her hands into fists until her short nails dug painfully into the flesh. Her traitorous emotions continued to churn and she bit back several creative curses. *Why did he have to come back?* She'd had enough problems keeping her emotions under control without him here stirring up old memories.

She returned her attention to the scene unfolding before her. Ariel's eyes narrowed as she first glared at her husband and then at Dagan. "Logan's right. But..." She held up a finger for emphasis. "Don't think things will just fall back to the way they were. You've lost our trust and it will be difficult to win back."

Dagan swallowed hard and she noticed for the first time how pale and pasty his skin looked and how he swayed just a little when he blinked his eyes.

"I'll keep trying until I do..." His words trailed off and he lurched forward as his legs buckled under him. Logan caught him and lowered him gently to the ground.

A giant fist squeezed her heart until she thought it might burst. *Dagan!* Before she realized what she was doing, she'd rushed forward to his side and pushed his black hair off his forehead. His skin was clammy and cold under her hand and he groaned and turned toward her touch. Her fingers lingered over the scar just over his right eyebrow. *I gave him this that last morning I saw him.* A sad smile curved her lips as she remembered throwing his leather boot at him. She'd been horrified when blood had welled out of the resulting wound. Just another example of her poor impulse control. She sighed and looked down at Dagan's handsome features.

Suddenly, his eyes opened and she became mired in their beautiful hazel depths. Small flecks of green swam just around the deep brownish-gold. She remembered how the moonlight brought out the green color and made her want to lose herself in his gaze forever. Then suddenly, Dara pulled her away from Dagan, breaking the spell he'd cast over her.

She shook her head feeling as if she'd just woken from a dream, the tendrils of it still clinging to her like a stubborn child. Helplessness overwhelmed her and she hugged herself and stood. James picked Dagan up as if he weighed no more than a feather and started up the stairs with Dara trailing protectively behind him. That left her to close her eyes and try to fight for her center of calm.

"Fi?"

She opened her eyes to see Odeda standing before her, her almond-shaped chocolate eyes almost reminding her of Dagan's. Deda's chestnut hair was pulled back into a clip, but still spilled over her bare shoulders touching the top of the ever-present leather bustier. Today's outfit was purple and if Kefira knew her sister, it was as soft and supple as the finest silk.

"How about you and I go for a ride. It's been a while since we've done a perimeter check and if we don't find anything, maybe we can go mess with Jeb. That always cheers you up."

The pity in her sister's gaze proved too much and her temper sparked. As if she watched it from outside herself, her eyes narrowed, and anger simmered around her in visible waves. "Take it elsewhere. I don't need your pity." She spat the words and when Odeda only smiled, her anger exploded outward like a balloon under too much pressure. Her vision

edged in black, and pure adrenaline flowed through her. Before she realized what she was going to do, she kicked the hardwood coffee table, cracking it neatly in two.

As the last splinters of wood settled to the floor, silence reigned and pain radiated up her leg. The sharp sensation served to chase back the blackness and drop her back into herself. She looked down at the ruined table and then around the room as shame embraced her. "I'm so sorry. I don't know what happened."

Logan stepped forward, curling her into his embrace. Her mind balked at the close contact, but her body huddled shamelessly within its warmth.

"Don't worry about it, 'Fi. Ariel wants to redecorate anyway. And besides, that table still had all those scars on it from where me and the boys used to play quarters back in my bachelor days."

"I like you Logan. You put up with all my shit and just roll with the punches." She grabbed a fistful of his cotton shirt and with her nose pressed against his chest, breathed in the comforting scent of horse and man that always clung to him.

"Punches being the operative word there, Red."

She knew Logan wanted her to laugh, but her capacity for emotions was overdrawn and a yawning black pit of despair had opened below her. She pushed back from the too comforting embrace and squared her shoulders. "I'll spring for the new table, as extravagant as you want." She turned to face Odeda, her sister's taunting smile still firmly in place. "Are you going to take me riding or just stand there and grin?"

Five minutes later, she and Odeda rode due west, the crisp wind stinging her cheeks and ruffling her hair. Between her thighs, the muscles of her horse flexed rhythmically. She wished she could be flying right now, but ending up as the cover on next week's National Enquirer wouldn't help keep the child of blood safe. She could see it now—"Flying Warrior Women Invade Texas!"

She leaned close to the horse's neck and let herself become one with the motion of the animal as they raced across the rich Texas ground. Her hair flew out behind her, as the ponytail holder ripped from her hair causing her to laugh aloud at the sense of freedom that surged through her.

This is what I need to find. A source of emotions that don't drown me – but only energizes me. Like flying.

You found that once! an insistent voice inside her said.

He betrayed me! Not the other way around. But the ever-present inner voice only laughed at her response, the laughter echoing inside her mind.

"You know," came Odeda's voice conversationally inside her head. *"When you start answering your own inner voice, there's definitely something wrong."*

Kefira ground her teeth to keep from retorting. It would only egg her sister on.

"You know they make tooth guards for that short of thing. You don't want to grind your teeth down to powder." Odeda lived to needle people. In her own twisted way, Deda often helped Kefira get out things she'd bottled up.

"Funny, funny." But on the other hand, there'd been many a time that Kefira wanted to beat her sister to a bloody pulp. Not that she ever would. Even in all of her out of control fits of emotions, she'd never struck one of her sisters and she hoped that day never came. She'd

gladly tear out her own heart before she hurt one of them. Not physically – gargoyles could take a lot of damage. But there were worse ways to hurt someone you cared for.

When they neared the old graveyard, Odeda slowed her horse and slipped from the saddle, her leather clad legs, ever-present bustier, and leather jacket creaking softly with the effort. *“I thought killing some zombies might cheer you up. And who knows, maybe there will be an incubus or two just for fun.”*

Kefira smiled at her sister, pleased at the prospect of doing something productive with her temper. She patted her horse’s neck with a quick mind push for them to graze and stay out of trouble. She shook her head and spoke aloud. “You know it’s most likely just skeletons which will regenerate an hour after we’ve killed them?”

Odeda shrugged. It was as close to an innocent expression that ever crossed her sister’s face. “That’s why none of the humans ever come out this far—even during the daylight. It’s got vampire fear spells on it to keep mortals out. So, not only is our risk of exposure minimal, we’ll have a never-ending supply of targets. And when it starts to get dark, then the zombies and vamps will come out. Sounds like a daylong workout to me. Are you game?”

Kefira laughed silently at her sister’s nonchalance. She stepped forward to open the creaky metal gate that surrounded the decaying graves. Just inside the fence stood rows of faded and crumbling headstones surrounded by hard cracked ground covered in a strange gray dust. It reminded Kefira of a macabre garden. Just outside the perimeter of the fence, lush greenery embraced the ground, almost as if making up for the barren expanse within the cemetery.

As soon as Kefira stepped through the gate, a skeletal hand broke through the ground in a spray of dust and closed around her ankle. Adrenaline flowed through her and she willed the iridescent fairy wings tattoo between her shoulder blades to change. A sudden ripping sound tore a curse from her as the weight of her wings settled against her back. “I’m definitely not dressed for this!” Her favorite shirt sagged where it had ripped down the back to make way for her wings. “Damn it, I’ve had that for two years.” She quickly adjusted her stance so the weight of her large leathery black wings didn’t topple her over.

The bone hand continued to constrict, digging painfully into her skin. She concentrated, willing her foot and ankle to turn to stone—the familiar cold flowed over her skin causing goose bumps to pebble over the rest of her body.

“Are you done playing with that thing?” Odeda stood just outside the gate, her arms crossed over her generous cleavage.

Ignoring her, Kefira kicked her leg forward, ripping the skeletal hand from whatever body it previously attached to underground.

“Nice ankle bracelet,” Odeda observed as her own wings flowed into existence to billow around her. “Notice I remembered to remove my jacket before bringing my wings out to play. Why the hell do you think I have so many bustiers?”

Kefira ignored her sister’s jibe and glanced down to see the stubborn bone hand still curled around her ankle and shrugged. “It’s welcome to come along for the ride as long as it doesn’t get in my way.”

The sisters walked toward the center of the gravestones as other skeletal body parts broke through the cracked ground all around them. Kefira stood about eight feet away from her sister at an angle, so their wings didn’t tangle when they needed to maneuver and turned

both arms to stone from the elbow down. "Deda, why didn't you tell me where we were going? I would've brought Lileth."

"Because swords are for those who can't handle hand to hand combat." The familiar argument caused Kefira to grind her teeth, but Odeda continued as if she didn't know she'd punched at Kefira's defenses once again. "And we've got skills to handle these guys in our sleep." Deda flashed a grin. "Besides, tearing some skeleton apart with your bare hands will release more frustration than just merely chopping them up with a souped up kitchen knife."

"I like my souped up kitchen knife." Kefira looked over at Odeda's stone hands and raised her eyebrows in question.

"Okay, with our bare *stone* hands," Odeda amended.

Now full skeletons crawled from their graves, some wearing the clothes they were buried in and others, nothing but pristine white bones—held together by necromancy. They shuffled toward the sisters in an ever-tightening circle.

Her mind calm and clear from the sudden surge of adrenaline, Kefira watched them, anticipation of the fight to come, sharp on her tongue. This she could do without struggling with her emotions. Killing skeletons or whatever other beastie happened to be in need of a quick death was straightforward and easy. Why couldn't things with Dagan be so simple?

The thought of the weakness she'd shown when Dagan passed out earlier washed through her, a tidal wave of embarrassment followed quickly by anger and she struck out at the nearest group of skeletons. Her stone arm plowed through their ribcages, the sound of cracking bones filling the humid Texas air.

More ripping and crunching sounded behind her assuring her Odeda was similarly engaged, but she knew from centuries of fights much more dangerous than this one, that Deda could more than hold her own. She grabbed a fallen femur bone and used it like a baseball bat to decapitate an oncoming skeleton wearing a blonde poufy cocktail waitress wig. The skull with perfectly coiffed hair still attached sailed out over the fence and disintegrated as soon as it left the magic confines of the graveyard.

"Nice hit, giant cousin." Kefira glanced up to see Alonna the fairy floating just overhead studying them with her large liquid lavender eyes. Her flowing blonde hair barely covered her shapely nude form, while her tiny wings blurred from their effort to keep her aloft. As always, she looked like a nude anatomically generous Barbie doll come to life.

Bony hands closed around Kefira's throat, jerking her attention back to the fight at hand. She pried the hands from her neck and used the arms to beat back the rest of the body.

Odeda's voice came from behind her. "Did you come to spy on us, Alonna? Or were you just bored?"

Alonna giggled, the sound like musical bells flowing over Kefira's skin.

"If I wanted to spy, I wouldn't have materialized, now would I?" She flew over to perch on top of the black bars that made up the ancient metal gate. "I came to deliver some prophesy, but I can wait while you enjoy your combat."

Kefira executed a roundhouse kick, knocking back a new wave of skeletons and followed up with sweep of her stone arm to keep them down. "I was hoping to get *away* from the prophesy, Alonna. Can't this wait?"

"Isn't that what I just said?" She stamped her foot against the gate and shrugged, her arms held wide. "You're becoming as bad as the man-things. I understand your frustration at

the original man-thing, but this shouldn't wait too long. I deliver the prophesy with the timing that it keeps you informed for the coming battles ahead. Without the knowledge I deliver, you could make choices you will regret."

Kefira snorted at Alonna's comment as she whirled to attack the skeletons that had been trying to tear at her tough leathery wings. *I've regretted tons of my choices in the past that had nothing to do with the prophesy.*

"Exactly my point," Alonna answered as Kefira's temper sparked at the fairy reading her internal thoughts. "If you don't want me to know your thoughts, stop thinking them." She crossed her arms over her full but bare cleavage. "I can't help that I can hear them."

Kefira spun around to face the last standing skeleton at the same time Odeda did. She grabbed one arm and leg and Deda grabbed the other and they pulled—a monster wishbone. The skeleton's body made a large popping sound as it broke apart and fell to the ground. Then all sound around them suddenly ceased—almost loud in its silence. The bones littering the graveyard disappeared, including her bone ankle bracelet, which suddenly turned to gray dust, coating the barren ground once again.

Brushing off her hands, Kefira sat down on the closest headstone facing Alonna. "We have about an hour before these guys regenerate, so get on with it."

Alonna sneezed and then turned an annoyed expression toward both gargoyles. "Can't my giant cousins find a pastime that isn't so...messy?"

"No," Deda answered. "I don't think we can." She smiled, brushing some of the gray dust out of her long sable hair. "So, what's the scoop, Alonna? Or do I need to take a walk so you can just talk to Kefira?"

The fairy's liquid lavender eyes perused the scene before her, a worried frown marring her tiny face. "Don't vampires frequent this graveyard at dusk?"

"That's what we're hoping." Kefira knew Alonna's concern stemmed from past experience. They'd once saved her from being raped by a vamp. The penetration alone would have ripped her in two, but as a supernatural being, she could take a lot of damage. However, the pain would be the same as it would be for a mortal, just without the eventual comfort of death. "Don't worry, Alonna. We won't let them near you. Why don't you tell us our piece of the prophesy and then you can be gone before they come."

Alonna glanced around as if expecting vamps to close in on her from all sides. She rubbed her hands over her tiny arms before returning her attention to the sisters. "Odeda, this prophesy is for Kefira, but you may hear it as long as you do not share it until the time is right."

Deda scowled. "I hate those! How the hell am I supposed to know when the time is right?" She held up a hand before Alonna could supply the dreaded 'You'll know.' "Don't bother. I hate *that* answer too."

A large smile bloomed over Alonna's face and her liquid lavender eyes danced with mischief. "Just wait until your part of the prophesy is revealed, Odeda."

Kefira glanced over at her sister in time to see the horrified expression transform her face. She couldn't help the laugh that escaped her.

Odeda narrowed her eyes and glared at Kefira and Alonna in turn. "Don't we have *Kefira's* prophesy to hear about?"

Alonna chuckled, a happy earthy sound like tinkling bells mixed with a rushing stream. "I suppose so." She turned her attention to Kefira, her tiny wings fluttering so she hovered a few inches above the fence. "However, you may not like it. The prophesy is this: 'The Fire Maiden sits poised on the sword's edge of good and evil. She must walk the path of evil to choose the path of good. If she strays from the path and evil gains her allegiance, darkness shall reign supreme. But either way, one close to you will be sacrificed.'"

All the blood drained from Kefira's face until dizziness caused her to sway and almost topple off the headstone. She glanced at Odeda, and then wished she hadn't. Her sister's brow furrowed with concern and she glared at Alonna with murder in her eyes.

"How can you ever think Fi would even walk the path of evil, let alone turn?" Odeda paced a path back and forth between two headstones before stepping close to Alonna, her lovely face suffused with rage. "You've known us for centuries. How can you even think it? And just what do you mean, one close to us will be sacrificed?"

The last angry word died away on the wind only to be replaced by eerie tense silence. Kefira took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She wished she could be mad at Alonna, or even rail that it could never be true. But didn't her volatility of emotions already show she was unstable? She'd like to think that God never made mistakes, but maybe the Almighty had when She made Kefira.

Kefira had killed millions of evil beings in the name of good. She'd even killed her own child. Maybe she did have the character deficit it took to become evil. She sighed. "Deda..." She stood and placed a comforting hand on Odeda's arm. "It's not Alonna's fault. She delivers prophesy, she doesn't make it."

"I refuse to believe it's even an option. There's no way in hell that you'd turn evil. And what's with the bullshit about someone close to us will be sacrificed?" Deda grabbed Kefira's shoulders, silently pleading for what she'd heard not to be true.

Kefira wished she could put her sister at ease, but she didn't know how. *I'd never willingly turn to evil.* But she also knew that the path to evil was easy to stumble onto. One false step, no matter how well intentioned, could lead you farther and farther down its road. She'd seen many on the side of good over the years succumb from just such an insidious attack. Coming back from her thoughts, she realized that Odeda still stared at her. "I wonder what it would take to turn me evil? Where is the line that would push me beyond the side of good? We all know I'm the most volatile of the group. If any sacrifice is to be made, I'll be the one to make it."

"Don't even say that, Fi. Don't even think it."

Kefira nodded. Deda wasn't ready to talk about it, so she'd let it drop...for now. But it was something she knew she'd think about later.

Kefira shivered, and not because of the cool dusk breeze that ruffled her hair. The cocktail waitress skeleton came at her again and she dodged before plunging her stone arm through its head and watching it fall lifeless to the ground.

"Stop thinking about it, Fi. It's got to be one of those pieces of the prophesy that means something besides what it says. God knows there are enough of those." Odeda executed a perfect front jump kick to decapitate the last skeleton, causing a new layer of the gray dust to explode around them as all the bones disintegrated until their next rising.

Kefira blocked her eyes and mouth from the foul stuff, but then slow applause had her removing her arm so she could look up.

"See, Fi. I told you this place had a vamp infestation." Odeda moved slowly to the side to give them both wing room should they need to fly.

Kefira glanced around, taking in the seven vampires standing just inside the graveyard. They all wore business suits and reminded her of the vampire mafia. She would've laughed at her own description if the situation hadn't been so dangerous. *"Good thing Alonna left when she did. She'd freak out right about now."*

Six of them were devilishly handsome, in the manner of most of the vampires she'd ever met. But the seventh—the leader—had ugly red scars running down his face, as if an angry woman had attacked him with teeth and nails. She couldn't help but stare. Vampires as a rule didn't turn those who were less than perfect in appearance—it hindered their hunting. Yup—even vamps discriminated.

"We come in peace, ladies." The leader's voice boomed out across the cemetery, his voice as rough and raw as his scarred face.

Shock traveled through Kefira and she exchanged a bewildered glance with Odeda who only shrugged.

Kefira opened and closed her right hand wishing for her sword. She could take seven vamps by herself without much trouble. With Odeda, the odds were even more in their favor. They'd won in worse situations. You just couldn't underestimate blood suckers—they were one of the most intelligent and cunning beasts in the realm of monsters. She decided for once to take the side of caution and to take her cue from the leader, especially since Alonna's words were still fresh in her mind. "What can we do for you... gentlemen?" She almost choked on the last word.

Scar-face smiled, one side of his mouth not quite moving with the rest. He bowed at the waist, a courtly gesture she hadn't seen in centuries except from James. But the others behind him stood calmly, watching and waiting, their faces a mask of hate and suspicion. At least Kefira was much more familiar with *that* than this courtly politeness.

"My name is Edward. We have a mutual friend, and a mutual situation that I thought it prudent we discuss." He held his hands out at his side, making sure to show no aggression.

Ignoring Kefira's snort of disbelief beside her, Kefira asked, "Who might our mutual friend be, Edward?"

"I can't believe you aren't chopping him up into tiny little pieces yet. Have they kidnapped my fiery tempered sister?"

"Just think of this as foreplay to the fight. We might as well see what his game is."

Edward cleared his throat. "James Wellington was the leader of our vampire kiss before he became the protector of the child of blood."

Kefira risked another glance at Odeda, but her sister's brow furrowed with confusion mirroring her own. She knew James still owned and made all major decisions for the Wellington Talent Agency that he started and grew to a Fortune 500 company. But she'd never spared much thought to what happened with his kiss who ran the agency. Monsters owned most of the richest and most successful companies. What better way to ensure longevity and survival? *"I guess I assumed the kiss still thought he was a big bad-assed vampire."*

"Leave it to James to be all noble and honest. I wonder how that's working out?"

Kefira resisted the urge to roll her eyes at James' trust. The breeze played through the gray dust causing small eddies of the noxious stuff to fly into her face. A sudden sneeze wracked her. When she looked up into Edward's face, a dark amusement ran over his sharp features. "What, no 'God bless you'?" Some rules weren't to be broken, and saying 'God,' while not fatal, caused vampires physical discomfort.

A pained expression suddenly graced his scarred face. "My apologies, but no."

"Just kill them and be done with it." This from a tall blond Adonis standing just behind Edward. "We don't need their help anyway. Gargoyles are for killing or using for sex, nothing else."

Odeda stomped one foot in front of her and when Adonis winced, she laughed aloud. "Scared of me, vamp boy? You couldn't handle me in a fight *or* in bed."

Kefira and Edward held up their hands stopping both Adonis' sneering retort and Odeda's impending attack.

"Deda, quit needling him and let's see what they need help with so badly they'd be willing to actually ask us for it."

"I'd rather rip off his head and use it to play volleyball..." Deda growled inside her head.

"Actually, I would too." She smiled as the notion formed a vivid picture inside her mind. *"But I have a gut feeling this has to do with the prophesy. And if part of it is about me turning to evil, what better way to find out more, than from the local minions of evil?"*

Odeda shrugged beside her. "We're listening." Then to Kefira, *"I fucking refuse to call them 'gentlemen'!"*

Edward straightened the cuff of his designer suit. "I'm sure you remember Nicholas from his unfortunate involvement with your sister and brother-in-law's near death." When they both nodded, he continued. "We've heard disturbing reports that before his death, he mated with the Queen of the Succubus."

"So why do we care who Nicholas nailed before he died?" Kefira's fingers itched to close around Edward's throat if she'd shown all this restraint for nothing. "This isn't about some vampire bigotry and cross race fucking is it?"

An amused smile played across Edward's features. "Nicholas was not only 'nailing' her, as you so eloquently stated. It is also rumored that he made a pact with the Dark One to grant him offspring."

Cold dread trickled down her spine raising the hairs at her nape and a derailed train settled deep inside her belly. She wasn't sure how she knew, but she did. This involved the piece of the prophesy that brought her to toward the danger of turning to evil.

Odeda stared at her expectantly, but when she made no move to speak, took the initiative. "So why would enemy vampires who think we are only good for sex and as fight fodder share such information with us? We're the good guys, remember?"

Adonis growled low in his throat. "Just tell them and get it over with. I need to go hunt."

In a motion so fast it blurred before Kefira's eyes, Edward backhanded the mouthy blond vampire sending him flying until his body slammed against the fence to fall in a boneless heap. Then Edward turned back to the sisters nonchalantly. "I am sorry. Stephan is still learning respect for his elders. But he's a good enforcer, so allowances must be made."

Kefira laughed at the notion of a vampire named Stephan—especially as a big bad vampire enforcer. “No problem. I’m sure ‘Steph’ just needs some...guidance.”

The vampire in question stood slowly with malice glittering in his cat-green eyes. But he didn’t seem ready to defy Edward by attacking her because of her teasing.

“Exactly.” Edward continued. “Anyway, James is on something of a leave of absence and only available to approve major business decisions for the company. This didn’t seem like the type of information to impart over voice mail or fax, if you know what I mean.”

A bank of clouds slid over the moon, plunging them into eerie darkness, but since all of them had been created to be creatures of the night—Kefira was sure it only enhanced the vampire’s vision, just as it did her own. “From our point of view, that’s going to be one hell of a new beastie to fight—part succubus, part vampire and with the blessing of the Dark One. But why would you share this with us, or even James for that matter? Especially since this seems like a major coup for your side.”

Edward smiled grimly, the scarred side of his mouth maintaining a downward frown. “This new race’s whole goal is to gather power purely for the Succubus Queen so she can rule all. Let’s just say, we don’t relish the idea of sharing.”

Kefira resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of her nose against an impending headache. “*Crap, a monster power struggle? This week already sucked. Damn, I need a vacation!*”

Chapter Four

"So, Fi..."

Kefira glanced over at Odeda expectantly.

"I never thought in a million years that I'd ever see you run to Dagan's side again."

"Kiss my ass, sis. Don't you think there are more important things for us to worry about than Dagan right now?" Kefira's jaw tensed and her eyes glimmered with a warning she knew Odeda would ignore.

Continuing undaunted, Odeda barely bothered to conceal her smile. "I mean, we all know he's a bastard."

Kefira's temper sparked and a growl escaped her from low in her throat. This was one subject she didn't need her sister pushing her buttons around. Her volatile emotions were already stretched too thin when it came to Dagan. She took a deep breath and vowed to ignore anything Odeda said.

"Of course, you did fall in love with a Paladin, and there's that whole vow of celibacy issue to get in the way. But I think almost nine centuries was a really good show of restraint, don't you?" She pushed her sable hair from her face and leaned down to pat her horse's neck.

Despite her intentions, Deda's jibe hit its mark. Heat flooded Kefira's face as her temper exploded. "God never asked him for that vow of celibacy! He *offered* it, damn him! Paladins never took vows of celibacy before Dagan made it accepted practice!" Kefira snapped her mouth closed as she realized she'd allowed herself to fall into Odeda's trap. She clucked to her horse to pick up their speed, but Odeda only sped up to keep pace.

"That's true," Odeda continued then paused dramatically, smiling when Kefira ground her teeth together in frustration at her sibling meddling. Guiding her horse closer to Fi's she sighed. "I wonder why he would do such a thing? I mean we've never asked him about his reasons. Maybe he'd been hurt by a woman and never wanted to take that chance again. He did say that his father and his new stepmother had suddenly packed him off to the Crusades before the marriage celebration had even ended. And as a first pampered son of the time, he wasn't well suited for a life of battle. I think he was lucky Gabriel found him dying in that ditch and offered him the alternative of being our protector during daylight."

Kefira pulled on the horses reins, bringing her horse in front of Odeda's, effectively stopping them both. Emotions buffeted her from all sides. She'd been in love with Dagan for centuries. Even before they'd shared a bed, they'd shared hopes, dreams and internal thoughts no other knew. And yet now, one of her sisters seemed to know about a piece of his past she'd never bothered to plumb. *What else don't I know about Dagan?*

"How the hell do you know all that and I don't?" Jealousy burned through her at the thought of Dagan with another woman, and she was sure Odeda wouldn't mention it in passing if she wasn't sure it was fact. "And why didn't you ever tell me about it before now?"

"I watch and I listen." Odeda turned in the saddle, her leather clothes creaking with the effort. "Look. Everyone thinks I'm as hard as stone. Unfeeling and uncaring. The playgirl of supernatural kind." She laughed at that, a bitter short bark. "And maybe I am." She lifted her chin defiantly. "But people often say things around me they wouldn't say around anyone else." She shrugged. "Let's just say you weren't ready to hear it before. I know Dagan acted like a dumb ass that morning in Romania. Hell the whole world probably knows it by now,

but if you both get past your pride you'll see that the feelings that led you to each other are still there."

Kefira studied the reins held tight in her hands for a long moment before looking up, a struggle of emotions making her lightheaded. She waited for the anger at her sister to come, but only a tired emptiness filled her. That was the irritating thing about Odeda—she poked at people until they realized some significant fact about themselves. Even though her needling was always painful, Odeda never hurt anyone unnecessarily. But damn! Now and then she would love to just be left alone to wallow in her blissful ignorance!

When she finally spoke, her voice was calm. "I think you just goad people until they tell you anything you want just to get you to shut up."

Odeda grinned. "There is that. But I prefer to think that I'm just a terrific listener."

Kefira snorted her disbelief. "Yeah, we'll go with that—not!"

"Not that you asked, but I also think you should tell Dagan about the baby. You can't condemn a man for something he doesn't even know about, and he has a right to know."

"You should've stopped while you were ahead." She snarled between gritted teeth and Kefira swallowed back the bile burning at the back of her throat.

Odeda held up her hands, palm out. "I'm worried about *you*, Fi, not Dagan. *We* were all there for you, but you needed *him*. This anger is destroying you." She pushed her hair off her shoulder. "Maybe you just need to work him out of your system. You know, go home, up the stairs, fuck his brains out and then walk away—like he did to you. A little therapeutic sex. It's been years—your virginity is going to grow back if you don't do something soon."

A small amused sound escaped Kefira before she rolled her eyes skyward. "It does *not* grow back! And I don't think I could have sex with someone I'm angry with." *And I don't think I can bring myself to tell him about the baby...yet.*

Odeda grinned unrepentant. "Angry sex can be even better. Just hot passion and release—you can totally let go and not hold onto all those emotions you're always trying to corral."

"I didn't think anyone knew about that. Am I that obvious?" Heat filled her face.

"Hmmm, let me think." She turned in the saddle to face forward, her index finger tapping against her chin. "Hell, yes. You're as fricking obvious as an erection on a priest."

Kefira shook her head. "What is this thing with you and priests?"

"Not a priest, sweetie. Paladin. Get your terms right. Besides, once Gabriel told me that God had never intended for her most faithful to forego one of Her greatest gifts—sex, I made it my personal mission to save them from themselves."

Kefira couldn't help but laugh at Odeda's smug expression. "Fine, let's go home."

Odeda grabbed Fi's reigns before she could motion her horse forward. "About Dagan, what's the worst that can happen if you just let go and trust yourself?"

Silence reigned while Kefira stared off into the inky black distance before turning back to face Odeda. "I could turn to evil."

Ariel scowled at her husband as he stood in the doorway, blocking her exit from their bedroom. "Damn it all, Logan. Deda and Fi called a family meeting and you're not going to keep me prisoner up here."

Logan's lopsided grin showed his dimple to perfection and she resisted the urge to reach up and trace the adorable dent. If she allowed herself to be distracted, she'd end up stuck in bed while the family meeting proceeded without her. She tilted her chin at a stubborn angle and glared at her husband, ignoring the mischievous twinkle lighting his blue-gray eyes. "Look, Logan, even extremely pregnant and with hormones raging, I'm still the leader of my clan and refuse to be swayed by your sexy cowboy flirting." She ducked around him but he stepped in front of her blocking her way.

"You think it's sexy? Really?" Logan grinned, "I guess I need to practice it more."

"Stay on target, pal."

"I have no intention of keeping you from an important family meeting. Anything that involves the prophesy, involves our son." He placed a gentle hand on her stomach and their son snuggled against the warmth much as Ariel knew she did when Logan placed a comforting hand on her.

She raised her eyebrows in suspicious surprise. "What exactly are you suggesting?"

"Do you two mind doing that *after* the meeting?" came James' voice from the doorway. "You're blocking the entrance."

Ariel smiled up at her husband as realization dawned. "You moved the meeting up here, didn't you?"

Logan brushed a quick kiss across her lips before steering her toward the bed. "I know you need to stay off your feet, and if the only way to accomplish that is to bring the family meeting to you, then that's what we'll do."

Before allowing herself to be settled onto the bed against a mound of pillows, she grabbed a handful of the front of Logan's shirt and brought his mouth down to hers, wrapping her free hand around the back of his neck. Their lips met and the kiss turned into something searing and intimate before the sound of James clearing his throat reminded her they weren't alone. She pulled back slowly and took a long moment to look deep into Logan's eyes. "*You can be very sweet when you're not stealing my ding-dongs, Logan. I love you.*"

"*I steal your ding-dongs because I love you and our son.*"

He smiled and the room seemed to brighten as her heart swelled with love for this wonderful man.

A wistful sigh caused her to glance up. "Alonna, I'm sorry, we didn't hear you come in."

"I've been here since you started and *that* never deterred you," James reminded her as he took a seat on the window seat, stretching his long legs in front of him and crossing them at the ankle.

"Dark Redeemer, I'm surprised at you." Alonna fluttered down to shake a finger at him. "Are you not happy for your offspring and your ex-lover?" She crossed her arms under her perky bare breasts and shot him a look that dared him to disagree.

James only smiled, an amused look glinting in his eye. "Of course I'm happy for them, Alonna. But you don't have to be around them 24/7. It gets..."

"Don't say it," Logan cut in, mock exasperation clear on his handsome face. "You're the one who insists you're always within sight of the baby—we're lucky you didn't insist on sleeping in here."

James brushed an invisible speck of dust from his black dress slacks before answering. "Believe me, once the child is born, he and I will be able to find other things to fill our time than watching his parents make out." He glanced at Alonna before looking back toward Logan and Ariel. "But I think you both already know how happy I am for you – and as much as it pains me to admit it since I'm still so young – about becoming a grandfather."

A full laugh bubbled up inside Ariel and she let it free as the others joined her.

"What?" James asked in mock surprise. "I'm not as old as Alonna. She was created when God created the heavens and earth. I'll admit I'm ancient, but I'm a mere child compared to her." His sculpted lips curved into an amused grin as Alonna's face suffused with anger.

"You're lucky I like you, Dark Redeemer, or I'd start sending you those nasty dreams again." Alonna landed on the windowsill and made a great show of preening her wings and pointedly ignoring the dark vampire, while he paled from the threat. Apparently, they were very nasty dreams. "Besides," she huffed, "I still look divine."

Odeda and Dara appeared in the doorway. "Are we going to start this family meeting, or just stand around complimenting everyone's extreme gorgeousness?" Odeda flopped down onto the overstuffed chair in the corner looking like an exotic leather clad model. "Because if truth be told, I'm definitely the best looking."

Pushing up in bed and adjusting some of the pillows behind her, Ariel looked around the room. "Aren't we waiting for Kefira?"

If Ariel didn't know better, she'd think Odeda looked uncomfortable at the question. But Deda was never uncomfortable with answering any questions, she was the most blunt and honest person Ariel had ever met.

"She was there when we received this information, so she asked me to bring it to the meeting."

Ariel's brow furrowed, but she nodded. It had been tough for Fi lately between Dagan coming back and her own self-guilt over the loss of the baby. Every year on the anniversary of their release from service to God, Fi went through a difficult time as all the memories of Dagan's betrayal and then the shock of the baby plagued her. "All right, Deda. You called the meeting. What happened?"

As Odeda filled them in on the message from the vampires, silence reigned around the room except for a deep feral growl, which originated from James at the mention of Nicholas. When Odeda finished, Ariel wiped her sweaty palms on the bedspread and tried to come to terms with the repercussions of her sister's words. "James, I thought you removed yourself from contact with the kiss?"

"I took a leave of absence. As you can imagine, my position as protector of the child of blood is something of a conflict of interest with vampire politics."

Odeda snorted, her full breasts bouncing within the confines of the tight leather bustier. "So you had to 'come out' to your kiss?" Her laughter exploded and Ariel had to fight to keep her grin from turning into full-blown laughter as well.

James glared around the room, while everyone ignored his warning. "Except in my case, I risked my life even telling them. But I've worked hard to get my company to the level of success it enjoys today. Let's just say I'm a vampire who wants it all. That is the mantra of the new century, is it not?"

"Yup, you go boy," Odeda confirmed through her laughter. "The mantra of working women everywhere."

Ariel placed a hand over her mouth to unsuccessfully smother the small burst of laughter that escaped, but James was too busy glaring at Odeda to notice. "Why don't we get back to the business at hand?" She turned her attention to James. "Can you meet with Edward to see if he has any more information?"

"No. If he could've met with me in person about this, he would have. Using your clan as messengers is probably the safest way he could communicate with me without alerting the Dark One or even Nicholas' mate and offspring. He gave you as much information as he dared."

Ariel winced as the baby placed one foot on each side of her pelvis and stretched. She rubbed circles over her swollen stomach. *I hate it when you do that, little one...*

In return, she got a general impression of amusement from her unborn son. *Great, another smartass in the family.* Turning her attention back to the conversation, she cleared her throat before speaking. "Maybe it's time we talked to Dagan again. With this new information, he can probably refine his impressions of what attacked him, and maybe we can learn something valuable."

Deda bolted to her feet. "I think I'll go check on him and let everyone know when he's ready to talk."

Ariel frowned and sent a questioning look toward Dara, who only shrugged in response. "All right, Deda. Let us know when he's ready."

"Dara, can you find out what the hell is going on with Fi and Dagan before we meet again?"

"You can count on it."

After Odeda bolted out the door, James and Dara stood and their eyes locked, as if no one existed in the world but the two of them. *"Damn, Logan, if the two of them throw off any more sparks they're going to burn down the entire house!"*

Logan's laughter sounded inside her head. *"Don't I know it. But don't mention it to either one of them or you get sparks of the non-fun kind. They just have to figure this out on their own, hopefully before they drive the rest of us crazy."*

"Amen!" Alonna's bell-chime voice rang through the room breaking James and Dara out of their moment, with twin looks of confusion plain on their faces.

Dagan started as Kefira burst into his room like a sudden storm—wild, dangerous and beautiful. He pushed himself up in bed, leaning back against the headboard and ensuring his blankets covered him. Since he'd sweated through his borrowed clothes when he'd passed out downstairs, Dara had taken them, which left him effectively naked. Not that he had any qualms about Fi seeing him naked, but he wasn't sure how serious she'd been about the shish ke-bob comment earlier.

He didn't speak, afraid to scare her away. He just took the chance to study her, to drink in her presence like a man dying of thirst who'd just been offered life-giving water. Her red hair flew around her in a waterfall of sexy tousled curls that flowed to her shoulders. Her cheeks flushed pink as if she'd been running or fighting, and since her shirt hung limp on the sides, he suspected it had ripped down the back when her wings materialized. *I hope she hasn't been out fighting those things that attacked me. I couldn't stand to have anything happen to Kefira.*

Kefira only continued to stare at him, her eyes blatantly perusing every exposed inch of him, even those parts covered by the blanket. It was thoroughly sexual and totally unlike the Kefira he remembered. Yet, also exciting and brazen, causing his body to react with the inevitable flood of blood away from his brain.

Finally, her eyes traced a path toward his and their gazes locked, shaking him to the core. This was the woman he remembered...and yet, she was different somehow. Something haunted her and he got the impression it was from more than just his stupidity all those years ago.

He tried to force himself to speak, to ask why she'd come or even what thoughts flowed through her mind, but he couldn't push the words past his lips. When she took a few steps closer, an unmistakable sexual hunger plain in her eyes, his erection hardened to the point of pain, tenting the sheet and blanket. He bit back a groan at the sensation of the suddenly rough linen against his engorged flesh.

All remaining rational thoughts fled when Kefira peeled off her shirt and dropped it to the floor, revealing the lacy green bra underneath. The dark cloth against her pale skin showcased her full curves to perfection and his mouth watered as a vivid memory of the last time he'd tasted her flesh flashed through his blood-deprived brain.

Finally finding his voice, he stammered, "Fi, wh...what are you doing?"

She leaned forward to place her finger against his lips, and in the process gave him an up close and personal view of the most spectacular cleavage he'd ever seen. Small gold freckles dusted her creamy skin, in the manner of redheads, and he fought the urge to trace each freckle with his tongue until he could ensure his past memorization of her body had been accurate. She straightened, breaking his train of thought, then kicked off her tennis shoes and unzipped her jeans.

Some semblance of rational thought broke through to him even though his entire body screamed at him to shut up and let her finish undressing. He pushed aside his baser instincts and with a heroic effort pulled his gaze back to her now stormy blue eyes. "Fi, what's going on? This morning you wanted to kill me and now you're..." His voice trailed off as she pushed the jeans down over her full hips revealing more pale freckled skin and a matching scrap of green lace that was probably considered underwear. Right now, he thanked God in Her infinite wisdom that this particular piece of material covered so little. In fact, through the thin transparent lace, Kefira's dark red curls were visible, taunting him and causing a surge of liquid fire to flow through him and straight to his throbbing groin.

A strained groan reverberated through the room and when she smiled, he realized it had come from him. "Fi, you're killing me."

"Good. Then maybe you'll get out of my head."

What the hell am I doing? What made me think I could seduce a man? I'm not Odeda! But then she looked at Dagan's strained expression and his dark hazel depths swimming with desire and she smiled. For once, Odeda might have the right idea. What would happen if she stopped reining in her emotions and just let them run free? She was about to find out, the consequences be damned. At the very least, she'd have one more night with Dagan to remember and cherish before he found out she wasn't the person he thought her to be. Deda was right, she'd been aiming all her anger at him, but how angry would he be when he found out she'd murdered their child. Hazy memories of that painful time surfaced, but they were

no longer crisp as they were just yesterday. Now they seemed disjointed and fleeting, as if she'd watched a movie about the events instead of experienced them. She frowned and then shook her head.

She pushed the dark thoughts aside and stepped forward to slide under the covers next to him. The sudden contact of his muscled flesh sent an army of gooseflesh marching over her skin. "I did say this morning I wanted to kill you." She kept her voice low and sultry, the tone speaking of dark promises and seduction. Dagan seemed frozen with shock and a wicked thrill raced through her at her daring. She leaned close and whispered against his lips. "But I never said how." She nipped his bottom lip and could almost hear Dagan's chains of restraint snap as he crushed her to him and devoured her mouth.

He tasted masculine and sweet just like she remembered, and when he thrust his tongue in her mouth, she sucked on it, swirling her tongue over the tip the way she'd like to do to his straining erection. He moaned into her mouth and she swallowed the sound, reveling in this feminine power she'd finally allowed herself to embrace. He tore the silk panties and bra from her body, a thick wet ripping sound reverberated through the room and Kefira laughed aloud at this heady flow of passion.

All those years ago, their joining had been gentle and slow, but this...this was an inferno. Everywhere Dagan touched her, she burned, liquid fire shooting through her veins and congregating between her thighs. Her mons was sensitive, her nether lips heavy and wet, burning with need. She started to tell Dagan to touch her, or even beg if necessary, but then his mouth closed over her right breast and she smoldered until she thought the bed might catch fire. Her other breast was cradled in his large calloused hand and he pinched her nipple lightly, even as his tongue and teeth ministered to the other with sweet torture. A moan ripped from her throat and she let it go, not caring if God Herself heard her.

Another rush of moisture between her thighs made her core throb. "Dagan, I need you inside me, now!"

Within seconds, he'd shifted his weight and slipped inside her. She'd been with no other man since Dagan and her body was tight, but soon stretched to accommodate him. She barely had time to register how he filled her completely before he withdrew, only to thrust inside her fully once again. Need twisted tighter deep in her belly, along with her sense of urgency. She raised her hips and grabbed his muscled ass in her hands, pulling him tight against her with each frenzied thrust.

Dagan kissed her, his tongue pushing into her mouth in time with the rhythm of their bodies. He drew back from the kiss, and she opened her eyes. Mesmerized, she stared at him as he pounded into her, dragging them both closer to release. His hazel eyes were dark with passion, the green flecks now more visible, making his eyes look like a pool of liquid emerald.

"I love you, Fi." He whispered the words against her lips and her body reveled in them, but her mind rebelled. She shook her head, but he captured her mouth, chasing all denials of her unworthiness from her tongue.

The vortex of her climax spiraled higher and higher and her entire world was Dagan. Sensations of him touching her, filling her, loving her, built until she slammed against a granite wall of release. As her body convulsed around him, his seed emptied deep inside her.

The world slowly took shape as blood returned to Kefira's brain. She opened her eyes and Dagan's face filled her vision. *I let myself go and nothing bad has happened yet. Maybe I can be like normal people and not hold in my emotions all the time.* A small smile curved her lips.

His hazel eyes held a tenderness she wasn't ready for, so she decided to take control. She threaded her fingers through his hair and pulled him down so she could nibble on his lips. "Mmm, you taste so good." She plunged her tongue inside his mouth, tasting, exploring and lightly dueling with his tongue. When he reluctantly pulled back, she licked her lips. "I wonder if you still taste this good everywhere." When his eyes darkened with desire and he hardened inside her, she laughed aloud and flipped him over so she straddled him. Leaning down to nibble at his jaw, she whispered against his neck, enjoying his resulting shivers. "I'll have to find out...later. You feel too good inside me right now to move."

"Ride me," he commanded.

She started to bristle at the tone, but she'd come too far to deny she wanted this. Rocking forward, she started a slow steady rhythm, enjoying the friction created between them. She closed her eyes, intent on the sensations spiraling through her. His calloused hands closed over her breasts and she gasped. When he lightly pinched her nipples, pulling on the tight buds, she increased her speed, her breath coming in short pants.

"Look at me, Kefira."

She shook her head in denial, not wanting the intimacy he demanded.

He pinched her turgid nipples harder, causing a sudden flood of lava to shoot straight between her thighs. Her eyelids flew open, allowing him to capture his gaze. "I want to look into your eyes while you cum."

A small voice in the back of her mind balked at his tone, balked at his possession, but she shoved it aside. She rode him harder and faster, staring into his eyes, watching the molten hazel blend with the green as she drove them both closer. "I want to feel you cum inside me, Dagan." Her words shocked her, but she didn't take them back. She wanted that intimate feeling of his seed shooting into her, craved it in a way she didn't understand.

He grabbed her hips, helping to maintain their rhythm until Kefira thought she might explode from all the pleasure assaulting every nerve ending in her body. The world around them receded until it was only she and Dagan and the ecstasy flowing between them. Only the slap of flesh against flesh and their harsh breathing filled the room. Her engorged nipples scraped against his springy chest hair each time she rocked forward, spiraling her sensations even higher and threatening to shatter her into a thousand pieces.

Time lost all meaning as she leaned down to capture his mouth with hers. With the sudden change in angle, Dagan was so deep she felt him inside her soul. They belonged together, two halves of the same whole. She reveled in the feeling, allowing herself to just enjoy. But then urgency set in, an irrational feeling to bind him to her, to mark his soul as hers for all time.

She switched to rubbing herself against him, groaning with him at the almost unbearable sensations flowing through her. The tension inside her neared the breaking point and she pulled back just far enough to look into Dagan's eyes without breaking her rhythm. "God help me, Dagan. I've never stopped loving you."

"I knew it." Dagan spasmed and as soon as the hot liquid that signaled his release hit her core, her own orgasm broke over her, stealing her breath and blanking her vision. When sanity returned, she lay on top of him, boneless and limp.

She gathered all her strength to curl her hand into a fist and lightly punch him in the chest. "Bastard," she whispered.

Dagan chuckled and kissed the top of her head. "Does this mean I'm officially forgiven?"

Closing her eyes tight, she gritted her teeth. She knew this time would come, but had hoped to delay the whole 'after sex discussion' section of the afternoon. Gathering her strength, she pushed up to a sitting position and noticed that Dagan's face was pale. She placed a hand against his forehead and scowled when she confirmed what she'd suspected, his skin was clammy with sweat. "Damn, Dagan. I didn't mean to overdo. You're still recovering from the poison."

He only smiled, the expression lighting the room as well as her heart. "If that didn't get my blood pumping enough to get out the poison, maybe you'll just have to stay here for a few more days to repeat the treatments."

She moved off him, gasping at the sensation of loss as he slid out of her. She pulled the covers up around him and perched next to him on the bed. "I was selfish and didn't think about your condition. I'm sorry."

He captured her hand in his, trying to pull her back down against him, but she shook her head. He sighed and lay back against the pillow. "You're still stubborn as all hell, Fi." He raised their joined hands to his lips, effectively breaking off her retort of denial. "You didn't answer me. I'm so very sorry I hurt you. I was selfish and stupid and completely male. Please give me another chance. I'll spend every day of the rest of my life making sure you never regret your decision."

Half of her wanted to laugh aloud because deep down, she knew she'd already forgiven him. But the other half, the insistent nagging voice in the back of her head reminded her that it could never work. He would hate her for what she had to tell him next. *You deserve it. This is your karma for killing his child. Get it over with, tell him.*

Wanting some sort of barrier between them, she gathered her clothes and began to dress, not bothering with the ripped underwear and bra.

"Fi, where are you going?"

Refusing to look at him while she dressed, she took a deep breath for courage. "I need to talk to you and I can't be naked to do it."

He sat up, leaning back against the headboard. "What is it?"

She zipped her jeans and turned to face him, her clothes at least offering her some barrier against what she had to do. Dark circles were prominent under his eyes and his brow furrowed with concern. She sat down on the bed next to him and steeled herself to meet his gaze, knowing that what she had to say would change his sculpted features to a look of hate and revulsion when she was through. "After we left for America..."

"Fi." He captured her hand again, the warmth of his skin flowing through her. "Everything that happened in Romania was my fault. Don't beat yourself up over anything that happened as a result. I know you were hurt and..."

"Stop!" She pulled her hand away and held her palms in front of her to block his words. "You're not helping." She stood and paced back and forth between the door and the bed trying to tether her raging emotions. When she had a loose reign on them, she turned to face him, crossing her arms over her chest, her breasts still sensitive under the thin top.

"Just tell me, Fi. I love you. Nothing you can say will change that."

The back of her throat burned and she swallowed hard. "After we left for America..." She pressed her fingers to her temples and closed her eyes trying to make sense of the disjointed memories that flowed through her mind when she tried to concentrate. "After we left for America..." The memory of the vampires attacking she and her sisters dissolved like mist to be replaced by several other faces—other gargoyles. But that was impossible. She and her sisters were the last of her kind. Her head began to throb and she closed her eyes and took deep breaths until the pain subsided.

She opened her eyes to see Dagan's concerned expression.

"Fi, tell me what's going on."

"I'm not sure." She grabbed his hand and squeezed as if borrowing his strength, and pushed forward before she lost her nerve. "I found out I was pregnant, Dagan. Then we were attacked by vampires and I was injured badly." Disjointed memories swirled through her mind again and she shook her head to try and stop them since they were making her dizzy. "Why do these faces of other gargoyles keep popping into my head?" she said mostly to herself. "We're the last, I know that." She scrubbed her hands over her face, steeling herself for telling him what she most dreaded. "Dagan, when I turned to stone to heal, I aborted our baby."

Dagan narrowed his eyes, studying her critically, his face showing the beginnings of the judgment she'd expected. He grabbed her shoulders in a tight grip and stared intently into her eyes. "There are no more gargoyles, Kefira. You know that." His voice was low and steely.

She wrenched away from his grip and stood. "Is that all you have to say to me? I tell you that I killed our child and you're worried that I'm having delusions?" Her hands clenched at her side and her heart hurt as it split in two inside her chest. She'd worried for all these years about how he would react, and then he didn't react at all—at least not to that. He obviously didn't care about their baby—or her. How she wished she would've known all those years ago—maybe she wouldn't have spent so much time hurting.

A loud knock on the door interrupted her and she silently thanked God for Her perfect timing. "Come in," she called, deftly avoiding Dagan's stare.

Deda appeared in the doorway, a smug smile curving her lips. "The family wants to talk to Dagan again in light of what we heard from the vampires." She glanced between them before holding up Dagan's clean clothes. "Now that you're...finished, I figured Dagan might like to get dressed if he's up to it."

Shock flowed across Dagan's chiseled features. "What vampires? Fi, what happened?"

Kefira, thankful for the diversion, jumped into the topic with relish. "Deda and I were out fighting skeletons and part of James' old vampire kiss showed up warning us about rumors of a new half vampire/half succubus race of monsters."

Dagan's face darkened with anger. "Those things that attacked me." He slammed a fist against the bed before glancing up at the women. "Wait, why would vamps share information like that? Purely because they were from James' old kiss?"

“More because they’re afraid of having their territory usurped.” Deda smiled and walked forward to hand Dagan his clothes, her leather outfit softly creaking with the effort. “Why don’t you get dressed and come on downstairs. We’ll all have some lunch and discuss it.”

“Fi was trying to tell me something when you came in. Why don’t you head on down and we’ll join you in a while?” Dagan reached for Kefira’s hand, but she jumped back as if afraid of being burned.

“No! We’re finished.” She made sure to emphasise the last word, letting all her anger show through the glare she leveled at Dagan. “He’s all yours, Deda.” She turned on her heel and walked out the door, slamming it behind her with a satisfying crack that splintered the wood.

Chapter Five

Dagan stared after her, but only splintered wood stood where the tornado of a woman had been.

"She'll be fine. Why don't you get dressed?" Deda turned to leave.

"You know what she was telling me, don't you?" Dagan edged the words carefully. He needed to find out how much the sisters remembered—if they really remembered anything of another Gargoyle clan. He and James had been entrusted with the secret and he'd sworn an oath of protection to them. Now it all teetered on the edge of a cliff because of his rocky relationship with Kefira. He hadn't known what form the new memory would take when he implanted it, but guilt assaulted him that she thought it was losing their baby. Now he understood just how deeply he'd hurt and betrayed her. Regardless if this mission came directly from the mouth of God Herself, he'd betrayed Kefira either way.

Odeda cocked her head to the side, studying him. "That's between you and Fi."

"In other words, you do know." He tensed, waiting for her answer.

She pursed her lips, as if deciding what to say next, which was totally out of character for Odeda, who usually blurted out whatever came to mind. He should've known she'd be more careful when her sisters were involved. Despite outward appearances of indifference, Deda was one of the most gentle and kind people he knew. She'd never purposely hurt anyone. "Let's just say you weren't there when she needed you most. The rest is hers to tell."

His brow furrowed, did Odeda only know about the false memory? He had to be sure. "Dara said something similar. She said it was more than one morning in Romania that caused the hurt in Fi's eyes. But she also mentioned something about disjointed memories?"

"Dara's right and I can't break Fi's confidence. But from her reaction to her yearly remembrance, I think her memory of the events are probably perfect." She dropped the clothes she'd been holding into his lap. "When Fi's ready, she'll tell you, but until then, you know the harder you push her, the faster she'll run."

"She told me about the baby." The words hung in the air between them for a few moments while Odeda's shocked reaction cleared and turned wary.

"Then how come she ran out of here ruining yet another door?" She raised one eyebrow and pierced him with her chocolate brown gaze.

He sighed, realizing Odeda didn't know anything other than the implanted memory. Even though it had been years since he'd spent time with the gargoyles, they were family and he knew their reactions as well as his own. "I admit, I could've handled it better." He searched his mind for something to say that wouldn't put him in the doghouse with yet another sister. "I was just surprised, that's all. She's had years to come to terms with it, and I've only had a few minutes."

Odeda studied him critically for a few minutes before her expression softened and she nodded. She stepped toward the door and then turned back, pointing an accusing finger at him. "Make sure you make it right with her. Letting her stew will only make it worse." When he nodded, she smiled. "I've got to go, I'm making enchiladas for lunch."

Shock flowed through him at her admission. "You're cooking? I didn't know you even knew how."

She laughed, and the sound filled up the small room. "I didn't. Logan's cook is a nice old lady who dared me that I couldn't do it, and you know how I react to dares." She tucked

her sable hair behind one ear. "And then I realized I actually enjoy it." She shrugged. "We all react to our new lives differently, I guess."

"I'm happy for you, Deda. For all of you. I'm just sorry I let you down." He twisted the cotton shirt in his hands. "I know when I hurt Fi, I hurt all of you. It won't happen again."

"Oh, I know it won't, or what the vampire slash succubuses did to you will look like a Sunday picnic." She flashed him a dazzling smile before walking out the door, carefully avoiding the splintered wood.

He was still staring at the shattered door when Dara's serene face peeked around the corner. "I came to check on you." She eyed the broken wood. "Fi can be a storm of destruction when she's upset."

"That's the biggest understatement I've heard in quite a while." He settled more comfortably against the headboard.

"Do you mind if I come in?" Her soothing voice flowed over him and he couldn't help but smile.

"You mean, do I mind if you come in and grill me about what happened with Kefira." He gestured toward the overstuffed armchair next to the bed.

She unsuccessfully hid a small smile. "I also need to make sure you're all right."

"I'm still a little weak, but I'm recovering." He placed his clothes next to him on the bed and turned his full attention to Dara. "Has Kefira said anything to you about some traumatic disjointed memories..." He swallowed hard, trying not to choke on the words. "...about the baby?"

Only a slight widening of her eyes betrayed Dara's shock. "No. I would think Fi's memories about that incident would be as crisp as ours. It was a difficult time for all of us." She looked down at her hands before returning her gaze to Dagan. "I'm glad she told you, maybe it will bring her a measure of peace."

Dagan sighed, relieved that Dara didn't remember anything. He needed to change the subject before she got suspicious. "I was just going to get dressed and come down for the family meeting. Odeda and Fi gave me the overview about the run in with the vamps."

"Good, but remember, I don't want you overdoing it. The poison is working its way through your system, but every time you push yourself too hard, it's going to take you longer to recover."

"Understood. You're a good woman, Dara, and a good healer." He reached over to take Dara's hand and pull it to his lips for a kiss of gratitude. It was old behavior but he was essentially a knight, and chivalry wasn't dead. "Thank you for everything. I've missed you."

A deep growl from the doorway startled him and Dara jumped, pulling her hand away like a child scalded by boiling water. He turned to see James, the Dark Redeemer. Dangerous eyes flashed blood red down at him. "What do you think you're doing? You make one sister run from the house and now you think you can come on to another?"

Whoa, brother! Dagan had no trouble reading the warning and even the possession in James' tone. He was curious what he'd stumbled into, but didn't think questioning an angry master vampire was a good move—especially since he hadn't fully healed yet. He opened his mouth to speak, but Dara beat him to it.

She stood and faced the vampire, all five foot three of her tall and proud—once again, the healer he knew. "*This is a private conversation.*"

The vampire's brow furrowed and the hair on the back of Dagan's neck stood at attention. "Is it?"

James started forward, but Dara flattened a hand against his chest. "Not that it's *any* of your business, but Fi and Dagan have come to an understanding of sorts, so whatever she's pissed about now is between the two of them. And just so you know if *any* advances *are* made, I'm a big girl. I do what I want." She narrowed her eyes as if daring him to argue.

James leaned forward, "Is that so?" Power crackled around the dark vampire like an angry lightning storm, but Dara stood her ground, as if she didn't notice all the pyrotechnics.

It was getting a bit too warm in here, Dagan decided. Being anywhere but here sounded like an excellent idea. He almost felt sorry for James, but when it came to the gargoyles, sometimes it was every man for himself. He shifted in bed and rolled to a sitting position, pulling the blanket around his waist to hide his nude form. "I'm going to go get a drink of water."

"I can—" Dara began.

"I'm fine, Dara. I was getting a cramp lying here, anyway. It'll do me good to get up for a minute." He grabbed his clothes and backed out the door with the blanket safely wrapped around his middle as quickly as he could. "Don't mind me."

James watched Dagan go and then turned back to face a very angry Dara, if the icy glare she leveled his way was any determination.

Blinding rage had burned through him when he'd seen Dagan kissing Dara's hand, and watched the blush of pleasure ride high in her cheeks. He knew Dara would never get involved with Dagan, he belonged to Kefira, no matter how rocky their relationship. But...in that moment when he'd seen red, his logic hadn't bothered to mention that.

His anger flowed away and his mind searched desperately for a way to remove the ice from Dara's beautiful cat green eyes. He took Dara's hand in his own, the olive of his skin a striking contrast to Dara's creamy white. "Dara, I'm sorry. Can we start this conversation over?" He feathered small circles over the back of her hand with his thumb and hid a smile when her heartbeat sped up and her breathing deepened. *Sometimes my vampire powers come in handy.*

Her pink tongue darted out to wet her bottom lip and James bit back a groan. "James, I think we need to clear the air between us. Lately, you seem to think that you can order me around. I'm not your employee." She slowly slid her hand from his grasp and James had a sudden vision of her slowly sliding her hand over his bare skin. His erection pressed uncomfortably against his slacks and he shifted, hoping Dara didn't notice his discomfort.

Her eyes lost some of their ice and she studied him a moment before continuing. "I'm a grown woman, and I've been taking care of myself for nine centuries." One corner of her lush mouth curved. "I don't suddenly need a vampire babysitter."

Without thinking, he recaptured her hand and brought it to his lips, her warm skin pulsing with life. His tongue darted out between his lips to taste her skin as he completed the kiss and she gasped, her eyes wide, her lips parted. His vampire senses rejoiced as the smell of her arousal flooded the air around him, making his erection throb.

"My apologies, Dara. I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions with you and Dagan. I was just..."

"What conclusions?" Her voice was cool and low. Dara pulled her hand back and crossed her arms over her chest, her icy wall a daunting defense and almost as menacing as any master vampire James had ever met.

James' mind whirled as he frantically searched for what to say. How did he have her thoroughly aroused one moment and angry and cold the next? "I...well. What I mean is..."

"What you mean is, you came in here to accuse me of stealing my sister's lover and making advances toward one of patients. That's sick!" Her voice was soft and low, but Dagan heard the unmistakable sharp edge beneath her words.

"No, I didn't think..."

Dara glared up at him, her green eyes glittering with ice. "No, apparently you didn't." She brushed past him and left before James could say anything further.

"Is it safe to come back in now?"

James turned to see Dagan, now fully dressed, in the doorway, his skin pale and clammy.

"Of course. I'm sorry, we didn't mean to chase you out of your room."

"Would you like to have a seat?" Dagan sat down heavily on the bed.

James huffed out a breath and sat, confusion still swirling through his mind. "When did I lose control of that entire conversation?"

"As soon as a woman was involved. It's even worse when you fall in love with them."

James stiffened in his seat. "I never said..."

"You didn't have to. Anyone with eyes can see you've got the hots for her. I feel for you. Loving one of the gargoyles isn't only dangerous at times, but frustrating as well. Not only are they women, which is confusing enough, but they could bench press tractors and have the ear of the Almighty. Talk about pressure."

James couldn't help but laugh at Dagan's astute description. But the Paladin was right. James found it interesting that such a delicate and beautiful woman could bring an ancient master vampire to his knees. Yet she had, and he'd gladly stay there for eternity if she was the prize at the end.

"So I take it she doesn't know?"

James tilted his head back and closed his eyes. "I'm too embroiled in the prophesy to complicate things further. Besides, after my relationship with her sister I'd be a fool..."

"Awkward," Dagan supplied.

James smiled. "Something like that." He sat forward in his seat. "I'd appreciate it if you'd keep this between us. And I'm glad that you and Kefira have come to an understanding. I hated seeing her so hurt."

Dagan nodded. "I didn't know the memory implant would manifest as a lost baby. There's no way I can ever make that up to her."

Unease trickled down James' spine and settled in an icy pool. "I know what you mean, I've had to live with her thinking she lost that baby for a very long time while feigning ignorance. They did lose something precious to them—their sister gargoyles, but you need to remind yourself Kefira and her sisters agreed to this before their memories were erased."

Dagan huffed out a breath. "You're right, but when I see the pain in her eyes, it's hard to remember that." He looked up to meet James' gaze. "But I think we have a bigger problem right now. Fi is starting to remember the other gargoyle clan. Deda and Dara don't, but when

Fi told me about the baby, her memory began to fragment and she mentioned seeing another gargoyle clan."

James set his jaw. "I'll talk to Ariel and ensure she doesn't know." He sighed and scrubbed his hands over his face. "Let's hope they don't get suspicious. Keeping a secret like this was hard enough all these centuries. If they start digging into it, there will be no way to contain it."

"It's going to be a long hard road. Too bad we can't tell Logan, we may need all the help we can get."

"I'll ask Gabriel for advice on that. Maybe we *should* invite Logan and have him bring a bottle of Jack Daniels. Now that I can drink, this is the perfect opportunity. The men in the house need to stick together."

Kefira ran until her sides ached and her legs screamed, then she collapsed on the grassy ground in between a large cluster of black and white cows. They mooed at the invasion, but then went back to cropping grass. "If only men would mind their own business as well as you do," she told them. They ignored her.

She lay on the grass, looking up into a canopy of green leafy trees, while her breathing returned to normal. She really liked Texas. The climate, the dozens of shades of green, the rich smells of earth, and the unmistakable Texas patriotism everyone from this state claimed as their birthright. Besides that, it was the first place she'd ever truly been able to call home. When they were still in service to the Almighty, they moved around constantly. She realized with a shock that she actually liked having a place to call home. In fact, she used to fantasize about it, all those long years that she mooned over Dagan from afar. Her thoughts suddenly turned dark as she remembered his reaction to the news she'd killed their baby. Sharp pain in her chest caused her to press her hands over her heart trying to alleviate the discomfort. She knew gargoyles couldn't have heart attacks, but broken hearts were still fair game.

The wind shifted and every hair on her body stood on end and a neck ruffling sensation caused her to shiver. Pure evil...and something else she couldn't define.

The cows raised their heads and after sniffing the wind, they mooed and trotted away from the tree line, out toward the open pasture. She bolted upright and jogged along with the herd, trying to use them as cover while she searched the edge of the trees for any sign of movement. A stronger blast of wind whistled by, whipping her hair against her face in stinging lashes and bringing with it the unmistakable tingle of sexual energy. "Damn, vamp *and* succubus. Looks like I'm about to meet the things that attacked Dagan."

Rustling from the trees caught her attention and when she looked closer, she saw...herself. "Now you're really losing it, Kefira!" Before she could step forward to investigate, the figure vanished, and in the next instant, several searing pains shot through her stomach and chest far to the left of where she'd been looking. Suddenly, she found herself pinned up against a frightened stampeding cow. She tried to pull away, but she was stuck tight. She looked down to see at least a dozen arrows sticking out from her chest and stomach. *Well, that explains why I'm stuck to a cow. I'd almost rather go back to the heartbreak.*

There had to be massive internal damage to the animal, and yet, its survival instinct still prevailed. As the cow's moos turned into loud angry moans, it ran, taking her with it. Every jolt of hooves against the ground, speared agony through her. Instinctively, she turned an

inch layer of the front of her body to stone, but until the arrows were removed, she couldn't heal.

And what if I'm pregnant again? What right do I have to kill another baby? Another round of disjointed memories flowed through her. Faces of other gargoyles, and a large oasis with a gargoyle fountain standing guard. *Damn, I must be losing more blood than I thought!*

The extra weight from her turning partially to stone slowed the progress of the frightened bovine, but still didn't allow Kefira any purchase to extricate herself. *"Shit, I'm going to die pinned to a freaking cow!"*

Dagan distinctly heard Kefira's voice echo inside his head. "James, Fi's in trouble." He jumped out of bed, ignoring the disorientation that came from standing too fast.

To James' credit, he didn't question how he knew. He reached out a hand to steady Dagan. "Where and what's wrong? Tell me."

Dagan reached out to steady himself against the chair. "I heard something about her being afraid of dying pinned to a cow. She must be delirious."

James' brow furrowed. "Knowing Kefira, I don't doubt she's out there right now pinned to some poor cow."

Before Dagan could reply, Dara burst into the room. "Fi's in trouble. Odeda is on her way out there, but you take it easy or I will tie you to the bed!" She pointed a threatening finger toward Dagan.

Dagan ignored James' growl at Deda's comment, and ran out the door and down the stairs. Dara stopped him at the bottom, handing him his boots. "You have to have your shoes on. Grab a horse from the corral, we're flying over."

"What about James?"

"He has to stay with Ariel—he's the protector of the child. His duty lies with them."

Dagan didn't like this news, but he understood. Hopping out the back door, he pulled on his boots and looked up to see Logan already mounted on a black stallion and holding the reins to a bay mare. He nodded his thanks and swung into the saddle, even as he urged his horse into a full out gallop.

Kefira's life force flowed out before him like a golden-red path of energy, and he followed it instinctively. He didn't look back to see if Logan kept pace with him, all his thoughts centered on Kefira.

"I'm coming, Fi." He prayed his frantic thoughts would reach her. Never before had he been included on the psychic communications between the sisters. Maybe this was just a fluke.

The unmistakable sound of wings cutting through the air caught his attention and he glanced up to see Dara and Odeda headed in the same direction as he and Logan. When he came to a fork in the path, he veered sharply right following his senses, while her sisters went left. When he crested the hill, he blinked hard to make sure he wasn't hallucinating.

A cow brayed loudly while bolting around the pasture in obvious distress, a trail of blood left in its wake. Pinned to its side was Kefira. His heart froze in his chest until he realized her life force still pulsed around her like a shimmering shield. Logan rode past him, loosening a lasso from his saddle. Before Dagan could recover his senses, Logan's rope

reached out like a greedy hand and closed around the poor animal's neck, stopping its forward motion.

Grateful, Dagan vaulted from his horse toward Kefira. Dozens of arrows protruded from her chest and stomach and streaks of blood stained her shirt. However, her skin resembled nothing but pure white marble. "Thank God she turned to stone, it probably saved her life." He heard her sisters land behind them, but paid them no attention.

"Fi?" He gently traced her cheek with his thumb. Her stone skin cool and smooth under his touch. "Speak to me, Fi. Are you all right?"

The stone on her face rippled as it returned to warm supple flesh under his fingers, and her large blue eyes snapped open to glare at him. "No, I'm not freaking all right! Do I look all right to you? Get me off this damned cow!" Her outburst caused the captive cow to bolt forward and Logan had to hold the lasso tight to keep it in one place. Odeda moved toward the animal's head and began to stroke its nose and speak softly to it.

Kefira glared up at Dagan and he couldn't help but smile in relief. If she was feisty enough to argue, then she truly would be fine. He took another dubious look at the arrows. Well, maybe fine wasn't the right word. "Did you see what did this?" He started to reach out to touch an arrow, but Dara slapped his hand away.

"I saw...me. At least I saw someone who looked just like me, and then suddenly I was going on a cow ride, but sidesaddle. It was both vamp and succubus though."

Dagan exchanged a worried glance with Dara. Apparently, the rumors from the vampires had just been confirmed. "You say it looked like you?"

"I know it sounds crazy, but I could've sworn it was me, over at the tree line. Then I smelled vampire *and* succubus."

Dagan's blood turned to ice. "That's what attacked me on the way to the ranch. I never got a look at them, but I got the sense they were both vamp and succubus as well as a few other things. Apparently, I wasn't as wrong as I thought."

"I'm glad you feel better about it, now can you all get me off this cow? This hurts like a bitch!" Kefira hissed as Dara moved an arrow, causing the cow to kick his legs angrily.

Dara turned to Logan. "I'm sorry, but we're going to have to put the cow down, or we'll never be able to get Kefira loose. The injuries will probably be fatal anyway, and it seems to be suffering. Deda and I didn't see anything else in the area, so we should be safe here for now."

Logan laid a comforting hand against the black and white hide and then nodded and walked back toward his horse. He pulled a revolver from one of the saddlebags before returning.

"Wait." Dagan stepped forward. "Let me calm the cow while you get Fi free and then I'll heal them both."

Logan eyed Dagan doubtfully. "Make yourself useful, Paladin."

Dagan ignored the comment and took Odeda's place at the cow's head. He placed his palms on each side of the beast's head, the coarse short hair tickling his palms. He closed his eyes and let his healing power spill outward. First, he absorbed the pain and the animal relaxed under his hands. The pain burned up his arms and he allowed it to flow through his body and down into the ground. Next, he took a deep breath and concentrated on relaxing the

cow's muscles. Without breaking contact he said, "Deda, help me lay him down, gently on his side."

As the cow's legs went limp, Odeda guided him softly to the grassy earth. Dagan sent a suggestion for a deep sleep that would keep it from feeling more pain while they extricated Fi.

Dara returned to her patient, shooing Dagan away. "Fi, go ahead and turn to stone and I'll try and pull the arrows out. It should reduce the damage to your body."

"No."

Dagan's brow furrowed and fear snaked through him. "What do you mean no? Fi, you have to heal." He pushed past Dara, his mind raced to find a way past her stubborn reserves.

"I've already killed one baby by turning to stone, what if I'm pregnant again? Turning on the surface is one thing, but an entire turn to stone might just repeat history."

The pain in her eyes tore through Dagan and for one irrational moment he considered telling her the truth—vow or no vow.

Odeda pushed forward, her almond shaped eyes glittering with anger. "Damn it, Fi. You think logically and you'll realize the timing's all wrong for you to get pregnant."

"Yeah, that really helped Ariel, didn't it?" Kefira quipped, referring to when God changed her cycle so she would get pregnant with the child of blood.

Deda glowered over her, anger flowing off her in waves. "You freaking stubborn assed stone brain! If God suddenly goes to all that trouble, I doubt She'll let you lose it because you were pinned to a damned cow."

Conflicting emotions flowed over Kefira's face, and pain etched deep into her blue eyes. Finally, she nodded and Dagan let out the breath he'd been holding.

Dara pushed him aside, examining Kefira's wounds. "Turn to stone, Fi. Now. You're losing a lot of blood."

"Yeah, but it will make it a bitch to get the arrows out!" Kefira scowled, but dutifully turned to stone.

Fascinated, Dagan watched as the white marble flowed over her skin until she resembled a beautiful but tragic Greek statue.

Dagan took a post on the other side of the cow ready to heal the animal as the arrows came out. He knew Fi could heal herself, but the cow had no such talent.

Stepping forward, Dara rested one foot on the sleeping cow for leverage, she grabbed an arrow with both hands and yanked. The motion only moved it partway, so she had to continue to tug until it pulled free. What seemed like hours later, two dozen long arrow shafts covered with blood lay in a pile next to them.

"Can I go ahead and heal now?"

Dagan jolted as her voice sounded again inside his head. Dara shot him a questioning glance. "You just heard her speak inside your head, didn't you?"

"Yes, that's the second time. The first time was when she said she was going to die pinned to a freaking cow."

Dara and Odeda stood staring at him as if he'd just declared himself God Almighty. Odeda recovered first. "It's got to be the prophesy."

Logan pushed forward into the group. "I'm a part of the prophesy and I can only hear Ariel inside my head. Thank God I don't have to hear all of you." The last he added under his breath.

Rocking back on his heels, Dagan rubbed his chin between his thumb and forefinger. "I wonder why. Logan, you're entirely human and I've been granted some supernatural powers as a Paladin and my oath as protector. I'm surprised both of us can hear..."

Logan shook his head. "Our respective gargoyles?" He smiled. "Guess again. I have ancient vampire blood running through my veins. I'm more supernatural than you are."

Stunned, Dagan stared for a moment as everything fell into place. Logan's firm jaw, mouth and even some of his mannerisms, reminded him very much of a certain dark vampire. "Damn! What all did I miss?"

"More than you know," Dara told him with a wry twist of her lips. "Maybe that will teach you not to take a vacation from your duties next time."

On that ominous note, the group fell silent and Dagan took the opportunity to finish healing the cow. When he was finished, he implanted a strong suggestion to sleep for a few hours and then wake refreshed.

He rose and brushed the grass from his knees and looked down at Kefira whose healing was almost complete. Stone flowed away and left only skin and ripped clothing in its wake. On instinct, he knelt next to her and lifted her gently off the side of the sleeping animal before her transformation could complete. When she opened her eyes to look at him, he'd already mounted his horse and started for home, Kefira's body held safely against him.

He knew the minute she realized where she was, because she began to flail wildly, causing his horse to prance nervously.

Chapter Six

Kefira lungs filled with the unmistakable scent of Dagan. The spicy male scent was flavored with the rich scent of earth and cow. She remembered his scent clinging to her hair even after she'd run from him in Romania—the same scent that clung to her skin and hair this morning before the cow incident. Memories triggered by the smell assaulted her, both new and old. Then she remembered his reaction to her news this morning. She couldn't allow herself to get too close to him. He'd made it clear through his actions that he didn't care about her or any their lost baby. If she gave in now, it would only be more painful when he left her again. She pushed against him to right herself and put distance between them.

"Hold still." When she continued to struggle, he raised his voice. "Damn it, Fi! Hold still. You can be angry at me later, but right now I just want to get you safely back to the ranch house."

His words reached her and she ceased struggling against him. "How did you hear me earlier?" Her mouth was suddenly dry as she remembered how Logan began to hear Ariel's strong thoughts once the prophecy came into play. She shielded her thoughts much as she did when she wanted privacy from her sisters. *Does that mean I will truly turn to evil? Then I definitely can't let myself get involved with Dagan again, I'll only endanger him—even if he is an ass.*

"I heard your thoughts," Dagan said, obviously oblivious to her recent ones. "I don't know how or why, but that's how I knew you were in trouble."

She barely heard his words as the ramifications caused a large load of cement to take up residence inside her stomach.

"I need to get you back to the house so Dara can look you over. And then you can tell us more about what happened." There was too much going on, she needed time to think, but she knew she wouldn't have a moments peace until she let Dara examine her. So, she relented and decided to save her dignity. "Can I at least *ride* the horse and not be slung over him like a sack of feed?"

Dagan's strong hands gripped her waist and she suddenly found herself straddling him, her legs resting over his. His hazel eyes bored into hers and she had to remind herself to breathe. She found herself mesmerized, unable to move, unable to do anything, but drown in the sensations of being so near Dagan. If she didn't know better, she'd think him a vampire using mind tricks on her. No, this was her own traitorous body and hormones kicked into high gear. Or maybe it was the undercurrent of restrained power that always clung to him. Or both.

The heat from his body seared through their jeans, heating her blood and numbing her thoughts. It seemed so natural for him to lean down and capture her lips while he threaded his large fingers through the hair at the back of her neck. The hot electric touch of his lips against hers dropped her into a world she'd craved for centuries—a world that consisted of only Dagan.

Of their own volition, her arms wound around his neck while her tongue danced with his. Hungry and greedy, she threaded her fingers through his silky hair, so she could devour his mouth in turn. He tasted wild and spicy and she growled low in her throat in satisfaction. When he pressed a large hand to her back to pull her closer, she wriggled shamelessly closer until she pressed against the large erection bulging the front of his jeans. A sudden flood of

moisture and an unmistakable ache between her legs made her burn for more, right here on horseback.

The sudden erotic visual cleared her senses and reminded her just what she was doing. She had to keep her distance from Dagan, for both their sakes.

She pulled back immediately and pushed against his chest hard. "Let me down!"

Hurt flickered in the depths of his eyes, but he quickly smothered it and released her. She couldn't gracefully jump down from such a tall horse, so she willed her wings to appear to slow her descent. However, in the next instant, her face painfully met the dirt.

"Fi!" Dagan was next to her in an instant, turning her over and cradling her in his lap.

Stunned, she didn't resist. "My wings. I couldn't make them materialize. I think the first arrow got me through the tattoo." Fear pulsed through her, reminding her of the night Gabriel gave them the power to glamour their wings. What if she'd permanently damaged her wings and she was never able to fly again? Horror and dread flowed through her, but she pushed them away brutally. She couldn't...wouldn't lose something that was such an integral part of her.

Dara pushed forward and crouched down to examine her patient. "Hold her up so I can see." Dagan, Logan and Odeda held her, while Dara ripped open Kefira's shirt to confirm the damage. "Pierced right through the middle of the fairy wings tattoo. You still have a wound, but it should've healed when you turned to stone." She turned to Dagan. "Can you heal this?"

His brow furrowed. "I'll try, but it's the first time I've ever tried to heal a gargoyle—they've never needed it before." He placed his hand over the wound and closed his eyes, reaching out with his healing powers. But they only sparked and fizzled causing Fi to groan in pain." He met Dara's eyes and shook his head.

"I'll have to call Gabriel."

Odeda looked worried, but as usual, covered it with sarcasm. "That's one more thing that we've learned on the job, I guess. Damage to the tattoo can affect the wings. But I'm curious why it hasn't before now."

"What was the first thing you learned on the job?" Dagan asked.

Kefira stiffened in his arms and then bolted to her feet, ignoring Dara's protests. A painful fist squeezed her heart until she thought it would burst inside her chest.

Dagan stepped toward her and she held her hands out to keep him away. "That turning to stone can have disastrous side effects." She glared at Dagan and crossed her arms over her chest. "We can't be together Dagan. Don't ask me to explain it, we just can't."

"Fi, I know I didn't react well earlier, but I didn't have much time to come to terms with it. I wasn't here for you before and now I am. Give me a chance."

She shook her head and ran toward the house, a slow burning sensation flowed through her along with a sudden premonition that chilled her to the bone.

It's begun...

Jeslyn smiled and licked her lips as she read the fear in the cowboy's eyes. He continued to plunge inside her, pain etched into every line of his rugged sun-browned face. She spread her legs wider and reached around to grab his ass in both hands, pulling him in farther with his every thrust.

"I can't stop." His voice turned pleading. "Help me, please..."

He'd already begun to thin from his repeated releases stealing anything inside his body it could break down—blood, organs, skin. He was literally dissolving from the inside out and would continue to do so until there was nothing left but a gory shell of the man.

She ground her hips against him hard as he continued to fuck her. "We've only been going for two days. My last meal lasted for a week and a half." At the mention of the word "meal," his eyes widened with sudden understanding, but due to her nature and her thrall, he continued to thrust inside her.

"I do hope you can at least make it till the end of the week." She stopped his annoying talking by pulling him down for a searing kiss. At the first touch of her tongue against his, his ardor speared higher and he pumped into her faster. Jeslyn growled in the back of her throat as wonderful sustenance seeped into her every pore. Moisture rushed between her thighs—a healing substance that would keep his cock healthy and whole until she was done with him. His breath came in short pants and he increased his speed. Then he came inside her...again...and her mind reeled as a surge of power zinged through her body.

She looked up to find her three daughters standing at the end of the bed, watching with hungry interest. With a frustrated curse, she rolled over, so she straddled the cowboy, the separation of their torsos making a wet sucking sound as his partially digested body peeled away from her. She looked down at her breasts and stomach, which appeared to be covered in a gelatin-like substance and watched as her body absorbed every last drop. Her skin glowed and she admired the way her veins shimmered just under the surface, dark and full of life-giving energy. She concentrated, turned on her thrall full force and told him, "Sleep." Obediently, he collapsed back onto the bed, instantly asleep.

Then she turned an angry gaze toward her daughters. "What the hell are you doing here? You knew I was feeding." She stood, comfortable with her nudity, but refused to pull on her silk robe since every cell of her body would be ultra sensitive from the recent burst of power. Even her favorite silk robe would feel like sandpaper against her sensitive skin and nipples right now.

Sarah stepped forward, her red hair in a sexy disarray of fiery curls. "We injured Kefira, mother."

"What do you mean 'we'?" Rebecca pushed forward, her chocolate brown eyes flashing with temper. "We only wanted to go observe them. But when Sarah saw Kefira in the pasture alone, she decided to try and kill her."

Jeslyn rubbed her forehead, her fresh power no match for the irritating responsibilities of new parenthood. "I told you all to steer clear of the gargoyles, did I not? I only wanted you to entice the ranch hands."

Sarah bristled under the reprimand, and raised her chin defiantly. "We've snacked on almost all of the ranch hands except the main one—Jeb. He proved too strong for our thrall—even combined."

"But that doesn't explain why you revealed yourselves to the gargoyles!" As soon as she realized she'd screamed the last sentence, she closed her eyes and took a calming breath. A feral smile crawled across her face before she grabbed Sarah around the throat with one hand and squeezed. The smaller woman clawed at her vice-like grip leaving bloody furrows along her skin. No matter, it would heal as soon as she digested more of the cowboy.

She held her daughter's face close to her own, oddly pleased that Sarah refused to flinch or cower. "My orders will be obeyed, daughter, or I will kill you myself. Your sisters will take up your slack and your brother will still be able to take his place as the child of blood." After another violent shake, she stared into Sarah's defiant gaze. "Do I make myself clear?"

A long pause stretched between them, and Jeslyn patiently waited. It mattered not to her either way. Obedience or death—either would suit her purposes. Finally, Sarah swallowed, the movement of her throat constricted by Jeslyn's tight grip. "Yes, mother, perfectly clear. I will...obey."

Pleasure flowed through Jeslyn that her offspring had enough pride to refuse to cower before her. Weakness wouldn't suit her purposes either and before all others but herself, her daughters would have free reign.

Loosening her grip suddenly, she dropped Sarah, who crumpled to the floor before pushing back to her feet—glaring at Jeslyn with barely concealed fury.

"Now that we've settled that, let's move on." Jeslyn crossed her arms under her bare breasts and gestured toward Naomi with a regal toss of her chin. "Tell me, does the gargoyle still live?"

Naomi's icy green eyes lowered as if she couldn't bring herself to say the next words. "She does, my mother. But she was gravely wounded. Two dozen arrows through her, one of them contaminated with our blood."

"Interesting." Jeslyn paced back and forth beside the bed, trying to think of a way to mitigate the damage. "Yet, she did not die? The poison from our blood is usually fatal to most. I know she's supernatural, but I had hoped the gargoyles did not retain that much resistance to our dangers."

Sarah held up her hand, a long bloody furrow etched along the top of her left index finger. "I loaded an arrow too fast and cut myself. I thought the blood would kill her. But we did see that she wasn't able to heal completely. She fell from her horse where she rode with the Paladin."

The mention of Dagan caught Jeslyn's attention anew. *I really should've gotten rid of the father and kept the son all those years ago. Then I would've still received the title I sought as well as a more interesting bedmate for my charade.* She waved away her regrets and focused on the present. "Why did she ride with the Paladin? Was she so near death?"

Naomi shook her head. "No, mother. She straddled the Paladin and looked as if she'd take him right there on the horse, but then she pushed him away and fell to the ground. That's when they discovered the wound on her back hadn't healed when she'd turned to stone."

The closest approximation a succubus could come to jealousy burned through her. She'd broken Dagan in, been his first and hadn't even taken full sustenance from him. Of course, she'd been trying desperately to carve a niche into human society and the nobility at that time. Somehow, it'd seemed counterproductive to her plan to digest everyone she used to gain power. And now he'd gone over the enemy, fucking one of those useless gargoyles. There was no sustenance in that, no power. She struggled to see what Dagan got out of such a relationship.

"Girls, I think it's time I paid a visit to Jeb and ensure our control of the bunkhouse and ranch hands is complete...since your powers were not enough to cow him." She enjoyed the hiss of anger that issued from all three women. She stepped toward her armoire and then

turned back when she realized all three women still stood next to the bed where her unfinished meal slept peacefully.

"Oh, and girls. If you lay one finger on my cowboy, I will give you to the local kiss of vampires to do with as they see fit." A small surge of curiosity snaked through her. Her girls were half vampire and she'd seen them eat, she shuddered at the memory. Only cum was meant to be taken orally, not blood. But she remembered Nicholas used to enjoy a good bite during sex. She shook her head, bringing herself back to the issue at hand. A kiss of vampires would see the women as a threat due to their dual natures and would kill them—painfully. The threat had, for lack of a better word—bite.

Sarah stepped forward. "You would sacrifice us, the master race, for a simple act of meal sharing?"

An evil smile curved Jeslyn's lips. "Remember this, girls, and remember it well. I don't share...with anyone. If you're the master race, then prove it. Be smart and find your own food."

Jeslyn adjusted her bustier, ensuring her breasts were displayed to their best advantage before she stepped through the front doors of Whiskey River—a local country bar known for its custom brewed beer, cover bands and horny cowboys. Always a plus for a creature of her particular...tastes. She smiled at her own pun. It was also a necessity for someone of her abilities to remain familiar with all the local hunting grounds...er...hangouts.

Every pair of eyes in the place swung toward her, some curious, some envious and several filled with lust—music to her eyes and to her gnawing hunger. She hadn't digested enough of her captive cowboy to slake her burning need. A smile curved her lips as she promised herself that her wayward daughters would continue to pay for that until her anger cooled. She flipped her dark hair over her shoulder, so as not to hide her breasts. *Oh well, my thrall is at its best when I'm not fully sated.*

She basked in the attention a moment, inhaling to ensure the view was everything it could be. When she ambled toward the bar, she swung her hips provocatively, each step calculated to display her long stiletto-clad legs to perfection. After more than a thousand years, she knew exactly how to exhibit herself to catch whatever prey she hunted.

Several men started toward her in unison and she dialed back her thrall just a touch so it only included the dark giant sitting on the end barstool downing whiskey shots. He tossed back another shot as she neared, his almost black eyes studied her as she approached. She smelled his lust, succulent perfume on the back of her tongue. But interestingly enough, he held it in check well—either from the effects of too much whiskey or pure male stubbornness. Her nipples hardened and she licked her glossy lips at even the small challenge he presented. *After all, it's been so long since anyone even offered me even token resistance. Not since Dagan...*

"Hello, cowboy. Would you like to buy me a drink?"

"The name's Jeb, ma'am. I'd be happy to." He stood none too steadily and gallantly pulled out the barstool next to him so she could sit.

She crossed her legs knowing just how far the black leather mini skirt rode up and exactly how much Jeb saw, since she never bothered with underwear. "I'm Jeslyn." She held out her hand to shake and packed some extra thrall into her touch when his large work-

roughened hand gripped hers carefully. The front of his jeans tightened noticeably and she fought not to purr deep inside her throat—a reaction to cum not yet tasted.

Jeb cleared his throat, still nobly attempting to hide his reaction to her. “What are you drinkin’, Jeslyn?” He made her name sound like a soft Texas caress.

She traced a line along his beefy forearm with a French manicured fingernail, enjoying the way he shuddered under her touch. “Whiskey.” Reaching in front of him, she picked up the bottle of Jack Daniels and sloshed some into his shot glass. “I’m a simple woman, with simple tastes.” She threw back her head, downing the burning liquid, knowing it would flow harmlessly through her system. A perk of being a succubus—anything could be ingested, but only seminal and body fluids were digested. Too bad she needed Jeb for information and not for dinner. He’d provide sustenance enough for an entire month with all those muscles. Wonderfully, muscles took longer to digest and were wonderful to look at while the man wasted away, fucking her for days on end.

Jeb chuckled at her enthusiastic drinking. “Would you care for another, Jeslyn?”

“I would. And maybe some information?” She pursed her lips into a practiced sexy pout.

He refilled her glass. “What kind of information, darlin’?” His manners were still in tact, but she sensed a slight reserve of suspicion now. She’d have to be careful or he’d pull back from her completely.

“I’m looking to buy some prime horseflesh and someone told me you were the man to talk to.”

Jeb’s smile widened until she thought his beefy face would split in two. “You’ve come to the right place, Jeslyn.” He continued to say her name like some exotic confection melting on his tongue. “I work on the McAllister ranch and I’m in charge of the stables. What type of horse are you looking for?”

She licked her lips slowly, enjoying the way his eyes tracked every move. “I’m not quite sure. Do you think I could come out to the ranch and take a look?”

Jeb downed a shot of whiskey and smiled. “I think something can be arranged.”

She knew her smile turned feral and she leaned close, allowing her breasts to brush up against his massive chest. “Why don’t we go now and we can take a nice moonlight stroll under the stars?” *And once I no longer need you for information, I’ll enjoy digesting you.*

“Stop touching it!” Kefira snarled against the back of the chair she’d straddled so Dara could examine her wound. “It freaking hurts!”

Dara tsked. “I expect it does. But if we don’t find out why it didn’t heal, then you might be hurting a whole lot more, so stop complaining and let me work.”

Kefira sobered at that thought. “I’m sorry, Dara. I’m just frustrated. Maybe we should try and call Gabriel.” Guilt flowed through her at suggesting Dara couldn’t handle her care. After all, she owed Dara her life thousands of times over. But even her quiet sister admitted there were limits to what she could do.

“I already tried, but he hasn’t answered yet.” She handed Kefira a small piece of wood.

Kefira turned to face her. “What’s this for?”

Dara winced, her expression apologetic. “The wound reeks of evil. I thought I’d try holy water.”

A cold sweat broke out all over Dara's body and not just from the recent prophesy that she could turn evil. She'd been infected by an evil wound hundreds of years ago and she still remembered the agony of having holy water splashed onto it. It had healed her – after four days of painful applications. Dagan held her the entire time, offering strength and comfort. But this time was different. Even though she knew he stood on the other side of the door, she couldn't risk letting him get too close. If the prophesy came to fruition, Dagan as well as her sisters would be in danger. The thought of anything happening to any of those she cared for sliced through her more painfully than the holy water to come. If she could protect them by giving herself to whatever whims the prophesy might hold, she'd gladly do it.

A slow burning throughout her body reminded her of what she feared most – that she was now infected with evil and would fulfill the prophesy. She shuddered at the thought, but even the most inexplicable parts of the prophesy had come to pass in the past. There was no reason to believe this time would be any different. Her temper boiled at the unfairness of it all.

"Shit! If I ever get a hold of that me look-alike, I'm going to turn her inside out for this!" She nodded at Dara before turning back to face the chair and biting down on the wood. She gripped the sides of the oak chair with both hands to ensure she didn't flail her arms and accidentally hurt Dara.

"Ready?"

Kefira nodded and closed her eyes. The first trickle of holy water hit healthy skin, a split second of cold tingling, but then it splashed against the wound and agony speared through her entire body. She'd had a red-hot poker speared into her flesh before, and she fleetingly wished for that level of pain back in exchange for this one.

The smell of acrid smoke rose in the room, choking her. Another splash of holy water notched up the pain even further and she ripped two hand-sized holes in the back of the chair. She spit out the wood before she could bite through it and tried to pant through the last of the pain. Nausea threatened, and small black dots danced in front of her vision.

"Fi, are you all right?"

Kefira swallowed hard before answering. "Finish it," she growled through clenched teeth.

Dara's comforting hand on her shoulder gave her strength and reprieve for a moment. But then, the burning pain shot through her spine again and a feral scream filled her ears. In the midst of hazy blackness, she realized the awful sound came from her. Sweat dripped down her forehead to fall on her hands, and she knew she was close to passing out. *What the hell? I never passed out last time.* "Something's wrong, Dara. Help me..." Then the blackness took her.

Chapter Seven

Dagan burst into the room, pulling the door from its hinges, in time to see Kefira slump to the floor, her back still smoking from the application of what he assumed to be holy water. He cradled her still form in his lap, careful not to touch the open wound. When his hands closed on warm flesh, only then did he realize she was nude from the waist up. Despite the fear spiraling through him, his body reacted and he cursed under his breath. "Dara, what the hell happened?"

"I tried everything I knew. Holy water was my last option." Dara capped the jar of holy water with short angry movements.

"Oh, God." He'd held Kefira for days the last time she'd been treated with holy water. She'd screamed in pain, wept, cursed and scratched bloody furrows in his arms, but he hadn't left her side. He turned his frustration on Dara. "Why didn't you tell me? I would've been here..." He trailed off as he realized Kefira hadn't wanted him here. He knew her memories of the lost baby and his reaction this morning stood between them. Not for the first time, he cursed the promise he made to protect the gargoyle secret. He ground his teeth, and swore he would be strong for Kefira. He knew she would be in his place, and he hadn't come this far to give up.

"I'm sorry, Dagan." Dara's soft green gaze had turned to ice, a protection she often used from harsh words and painful feelings.

He heard true pity in her tone and that alone told him how lost he was still to Kefira, and even her sisters. He looked down to study the still-smoking wound marring Fi's iridescent tattoo. The skin around it burned an angry red, but the wound itself seemed even bigger than before. "Dara, look, it's growing."

"I know. I didn't want to say anything until I was sure." She knelt to examine it, and then met Dagan's gaze, her furrowed brows showing her frustration. "The holy water only seemed to slow it down a bit. I was at least hoping for some signs of healing."

"Let me try healing her again. It can't hurt at this point."

Dara nodded and stood to give him some room.

He placed his hand over the still smoking wound and closed his eyes, opening his senses. The wound reeked of evil and again, his healing powers fizzled before even beginning. He bit back a frustrated sigh and allowed his senses to reach out toward Kefira's mind. Maybe now was a good time to repair her fragmenting memory.

He allowed his mind to merge with hers and gently replaced the memory block he'd done on each of the gargoyles long ago. However, as soon as he pulled away, he knew it had crumbled again. Something was causing it to break down, slowly, as if it were being eaten away with acid—or evil. He frowned and slowly opened his eyes, meeting Dara's worried frown before he shook his head to tell her his healing hadn't worked.

A large "pop" echoed through the room, followed by a sudden overwhelming scent of cinnamon.

Dagan waved a hand in front of his face, desperately trying to breathe in non-cinnamon scented air, his eyes watering from the onslaught.

"Sorry..." Gabriel said sheepishly. "When I rush, the scent sometimes overpowers the room."

Dagan placed a fist over his heart and bowed his head, Kefira still cradled in his lap. *You'd think he'd have mastered that by now.*

"Not even I was made perfect, Noble Warrior," Gabriel admonished.

When Dara raised her head from a similar salute to Dagan's, she automatically walked over to open a window and let some fresh air in. "It's going to smell like a bakery in here."

Gabriel ignored the comment and knelt down to examine Kefira's wound. He shook his head before raising his gaze to meet both of theirs in turn. "It has begun, then."

Worry turned in Dagan's stomach as the angel's halo of light dimmed slightly—an obvious sign of distress.

"What has begun?" Dara and Dagan asked in unison.

Gabriel laid a gentle hand on Kefira's head before rising and facing them both. "A terrible part of the prophesy. We'll need Alonna."

Giggling which sounded more like dozens of tinkling bells sounded out of thin air and then the small fairy materialized behind it. As usual, Alonna, the fairy of prophesy, was completely nude and resembled an X-rated version of a Barbie doll come to life, only this Barbie had shimmering wings and was extremely anatomically correct. Her long blonde hair flowed around her like a living thing and her liquid lavender eyes, danced with mischief. "Who calls me?" she asked, her voice also like tinkling bells.

"Alonna, I fear I have grave news." Gabriel gestured toward Kefira's wound.

Alonna turned and finally caught sight of Dagan. "Dagan!" Still fluttering a few feet off the floor, her tiny arms crossed over her generous cleavage while she glared at him.

"What did you call me?"

"Dagan. That is your name isn't it?"

He sputtered in shock. "Of course it is, but you've never called me anything but 'man-thing.' Not for centuries." *Just when I think I understand women, they always do something to throw me off again!*

She puffed out a frustrated breath, fluttering her tiny blonde bangs. "Well, now that Ariel married a man-thing, I can't very well call you both that, now can I? Besides, you were here first. Even though I'm still not through being angry with you for hurting my giant cousin." She shook a tiny finger at him for emphasis.

Gabriel cleared his throat, gaining Alonna's attention.

"Sorry. Let me look at Kefira's wound and see what's happened." She fluttered down to alight on Kefira's back. She took a few steps toward the wound and then turned pale. "Dear, God. It has begun."

"That's exactly what Gabriel said." Dara knelt down eye level with the little fairy. "Does someone want to tell us what's begun?"

Alonna shook her head before continuing. "There is a branch of the prophesy we hoped would never materialize. There are thousands of parts like that, which only come into play if certain other events trigger them."

Dagan ground his teeth in frustration. "With all due respect, Alonna. We need to know what this is and how it relates to Kefira."

She nodded, her miniature lips pursed in thought. "This part of the prophesy can only be heard by the men."

"You don't think we will stand aside while we are kept in the dark about our own sister!" Dara's hands clenched and unclenched in agitation as she towered over the small fairy, who didn't even wince in the face of such anger.

"All love and care for Kefira, but the prophesy is not to be heard by all. You know that better than the humans, healer." Her liquid lavender eyes held sympathy, but she didn't back down. "I can only speak with Dagan, the Dark Redeemer and the man-thing."

Dara's entire demeanor iced over—her defense mechanism of choice. She slowly looked between the angel, the fairy and Dagan before speaking through gritted teeth. "I'll get Logan and James."

"Dara..." Alonna's words caused Dara to turn, her right hand still on the doorknob. "Tell Odeda that the time has not yet come. She will understand."

Dara's eyes narrowed, but she finally nodded.

Dagan closed the door and leaned against it before reminding himself to breathe as Alonna fluttered down to stand on the end of the bed, next to Kefira's still form.

"If the unholy wound appears and can not be fought by holy means, only the Noble Warrior may save the Fire Maiden from becoming consumed by the grueling death. He must become one with her and offer his essence to heal her—body, mind and soul."

"You've got to be kidding me, right?" Logan raked his fingers through his hair, leaving it in unruly waves. "I got succubuses trying to bite off my Johnson, painful bouts with poison and near death by a mob of vampires and Dagan gets sex with Kefira?" He snorted from his perch on the arm of the overstuffed chair next to the bed. "I really got screwed in this whole prophesy thing."

"You *did* get Ariel," James reminded him.

Logan smiled and nodded looking as if he finally realized all his tribulations were worth it. "Very true. And I'd do it all again for her, but I was just pointing out his part of the prophesy seems much less...painful than mine."

Dagan wondered if it ever bothered Logan that James had been previously involved with Ariel. Not that Logan had even been born yet at the time, but knowing your father had carnal knowledge of your wife had to be a bit of an uncomfortable family moment.

Alonna continued as if she hadn't been interrupted. "The merging must happen when she chooses her path—light or dark. If he does not merge with her, her death will lead to darker paths among the prophesy. If he does, and is not accepted by the Fire Maiden in all three aspects, without her knowledge of these words, then the child of blood will perish."

"Whoever writes this stuff needs some serious help. A soap opera has more optimistic moments." Logan placed a hand gingerly over his upper thigh.

Dagan had to agree with his sentiment. "Is that what happened to your thigh? Succubus bite?"

Logan nodded and then glared at Alonna. "Yes. Take it from me, Dagan, if Alonna offers to heal you, make her promise you there will be no lasting marks left behind."

Alonna crossed her arms under her tiny perfect breasts. "Man-thing, if I realized you would be forever ungrateful for my help, I would've let the succubus poison turn you into a big glob of goo!"

"And don't be surprised if she conveniently shows up whenever you're stark naked." Logan continued to glare at Alonna.

Dagan chuckled. "I well remember Alonna's voyeuristic ways. But thanks for the advice."

"Tempted I am to send you some succubus dreams, you ungrateful man-thing!" Alonna pointed at Logan and all blood drained from the man's face. Apparently, that threat held some definite bite.

Even as he winced at his own bad pun, curiosity coursed through Dagan as to the full story behind the succubus bites, but fear for Kefira won out. "How am I supposed to fulfill this part of the prophesy with her unconscious?"

"The wording said the merging for the prophesy must happen when she chooses her path. I don't think she can do that while she's unconscious." James stood and walked toward the window to stare out into the darkness. "I've been around enough of these damned things to know when you can at least take some good out of them." He turned back to face them.

"James has a point." Logan nodded toward the vampire, an identical expression of concern etched onto each of their faces. "She'll wake up, and it seems like she will inevitably have to make a choice between light and darkness – which, in our case would seem to be good or evil."

Dagan slammed his fist against the door behind him and pushed away to pace back and forth inside the small room. "I can't ever see Fi choosing evil." He gestured to encompass Gabriel, Alonna and James. "You three have known her long enough to know that." He stopped in front of Logan. "And from your speech when I got here about how you would die for her if need be, you know it too." He ground his teeth together in frustration as an overwhelming wave of helplessness flowed through him.

James cleared his throat before speaking. "As much as I agree with you, Dagan, the prophesy has an uncanny ability to happen. Maybe not exactly in the way we fear – sometimes worse, but it always happens. I can see Kefira being confronted with the choice, but I'm with you, I believe in the end, she would persevere."

Dagan opened his mouth to protest, but James held up a hand to ward off his disagreement.

"I'm in a unique position to know how easy it is to fall into the trap of evil."

"Apparently, you got out though, since you're now firmly entrenched with the good guys," Dagan said, still struggling with the thought of Kefira being tested in such a manner.

James looked skyward and held up both hands, palm up. "Only through the grace of God..." He turned his head and gazed toward Logan, and in that moment, Dagan saw fatherly pride shining in the vampire's gaze. "And family."

"So where does this leave us?" Dagan interrupted.

Logan stood, facing Dagan. "As strange as it sounds, I think you need to stick close to Fi, so when the time is right..." Logan seemed to search for his next words and Dagan waited patiently. "Do the deed," Logan finally said.

Everyone in the room suddenly swiveled their heads to look at Dagan. *Great, I have a house full of people waiting for me to bed Kefira at the 'appropriate time.'* No pressure there.

Jeb opened the passenger-side door of his truck and spanned his hands around Jeslyn's trim waist to help her out of the truck. She surprised him by looping her arms around his neck, forcing her full breasts to slide against his chest until her feet touched the ground. Not that he minded, he'd been in a black mood when he'd gone to the Bad Ass Café tonight to brood—about *her*. The damn woman had invaded his thoughts since she'd set foot on the ranch with her brood of hot sisters.

When Jeslyn appeared tonight with eyes only for him, it had not only been a big ego boost, but a welcome diversion. Granted, she would never be Kefira, but then no one could in his mind. Kefira was all fire and passionate perfection and he'd lost his heart to her as soon as she'd broken a horse he thought unbreakable. True, his ego had taken a beating from all the teasing from the ranch hands, but just being able to see her every day had made it bearable. He still remembered her fiery hair flowing behind her, her expression filled with glee as she rode the feisty animal that had thrown Jeb at least a hundred times. Not that she'd noticed him much before, but ever since the wounded stranger had shown up on their doorstep with an obvious past with Kefira, Jeb knew he didn't stand a chance.

He sighed and realized he still held Jeslyn clutched to his chest.

"I already have you breathless?" she asked with a seductive smile. "And I thought you'd give me an exciting challenge."

Jeb's erection swelled against his jeans and Jeslyn's smile widened in response.

"And I thought you'd give *me* one."

Jeslyn purred low in her throat, the sound vibrating through Jeb's chest. She threaded her fingers through his hair and pulled his head down so she could nibble on his lips.

His alcohol-hazed brain registered the slow sensuous pleasure that flowed through him. Then another sound from Jeslyn, almost like a growl of frustration, and then suddenly he wanted sex. Most of the blood in his body flooded toward his groin and he swayed in reaction. A burning lust like nothing he'd ever experienced flowed through him like a wildfire and without thought, he slammed Jeslyn back against the door of his truck. She wrapped her long legs around him, grinding her core against his jeans, the scent of her arousal strong in the air around him, assaulting his already overtaxed senses.

He plunged his tongue into her mouth and she met him thrust for thrust, nipping and biting while he ground his throbbing erection against her, wishing his jeans would just disappear. Suddenly, cool night air hit his heated flesh and he realized she'd reached between them and made quick work of unfastening his jeans. She wrapped her long fingers around him and guided him to her core. The head of his erection met hot velvety flesh and he thrust hard, fully seating himself inside her. His blood thundered through his veins as he set a frenzied rhythm, and she met him pump for pump.

Her core milked him expertly while she feathered kisses across his jaw and down his neck, sending gooseflesh marching over his entire body. "Cum for me, cowboy. Share your essence with me."

The words feathered against his neck, triggering an explosive orgasm that caused multi-colored lights to dance behind his eyelids and a fuzzy tingling sensation along his cock. When his brain stopped buzzing, he opened his eyes and realized he still held Jeslyn impaled against the truck, her dark waterfall of hair giving her the appearance of a very satisfied siren, although her breath still chuffed out in choppy pants.

"That's the hardest I've worked in centuries, cowboy."

He chuckled, enjoying the way her warm core still enveloped his shrinking member while he continued to judge how rubbery his legs were. Wouldn't be very smooth to move too quickly and drop her on her bare ass onto the dirt. He firmly vowed not to touch the 'centuries' comment. Women were universally prickly about their age, and he wouldn't make that mistake, especially not while still inside the woman in question. "How about we move this inside to a little more comfortable position?"

Jeslyn's smile widened and she carefully unwrapped her legs from his waist and Jeb gently lowered her until her feet touched the ground.

She straightened her skirt while he fastened his pants. "Is your room inside the bunk house?"

He was surprised she knew what a bunkhouse was, a woman of her obvious breeding and education was no cowboy chaser. But he smiled down at her and nodded. "Yes, ma'am. As the foreman, I bunk with the men, but I have my own room. We'll have to be quiet though, we aren't supposed to bring women to the ranch."

She trailed her fingers down his chest and past his waistband to cup him and he sprang to life, harder and faster than he had since he'd hit puberty. He groaned as he adjusted his stance to try to find a more comfortable position. The head of his cock peeked out the top of the waistband of his jeans and Jeslyn purred as she leaned down to flick her tongue over the tip. Jeb gasped as she unzipped his pants and freed his throbbing cock once again to the night air. "I have to taste you, I have to feel your cum on my tongue."

His balls tightened at her words as she dropped to her knees and wrapped her long fingers around his shaft, guiding it between her kiss-swollen lips. He watched in awe as she took him all the way to the base and then tightened her throat around him, making him groan and grab onto the bed of the truck to keep from falling over. She set a slow rhythm with her mouth and tight lips, and grabbed his ass encouraging him to thrust into her mouth, like he had her core. Unbelievable pleasure flowed through Jeb and he couldn't take his eyes off the erotic site of her red lips sucking his cock so expertly. She purred deep in her throat and he thought he might burst from the vibrations traveling through his member. She sucked hard and his climax broke over him like an ocean wave, threatening to drive him to his knees. And still she sucked him, hard, as if her very sustenance depended on savoring every last drop.

He gripped the truck bed with white knuckles, struggling to remain upright while Jeslyn slowly stood and brushed off her knees, licking her lips as if enjoying the finest caviar.

"I love a man who's thick and long. Show me your room, Jeb, and I'll make sure this is a night you never forget."

Chapter Eight

The scent she knew belonged to Dagan filled her senses and she inhaled deeply, reveling in it. When she sighed, a fully contented sound, and his deep low chuckle sounded next to her, she knew she wasn't dreaming. She opened her eyes and couldn't help but smile up into his handsome face. Regardless of what happened between them, she'd lost her heart to him long ago.

"Good morning, beautiful." He reached out to take her hand in his and bring it to his lips. "You had me worried."

"What happened?" As soon as the words left her lips, she remembered—the holy water.

He must've read the knowledge in her eyes because one side of his chiseled mouth curved up into a sad smile. "You should've let me be there for you, Fi. This distance you're trying to keep between us isn't going to work." He cupped her hand between his. "We belong together and we've wasted enough time being apart."

A moment of disorientation shook her until everything came flooding back. The prophesy, her fear of herself turning evil, and the necessity of keeping her emotional distance from Dagan. But looking up into his beautiful hazel eyes, her heart wept at the thought. She'd already forgiven him for his betrayal of her, no matter how hard she projected otherwise. He'd been right, she'd had years to come to terms with the loss of her child and yet she'd expected him to process it within seconds.

The problem remained, she'd never be able to forgive herself for the fate of their child, and worse, she wasn't sure Dagan could either. She covered her eyes with her forearm and she bit back a groan. Her entire body wanted her to bolt up and run, but it seemed like thick molasses flowed through her veins, bringing with it exhaustion. Not only physical, but also mental. She was tired of fighting herself—and him.

Dagan gently moved her arm off her eyes and she looked up to see a puzzled expression on his face. "I could hear your thoughts clearly yesterday, but now it's as if they're thousands of miles away."

"Maybe it was a glitch in the prophesy that you heard me the other day. I was in a lot of pain, I'm sure it broadcast pretty loud."

His look showed that he didn't believe her for a minute. "Think something at me, Fi. Let's figure out what's going on with this."

"I'm not up for this right now, Dagan. I'm probably turning evil for murdering our child." Her head throbbed and thousands of disjointed pictures flashed through her mind. She took a deep breath and set them aside. *"I've lost something precious to me and it will take time for both of us to come to terms with this."*

Shock flowed across his face before he hid it and nodded. "It's very faint now, but I can still hear you." He squeezed her hand. "I'm here now, Fi. We've both lost something precious, and we'll work through this together."

She furrowed her brow at his wording, but then after studying his face, decided she was making too much of the situation.

An urgent knock sounded before the door opened to admit a very worried-looking Odeda. "Ever since I felt you wake up, I've been calling you. Didn't you hear me?"

Kefira pushed up in bed so fast a wave of dizziness swept over her as a fist of fear closed around her heart. She remembered belatedly to pull the sheet up over her naked breasts. *"Please, Deda. Tell me you can hear me!"* She stared into her sister's face, willing her to hear her. This couldn't be happening so soon. *Please, God...*

Her sister's brows furrowed and she walked forward to stand next to the bed. "I can barely hear you. What the hell is going on?"

She exchanged a look with Deda, knowing she thought the same thing she—or at least partly. Fi was turning evil. What Deda probably wasn't thinking was that Fi planned to be the sacrifice Alonna mentioned. Kefira brought her knees up under her chin and wrapped her arms around her legs, curling the comforter around her.

God may or may not have planned it that way, but she'd never let one of her sisters be sacrificed in her place. If it took giving her soul to the Dark One to save her sisters, she'd do it without a second thought.

"I've called Dara, she's on her way up."

Fi held up her hand, stop sign fashion to Odeda. "There's nothing she can do at this point. We both know that."

Odeda seemed ready to argue, so Kefira cut her off as she swung her legs out of bed and snatched her robe. "Logan's gig is tonight and I need to scout the location." She pulled on the robe, a layer of defense against the argument she knew they would mount.

"Fi," Dagan began. "You're injured and you're not yourself, there's no way any one of us will let you out of this house."

Her chin thrust into the air, she pinned Dagan with her disapproving stare. "I wasn't asking for permission."

The Bad Ass Café reminded Kefira of a scene out of the movie Roadhouse. There was a large stage against one wall, sectioned off with gaily-painted blue chicken wire. A small assortment of musicians sat on stage adjusting their instruments or talking in hushed circles. The raised hardwood dance floor was enclosed with railing, she assumed to keep people from falling off while executing their highly complicated country dances. She remembered the dancers she'd seen twirling and twisting when Logan had played at Whiskey River and then nodded her head at the wisdom of the sturdy railing. Of course, that performance had ended badly when the group of succubuses attacked him. *I won't allow that to happen tonight!* She stepped forward into the main restaurant slash bar area, her feet crunching on a pile of broken peanut shells. "Your friend needs to get someone to sweep his floors, Logan."

At Logan's chuckle, she turned to face him. Obviously, she'd missed the joke.

"Did you see the big barrels of peanuts when we came in?" He pointed and she dutifully looked before nodding. "Well, people grab bowls of them as they come in and they shuck the peanuts and drop the shells on the floor."

Kefira looked at Dagan to see if he was in on this particular joke, but he seemed just as confused as she did.

Logan smiled, the dimple just next to his mouth winking along with his mirth. "Trust me, it's a country thing."

"Maybe Odeda should've taken this shift. She has more experience in country bars than I do."

"As if your hard head would've listened to that idea," Dagan grumbled under his breath.

Kefira hid a small smile. She'd put her foot down with her family and had finally won. Evil might be her future, but she was going to do everything in her power to fight on the side of good as long as possible. "I won't sit home like an invalid, Dagan, and that's that. I just meant that Deda is probably more familiar with the culture of this type of setting."

He snorted in disbelief. "Since when?"

"Since she found out Texas is full of cowboys who wear tight wranglers and love sex."

The edges of Dagan's lips quirked up in amusement and the familiar sight hit Kefira like a fist of desire. A sudden memory flowed through her of that same grin on his face when he'd asked her to go see her first sunset with him, several long years before. The night she'd gotten pregnant. The morning before he'd gotten scared and betrayed her...back before she even knew gargoyles could get pregnant after their release from God's service. The memory fragmented as if it had been painted over an original picture, and faces of other gargoyles smiled at her. She closed her eyes and willed her mind into obedience. If she let Dagan know she was disoriented, he'd have her locked up in her room at home so fast her head would swim.

Someone shouted Logan's name and he waved and started forward, breaking her out of her thoughts. Kefira caught his arm, instantly on alert. "Who's that?"

"That's Tom, the owner. I owe him a favor, that's why we're here. He gave me my first gig." He smiled down at her. "Don't worry, Odeda checked this place out thoroughly this afternoon while we were arguing with you. She even made a date with one of the bartenders who moonlights as a tattoo artist."

Kefira shook her head. "Figures." She pointed her index finger at him. "Okay, but stay where I can see you. If I bring you home with so much as a scratch, Ariel will have my head."

"Yes mom." He tugged her hair playfully before heading off toward his friend.

She turned, laughing at herself until she came face to face with Dagan.

"It's good to see you laugh again, Fi. I've missed it."

The sincerity in his deep voice brushed across her skin like a caress and she fought the need to purr against the feeling like a contented cat. Then she remembered she was keeping her distance from him and bristled. If she let down her guard, he might figure out she wasn't at 100%. She just hoped he didn't notice her hesitation.

When he smirked, her temper flared and she let it explode toward the nearest target. "The only reason you're here is that the others are needed at the ranch to watch over Ariel. So pull your weight tonight or I'll kill you myself. Are we clear?"

He stepped close, invading her space and she ground her teeth but refused to step back. She craned her neck to return his intense stare and fisted her hands at her sides.

"No, Fi. The only reason I'm here is because I love you, we work well together and Logan needs protecting. The only reason *you're* here is because your family drew the line at physically restraining you. Even though I suggested it."

She opened her mouth, a thousand sharp retorts sharp on her tongue, but he placed a long blunt finger against her lips, silencing her and causing a burning tingle that flowed from the contact with his warm flesh through every vein and straight to her core.

His eyes darkened as if he knew her reaction. "We can continue this discussion later. Right now we need to do our jobs and make sure we bring home the father of the child of blood intact or not only will good and evil shift, but Ariel will be unhappy with us—and believe it or not, that scares me more than the first." He smiled and then turned on his heel and walked away, leaving her speechless.

She continued to watch until he rounded the dance floor and disappeared into the back hallway where the bathrooms and office were located. *Keeping a distance between us is going to be much harder than I thought.*

A deep male chuckle sounded inside her head and she growled low in her throat. "Bastard! So much for you not being able to hear me!" She crossed her arms over her chest. "Why do women even put up with men?" she asked aloud.

"If you have to ask that, you haven't found the right man...yet."

Fi whirled, angry she'd lost focus and allowed someone to come up behind her unnoticed. A cowboy who appeared to be a cross between the Marlboro man and a Chippendale's dancer stood in front of her wearing a smile that could cause spontaneous orgasm at sixty paces. "Not interested, boy toy, move along."

"Beautiful, I consider it my personal challenge to change your opinion about men." He reached out to run the pad of his thumb over her bottom lip, igniting her already hair trigger temper.

Fast as a snake, she grabbed his wrist, twisting it back and using leverage and good old-fashioned pain to bring him to his knees. A few seconds later, Mr. Orgasm blinked up at her, confusion and pain clear on his handsome face. She let him suffer for a few seconds and then cleared her throat, her temper sated for the moment. "Don't call me beautiful, no one changes my opinions but me, and never, ever touch me unless you want to get your ass kicked from here to El Paso. Are we clear?"

Before he could answer, Logan, Dagan and Tom, the owner stood at her side staring down at Mr. Orgasm with a mix of concern, amusement and horror plain on their faces.

Logan placed a comforting hand on Kefira's arm and she ignored it. "Fi, why don't you let him up and we'll discuss this civilly."

"He and I are having a perfectly civil conversation with him down there, and he hasn't answered me yet." She stared at him, waiting.

Through gritted teeth he said, "We're clear."

Without a word, she released her hold on his wrist and stepped back so he could unfold his lanky frame from his kneeling position and stand to face them, rubbing his wrist.

"Kefira, Dagan, this is my friend Tom." Logan turned to Tom, an older, grisly balding man who reminded her of the bar keeps in all the John Wayne movies. "Tom, this is my sister-in-law Kefira and her...associate...Dagan. They are both seasoned security specialists, so I appreciate you hiring me someone, but as you can see, I'm well protected already."

Kefira tossed her head to move her hair out of her eyes and snorted. "Pretty boy here is a security guard?"

Tom, still fighting to hide a smirk at Mr. Orgasm's discomfort broke in. "Actually, Dex is a bouncer. I figured he could help with crowd control. Even before Logan was famous, the ladies always caused somewhat of a mob scene whenever he sang." He turned his attention to Logan. "I think you write great songs, but I also think you'd make it big as a singer."

Logan laughed and shook his head. Apparently, this was a familiar argument.

Dagan held out a hand to Dex. "Nice to meet you."

Dex held up his hand as if he was being sworn in. "If you don't mind, I think I'd rather not shake. I didn't mean to make moves on your woman."

Dagan stared across at Dex and a smile that didn't reach his eyes curved his sculpted lips. "If you knew she was my woman in the first place, then you deserved much more than she just gave you. But if you do your job and stay out of our way, I'll see if can get her not to finish kicking your ass."

Kefira glared over at Dagan. "I can take care of myself, thank you very much." She turned her attention to Dex and said, "What he said," before she walked away, trying to ignore the sound of Logan and Dagan's male amusement behind her.

Three hours later, Logan's show was officially in full swing. Logan and the backup band performed behind the bright blue chicken wire while hundreds of cowboys and cowgirls danced, drank, and threw their empty beer bottles at the 'band cage.' The first time someone had done this, Kefira had pinned him within seconds and made him apologize. After learning that it was common practice and even encouraged, she decided to work the back of the room by the bar and let Dagan stay close to the cage with Mr. Orgasm.

Logan's voice boomed out over the room, and pride swelled inside Kefira's chest. Even though he'd only been part of their lives for a short time, she loved him. He'd turned into the brother she never had and she was very proud of his success.

The crash of more beer bottles shattering against the cage caused a sudden cheer from the audience and another volley of empty bottles. She shook her head. *Maybe Deda really should've come with us tonight. This is definitely more her domain.*

"May I buy you a drink?"

Kefira sighed and turned toward the latest in a long line of men who had hit on her tonight. "No, thanks. I'm here with someone." She gritted her teeth against the last statement, but after watching her turn down men all night, Bob the bartender had suggested she tell them she was taken. Cowboys might be forward, but usually, the respected each other's territory. She'd been tempted to mention that Mr. Orgasm didn't, but Bob didn't need to know that.

"I know," her latest suitor said, startling her since she thought she was rid of him. "I've been drawn to you since I got here and I can't seem to fight it."

She growled at him. "Try..."

Bob appeared from behind the bar and grabbed the man by the scruff of his neck, pulling him toward the door.

She laughed aloud at the man's shocked expression. "Thanks, Bob. I owe you."

"Just put in a good word with your sister, Odeda, for me. We have a date next weekend," he called over his shoulder.

Scanning the room in bodyguard mode, she made eye contact with Dagan and nodded, letting him know the back of the room was secure. He returned her nod, confirming the situation up front. Suddenly, the wound on her back sizzled as if on fire and she thought for a second it might sear through her silk shirt and jacket. She gripped the edge of the wooden bar,

swaying as the pain tried to drive her to her knees. Gritting her teeth, she closed her eyes and fought for equilibrium.

In her mind's eye, she saw the wound flash black and red and then slowly fade from view as the pain receded. When she opened her eyes, Dagan stood in front of her, his jaw clenched with worry. "I've called Deda. She's on her way."

She almost argued on principle, but then her rubbery legs gave out under her and Dagan caught her, guiding her onto a barstool.

Someone placed a glass of water next to her and she turned to see Bob.

"I'll look after her until Odeda gets here, Dagan. Go ahead and keep an eye on Logan."

Dagan didn't look happy, but he brushed a quick kiss over her lips before returning to his post.

"Thanks, Bob. I don't know what's wrong with me." She took a large gulp of water as the room suddenly became claustrophobic.

"No problem at all, Kefira." He smiled and refilled her glass from a pitcher behind the bar. "I like you, especially since you kicked Dex's ass." He winked. "And I'm hoping to get in good with your sister."

Sunlight slanted across her face and Kefira slung her arm over her closed eyes, groaning at the intrusion. A slow burn started at the wound on her back and slowly flowed through every vein in her body, bringing with it energy and a tingling awareness, but thankfully no pain. She opened her eyes, a satisfied smile curving her lips as she sat up and swung her legs off the bed and onto the floor. She stretched languorously, enjoying the cool morning air flowing through the open window against her naked skin. *This is the best I've felt in a long, long time.*

The door cracked open and Dara peeked inside. "You're awake." Her furrowed brow relaxed and her lovely face creased into a beaming smile as she stepped forward and closed the door behind her. "How are you feeling?"

Kefira waited for the normal snap of temper to skew her emotions, but it never came, so she shrugged. "I feel terrific. I was just going to get dressed."

Dara's brow furrowed again. "Okay...let me take a look at the wound and make sure everything's all right."

Kefira stood and turned her back toward her sister, who gasped and then continued to study the wound silently. Kefira again waited for her temper to flash at being kept waiting without information, but she remained calm and relaxed. *Wow, maybe one good thing came out of being wounded. It seems like my emotions aren't ruling me any more.*

"Fi, the wound is growing, but..."

"Yes?"

"It's growing in the shape of your fairy wings tattoo." Dara's cool fingers traced along the healthy skin just below the wound. "I need to call Gabriel again and fill him in on this new development." More gentle tracing of Dara's fingers. "Can you try and materialize your wings?"

Kefira concentrated on her wings, but nothing happened. A small surge of fear closed her throat and caused the back of her eyes to burn, but then knowledge from somewhere deep

within her reassured her. "Don't worry, Dara. As soon as the wound encompasses the entire tattoo, I'll be able to call my wings again."

Dara stiffened behind her and then stepped around to face her, her hands lightly holding Kefira's shoulders. "How do you know that?" Dara's green eyes burned into hers, her full lips pursed into a frown.

She tried to explain how she knew, but it eluded her. "I don't know, Dara, I just know. Isn't that enough?" She brushed past her sister, opened the top drawer of her chest of drawers and sifted through her undergarments for something that matched her mood. She felt sexy and alive and wanted her clothes to match. Her hand closed over a sheer blue thong and a push up bra that matched her Kerry blue eyes. She pulled them out and slipped them on, studying herself in the mirror mounted on the back of the closet door.

"Fi, when Odeda bought you those for Christmas, you swore you'd never be caught dead in them. I think you said there was no need to ever wear butt floss and that women with real curves had no need for a push up bra. What's gotten into you?"

Kefira turned to see Dara studying her critically. "I just want to look sexy today. Is there something wrong with that?" She turned away from her sister and continued to study herself in the mirror.

"No," Dara answered slowly. "There's just something different about you today. And I can't help but think it's got something to do with your wound."

Laughter bubbled up from deep in her belly and overflowed. "I feel great, Dara. Shouldn't that be enough?" Not waiting for an answer, she turned her back on her sister and began searching through her closet for something to wear, which didn't take long. She sighed with disgust at the conservative choices that comprised her wardrobe. "I'm going to go borrow something from Odeda." She turned to go.

"Wait, aren't you going to put on a robe or something?" Dara held out a robe toward Kefira. "Logan or James or even the housekeeper or the cook could see you if you walk out there like that."

Kefira waved away the offered covering. "Deda's room is just down the hall and besides, I'm not ashamed of my body." She glanced in the mirror again and confidence surged through her along with an ease with herself that she'd never before experienced.

She turned to find Dara staring at her open mouthed. "Be happy for me, Dara. This is the first time I haven't struggled with my emotions for as long as I can remember." Her lips curved in a feral smile. "And damn it, I'm entitled."

Kefira stepped out onto the back porch enjoying the way the soft slinky dress caressed her bare skin. She removed the thong once she tried on the dress, excited about going commando for the first time. However, she'd kept the push up bra. A woman with her healthy curves could have some painful side effects from trying to do a physical job like hers with no support. Besides, the bra showed off her ample cleavage to best advantage, and she rather liked the effect.

She'd often wondered why Odeda walked around a dusty ranch wearing sexy leather outfits or revealing dresses and now she knew. She looked good, she felt great and before doing her perimeter check, she was going to try out her new look in the bunkhouse. She knew there was something different, and she suspected it was being with Dagan. She'd tried to

deny him, but they belonged together, and somehow their union had broken through her repression and turned her into a confident sex kitten. "And damned if I don't think I'll enjoy it!"

A slow breeze ruffled her hair as she made her way down the back porch steps. By the time she made it halfway across the back lawn and out to the bunkhouse, several pairs of appreciative eyes studied her, and she reveled in it. Her nipples hardened against the silky material and moisture rushed between her thighs at the feminine power rushing through her. "Good morning, boys. How's everyone doing today?"

"Ma'am," she was greeted by several and, "Kefira," by others. Yet none could rip their eyes away from her. Somewhere deep inside her mind she realized if they'd reacted this way toward her yesterday, she would have been angry and offended. For the life of her, she couldn't figure out why she would ever be unappreciative of all this attention. After all, God had given her this body. Wasn't it hers to enjoy and use as she saw fit?

As she neared the center of the group, they closed around her. She smelled a faint whiff of evil. Confusion slowed her steps as she looked from face to face. Never in all her existence had she only detected a faint whiff of anything evil—her powers were too sensitive for that. Was she losing her touch? She looked around at the smiling faces and decided that she'd been mistaken. None of the ranch hands were evil or she and all her sisters would have sensed it before.

Grady, a tall blonde cowboy who looked like he'd stepped out of playgirl magazine spread, grinned down at her. "You look amazing today, Kefira." He reached out to rub one of her red curls between his two sun browned fingers.

She let her smile widen and leaned forward so her breasts brushed his chest. He gasped and she stage whispered, "Look and touch are two totally different things, Grady." At his amused smile, she stepped back just enough to remind him she was in charge. "Besides, there are plenty of other men here who seem like they'd like to talk to me as well. You'll just have to wait your turn."

Chapter Nine

Stretching his legs out in front of him, Dagan listened as Ariel, Logan, James and Odeda discussed all nuances of the new vampire/succubus threat. He'd never been a big strategy man, he preferred meeting his enemies head on and removing the threat. That's why he'd appreciated Ariel's leadership and strategy over the years.

It had been humbling at first to admit a woman had better strategic skills than he did. After all, he'd been born in a time that didn't value women as intelligent creatures. However, he was smart enough to know when to change his views, and he had. So, he and Kefira had been thrown together over the years since they were usually the front attack force.

He sighed. His fingers itched for his sword. He'd been forced to leave it in Romania. The world was a different place and what with all the security around what could be brought into the United States, not even a Noble Warrior for God could bring in his favored weapon. He hoped to see if it could be shipped, but hadn't gotten around to it yet.

He turned his attention back toward Ariel. They'd been grilling him for over an hour, so his patience at all this inaction was becoming unbearable.

He looked up as Dara burst into the room.

"Thank God. I need to talk to all of you about Kefira."

A fist of fear squeezed his heart. "Is she all right?" Dagan shot to his feet and she gestured him back to his seat.

"Let's just say she's not herself." Dara proceeded to fill them in on her visit to Kefira's room, and with each word, Dagan's mood darkened. Was this a sign that she was about to make her choice between dark and light? Not that a little additional sensuality pushed her toward either side, but such a drastic change concerned him. He exchanged a significant glance with James and Logan and knew they were thinking of Alonna's words to them as well.

Ariel placed a gentle hand on her stomach, rubbing small circles over her unborn son. "Where is she now?"

"When I left, she was on her way to Odeda's closet to find something sexy to wear."

Odeda snorted. "I've been trying to get her to dress sexier for years, but this isn't quite what I had in mind. What you just described isn't Kefira." She pinched the bridge of her nose and squeezed her eyes tight. "I need to call Alonna."

Dara whipped her head to the side to pierce Odeda with a suspicious glare. "You know prophesy that may be applicable, don't you? Something's going on here and we don't have all the pieces."

"Yup, as usual. And I can share it 'when the time is right'." She emphasized it by making quote marks in the air with her fingers. "I don't know about you guys, but I suck at knowing that 'magic' time." Dagan wondered what Deda's piece of the prophesy might be, but since he couldn't share his or his secret, it didn't seem like a good idea to bring it up. Especially since Dara was becoming so suspicious. Once they sunk their teeth into something, it was only a matter of time before they figured it out.

He stood. "I'm going to go find her. I need to stay close."

Odeda stood as well, but both James and Logan grabbed her arms.

"Deda." James smiled up at her. "I think it's important that Dagan stay close to her right now and that the rest of us concentrate on what we can affect."

Odeda crossed her arms in front of her, her purple leather jacket creaking with the effort. "What are you men up to? Does this have to do with your own session with Alonna that we were kicked out of?"

Dagan started to answer but firmly clamped his lips shut. Defying Alonna's directions concerning prophesy was never a wise course.

"Apparently, all this silence answers my question." She turned her attention to Logan. "Fine, you go find Fi, and we'll pursue other angles."

Dagan escaped before he could be drawn into more discussions. He needed to find Fi and figure out what the hell was happening to her.

As soon as the back door closed behind him, he saw her. She wore a dress that left less to the imagination than if she'd walked outside totally bare. In other circumstances, he'd appreciate her daring choice, but not when she was surrounded by a dozen ranch hands who looked like they appreciated it just as much as he did. He'd closed half the distance between them when she leaned close to one of the ranch hands and whispered something against his lips.

His steps faltered and his jaw clenched as jealousy rose up bright and hot, threatening to blur his vision. When the men closed around her, blocking her from his view, he started forward again. He closed his hands around the neck of the shirts of the first two men he reached, ripping them back away from Kefira. What he saw stopped him again.

She stood laughing and flirting with the entire group of men and they all seemed drawn to her somehow. Hell, he was drawn to her, but something here didn't seem right. A man with red hair and freckles traced a path along the low cut neckline of Kefira's dress and all reason and control snapped.

Dagan's hand curled into a fist and he let his jealousy and anger power his arm as it arced into an uppercut, which connected with the man's chin, snapping his head back and causing him to stumble away from Kefira. There was a split second of total silence and then the small group erupted into chaos.

Someone jumped on Dagan's back, their arm around his throat cutting off his air supply. Then a hard punch connected with his solar plexus causing him to double over. His body instantly switched into battle mode borne of centuries of fighting to live or die. Continuing his momentum, he slung the person hanging onto his back over his head to land with an oomph in the dirt. Then he planted both hands in front of him on the ground and kicked out his feet behind him, hitting two of the men in the jaw and knocking back several others when his targets stumbled backward.

He landed on his feet in a balanced crouch and then struck out with his right leg to sweep the legs out from under three more men in front of him. As they fell like dominos, he heard Kefira's soft gasp from somewhere off to the side. Concern for her rose, but he quickly swallowed it back. He couldn't afford a lapse in his attention when there were still six more opponents standing.

Three of them lunged at him and he turned to see a fourth man pushing to his feet. Dagan grabbed the man by the scruff of the neck and the back of the jeans and shoved him forward into the path of the other three, turning their charge into a pile of cowboy bowling pins. He raised his fist to deliver a punch to another attacker when a gunshot rang out silencing the group and effectively stopping the fight.

"What in the hell is going on out here?" Dagan turned to see a Goliath of a man with dark hair and equally dark eyes holding a smoking pistol above his head. His gravelly voice spoke to too many years of hard living.

The ranch hands all looked like wayward children caught with their hands in the cookie jar as they dusted each other off and separated into a group a few steps away from where Dagan stood, his fist still cocked back for attack.

"Jeb, we're sorry..." This from the red head whose actions had broken Dagan's control.

"Don't Jeb me. You'll all be very sorry if Logan decides to boot your asses out of here." He glared around the group and they didn't exactly cower, but they didn't meet his angry gaze. He pointed toward the red head again. "Sam, tell me what happened."

Sam looked around the group and then cast a quick glance toward Dagan. "Well, Kefira came out all dressed up and well...then I'm not quite sure what happened."

Dagan glanced around to find the offending female, but she had disappeared. He ground his teeth in frustration. He'd find Fi and deal with her later.

Jeb turned his attention toward Dagan, interrupting his musings. "I don't think we've actually met, but I know who you are. Do you care to tell me what happened here?"

"What happened is that Red over there traced his finger over Kefira's cleavage and the rest of them looked ready to follow suit." Before Dagan could continue and say that he'd lost control, Jeb's beefy fist connected with Sam's jaw, snapping his head back before the man hit the ground in a boneless heap.

Jeb's dislike of Dagan fairly radiated off the man, but when Jeb turned to face him, they shared a look of total and complete understanding. Jeb turned his attention back to the men. "Every single one of you knows that Ariel's sisters are strictly off limits. And there is no fighting allowed on this ranch. Anyone with a problem is welcome to pick up his gear and move on."

To Dagan's surprise, there were immediate apologies mumbled from every one of the men—except Sam, who remained unmoving on the hard Texas ground. Apparently, none of them wanted to leave their post on Logan's payroll.

Something just didn't add up. He'd expected the kind of men who would act like they had, to storm off or tell Jeb where to go. Instead, it seemed their actions were most likely out of character for them. *Interesting, I wonder if something about her wound is making people react differently in her presence.*

"If you're all staying, then get back to work." Jeb turned on his heel and walked away—a man who knew his orders would be followed.

A wiry man with a pockmarked face and muddy brown hair stepped forward and offered his hand to Dagan. "I'm really sorry, but I gotta say, you put up a hell of a fight against us all. You're welcome in the bunk house any time."

Dagan grinned at the man and accepted the proffered hand. "Likewise." A slight whiff of evil caught his attention and he looked at the man more closely. Just above the bandana he wore tied around his neck, several red marks peeked out. "What happened to your neck?"

The man seemed genuinely surprised and then gingerly touched the mark and winced. "To tell you the truth, I can't remember. I woke up a few days ago with it and it's been sore ever since. "In fact, every time I think to go and let that pretty healer up at the house have a look at it, I plumb forget." The man pulled down the bandana and Dagan's eyes narrowed.

Outlined in an angry red were a perfect set of eight teeth marks, with the incisor wounds left as deep round holes. He'd normally say vampire, but vamps never left full teeth imprints, only fang marks. His blood chilled as he remembered the beasts that chased him to the ranch. "Do any of the other men have these marks?"

At the man's confused expression, Dagan continued. "Why don't I talk to Dara for you, and let her know to drop by."

The man smiled and then his brows furrowed in confusion. "Miss Dara's always welcome, but what is she stopping by for again?"

Dagan patted the man on the shoulder. "Nice to meet you. I really need to go find Dara." *And figure out what the hell is going on.*

Logan walked into the living room and immediately knew something was wrong. Dagan and Dara spoke in hushed whispers and Dagan's hand gestures were animated and choppy. He sat down in the easy chair next to where they sat on the couch. "Let me guess." Both turned their attention to him. "Massive vampire incursion? Some new breed of demon that's going to eat our entrails if we don't perform some weird sex ritual?"

When Dagan's didn't smile, Logan's heart swelled into his throat and anxiety bottomed out his stomach.

"No, our local new breed of vampire/succubuses are snacking on your ranch hands."

Logan bolted upright in his chair. "Run that by me again?"

As Dagan filled Logan in on all the events of the afternoon, Logan shook his head in concern over Kefira's behavior and then clenched his fists over the ensuing events with his men. "Where the hell was Jeb while all this was happening? I've never heard anything like it. Those are good men!"

Dagan flexed his fingers in and out of a fist and Logan noticed the abrasions on his hand. "I didn't see Jeb until after the gunshot."

Logan turned to Dara. "Can you take a look at my men while I go have a talk with Jeb?" When she nodded, he turned his attention to Dagan. "What do you think happened out there? If you would've asked me five minutes ago, I would've bet my life that my men would never act like that. Especially since Fi would kick their asses if they ever tried."

"As I was telling Dagan, I think she's giving off some kind of sexual vibe or pheromone." Dara looked toward Dagan for confirmation. "Did you feel anything different from her out there?"

"No," Dagan admitted slowly. "But I wasn't paying attention to anything but getting them away from her."

Dara placed a hand lightly on his knee. "I've seen you jealous before, even before you admitted your feelings for her. Your control is always better than what you described. I think the same phenomenon affected you."

"I'll keep that in mind when I find Fi."

Five minutes later, familiar smells assaulted Logan as he entered the bunkhouse. The smell of leather, horse and sweat mingled to remind him of an earlier era where a man and his horse survived together or not at all. The first hallway he entered was everything he remembered growing up on a ranch with his aunt and uncle—rough wooden walls with hooks for lassos and hats and cubbies for boots, spurs, gloves and other implements of the trade.

However, Logan had made some definite changes on his own ranch. He opened another door and entered a main room that reminded him more of a large bachelor's living room than a bunkhouse.

A red brick fireplace dominated one entire wall, while another was crammed with a large screen TV, and every modern man's idea of technology heaven—several top of the line speakers and various audio and video components. Solid oak storage cabinets held video games, DVD's, CD's and books. Couches and comfortable recliners ranged around the room accenting the all male color scheme of hunter green and maroon. Off to the left, spread a large kitchen area and a full bar, complete with a kitchen table that seated twenty.

He crossed the room and entered the back hallway, which led to the bedrooms. There he almost collided with his foreman. Jeb was a barrel of a man, three times as thick as Logan, but all muscle. His face held a weathered appearance from countless hours under the unforgiving sun, and his normally hearty expression was absent.

Jeb looked up, as if he'd been startled out of a daze in his near collision with Logan. "Boss, sorry. Didn't see you there."

Logan's temper simmered, but he held it in check until he knew the situation. With all the different parts of the prophesy constantly converging around them, the last thing he needed to worry about was his men. "What the hell happened this afternoon, Jeb? Where were you? Are you sick?"

When Jeb didn't respond immediately and with a smart ass remark, Logan's insides churned. Something was *very* wrong.

"I...I was out late last night and I guess I'm a bit more wiped out than I thought. I overslept and then had trouble getting started." Jeb stared straight at Logan through the entire admission. "I'll understand if you'd like me to resign."

Logan steered Jeb back toward the dining room and pushed him into one of the kitchen chairs that looked like children's furniture when Jeb sat in it. "What I want is Dara to take a look at you."

Jeb smacked his open palm on the tabletop, the first passion he'd shown. "Damn it all, Logan. I take full responsibility for what I did, but I don't see what having some flighty blonde look me over is going to solve."

This was all wrong, not the response Jeb would ordinarily have. This was too large of a reaction to be just from Kefira's wound. Something more sinister was going on here, and he swore he'd get to the bottom of it as quickly as possible. But for now, he needed to see what information he could get from Jeb. "I'd be careful calling her a flighty blonde to her face. She may look fragile, but you and I both know any one of those sisters is more than a match for any man on this place." Jeb grudgingly nodded in agreement and Logan breathed easier. "I don't mean to pry, Jeb, but you know me well enough to know I have a good reason for asking." Again a nod. "Exactly what were you doing last night?"

Jeb's dark skin turned darker and Logan knew he'd embarrassed the man. He cleared his throat before speaking, but met Logan's gaze, his chin thrust up at a stubborn angle. "I brought a lady friend back here from Whiskey River. I know we aren't supposed to have women here, but well, I suppose we stayed up too late."

"I'm more worried about you right now than the broken rule. Did you notice anything strange about her?"

"No, not really. She wore me out though. I must'a fallen asleep around three in the morning and when I woke up at nine, she was long gone."

What his men did on their own time was their business, as long as it didn't interfere with their work, but lately, they'd tried to keep strangers to a minimum because of the possible danger to the child. But Logan had a feeling more than just a one-night stand was going on here to make Jeb so disoriented. "Thanks Jeb. Just make yourself available to Dara and we'll forget this ever happened. All right?"

"Thanks, boss. It won't happen again."

Dara took the stairs slowly, the enormity of what had been done right outside their door still shocked her. When she walked into Ariel's room, all eyes turned toward her.

"Well?" came at her from several directions around the room.

"It's bad." She sat down in the rocking chair in the corner and took a moment to gather her thoughts. "As far as I can tell, they've all been infected with succubus poison, but only enough to gain their compliance and fuzz their memories. They are also anemic from blood loss."

"All of them?" Logan demanded.

"Yes, all of them. Some worse than others. The men with lower body weights are obviously more affected, but all are showing signs. And when questioned, they can't remember anything about what happened to them, or even that they have a bite wound for more than a few seconds at a time." She worried her lower lip with her teeth as the enormity of the situation became clear to those around the room.

Ariel swung her legs over the bed, but before she'd made it very far, Logan swung her legs back up and gently pushed her back against the pillows.

"You can command your clan from that position." He sat down next to her, the bed dipping slightly with his weight. "Dara keeps telling you to stay off your feet if you can and you keep ignoring her."

"We have a major threat that's a little more important right now, Logan." She glared at her husband, who only smiled at her in return.

Dara looked at her sister, pregnant and happy, and a part of her wished for the same. However, she'd seen her sisters go through pain too in all their relationships. Maybe she was better off without it. She sighed and turned her attention toward Ariel. "Logan's right. You need to stay off your feet. Your ankles are swelling and with the dizzy spells you've been having, I'd rather be safe than sorry."

"Dizzy spells?" Logan demanded, glaring at his wife. "What dizzy spells?"

"Logan," Dara interrupted. "Chastise her later. We need to discuss the ranch hands." She looked around the room, seeing everyone but Kefira. "Where's Fi?"

Dagan slammed his fist down on the arm of his chair, his handsome features darkened with anger. "I can't find her. I've looked everywhere."

"And I can't contact her telepathically," Deda added. "I talked to Gabriel and he said his hands are tied since prophesy is in play, and Alonna hasn't answered our summons yet."

Dara rubbed her right temple as a headache threatened. "Terrific." She dropped her hand into her lap and faced the room. "Well, I treated the wounds, most of them with holy water, but as you know, that's only a surface treatment. And I don't think Alonna is going to

go around to all the ranch hands leaving little fairy prints on their necks to heal them.” She shot an apologetic glance at Logan and he winced as she caught him gingerly rubbing the spot on his upper thigh. “They are all under the thrall of the succubus who bit them, the same succubus who also drank their blood, most likely during sex.”

James turned from his spot at the window. “Other than the fact we know it’s a succubus, why are you sure they were bitten during sex?”

“First, I can’t think of a better way to entice a group of bachelors into submission and second, I found this jelly-like substance all over their genitals and on their sheets.” She held up a Ziploc bag that contained what looked like clear Vaseline. “I don’t think they started by bringing the women here, but I think after they were thrallled, it was probably easy to make them overlook the rules.”

“Yuck,” Ariel said from the bed as James growled low in his throat. “You checked all their genitals?”

Dara smiled at her sister’s comment and ignored James. “I knew we were dealing with a succubus, so I thought it prudent. Even more interesting, I found out that this substance is a super healing compound, most likely made by the succubus’s body to keep their victim’s ‘equipment’ performing for as long as possible.” She examined the sample she’d taken. “I may be able to treat their neck wounds with this. Even better, it may offer some protection from the poison running through their system. Sort of like using a snake’s own anti-venom.”

Odeda snorted from her perch on the arm of Logan’s chair. “Wait, let me see if I understand this.” She held up her hand in stop-sign fashion. “You’re going to harvest this succubus vagina goo from the ranch hand’s genitals or their beds and then put it on their necks?” She giggled behind her hand. “I understand the necessity, but I’m just glad I’m not the one harvesting, wherever you get the stuff.”

All eyes turned toward Odeda and she bristled under the attention. “What? I’ll admit I have no problem inspecting some dicks, but I don’t do sloppy seconds. If there’s any ‘goo’ when I leave a man, it’s all from me and him, if you get my meaning.”

Logan shuddered and Dara hid a quick smile at his ongoing discomfort from his succubus experience. It wasn’t that she didn’t sympathize, but she’d dealt with the supernatural more often than the natural, and Logan was still very new to this way of life. He cleared his throat and swallowed hard before continuing. “I’m not sure which is worse, Alonna’s method or the *goo* method.”

Ariel placed a comforting hand on her husband’s arm and Logan smiled sheepishly.

Dara turned her attention back to the topic at hand. “Anyway, I’m going to try it out on one of the men and see if it works before using it on all of them. And Logan, I hope you don’t mind, but after confiscating their sheets, I confined them all to bed rest, but now I think we need a guard out there in case our succubuses come back.”

James leaned forward in his chair. “I agree completely. But I don’t think it should be any of us. With Ariel vulnerable due to her condition, and Fi wounded, I think we need to stick together.”

Dara looked up at the dark vampire, her breath catching in her throat as it did every time she looked at him. Their eyes met and a shiver of awareness snaked through her before she wrenched her gaze away to make a very thorough study of her shoes. *The man’s just too damned handsome for my own good.* She swallowed hard, ignoring her raging hormones.

James' deep voice flowed around her. "I'm going to put in a call to my vampire kiss and offer them a chance to trap one of the new race of monsters in the neighborhood."

She looked up. "Why would they help us?"

"The same reason they shared information. Trust me, I think they'll be very receptive to our offer—even if it includes no 'snacking' on the ranch hands." His chiseled lips curved up into a smug smile. "Especially if we remind them that drinking from the men will infect them with the succubus poison. There aren't many vampires alive today who could withstand that."

"Except you..." An idea began to form inside her mind.

James' brow furrowed in suspicion. "What exactly are you thinking, Dara?"

"If your kiss captures one of the succubus, I was hoping...well...that they could harvest some more, *goo*, for lack of a better word. I'd like to see if it will heal the wound on Fi's back."

James' eyes lit with understanding. "I'll include that in my discussions with the kiss. I'm sure there won't be any problem convincing them. Especially if that knowledge comes in handy for them in the future."

Odeda stood and stretched. "Just do me a favor. Before we market this stuff to the greater monster community as a cure all—count me out of any harvesting activities, and find a better name. I can't keep a straight face while talking about *vaginal goo*."

Chapter Ten

Kefira threw back her head and laughed. The wind whipped her hair behind her as she raced the setting sun toward the ranch. Hours earlier, she'd done a perimeter check of the ranch, and sensing nothing amiss, she'd kept on riding. She'd stopped long enough to water and rest her horse, but there were also several hours of her day she didn't even remember. A small grain of worry pricked at her, but she pushed it away. *I finally found a way to break away from my emotions, I'm just going to enjoy it.*

She enjoyed the new parts of herself that were emerging—parts she'd always envied in her sisters, but could never seem to let out within herself. However, throughout the day, more and more glimpses of memories had assaulted her. That was part of the reason she'd stayed out so long, to give herself time to assimilate what was happening inside her mind. She'd actually pieced together some of the images, but still wasn't sure what they meant.

The faces were from two other gargoyle clans, the two clans who were destroyed back in Romania leaving Kefira's clan as the last of their kind. The other images were of a large grassy oasis, dotted with flowers and blooming trees ringing a gargoyle fountain. She didn't remember ever actually visiting the oasis, but the picture inside her mind was so crisp, she knew it was real. Even stranger still was when she tried to remember the day she lost the baby. The memory had faded with time and now resembled a memory of a television show she'd once watched rather than something traumatic that had actually affected the last several years of her life.

She really needed to talk to her sisters. They would be able to help her piece everything together.

As the ranch grew bigger, she caught sight of Dagan. He stood next to the main corral, his body relaxed back against the steel bars of the enclosure, but his hands were curled into fists. She knew him well enough to know he was unhappy with her. She still wasn't sure what had happened earlier at the corral, but she also wasn't in the mood to discuss it. There were too many other things on her mind.

Maybe he could be distracted. She smiled, the thought of different ways to distract Dagan flowing through her mind. The thought cut loose another full-throated laugh that carried on the wind. Her horse, spurred on by the sound, thundered faster toward the deceptively calm figure.

Not bothering to slow down, she leaned down over the horse's neck and barreled straight toward Dagan. To his credit, he never flinched, and showed no surprise when she veered off at the last second, jumping down from the still-moving horse. Joy and excitement flowed through her and she ran to Dagan, throwing her arms around his neck and capturing his lips with hers.

Now I've surprised him. For a moment, he didn't return her kiss, only stood stiff in her arms, but he slowly melted against her and when she ran her tongue over his lips seeking admittance, he opened his mouth and let her inside. His taste broke over her tongue, spicy and masculine with a hint of whiskey. She plastered her body against his, his erection digging into her stomach. He groaned when she ground against him, causing a sudden rush of moisture between her thighs.

She wanted him inside her, here, now. Reaching between them, she unfastened his belt and he caught her hands in his, setting her back away from him. "Fi, what's gotten into you?"

"I'm hoping, you." His brow furrowed and another laugh freed itself from her throat.

"We need to talk, and not here." Before she knew what he was about, he picked her up and tossed her over his shoulder like a sack of feed, placing his hand on her ass to keep her there. "You're not wearing any underwear! My God, Fi. What the hell is going on?"

She wiggled back against his hand as he walked toward the house, wishing he'd slip his hand under her dress to find her slick folds below. "I thought I'd made that clear. I want you to fuck me."

Dagan's steps faltered, but he recovered and kept walking, taking the stairs two at a time. When he reached her room, he closed the newly repaired door behind him before unceremoniously dumping her on the bed. Then he stepped back to put some distance between them.

She leaned back onto her elbows, keeping her knees bent, which caused the dress to ride up over her thighs and show him her bare crotch beneath. "Come over here and see what I have for you, Dagan." She licked her lips as she thought about all the sustenance he'd bring her. *Sustenance?* She shook her head to clear it. *I must've meant pleasure, or orgasms...definitely not sustenance.*

After catching sight of her bare sex, Dagan swallowed hard and firmly settled his gaze on her face. "Where have you been all day? I've looked everywhere and so has your family. No one could contact you and we were worried."

Her temper sparked, but nothing like it had in the past, and she settled for glaring at him. "What does it matter, I'm here now, and I need you."

He appeared to be struggling between closing the distance between them and maintaining his distance. "Fi, a lot has happened while you were out doing God knows what today. We found out all the ranch hands have been injected with succubus poison."

A familiar reaction pushed up through the sexual haze and she bolted to her feet. "What? All of them?"

"Yes, all of them."

She growled low in her throat. "All of the people on this ranch are mine!" She didn't realize she'd screamed it until Dagan raised his eyebrow at her.

"Fi, don't take this all on yourself. Everyone on this ranch isn't just yours to protect. All of us have a vested interest in doing that."

She ignored his misinterpretation of her comment and thought about all those tasty cowhands—tainted by another. Then she caught Dagan's concerned gaze, his hazel and green eyes burning through her, imprinting on her brain. He was hers, and hers alone and she reveled in the knowledge. Concentrating on Dagan, she willed him to come to her and for a moment, it seemed as if a tiny mist emitted from her every pore, reaching out to Dagan, beckoning to him.

In the next instant, he'd closed the distance between them, crushing her against his hard body. His hands and mouth were everywhere at once, biting, licking, tasting, possessing. She reveled in the ability to push him past reason, but whimpered with the need to press her bare skin against his. As if he'd read her thoughts, he ripped open his shirt, sending buttons spraying around the room and pushed the top of her dress down over her arms, baring her push up bra to his hungry gaze. She reached back and unhooked the bra, letting the blue silk slither down over her arms, but Dagan's gaze never left her breasts.

He ripped the bra from her hands and pushed her down on the bed, capturing her breasts first in his hands and then in his mouth. When the wet heat of his tongue swirled over one swollen peak, she cried out and threaded her fingers through his hair to ensure he'd never stop. He scraped his teeth across her nipple and a new rush of moisture dampened her juncture.

"I need you inside me, Dagan. Now!"

Within seconds, he'd stripped them both of every scrap of clothing and crawled up her body like a hungry predator. "I can't seem to get enough of you, Fi. I need you like I need food or water."

As he thrust inside her, she sighed. "Sustenance at last..."

Dagan seemed not to notice her comment, but captured her lips as he pistoned inside her, driving them both toward a frenzied release. When their breathing became too choppy to continue the kiss, Kefira buried her face against Dagan's neck and concentrated on the power spiraling through her as the exquisite friction of each thrust drove her closer to orgasm. His woodsy masculine scent filled her nostrils and she ran her tongue along his neck, his taste bursting inside her mouth. In the next instant, she bit down hard, grinding her teeth against the flesh of Dagan's neck, triggering her own orgasm even as his nourishing seed spilled inside her, infusing her with a flood of power that left her breathless. When she was finally able to open her eyes, the skin of the arm, still slung over Dagan's back, seemed to glow from within.

James stepped off the back porch and took a few steps toward the kiss. Fifteen of the kiss's best hunters, all the same choices James would have made himself, stood arrayed around the perimeter of the bunkhouse. James nodded his approval.

"Good to see you, James. I see you got our message." Edward nodded his head in greeting.

After returning the greeting, James gestured to encompass the entire group. "And I see my offer was agreeable to you, as well."

Edward smiled, the unscarred half of his mouth curving up into a wide smile. "How could I refuse the offer to capture one of Nicholas' offspring? That would prove beneficial in every respect." Edward spared a glance for the rest of his group and pulled James off to the side for a private conversation, not that every vampire couldn't hear them as clearly as if they stood right next to them. Human habits died hard, even after centuries. "James, is the healer sure about this healing substance?"

"Not entirely. But as you know, she's rarely wrong, and if you procure us a significant amount of a sample, she will be more than happy to share our results."

Edward's dark eyes gleamed with predatory glee as he slammed his closed fist into his open palm. "Those bitches have never been stronger than us, but their blood can eat through us like a plague. To have the key to overcome that...liability...will be a large coup for our kiss."

James swallowed hard as he remembered drinking down the chunky succubus blood to save Logan. It hadn't been pleasant, but as an ancient, he'd been immune and had only endured the vampire version of heartburn for a few days. "I assume then you'll use the new information for the good of the kiss and not share it beyond that?" Try as he might, James

couldn't shed his concern for the welfare of the company he'd envisioned and created. Even though he'd been a spy for God the entire time the company existed, he'd taken pride in its success and wanted to see it continue.

Edward lowered his voice, another human habit. "We both know our arrangement with you as head of the kiss is...unusual, to say the least. But in a warped way, you've been able to juggle your loyalty to us with your loyalty to those on the side of good. I agree with your vision for the kiss, and I will most definitely keep it and Wellington Enterprises flowing in the right direction in your absence. It would be naïve and suicidal for us to share this boon with any other kiss, who might not understand the larger picture."

James laughed, the sound echoing out across the ranch. "Edward, you talk like a bloody politician, but you have my complete confidence."

"Go back in the house with the women, day walker. We'll mop up your problem for you." James turned an amused eye toward Stephan, a baby vamp he'd allowed to join the kiss right before he took his leave of absence.

Blood and adrenaline flooded through James so loud he could almost hear its passage. Some part of him would always miss the excitement of the challenge—even though the vampire games became tiresome with repetition. He walked forward slowly until he stood toe to toe with the smirking blonde man. "Excuse me, Stephan. I know you just didn't show disrespect for the rightful leader of your kiss in front of others. That would officially issue a challenge and I don't believe you have the power to back that up."

Stephan sneered up at James and reached forward to poke a finger into James' chest to punctuate his words. "*You*, day walker, are no longer the rightful leader of our kiss. You've defected and betrayed us all, and therefore should be killed."

James allowed his mouth to curve into a smile before using the speed he'd gained from being an ancient. His fingernail extended into a razor sharp talon and in one quick swipe, he neatly sliced off Stephan's finger and then stepped back out of the range of the spray of blood.

No doubt it took several seconds for Stephan's mind to catch up to current events, because there was a pregnant pause before he howled in rage and pain, his hand curled protectively against his chest.

"Never poke me again, Stephan. If I wasn't in such a good mood, you'd be nothing but dust right now."

Stephan stared at James, hatred seething from every pore. He spared a glance for Edward who stepped forward to place a hand lightly on the injured man's shoulder. Stephan's features relaxed with the obvious show of support from the scarred vampire.

Edward sighed. "Stephan, I am the day to day leader of the kiss, and as such, I recognize James' authority. However, since you question my judgment, I have no choice but to take that as a direct challenge to my standing in the kiss." In the blink of an eye, Edward plunged his hand through Stephan's chest and crushed his shriveled heart within his palm, until there was nothing left of the vampire but an explosion of gray noxious dust. "James might be in a good mood, but apparently, I'm not."

Edward turned back toward James, while pulling a handkerchief from the breast pocket of his suit. "My apologies, James. I had thought he could be trained, but apparently not." He wiped the dust away from his face with the cloth and then brushed off his clothes. "If you'd like to find out if anyone else has loyalty issues, you've only to ask."

A quick glance at the rest of the group showed none of them willing to even make eye contact. *Good, fear is the only thing vampires understand and that will keep them in line.*

Thoughts of Jeslyn made Jeb's body react and he shifted, trying to find a more comfortable position. He looked down toward his crotch. "You'd better pace yourself, buddy. We've got a long night to go."

Several hours later, he was thinking that same exact thing as Jeslyn's name spilled from his lips and he pumped his release inside her. She purred like a kitten receiving an entire bowl of milk and when he collapsed, spent, on top of her, she idly traced patterns on his back with her fingernails.

"I haven't had anyone keep up with me like this in years, cowboy." She laughed, and the movement caused him to harden inside her once more.

He flipped over, taking her with him, until she straddled him and he relaxed back against the pillows with one hand tucked back behind his head, the other resting lightly on her silky thigh. "Glad to be of service, ma'am. You've just been hanging out with the wrong type of men, that's all."

She clenched him with the muscles of her core and he gasped at the sensation. "You're absolutely right." She rocked forward slowly, allowing him to slide slowly out of her channel until just the sensitive tip remained inside.

Pleasure arrowed through Jeb and he almost whimpered when she stopped, suspended and watching for his reaction. Then, in an instant, she rocked back, quickly taking him to the hilt, and another feral sound ripped from his lips, his breathing already short and shallow. "What do you do to me, woman?" He growled deep in his throat before he took her hips in his hands and helped guide her motions while she rode him.

Minutes stretched by, dragging Jeb through a sea of pure erotic bliss. Jeslyn increased her speed, her choppy pants now matching his. Then her channel slowly tightened around him with each thrust inside her until she called out, while her body continued to milk him to his own explosive release.

When awareness returned, Jeslyn lay beside him on the bed, slowly threading her long fingers through his chest hair and sending goose bumps marching over his flesh. "Yes, I vow."

He started as he realized he'd spoken those words. He pushed up on his elbows wondering what the hell he'd been talking about. But Jeslyn only smiled wide and straddled him again, immediately taking him deep.

"Wonderful, absolutely wonderful." Before he could question her, she leaned down to capture his lips, erasing all rational thoughts from his mind.

Sarah padded through the trees, looking forward to another full night with the ranch hands. Naomi and Rebecca followed silently behind her. The full moon cast gentle fingers of moonlight between the trees and the soft evening breeze fluttered through her hair, cooling her skin.

Naomi caught up and placed a hand on her sister's arm. "Are you sure we should go back so soon? Mother told us not to take too much, just enough to keep them coming back. Not enough to raise suspicions."

Sarah shook off her sister's hand, glaring over at the blonde woman. "Are we hungry? Do we need sustenance?"

"Of course, but..."

"No buts, Naomi. We are the new master race. We can take whatever we want. Besides, the gargoyles don't even suspect we've been there. They're too worried about protecting the child of blood." Sarah glanced toward Rebecca. "Are *you* with me? Or would you rather go back and feed from mother's breasts with Naomi?"

Naomi's green eyes flashed dangerously. "You weren't so sure of yourself when mother backhanded you across the room, were you?"

Sarah bared her teeth, growling at her sister.

Rebecca pushed between them, her long chestnut hair fluttering into her face. "The ranch hands can survive one more night with us. Then we can seek sustenance elsewhere. One last taste won't hurt us or them, as long as mother doesn't know about it." She cast a meaningful look toward Naomi.

"I won't tell her." Naomi thrust her chin up, indignant. "But she always knows everything. If you haven't learned that by now, you'll ignore it at your own peril."

Sarah snorted. "Mother doesn't know everything, or she wouldn't have allowed father to be killed."

Rebecca's dark head nodded in agreement.

"Since neither of you agree, then I'll go on ahead and you can catch up on your own." Naomi tossed her head, swinging her long blonde hair over her shoulder. She brushed past them, and sped ahead toward the ranch.

Sarah watched her go and pursed her lips. "She's weak. She won't survive long among us."

Rebecca stopped and held her arm in front of Sarah to stop her forward motion. "Do you smell that?"

Sarah sniffed the air and then scowled. "Vamps. What the hell are vamps doing out here?"

"What if it's just the day walker?"

Sarah shook her head. "This is too strong. This is several vamps."

"And Naomi is running straight into them."

Both women exchanged a worried glance before breaking into a full run.

Trees whipped against Sarah's face and she rushed ahead, only slowing to a run at the edge of the tree line. But it was already too late. Rebecca crouched behind her as they watched Naomi battling with several vampires. They both knew their sister wouldn't survive whatever the vampires had in mind for her. The vamps wouldn't suffer a cross breed that could threaten their domain to survive.

"Damn it, Sarah. Mother is going to be extremely angry." She clenched and unclenched her fists.

"I told you she was weak." Sarah shrugged, silently cursing her sister for getting herself captured. "She should've been alert for danger."

"I meant about us losing access to the ranch hands. This means they're on to us, and Naomi was right."

Sarah nodded. "Of course, you're right. We'll blame that on Naomi. It's not like she can dispute our version." She sighed. "Are you hungry?" At Rebecca's nod, she continued. "Let's go find some alternate dinner. I've heard the Bad Ass Café has a good assortment."

Odeda flew high above the ranch, enjoying the wind whipping through her hair, and the cool tang of the night air. She's been circling the perimeter for the past three hours hoping to catch sight of the bitch who'd injured Kefira. The entire time, she'd fantasized about how she'd kill her...slowly. Good thing she'd been released from service. God tended to frown on the entire revenge scenario.

Movement just outside the tree line below caught her eye and she reached out with her senses. Succubus and vampire along with a few other things. Her lips curved into a satisfied grin. "Welcome to the last day of your life, you blood-sucking whore."

After sending a quick telepathic message to her sisters to pass on to their new vamp watchdogs, she hung back, watching for any others.

The small lone figure jogged across the pasture, confident in her step. "I'm not sure how the hell you guys evaded our perimeter checks to snack on our ranch hands, but it's time to go hungry."

When the vamp/succubus made it to the other side of the pasture, Odeda sailed down over the trees looking for any others. No movement caught her eye that couldn't be attributed to the local wildlife, but the stench of evil congregated just inside the trees. Maneuvering carefully, she landed on a high branch, retracted her wings and quickly climbed down to sit on the lowest branch. Placing her hands on either side of her thighs, she grabbed the branch and swung herself down to drop harmlessly to the forest floor.

Immediately, she noticed a patch of flattened pine needles, as if two or three people had knelt there. A small rabbit darted past, but slowed enough to avoid the disturbed area. "You smell it too, don't you buddy?"

As she neared the area, a prickle of evil ran down her spine, and she knelt to place her hand against the forest floor. The neck ruffling sensation of evil flowed up her arm while she memorized the 'taste' of each individual who'd knelt here. "Two, definitely two." Now she would recognize them if they ever crossed paths again, and even better, she could pass her impressions onto her sisters.

She stood, brushing her hands together, as if she could rub away the evil. After a quick look around her, she broke through the tree line to jog after her prey. Even from two pastures away, she heard the sounds of battle. "Damn vamps. Couldn't even wait for me!"

Her wings materialized on her back and within seconds she was airborne. A loud 'poof,' like the sound of a balloon popping, reached her, quickly followed by a whooshing noise. "One vamp down. Damn, she's tough."

When the scene came into sight, Odeda confirmed her earlier thoughts when she saw a pile of gray ashes just outside the bunkhouse. The intruder fought with four vampires, holding her own, and Odeda stopped to study the situation. After all, she really didn't care how many of the vamps died in the process. Especially the mouthy one from the graveyard, but as she looked around, she didn't see him anyway.

"Are you gonna just hover out there, or are you going to help them?" Kefira's voice sounded inside her head.

She laughed and turned to see Fi jog out of the house, still buttoning her jeans pulling on her shoes. *"I just thought I'd study our opponent for a few minutes."*

Kefira's disembodied snort of disbelief echoed inside her head, causing her to smile.

"Don't kill her, I get a piece of this bitch too."

Odeda blew her a kiss. "Not if you're too busy getting dressed."

The intruder ripped a tall vamp's throat out and then licked her fingers as she turned toward Edward. Out of respect for James, Deda sailed down to land between Edward and the woman. James probably wouldn't be happy if she watched while his kiss leader became dust.

When Odeda landed and finally looked into the face of her opponent, she stood stunned for a moment. Before her stood an exact replica of Dara—except for the eyes. This woman's face held pure evil, and hatred shined from the deep green depths of her eyes, where Dara's held compassion, amusement or ice, depending on her mood.

Before Odeda recovered from her shock, the woman reached out and slashed deep furrows across her chest, slicing open her bustier and baring her breasts to everyone in the yard.

Damn! I need to pay attention. Her chest quickly turned to stone, locking the bitch's talons inside the outer layers of her stone chest.

The imposter tried to retract her hand, but her talons stubbornly held and her look of mischievous evil turned to one of wary confusion.

"Welcome to my world, bitch! This was my favorite leather bustier you just ruined." Odeda grabbed her by the neck and simultaneously allowed her talons to slip from her stone front before she finished her stone healing and returned her skin to flesh. Her other arm cocked back and she delivered a bone jarring punch to her porcelain jaw, even as she reminded herself that this woman was not her sister. The Dara look-alike flew back to land on her butt in the grass.

Kefira joined her, automatically assuming a battle stance next to her as they had in the graveyard.

The intruder's eyes snapped open and pure hatred seethed inside the green depths. *"So, you're two of the gargoyle bitches, I've heard so much about."* She spat on the ground and the grass sizzled and wilted. Then she stood facing Odeda, while four vampires fanned around behind her. *"If we just knew where you'd hidden the others, we'd wipe all of you out and be done with it!"*

"Others? What others?" Kefira's brow furrowed and she looked like she might faint.

"The other gargoyles. Don't worry, we'll find them and wipe your pathetic race off the face of the planet for good!"

Kefira was about to comment when one of the vamps led Kefira back away from the fight, and what worried Deda more was that Fi let them. She shook her head, she needed to concentrate on the fight ahead.

Odeda waved the vamps back and motioned the woman forward with both hands. She obliged and when she reached Odeda, delivered a right to the jaw that knocked her back and made her teeth rattle.

"You don't seem so tough to me, even with your vamp lackeys."

Damn, her voice even sounds like Dara's! Odeda, still hunched over, swung around driving her elbow into the woman's midsection. The woman crumpled inward, but then grabbed Odeda's elbow and sent her flying as if she were a rag doll.

At the last moment, Odeda had the good sense to open her wings and catch enough of a gust to slow her descent. She twisted in the air, so she could land on her feet, causing a growl of frustration from their intruder.

"Don't you bitches ever die?"

"Not at the hands of blood-sucking whores."

The four vampires repositioned with each movement, cutting off her escape, but Odeda knew she wasn't done yet.

Her back leg kicked out catching one vampire in the jaw, and knocking him flat, before she rushed forward, talons extended, toward Odeda. A smile curled Odeda's lips as she stood still until the last possible second, then lunged to the side and kicked out, catching her attacker in the torso, and knocking the wind from her. Surprise and shock registered on the woman's face before she crumpled to the ground.

Odeda took advantage of the opportunity and pounced, pushing the woman's face into the grass, and twisting her arm behind her at a painful angle. "Gentlemen, do you think you could take her off my hands now?"

When none of them moved to help her, she followed their line of sight to her bare breasts, now fully healed from their quick turn to stone. She sighed. "Men."

Edward blinked rapidly as if coming out of a deep trance before taking off his suit jacket and stepping forward to offer it to Odeda. "My apologies, Odeda. Men of all races appreciate a beautifully formed woman." Three other vampires stepped forward to take the prisoner.

"Thank you, Edward." She slipped on the jacket. "Try not to let her loose again, will you? I think James would be very unhappy if he had to take his entire kiss home in a Ziploc bag."

James stepped out of his PT Cruiser and closed the door. At least since this meeting had been called at night and wasn't an *official* business meeting, he didn't see the necessity of driving the Aston Martin. He had to practically do contortions to drive, let alone sit in the tiny car. He looked up at the Wellington Enterprises building he'd built from scratch and sighed. *I don't miss being a spy – all the evil, all the daily intrigue, but I do miss my business.*

Being a talent scout had started out as his front for his kiss, but had become a secret passion of James.' Regardless of his new responsibilities, it was hard to completely let go of his old life, and he wasn't sure he wanted to. He just hadn't figured out how to merge the two quite yet. *But I will!* Noting the promise to himself, he walked toward the front doors.

"Mr. Wellington!" The night security guard jumped up from behind his desk to hold out a hand.

James smiled and shook. "It's been a while Dan, how have you been? Still studying?"

The man bobbed his bare round head in a nod and pushed his round glasses up farther onto his nose. "Yes, sir. In fact, I graduate at the end of the year."

"Great. Don't forget to send me your updated resume with your degree on it. We can always use more people in accounting."

A large smile split Dan's beefy face. "Yes, sir, Mr. Wellington! I sure will. I'd love to continue to work for the company." The man slapped a button on the side of his desk and the glass doors to the hallway containing the elevators slid open allowing James entry.

"I'll ensure Edward keeps an eye out for your resume, even if I'm still on leave." He shifted his weight, feeling out of place in his jeans, loafers and button down shirt. Usual attire for work involved a full suit and tie. "Has anyone else arrived?"

"Yes sir, they came through the back entrance." Which meant Edward and the other kiss members hadn't wanted to bring their vampire business past the mortal security guard, since the back entrance involved a swipe card and voice recognition only. The front security would only notice a new entry on the computer's activity report.

Inside the elevator, he punched the basement button and inserted his passkey, which would allow him to access the extreme lower levels of the building—since there were twenty floors below the *basement* where only vampires or their unfortunate *guests* ever ventured. The doors whooshed open in front of him and he stopped dead in his tracks. Two of the vampire enforcers held a squirming, angry woman between them. Even without seeing her face, James would know her anywhere.

"Dara?" He rushed forward, ready to kill his own kiss members in her defense. Then she raised her chin, their eyes met and his breath caught in his throat. She could be an exact copy of Dara, except for the emptiness in her green eyes.

Edward stepped forward, breaking him out of his shock. "James, may I present one of the beings who've been dining on McAllister's ranch hands."

"She looks just like Dara." He walked around her, studying her from every angle and she tracked him with an angry glare.

"We are the new master race, blood-sucker." She spit at him, the foul poison falling harmlessly against the concrete where it started to bubble as it slowly digested the concrete. If you don't let me go, my race will hunt you all to extinction!"

James couldn't help himself, he laughed, a full-throated sound of mirth that bounced off the cement walls and echoed around them. Unlike Dara, this one had fire. Dara used ice as her defense and could freeze out any unwanted attention, with a few chill words. "Edward, do you mind if I talk to your...prisoner?"

An evil smile curved the good half of Edward's face. "By all means, James. Please, be my guest."

James stepped forward, leaning down eye level with the imposter. "Perhaps you've forgotten which side you're on. Neither succubus nor vampires are known for their 'never leave anyone behind' philosophy." She narrowed her eyes, but remained silent. "Here's what I think. I think since I can clearly smell both races on you, that you are a cross breed from Nicholas and the Succubus Queen we've all heard so much about. And I think your mother and sisters are at this very moment discussing how weak you were and why you didn't deserve to live by the survival of the fittest rule that most servants of the dark embrace."

She struck forward with her fangs, nearly catching James off guard and definitely startling the two vamps who held her. James dodged and brought up his left hand to catch her around the throat, squeezing until she ceased struggling and reverted to glaring, her short fingernails digging into his hand.

"What the hell?" The vampire holding her right arm asked. "We barely saw her move. I thought they were a new race—only ancients can do that!"

Edward sighed and exchanged a long-suffering look with James. "I do apologize, James. It seems some of our number can't keep up." He turned his attention to the offender. "Nicholas' blood runs through her veins, which means she will share some of his ancient powers."

She pulled against James' hand to find enough air to speak. "Which means I'm more powerful than your kiss leader here, especially now that he's sold out."

James laughed again, letting only cocky arrogance remain in his expression. "And yet, your father is now dust, and I stand here with my hand around your throat. I would be careful about making too many assumptions—especially in your present circumstances." She glared at him, raw hatred seething from every pore, but she remained silent.

"Perhaps you'd like to trade some information for a postponement of your death?" He gestured around the room. "I'm sure we can make your stay either pleasant, or..." He left the alternative unsaid, hanging in the air like a dark promise.

She raised her knee into his crotch and only his fast reflexes allowed him to turn so the blow connected with his upper thigh instead. He lifted her until her feet hung uselessly a foot above the ground and she gasped for breath.

"I see you've chosen the hard way. Very well." He lowered her slowly until only an inch separated their faces. "I'll leave you to the kiss."

At his signal, the two vampire enforcers again stepped forward to take her.

"James, go home and watch over your daughter-in-law."

Shock traveled through James and he turned toward Edward, his brows raised in question.

"Don't look so surprised, James. You're not the only one who has avenues to hear pieces of the prophesy, and after the incident with Nicholas, the news of your true relationship to Logan was rather easy to deduct." Edward crossed his arms and studied James. "The entire kiss knows you're the vampire spoken of in the prophesy, the one who has always walked in both worlds."

James gaze hardened as he readied for a fight against the entire kiss.

Edward held up his hand. "There's no need for that, James. You've always been exceedingly fair to all of us and most of us see the value in fitting into the human world. Centuries of being the boogey-men can pale over time, and your company and your policies offer us a way to live that doesn't involve a daily struggle for existence."

"I can't believe I'm hearing this. I spent centuries hiding what I truly am from everyone."

Edward shook his head. "You can be just as ruthless as any vampire who ever existed, but you've always gone about it with an innate sense of loyalty and fairness that didn't exist in the others. That's why you're still here and they are dead. There are more of us who appreciate that quality than not."

James stood stunned. "I'm not sure what to say."

Edward clapped him on the back. "Just say that you'll consider coming back to Wellington Enterprises when your duties to the child of blood are done. We'll extract as much information as well as the *sample* you require from the girl and I'll be in touch."

“You realize that if the side of good prevails, it doesn’t mean that the kiss won’t be hunted down and eradicated?”

“I think that if it’s known that we openly supported the protector of the child that there is a chance for us. Besides, if one vampire can be given a chance, why not the rest of us?”

James nodded. “Why not indeed.”

Chapter Eleven

Kefira slowly surfaced into wakefulness. Dagan's arm tucked protectively around her and he spooned against her back as if they'd been falling asleep together for years. She resisted the urge to snuggle back against his warmth and let sleep take her.

Something sizzled inside her small room—an awareness, a tension that hadn't been there when she'd fallen asleep.

Slowly, so as not to wake Dagan, she slid out from under his arm and out of bed. She glanced around the room, but nothing seemed any different than it had last night. She padded toward the window to look outside at the waning moonlight. The gentle fingers of dawn had already started to push back the night and the world hung in a hushed state in between the two.

Pain shot through her like lightning as the wound on her back burned and sizzled. She gripped the windowsill and locked her knees, hoping she wouldn't fall to the hardwood floor. Nausea roiled in her stomach and bile rose in her throat. She swallowed hard against the sensation, clamping her teeth together until it finally receded.

Sweaty and panting, the haze of pain cleared, and she glanced out the window in front of her. A rush of movement in the yard caught her attention and she pressed her nose against the cool glass trying to catch a glimpse of whatever lurked in the yard. A lone figure stepped out from behind the old oak, just behind the tire swing that swung gently in the breeze. Kefira's lips thinned into a line as she stared at her doppelganger. The one who had shot her full of arrows and started the wound on her back.

As if Kefira's anger radiated clearly down to the yard, the woman winked, sparking Kefira's temper further. Kefira placed both palms flat against the glass and closed her eyes, reaching out with her senses until she found the imposter. When her awareness closed around the woman, she understood what Dagan struggled to describe to them about the beings that attacked him. Definitely succubus as well as vamp, with hints of several other supernatural beings—all very powerful, but very raw and uncontrolled. She took a minute to imprint everything she'd learned in her memory.

She stepped back from the window and allowed a satisfied smile to curve her lips. "I've got you now. You can't run, or even hide." Once a gargoyle had an imprint, they subject could be tracked to the very ends of the earth. And that's exactly what Kefira had in mind—then she'd find the key to her disjointed memories and these rumors of other gargoyles before she treated the bitch to a painful death.

Opening her connection to her sisters, to tell them not to worry, everything was fine, she stopped short as nothing happened. *It's happened then... I'm turning evil and I can't even contact me sisters.* Anger at the universe flowed through her, but she carefully replaced it with the knowledge that if she ended up being the sacrifice, she'd at least make damn sure the bitch imposter went with her.

She made her way silently to her chest of drawers to pull out jeans and a comfortable top, low in the back, which would allow her to manifest her wings. She startled a moment as the knowledge that she *could* once again materialize her wings, but then shrugged and continued dressing. *It doesn't matter how I know, as long as I still can.*

Grabbing Lileth from her perch on the wall, Kefira took one last look around at her room with its beautiful dark cherry hardwood floors, pictures of her sisters, knick knacks from

almost a thousand years of living and, of course, her extensive sword collection. Then her gaze fell on Dagan.

Her breath caught in her throat as she took in his dark beauty. She loved this man, the knowledge was there in her mind, but where had that emotion gone? Anger had flooded her only moments earlier. It might not be her favorite, but at least she felt alive when it flowed through her veins.

Her entire life she'd fought against them, fought to tame them, and now...only the ones she wanted to keep were gone. She stood a moment, waiting to feel...something, but it never came. For one wistful moment, she wished she could even experience sadness for the emotions she'd lost, the emotions she knew she'd never experience again, but she had things to do, and there would be time for regrets later. She cracked open the door and left.

Outside, the air held a slight chill, but she concentrated and turned a hair-thin layer of her skin to stone, insulating her from the cold. As she moved, thousands of tiny cracks permeated the stone layer, allowing her freedom of movement. That done, she concentrated, orienting on the imposter. A faint whiff of her tainted the bunkhouse, but a larger thread hung like a beacon toward the south, through the trees at the edge of Logan's pastures. The same trees where she'd seen her evil twin. *Look out honey, because I refuse to be second at anything!*

Her wings materialized on her back without a thought and she flapped hard and pushed off with her feet. The air caught her immediately and she breathed a sigh of relief at swimming through the air currents. This was part of her existence she never wanted to give up. A gift from God, she would always treasure.

As soon as the Almighty's name flowed through her mind, the wound on her back burned as if a white-hot brand seared her skin. Her wing stroke faltered and she lost altitude. A barn grew larger and larger in her vision and at the last moment before she hit it head on, she flapped both wings in one large downward gust and flew up and over the structure, scraping the soles of her tennis shoes on the roof. *Note to self—be careful what you think while flying or in other precarious situations.*

"I wonder if that's what happens to vampires when they say...well...*that* name." She made another mental note—this time to ask James, but then started when she realized she'd probably never see him again. Again, the anger at the universe flared and she fought against the red that tinged her vision. Finally, she won, pushing it away to examine later. How ironic, she'd spent her whole life craving exactly what she seemed to have now—freedom from her emotions—but not from the ones she'd hoped. Why did life never tend to be ironic in the right direction?

The strange awareness pulled at her with an almost physical tug, like trying to hold two magnets just apart from each other. She allowed it to guide her toward her destination. Several minutes later, she landed on the second floor balcony of what appeared to be a sprawling mansion about fifty miles outside of McKade, Texas.

The new dawn conquered the dark and weak shafts of early sunlight warmed her thin layer of stone skin. Shaking herself, she allowed that layer of now dead skin to fall away, knowing it would regenerate the next time she healed.

Reaching out with her senses, she smelled neck ruffling evil and sex. The latter caused her body to react with a sudden arousal that almost drove her to her knees.

She willed her wings back into their tattoo form since the veranda doors didn't look wide enough to accommodate them. Holding Lileth ready, she stepped forward and flung them open, alert for anything. When nothing happened, she crept into the room. *It's dark as a freaking tomb in here. Someone has invested a significant chunk into sunshades or heavy drapes.* Her eyes instantly adjusted until her visual acuity gave her better vision than she would ever have in daylight.

Another step forward and the stench of body fluids and death filled her nostrils. A familiar smell, it didn't shake her, only gave a direction to head. A gut instinct had her rolling to the side before her thoughts even caught up enough to analyze the situation. She landed on her feet, her sword automatically in position to block the downward stroke of a large pole. With a practiced rotation of her wrist, she flipped the pole out of her attackers' hand, which was quickly replaced by a rapier. She smiled as the adrenaline of the challenge flowed through her. "Who the hell are you?"

A stunning brunette stood proud and haughty, her rapier held expertly in front of her. The woman raised her perfectly arched eyebrow as if she'd been interrupted during tea. "You've broken into *my* house, I think I have the right to ask first." She chuckled low in her throat. "But since I already know, I'll save us both the trouble." The rapier still held at the ready, she studied Kefira critically from head to toe. "I can smell him on you, Kefira Knight, and I can smell the evil festering in your soul. I suppose that answered my curiosity about what happens when a gargoyle is tainted with the blood of the new master race."

Kefira waited for anger or even excitement, but only a quickening of her pulse and the pounding in her temples alerted her that she existed. "You never answered my question. Who the hell are you?"

The woman's cultured laugh spilled out, caressing along Kefira's skin like silk. "Shall we stand at the ready to fight all night, or can we call a momentary truce and put down our weapons?"

"You go ahead and drop yours, I can stand here all night if needs be."

Again, the cultured laugh, but this time when it caressed her skin, it moved over her nipples and between her thighs like a lover's caress. "You are now one of us, Kefira, whether you admit it or not. You've only to accept it and take your place among us."

A sudden intuition had her kicking out with her back foot, smiling when it connected firmly followed the crack of breaking bone. Still keeping the woman with the rapier in sight, she stepped back to see who had attempted to sneak up on her.

Her doppelganger sat in a crumpled pile on the floor, her right arm held over her stomach, while her left hung uselessly at her side. "You bitch! You broke my arm!"

Kefira lunged forward bringing Lileth down and across in a wide arc aimed for the woman's neck. Her would-be victim rolled out of the way at the last moment before jumping up, balanced lightly on the balls of her feet. She glared toward the brunette with the rapier. "You could have helped, Mother."

Mother, huh? I guess I've just met Nicholas' mate, the Queen of the Succubus.

The brunette shrugged. "If you can't win a fight against a gargoyle, then you do not deserve to be part of the master race. Perhaps your sisters will help you."

"Why should I? She wouldn't help Naomi when she was captured."

Kefira turned toward the doorway to see a perfect replica of Odeda. She might actually think it was her sister except for the evil shining in the woman's eyes.

A menacing growl came from the brunette. "Captured by whom?" The demand and displeasure in her voice sliced across the room like a whip. *They are just now telling Mommy that we have one of the sisters? Interesting.*

The Odeda look-alike spared an evil smile for her wounded sister before facing her mother. "A vampire kiss was staked out at the McAllister ranch, no pun intended. Naomi ran ahead of us and was caught."

The brunette's glare turned deadly. "I'll deal with you two later," she hissed. "I'm quite displeased. If I wanted one of you dead, I would've done it myself." She turned her attention back toward Kefira, her face suddenly composed as if they were discussing what to have for breakfast. "Now, what were we discussing?"

Kefira gestured with Lileth toward the rapier, still pointed toward her. "You were going to put down your weapon and surrender, to save yourself and your daughters a major ass kickin'."

"No, I think we were discussing you joining us. How convenient that we seem to have an opening in our ranks. And since you can show us the location of the hidden gargoyles, so we can wipe them out, all the better."

"One of your daughters has just been captured and will most likely be killed, and you're already replacing her?" Then Jeslyn's last words registered and the montage of memories fast forwarded through her brain again. Suddenly her wound burned and she gritted her teeth against the pain, refusing to stumble or to relinquish her weapon.

"Kefira, don't you see? You are now one of us. The evil burns through you and will continue to do so. If you continue to fight it, you will die."

Lileth began to shake in her grip. She didn't know how much longer she could maintain her grip and her stance. Sweat beaded on her forehead and ran down the crevice between her breasts. "No, I am not evil!" Sweat dripped into her eyes and she brushed it away with her free hand.

"Kefira," she tsked. "I am Jeslyn, Queen of the Succubus, and believe me when I tell you that you are. I can smell evil, as can you. You were destined to take Naomi's place among us." Her tone took on a comforting motherly tone and Lileth became heavier and heavier in Kefira's hand. Her arm shook with the effort of holding the broadsword in position.

Kefira tried to form the words, to deny the accusation, but her mouth and tongue wouldn't cooperate. She screamed inside her mind as anger and frustration crashed over her like a tidal wave. *"I'm not evil! Evil is not a state of being, it's defined by actions!"*

Jeslyn purred and stepped closer, just out of reach of Kefira's sword. Kefira tried to make her arm respond and lunge forward, through the perfect white breasts, but it wouldn't heed her command.

"Excellent, I can hear you telepathically. Don't you see, Kefira? You are already ours. By thought and by deed."

Kefira shook her head from side to side, the motion slinging sweat onto her outstretched arm. *"Liar! I've done no evil deeds!"*

"Ahhh, who is lying now?" Jeslyn leaned forward so the sharp tip of Lileth's blade rested between her breasts. "Kill me if you are truly still on the side of good, Kefira. Even I have never killed my own child."

Shock and shame flowed through Kefira. How did she know?

"The Dark One has endless fonts of information. You have always been slated to come to us. Haven't you struggled with it all your life? You were made with a defect that made you different than your sisters. You've lived with that shame all your life, but now with us, there is no shame. Anger and emotions define us and the only time we control them is when it helps us get what we desire."

"You're full of crap."

"Suppose I told you it was all a lie, Kefira? That you were never pregnant. There was never a child. You were simply betrayed by a man you loved." Jeslyn grinned wickedly, "We've all had that one happen."

Kefira's vision wavered as the words blasted away at her thin wall of resistance. Everything Jeslyn said was true. She'd thought so herself, she'd said as much to Odeda at the graveyard. Why did she fight? It would be so easy to drop her arm and succumb.

A small memory in the back of her mind surfaced, just a face—a handsome face with deep hazel eyes with flecks of green. She fought to capture the memory, but it flitted away before she could put a name to the face. Slowly, as if a thousand men balanced on the blade of her sword, her arm lowered a small fraction at a time until the razor sharp tip clinked against the tile floor.

"Welcome, Kefira. Come, let me introduce you to your new family."

Ariel bolted upright in bed, startling Logan out of a deep sleep.

"Ariel. Is it the baby?"

She shook her head, reaching out with her senses to touch those around the ranch. Past Logan, she found James and then Dara, Odeda, Dagan, Jeb and several of the ranch hands. Straining her senses to the limit she searched for Kefira, but found nothing—almost as if, the connection to her sister didn't exist. When she opened her eyes and saw Logan's handsome face knit with concern, she blinked back the tears, which burned, at the back of her eyes. "Kefira. She's gone."

"What do you mean, gone?"

Within an hour, the entire family had assembled inside her room, all wearing grave expressions except for Dagan, whose eyes were wide, his mouth slack with shock. "I don't understand. We were together last night." He scrubbed his hands over his face. "I know she'd been acting strange, but I thought it would pass."

Odeda placed a comforting hand on Dagan's knee. "It's not your fault, Dagan. No one can watch her 24/7. She's a big girl and she'd kick your ass if you tried." She curled her legs under her on the fluffy window seat cushion and looked around the room. "Besides we don't know for sure she isn't coming back. We've looked everywhere, but without our connection to her, she'll be impossible to find unless she wants us to."

Ariel took a quick glance around the room. Everyone seemed suddenly interested in their shoes, the floor, anything but facing the truth. "She's gone. We all know it, we just don't know what to do about it." Logan's hand closed over hers and she allowed his warmth and

strength to flow through her before continuing. "Gabriel won't answer, I've called repeatedly. I think we need to call Alonna..." The words died in her throat as she caught sight of Odeda's face. Her eyes were haunted, her lips thinned with concern. Fear twisted Ariel's guts.

"Deda?" she asked softly.

Odeda continued to study the floor. "There's no need to call anyone. Alonna gave Fi and I some prophesy and told me I could share it when the time was right." She huffed out an impatient breath. "Screw timing—I think everyone needs to know now." She pushed to her feet and turned to face the window, her arms crossed tightly across her bustier-clad chest.

"Alonna came to the graveyard when Fi and I were killing skeletons." She took a deep breath before continuing. "She said, 'the Fire Maiden sits poised on the swords edge of good and evil. She must walk the path of evil to choose the path of good. If she strays from the path and evil gains her allegiance, darkness shall reign supreme. But either way, one close to you will be sacrificed.'"

Silence hung in the room like a tense fog as everyone digested this new piece of prophesy. Ariel pushed herself up to settle more comfortably against the pillows. "It says she must walk the path of evil to choose the path of good. It didn't say she'd choose evil. There's still a choice." She glanced toward Logan and then followed his line of sight. He, James and Dagan exchanged a significant look that instantly raised the hairs on the back of her neck. "I take it you three have something to add?"

Dagan's chin raised until he met Ariel's stare. "If the unholy wound appears and can not be fought by holy means, only the Noble Warrior may save the Fire Maiden from becoming consumed by the grueling death. He must become one with her and offer his essence to heal her—body, mind and soul. The merging must happen when she chooses her path—light or dark. If he does not merge with her, her death will lead to darker paths among the prophesy. If he does, and is not accepted by the Fire Maiden in all three aspects, without her knowledge of these words, then the child of blood will perish."

As Dagan's deep voice died away, fear ran through Ariel's veins like liquid ice. "What if she's already chosen?" Her words came out a mere whisper, but by the unbroken silence in the room, she knew everyone heard her clearly.

Kefira followed Jeslyn down the stairs, keeping her senses attuned upstairs to the two remaining daughters. Survival of the fittest reined here and she refused to be second best.

The smell of dank mold was thick on the back of her tongue as the chill of the basement marched up her spine in an army of gooseflesh.

"It's nearly time. Now all we need is the sex ritual and the blood." Jeslyn flicked a switch at the bottom of the stairs and an overhead light blared to life, illuminating the sparse inhabitants of the large room.

The far corner held a nondescript white door with a large padlock. Jeslyn continued across the floor, her spike heels echoing off the bare cement walls. She made quick work of the lock and then swung the door wide. Inside, a plush king-sized bed perched on top of plush red carpet. The bed was stacked high with blankets and pillows, where a still figure lay. A small space heater hummed happily in the corner, giving off a soft red glow and filling the room with snug comfort, which was at odds with the macabre scene.

Kefira reached out with her senses, but nothing but evil surrounded her. Even the figure on the bed reeked of evil, the same evil which she now knew coursed through her veins. She'd accepted it, even embraced it, but couldn't remember what other choices there had been. She shrugged and stepped forward to examine the figure.

Jeslyn pulled the blanket back to reveal a very pregnant woman with tangled blonde hair and large blue eyes that brimmed with hatred and fury, her arms and legs strapped to the bed. Kefira blinked as another image of the face before her swam through her memory. "Charity," she said, surprising herself that she'd spoken aloud.

"Yes." Jeslyn gestured around the room. "As you can see, we've been keeping the child of destiny safe, but soon it will be time for her to take her rightful place."

Something flitted just at the edges of Kefira's memory, and she closed her eyes, trying to grab it, to examine it, but it dissipated like mist on the wind. *I've seen this woman before, I know her. But from where?* She squeezed her eyes shut and a vision of the blonde woman overlapped with a picture of a beautiful woman with dark hair and laughter in her eyes. "Ariel," she whispered.

An impatient sound from Jeslyn broke her concentration and the vision flowed away, leaving her only with a name. But who was Ariel? For a moment, she could've sworn it was someone she'd cared for, someone she would kill for...

"You must concentrate. Time grows short!"

Kefira nodded. Her allegiance was to keep the child safe. She remembered placing her hand on a pregnant stomach and swearing to protect the child at all costs. Her memory may be spotty lately, but that much she remembered. Then another memory surfaced. The man with the hazel and green eyes on his knees knelt before an angel and swearing to protect all the gargoyles—both in hibernation and not. She rubbed her temples trying to remember how that was significant, but it flitted just out of her reach. "I'll do my part," she snapped and pointed toward Jeslyn. "You make sure to do yours."

Jeslyn's eyes glittered with fury, but then her look turned calculated and she tapped a perfectly manicured nail against her chin. "The Dark One will provide a subject for the sex ritual, we just need to wait for him to drop on our doorstep. You will need to cut the child from Charity's stomach when it's time." She gestured at the silent figure on the bed.

"No!" Kefira stepped between the still figure and Jeslyn. "I've sworn to bring no harm to the child, and chopping open his mother puts him at risk. I'll not allow it." She glanced down at the woman they were discussing cutting open like a Thanksgiving turkey. "And why doesn't she object? I wouldn't think she'd be too happy about the idea."

Jeslyn huffed an impatient breath and stepped forward to stand eye to eye with Kefira. "We cut her tongue out long ago. I got sick of listening to her. So, don't try my patience." The last was said through gritted teeth. "You need to remember which side you're on now, gargoyle. Things are done differently here."

Kefira allowed a cruel smile to play over her lips—the same one she'd used when she routed Hitler and his concubine from their bunker hiding place years ago. Wise beings recoiled, and since Jeslyn didn't, that told Kefira quite a bit about the Queen of the Succubus. "My memory may be spotty, Queen of the Whores, but when I take an oath, I keep it."

Jeslyn threw back her head and laughed, a full-throated sound laced with pure malice. "You've got balls, Fire Maiden, I'll give you that." She perched her fists against her shapely

hips. "Fine, you'll do the sex ritual. You have to participate in some part of the rituals in order to comply with the prophesy. That's the only reason you aren't dead for speaking to me like you have." She held up a finger. "But remember, the timing of the ritual must be perfect."

At the mention of completing the sex ritual, moisture dampened the juncture between Kefira's thighs. Apparently, her body had given its vote. "I'll be more than happy to do my part, Jeslyn." She made sure the name came out like an insult and enjoyed watching it hit its mark. Jeslyn's skin darkened with repressed fury and Fi enjoyed watching her struggle to contain it. *Why does she bother? She's not afraid of me. There's got to be some reason she needs me alive and cooperative, or she would've challenged me by now – and lost.*

Footsteps on the floor above them reminded her of the daughters. "What exactly will the other two be doing during all this? Or does your whole pitiful organization revolve around weaklings."

Jeslyn seemed to have found her calm center again, disappointing Kefira when the comment caused no reaction. "Let me worry about them." She leaned forward until her lips were but a hairsbreadth away from Kefira's. "If you do your part to make the prophesy turn down the dark path, I'll make sure you have a place in the new order."

While you rule all? I think not...

Alonna materialized next to Gabriel and then immediately fluttered up to take a safe perch on his shoulder. Dark green jungle surrounded them and snakes, monkeys, spiders and all manner of creepy crawlies teemed over every available surface. "What is this place?"

"We're deep in the rainforest. Or at least only *I* was, until you came." His voice sounded flat and distant. Alonna hadn't heard him sound like this since the night long ago in Egypt where the angel of death had gone door to door, killing the first born of the non-faithful.

"I've looked everywhere for you, Right Hand of God. Don't you care that my giant cousins are facing a crisis?"

Gabriel's normally serene countenance turned quickly to one of anger. His eyes glittered with suppressed rage when he turned to face her. "They have been in my charge since their creation. They have been as close to children as I will ever come, and you doubt that I care for them?"

Alonna lowered her eyes. "Forgive me, Gabriel. I just worry for them all." Usually she flouted the angel's superiority over her, but even fairies knew the full power of an archangel and would not cross certain lines.

Gabriel sighed and reached out to pet a passing spider, as big as Alonna's entire body, which seemed to arch into his touch like a small cat before skittering away to join its family. "You never need to fear me, Alonna." A ghost of his usual smile curved his lips. "Unless you disobey me about sending people bad dreams for revenge again. James still has bad memories from the last set you sent him."

She humphed and crossed her arms over her chest, but bit her tongue against a pithy retort. It wasn't wise to stretch his goodwill when he was in such a mood.

"I've just come from speaking with the Almighty about the situation with the gargoyles..."

His words trailed off and she tapped her foot impatiently. Surely, after all this time, Gabriel knew patience was *not* a fairy trait! After a few long moments where snakes and all

other manner of beasts squirmed or crawled around her, she couldn't stand it any longer. "Well? What did She say?"

Silence fell between them again and Alonna opened her mouth to ask again, when Gabriel's deep voice broke through the quiet.

"As soon as the prophesy turned down the dark path, my role became extremely limited." He glanced up toward the green canopy of leaves that made up the sky in this place. "I want to be there for them, but if I am, they will expect me give answers, and I'm no longer allowed. Any interference on my part could turn us down an even darker path. I just can't risk it."

Anger sparked through her until she was surprised the forest and every animal near her didn't spontaneously combust. "So instead, you want to sit here with the creepy crawlies and feel sorry for yourself instead of being there for the women you've said yourself are like your daughters?"

His mouth hung open in surprise. "I've not abandoned them. Don't you see? I can't help them now. And as much as I hate to say it, if they fail, there are still the others to take their place."

She fluttered up until she hovered eye to eye with the angel. "Bull!"

His face darkened with deadly anger and the forest around them turned to dusk in time with his roiling emotions. "What did you just say to me?"

She poked a finger against his nose. "You heard me. You don't want to be there because it will be too painful for you to watch them go through this while you're unable to help. So, instead, you choose to be selfish and sit here drowning in your self pity. And the purpose of the others was for future prophesy, not for this, and you know it!" She glared at him as the full realization of what she'd done hit her. She crossed her arms over her chest and intensified her glare. If Gabriel chose to disintegrate her on the spot for her insolence, she'd accept it. She'd spoken no more than the truth. At least she had the consolation of knowing guilt would consume him once he calmed down.

Gabriel opened his mouth and she winced against what was surely her last few moments of life.

A booming laugh flowed from the angel, the intensity pushing her backwards until she almost lost altitude and fell to the leaves below. Gabriel reached out a large palm scooping her up before she fell. Animals around the forest chattered, shrieked and shrilled—the animal version of laughter—again echoing the angel's mood.

Long moments later, Gabriel brushed a tear from his eye as his mirth subsided. "Oh, Alonna. No one but you or my gargoyles could speak to me that way and live."

She looked up at him from her perch on his hand, waiting for his next words.

"Now you've suddenly found patience, I see." He smiled down at her. "You're right. I've been staying away because of my own discomfort, but my job is to be there for them, no matter how difficult." He cocked his head to the side as if listening to a voice only he could hear.

"Women. Now I understand James, Dagan and Logan a bit better." He held Alonna up even with his face. "Apparently, She agrees with you wholeheartedly." He took a long look around the jungle before returning his gaze to her. "Shall we go see how they are holding up?"

“Kefira? Or the rest of the clan?”

He shook his head. “Kefira is gone from us until she makes her choice. I can not interfere or even tell them where she’s gone, and neither can you. The prophesy will play out as it must.”

Chapter Twelve

Dagan pulled his sweat soaked shirt off and threw it into the clothes hamper in the closet before slamming the lid. He'd tried for hours to search for Kefira, but his link to her had been completely cut, almost as if it had never been. *I know I didn't imagine hearing her thoughts inside my head.*

He pulled off his cowboy boots and threw them against the wall, leaving small dents where the heels hit. When he'd woken without her, he'd been frantic. Some inner knowledge told him she'd left, for good. Then minutes later, as if on cue, Dara had summoned him to Ariel's room, where Fi's sisters had confirmed his fears. He shucked off his jeans, underwear and socks, opening the hamper to toss them in, purely for the satisfaction of slamming the lid again.

Following the family meeting and his failed search attempts, he'd gone out with Logan to do chores around the ranch. With all the ranch hands bed-ridden until Dara cleared them, he Jeb and Logan were left to do the work of twelve. Dagan was no stranger to hard work, and he'd hoped the physical labor would take his mind off Kefira. But it had only served to taunt him.

They repaired sections of fence out where she'd been pinned to the cow. They'd immunized cattle out by the barn, in full view of the side of the bunkhouse where she'd pushed him up against the wall and demanded sex the night before. Then, when they'd mucked out the stalls, the smell of horse and sweat reminded him of when she'd ridden riding toward him, her red hair flying behind her looking like an extension of the muscular animal she rode.

Now, he just wanted a shower, some hot food and some whiskey to dull the slow ache of his muscles. An ache of a good day's work.

He turned the shower spray on high, letting the hot water beat against his back and shoulders. He sighed and closed his eyes, enjoying the massage of the water against his sore muscles.

Tinkling laughter sounded in front of him and he opened his eyes, unsurprised at the sight before him. "I should've guessed. Anytime there's a naked man around, you always seem to turn up, Alonna."

She didn't even look up, but kept staring at his member, a dreamy expression on her face, her chin resting in her cupped hand. "Even soft, it looks wonderfully large."

Her blatant perusal reminded him of last night with Kefira. In between rounds of mind-blowing sex, they'd taken a long shower together. He'd stood just like this while she'd knelt in front of him and taken his erection between her lips, swallowing him until the tip bumped the back of her throat. Blood flowed south and his erection expanded.

Alonna clapped her hands together with delight. "I do so love it when it grows."

He ignored her and turned to reach for the shampoo. From several centuries of experience, there was no way to get rid of Alonna's voyeuristic ways, so he continued as if he were fully dressed. "What are you doing here?" He'd also learned the hard way not to ask 'What can I do for you?' in these situations.

"I came to see how you were doing since Kefira left."

He glanced over his shoulder and realized she'd been ogling his butt. "Don't you ever get tired of checking me out? I figured you'd have moved on to fresher sights by now."

She smiled. "Some things a woman never tires of. Like a fine piece of art, only it's real. Besides, Logan is still mad at me for the succubus incident, so he tells Ariel if I ogle—especially in the shower. And Ariel has become very grumpy about such things since she's gotten pregnant."

Dagan barked a laugh, poured shampoo into his hand and began lathering his hair. "As much as I'd love to hear the full story behind the succubus incident, I'm not in the mood right now."

"All will work out, Dagan. You'll see."

He stopped his lathering mid-motion and turned to face her. "Is this official prophesy?"

"No." Her tiny mouth thinned into a grim line. "I just have faith in my giant cousin. Neither Gabriel nor I are allowed to interfere in any way now that it's turned down the darker path. But we are both here for all of you."

He leaned back into the spray to rinse out the shampoo as he spoke. "I thought you were still upset with me over what I did to Fi."

"I think the time for recriminations has passed. Besides, I know how much it has pained you to hide secrets from her. It is time for us to stand together, and per the prophesy, you will be an important part in bringing her back to the light if she so chooses."

He gestured toward the tiny fairy with a bar of soap. "How the hell am I supposed to do that? I'm supposed to stay close to her until she makes her choice, so I can 'offer her my essence.' But that's difficult to do when I can't even figure out where she went."

"Trust in the prophesy, Noble Warrior. All is not lost until it is."

He lathered his chest as he thought about Alonna's words. "I know you can't help, but you love Fi as much as the rest of us. What's your gut feeling, Alonna?"

The fairy fluttered up to land on Dagan's outstretched hand. "My inner intuition tells me we haven't seen the last of my giant cousin yet." She winked at Dagan before dissolving into nothing.

Jeb finished dressing and ran a brush through his hair, still damp from the shower. He rotated his right arm, still sore from the long day of physical work, and sighed. There was nothing quite like a good day's work to set a man to rights. He'd been somewhat muddled the past few days, although he'd been relieved to find no bite marks on his neck like the rest of the hands. He was probably lucky Jeslyn had found him when she did, or he might've shared the same fate.

He shuddered as he remembered the angry red bites festering on every hand's neck but his. Logan and Dagan had laughed off his suggestion about vampires, insisting they were nothing but myth. Not that Jeb was a superstitious man in most respects, but sometimes the facts spoke for themselves. He'd never ignored the little niggling in his gut, which acted as his measure of what was what, and that little internal meter screamed vampire, however unlikely.

He sat down on his bed and slipped an eight inch hunting knife into the boot sheath he'd had specially made years before. Riding the range, even on a ranch was dangerous business and a knife came in handy. Besides, with all the strange happenings lately, no beast, vampire or otherwise was going to take him without a fight.

He closed the door to his room behind him and walked through the bunkhouse, stopping to talk with each of the men, making sure they were comfortable and checking the wounds like Dara had showed him. Everyone to a man was still groggy and couldn't wrap their mind around one train of thought for more than a few seconds at a time. Jeb scrubbed his hand over his face and sent up a silent prayer that his nights had been filled with Jeslyn and not whatever had found all the men. He wasn't sure what he'd done to deserve such good fortune, but he thanked his maker that it was his.

The alarm on his wristwatch chimed softly, reminding him he'd promised Logan he'd be up at the main house for dinner. "I'll be back later, boys. Give a yell if you need something and one of the guards will come tend you." Groggy mumbles followed him to the door.

He stepped outside, the back of his neck prickling as he came face to face with one of the guards. The man spared him a scowl before stepping aside, but not before gooseflesh marched over Jeb's spine. *There's just something damn sure not right about those guards James hired. They dress like mafia, but reek of...well, evil.* There was no other way to describe it. Something about them didn't quite sit right. He couldn't put his finger on it, but the niggling in his gut was back—and not in a good way.

He closed the bunkhouse door behind him and turned toward the ranch house. The blood red moon bathed everything in a soft sheet of crimson and he raised his chin to stare at the mesmerizing orb. Something about this moon tickled at the back of his mind, like a memory just out of reach. He struggled to pull it to the forefront, but only a dim recollection of something he'd said to Jeslyn came back to him. "I told her 'I vow,' and it had something to do with the moon of blood. What the hell did that mean?" He rubbed his eyes, suddenly tired.

Keep your promise. Only then can you rest.

His head snapped up in surprise and a red haze fell over his mind. Everything crystallized as his mission became clear. "The time is at hand, I must prepare."

When he glanced back toward the ranch house, it beckoned to him, the pull almost unbearable. "I am ready. Soon, very soon..."

"My lower back aches, that's all. I've probably just been on my feet a bit too much today." Ariel reached for another ding-dong and slowly unwrapped the treat under James' watchful eye.

"Just humor me, will you? Dara will decide if 'that's all' or not." James grabbed one of the treats from the box and Ariel resisted the urge to snap. He'd been unable to eat anything but blood for centuries, and ever since he became the protector of the child of blood, he'd been making up for lost time. Chocolate seemed to be one of his favorites, and she couldn't blame him.

They both bit into their cakes at the same time and a unison twin sigh of semi-orgasmic contentment escaped from both.

"I must admit," James managed through a mouthful of chocolate cake and cream, "you have terrific taste in food."

"You won't still think that when your fangs fall out and you gain a hundred pounds."

Ariel jumped like a guilty child at Dara's chiding voice and she hid a smile when she noticed James looked sheepish as well.

"Now, Ariel. Why didn't you tell *me* your back hurt?" Dara's cool green eyes assessed her and Ariel resisted the urge to squirm under the scrutiny.

"Because then you wouldn't have let me out of your sight and I'd be in for another round of poking and prodding." Before Dara could steal her chocolate, she stuffed the rest of her cupcake in her mouth and chewed defiantly behind her hand. After all, there was no reason to forget manners while she scarfed down ding-dongs.

Dara snatched the box of treats from the middle of the table, and Ariel lunged for them, but missed. Dara shook the box. "How often are you having these back aches?"

James swallowed and then took a large drink of milk. "On and off about every ten minutes, although they've been a little more often since we've been down here in the kitchen."

"Thanks for ratting me out." Ariel puffed out a breath, which fluttered her bangs.

Dara pursed her lips in disapproval. "I know you two aren't taking this seriously, but I need to know exactly how far apart these are."

The muscles in Ariel's lower back chose that moment to bunch and constrict, but this time pain radiated not only across her lower back, but also around the front of her abdomen as if a giant hand squeezed her, the strong fingers, lacing around her swollen stomach. She leaned onto the table and bit back a moan before she rubbed a soothing circle over her son. "*It's all right, little one. Just relax.*" She braced her other hand on the table and tried to breathe deep against the discomfort. Dara stepped behind her to massage her shoulders.

"Breathe, Ariel. In and out. That's it. It's almost done now."

She opened her mouth to demand how Dara would know it was almost over, but then her traitorous body chose that moment to unknot and relax. "That was a bit uncomfortable." To her son she sent thoughts of love and she hoped, calm. He kicked her lightly and a wave of unconditional trust nearly overwhelmed her. When she looked up at Dara and James, her eyes brimmed with unshed tears.

Dara pulled Ariel's chair out from the table and placed one gentle hand against Ariel's swollen stomach and the other against her lower back. Closing her eyes, she remained silent for several minutes until Ariel bit back a curse as her muscles tightened again. This time, uncomfortable didn't even describe it, this time pain was definitely involved. If she didn't know better, she'd think her tightening muscles would pop the baby out like a cork from a bottle.

"Breathe, Ariel. Don't forget to breathe." Dara breathed with her until slowly, the pain receded, leaving her scared and panting.

"James, go find Logan and tell him to meet us upstairs. Then find Odeda and have her call Gabriel and Alonna. I'll take Ariel upstairs and check her dilation, but I'm pretty sure we're in labor."

"We?" Ariel was horrified when her voice squeaked. She never squeaked! "I don't see anyone else around her in pain."

James' eyes went round and he sat like a block of stone, his mouth hanging open until Dara smacked an open palm against the table, startling him. "Snap out of it. Go do what I told you."

James stood so fast, the chair toppled backwards to lie sideways on the floor. "Yes, of course." He scrambled back out of the room so quickly, Ariel only saw a blur.

"I think he's a bit nervous if he's using vampire tricks in the house." Ariel laughed, although her voice sounded strained. She swallowed against the lump of fear forming in her throat. "I don't know if I can do this, Dara." Her words came out a mere whisper.

Dara knelt so she was eye level with Ariel. "Of course you can. You're one of the strongest people I know. And God would never give you something you couldn't handle. She knows your abilities—She created you and blessed you with this baby."

Ariel closed her eyes and thought back to the day when God created her, fully formed. So in awe was she, she couldn't bring herself to look into the face of the almighty. But then a gentle hand had settled onto her head as she knelt and God had spoken. "Ariel, Lioness of God, and leader of your clan, go forth and protect those downtrodden. I have blessed you with strength and wisdom, which will serve you well. Go forth with the knowledge that I will always be with you."

When she opened her eyes, Dara still knelt patiently in front of her.

"I think I can do this." She smiled and grabbed Dara's hand. "But I'm still terrified."

Logan watched waves of pain break over his wife, and stood feeling about as useful as a doorknob on the middle of a wall. He held her hand, and breathed in and out with her every time her face twisted with pain, biting back his own fear and wishing there was something he could do to help.

"It's all part of the natural process, Logan."

He looked up to see Dara smiling at him.

He nodded, hoping she was right, but held his own council. He'd seen cattle and horses give birth hundreds of times, but none of the mothers seemed to be in as much pain as Ariel. She'd nearly twisted his fingers off during her last contraction. He held a newfound respect for women after this experience. He didn't think many men could hold up to this kind of pain.

Dara pressed a comforting hand to his shoulder and turned her attention to Ariel. "One thing I forgot to mention..."

"There's more?" Ariel's eyes rounded with fear. "I've decided not to have the baby today. Can't we put this off until I'm ready?"

Dara took both of Ariel's hands into her own, which seemed to have somewhat of a calming effect. "Nothing like that. Don't get upset, or you'll just make the labor harder. Deep, even breathing, okay?"

Ariel nodded and Logan took Dara's pointed look as a sign to offer his wife some of the ice chips, which Dara advised were the only refreshment allowed during the labor. Ariel accepted them gratefully and relaxed back against the pillows, rolling the ice around in her mouth.

"What's the 'one more thing' you were going to tell us?" Logan placed the cup of ice back on the bedside table, shoving the spoon in the middle, so it didn't fall out.

Dara looked between them, but her gaze settled on Ariel. "No matter how much pain you're in, be very careful that you don't change to stone."

Ariel's features hardened, and Logan whipped his head toward Dara. "What effect will that have?"

Dara dropped her gaze, and he suddenly knew he wouldn't like the answer. "We aren't quite sure. Kefira miscarried when she turned to stone, purely because our healing abilities return us to our original states when we heal, and our original state doesn't include a baby. And I don't think any of us want to risk anything happening, so it's better to avoid it altogether."

Logan digested the information. He'd suspected something like that had happened to Kefira, but none of the sisters had ever come out and told him. He wondered briefly if Dagan knew, or if the baby had even been Dagan's. After all, the women had lived centuries. He could see they truly loved each other—no one in a ten-mile radius could help but see it. But that didn't mean he'd been Kefira's only relationship. "Can't you give her painkillers, to lessen the chance that when she's in pain and scared, she'll change just on instinct?"

Dara shook her head. "Our bodies metabolize medicines too fast. It's a defense mechanism to keep us from being poisoned, after all, we usually don't have to deal with pain for long, we just turn to stone and heal. When we were created, we weren't intended to have children, and in fact Ariel's is the first pregnancy among our kind—ever."

"Logan..." Ariel said through gritted teeth as her features contorted with pain. He grabbed her hand and helped her breathe through another long contraction. When it finally subsided, he helped her relax back against the pillows and dribbled a few more ice chips through her parched lips.

"I thought she said she'd been poisoned once before? If fact, that's why she missed that she was pregnant because of similar symptoms." He looked down at his wife. "Okay that and she thought she couldn't get pregnant."

"They gave her enough poison to kill everyone in the Greek Isles, and that was only enough to make her severely sick. As I said, we metabolize any foreign substance so quickly, it doesn't have much time to do damage to our bodies."

Tinkling, like the sound of wind chimes in an insistent breeze, drifted through the room.

Logan looked around the room for the inevitable appearance of the small fairy. When he turned back, she knelt on Ariel's swollen stomach, her ear pressed to Ariel's shirt. "He certainly is excited to get out of there." She stood and faced Ariel. "How fare you, giant cousin?"

Ariel's muscles knitted beneath the fairy's feet, knocking her off and sending her fluttering to land on Logan's shoulder. Logan ignored her as he reached for his wife's hand and talked her through the next round of breathing.

When the latest contraction passed and he'd mopped her brow and given her more ice chips, he leaned back in his chair and looked at Alonna, who'd taken up residence on the bedside table.

Ariel sighed and looked over at the fairy. "Thanks for coming, Alonna. I'm surviving—one contraction at a time."

Helplessness washed through Logan and he brought his wife's hand to his lips. "Ariel, I'm so sorry. If there was anything I could do to take this pain from you, I gladly would. I can't stand to see you this way."

Alonna brightened. "Man-thing! I'm so proud of you for being a supportive husband. I'm sure my giant cousin would appreciate the help." She smiled and fluttered forward to

land on Logan and Ariel's joined hands. "May you both see this through together." The room flashed with small specks of gold and silver lights before dimming to normal.

Logan opened his mouth to ask what that was all about when the fairy cocked her head to the side as if listening and then pierced him with a stare. "All questions will have to wait, man-thing. Gabriel needs me elsewhere. But we'll be back in a few hours, well before the baby is born."

With those parting words, she dissolved and Ariel shrugged. "Don't look at me. She enjoys being mysterious."

A sheen of sweat broke out on Logan's brow and he brushed it away. *What the hell? Now is not a good time for me to get sick. I need to be here for Ariel!* The muscles in his lower back twinged and tightened further and further until the worst pain he'd ever endured radiated from his lower back around to his abdomen. He doubled over and a scream of anguish ripped from his lips.

Then Dara was there, telling both he and Ariel to breathe. After a moment of panic, he did what he was told, and even though the breathing helped, it did little other than to help him manage the unbearable pain. Finally, mercifully, it subsided and he looked up at Dara, his breath still coming in short gasps.

"Dara." Ariel looked over at her sister, her brows knit with confusion. "That wasn't nearly as bad as the other contractions. That doesn't mean there's something wrong with the baby does there?"

Dara's hand covered her mouth, but Logan could tell she hid a smile. "No, I think Alonna just found a way for Logan to help. It appears that she gave him half the pain."

Logan swallowed hard before his mouth dropped open. "That was only half the pain Ariel's been dealing with?"

Ariel squeezed his hand tight. "I know you didn't really mean to sign up for this Logan. But I think I can manage the half much better than the whole."

He looked down at his wife, disbelief plain on his face. "Only half..." He'd been sure the pain would split him in two. There's no way he could imagine taking all her pain on. *Remind me to stay on Alonna's good side!* "Dara, just how long do we have left of this labor?"

She patted his hand. "Nature doesn't give us a countdown Logan, but judging by her dilation, I'd say only six or seven more hours."

Logan's head swam and beads of sweat broke out all over his body as the next wave of pain slowly built inside his body. "Hours?! Dear, God. Do you think you could have James bring up some whiskey, and maybe my leftover morphine from my concussion?"

James switched the bottle of Jack Daniels to his other hand, along with Logan's morphine and a glass, so he could open the back door with his free hand. "Jeb, come on in. Dinner is going to be delayed a while – Ariel is in labor."

Jeb's beefy face split into a wide grin. "I'll bet Logan's excited. Can I help?"

James closed the door behind Jeb and studied the man. He looked the same, but something about him was...different. James made a mental note to mention it to Dara and see if he was imagining things. "Let's just say it's almost as if he were in labor too." *If you only knew the half of it.*

"Well, since everyone's busy and it's the cook's night off, maybe I can throw together some sandwiches to tide everyone over."

James' eyes narrowed. Jeb had always been helpful around the ranch when it came to the stereotypical 'men's chores', but he'd never seen him offer to cook. Maybe it was purely his loyalty to Logan. *Or maybe I'm just reading too much into it.* "That would actually be a great help, Jeb." He held up the items in his hands. "I've got to take these upstairs, but I'll be back down in a few minutes to help you."

As Jeb veered off toward the kitchen, James took the stairs two at a time and nudged open the door to Ariel and Logan's room with his foot. Logan, Dara and Ariel were deep into a contraction and Odeda stood by looking distinctly uncomfortable.

"Deda, I thought you were out keeping an eye on our vampire sentries." He crossed the room to place the glass on the bedside table beside Ariel's ice. He opened the Jack Daniel's and poured a liberal amount before opening the medicine bottle and taking out two tablets.

"I have been." She sat, her leather pants creaking with the effort. "Haven't even killed one of them yet, so you should be proud of me. I wanted to come check on Ariel." She glanced over at her sister. "I've never really been around someone giving birth. I hate watching her go through all this pain. It makes me wish there was something I could do."

"I'd be careful what you say out loud around here. That's how Logan ended up having contractions."

The contraction subsided and Logan glared up at James before accepting the proffered whiskey and medicine. "Let's just hope this takes affect quickly, and when this is done, I'm going to thank God formally for making me a man. I don't know how women do this."

James shuddered, glad he hadn't been the one to offer his 'support' of Ariel. Logan had said the same thing every man with a wife in labor had said throughout the eons, but like all his brethren before him, said it 'knowing' he wasn't in danger of having his offer come true. Except Logan hadn't factored in Alonna. "Something about survival of the species, I would think."

Logan popped the tablets in his mouth and downed the glass of whiskey, then followed it up with a several chugs straight from the bottle.

Odeda's full red lips curved into a mischievous smile. "Take it easy there, Logan. You're trying to dull the pain, not get bombed. You still need to be coherent enough to greet your son when he arrives."

"I promised Jeb I'd go back down and help him make sandwiches to tide everyone over." James turned to go.

"Wait." Deda closed the distance between them. "Jeb's cooking? I knew the red moon would have an eerie effect, I just didn't think it would be that."

"Red moon?" James asked.

Odeda stepped to the window and pulled back the drapes, allowing the crimson moonlight to filter in through the window. "I'm not shocked Ariel went into labor under such a moon."

James leaned over to look out the window and his insides turned to ice. "Incoming."

Deda pushed him out of the way. "I don't see anything." She looked back at James. "I don't sense anything. What's up?"

"Trust me, there's several legions of shifters on the way, and we're about to take center stage in a war zone. We've got some time, but we need to prepare." James couldn't explain how he knew, but centuries of following his instincts, no matter how far fetched had kept him alive. And the last time he'd sensed this particular flavor – he'd almost had his arm ripped off by an angry werebear.

Odeda ran from the room without a word and James looked over to see Dara's lovely face clouded with concern, a furrow between her stormy blue eyes. He resisted the urge to smooth away the worry line.

"I have to go warn my kiss. I'll be back before the were's get here. My place is here with the child."

She stepped so close, the gardenia scent that always clung to her filled his nostrils. "We're vulnerable right now with Fi gone and Ariel and Logan in labor." Silence fell between them and he studied her, trying to figure out what she *wasn't* saying. "Be careful."

He smiled. "I'm always careful. Besides, I can't wait to see my grandson."

James raised his arm to touch her cheek, but Odeda chose that moment to barrel through the door between he and Dara, knocking them both a few steps backward. She carried two shotguns and a burlap bag.

"What's in the bag?" James glanced over at Dara wondering what would've happened if Deda's timing were better.

Odeda crossed to Logan and handed him the shotgun before fishing a box of ammunition from the bag. "Silver bullets." Her tone clearly said he should've known. She turned back toward Logan. "Do you think you can shoot in between contractions?"

Tinkling echoed throughout the room as Alonna materialized in front of Odeda, interrupting Logan's response. "Where's Dagan?" Her head whipped around as she searched the room, causing her long blonde hair to gyrate around her revealing tantalizes glimpses of her naked form.

James looked around as he realized he hadn't seen Dagan in hours.

Deda gestured with a box of ammunition, the bullets clinking softly against the plastic box. "He's out doing perimeter checks. I'm on my way back out there to take him this shotgun."

Ariel's rasping pants filled the room as she finished another contraction. "Alonna! Take Logan's pain away so he can fight, I'll have the baby on my own." Her hand snaked out to grab Deda's arm. "Give me that shotgun."

James crossed to the bed. "You'll end up shooting one of us during a contraction. There's no way we're giving you a gun."

Alonna fluttered down between them to stand on Ariel's bent knee. "Stop it. All of you!" She pointed toward James. "You give my giant cousin that gun or I'll send you the most horrible nightmares you can imagine for the rest of your life."

James shuddered from the memory of the last batch of nightmares the vengeful fairy had sent him.

"You!" She pointed to Odeda. "Take me to Dagan. He needs to go after Kefira. Now!"

Odeda disappeared down the stairs with Alonna fluttering behind her.

"Wait!" Logan called. "What about the contractions?"

Chapter Thirteen

James found Edward and several enforcers grouped in front of the bunkhouse. They all turned at his approach.

"Is the child of blood's arrival imminent?"

James nodded. "Ariel's in labor, but it could be hours." He held up a hand to stop Edward's response. "There are several legions of shifters on their way here. We need to prepare."

Edward lifted his face and sniffed the wind, while several of the enforcers did the same. "I don't smell anything."

James resisted the urge to shake the man. "Trust me, they're coming. We may want to elicit some help."

Edward nodded and pointed to two of the enforcers. "Spread the word to those who are willing to stand against the Succubus Queen ruling all. If the child of blood falls this night, the world as we know it is lost."

They nodded their heads in a quick sign of respect before rushing away. James knew all the other vamps would see their exit as only a blur, but to him, their exit seemed almost in slow motion. Sometimes being ancient caused him to be almost jaded.

Edward turned back to James. "I realize we may be on opposite sides in certain things when this is over, but there are several in the monster community who see the larger picture."

"Then why are there legions of shapeshifters descending on us," James said under his breath.

"Because they've probably been misled. As you well know, the Dark One is a master of deceit."

James studied Edward a moment, framing the battle plan inside his mind. "My place is at the house with the child, but Odeda will be here to fight, and Dara if I can convince her to leave Ariel."

Edward glanced off into the distance as if he could see the oncoming enemy. "Agreed. What about the ranch hands? We can't protect both them and the child. The only reason I've been able to keep the newer vampires from feeding on them is the knowledge the succubus poison infecting their blood would be lethal. The shifters won't be dissuaded so easily—even if the result is the same."

James pinched the bridge of his nose against an oncoming headache. *I'm running out of people I trust!* Then slowly, an idea formed inside his mind. "I'll handle that." He turned his attention back toward Edward. "Even if I can't get it to pan out—your priority is the house. The child must survive or the Succubus Queen will rule."

"You want me to what?" Gabriel stared at James dumbfounded. "I've already told you, I can't get involved in anything to do with the prophesy."

James eyes narrowed slightly and his lips curved into a grin that clearly said he knew something Gabriel didn't. "However, there's nothing against you helping in a capacity that has nothing to do with the prophesy, now is there?"

"No," Gabriel answered, his frustration growing by the minute. "But..."

"So if I can prove to you that none of the ranch hands you'll be protecting have anything to do with the prophesy, there won't be a conflict of interest. Correct?"

"Yes, of course, but..."

"Alonna, please join us." James looked upward expectantly until Alonna materialized between them, heralded by what sounded like thousands of tinkling wind chimes.

"You called, Dark Redeemer?" She tapped her tiny foot in the air as she hovered. "I am a bit busy."

Gabriel took a breath to speak, but James plowed on before he could even utter a sound.

"We'll just need a moment of your time, Alonna, for a clarification of the prophesy."

She huffed out a breath through her nose while she studied them both. "I can't give you any more prophesy than I have."

"Of course you can't." James' voice oozed charm that had nothing to do with his vampire tricks and everything to do with his natural effect on women. "We only need you to answer a question for us, but only if you can."

She pursed her lips, but finally shrugged. "All right. If I can, I will answer."

"Alonna." Gabriel stepped forward, a small surge of triumph flowed through him, as he was finally able to wedge a word into the conversation. "Do any of the ranch hands have any part in the prophesy?"

Alonna's manner became guarded. "Why?"

"James wishes me to protect the ranch hands against the wave of incoming shape shifters."

"Oh." Relief flooded her features and she grinned. "I see why you would ask, Gabriel. None of the ranch hands currently abed and helpless in the ranch house have anything to do with the prophesy."

James cocked his head to the side, his surprise at Alonna's carefully worded warning as obvious as his own. He seemed to struggle with his next words, but finally just said, "Thank you, Alonna. That's exactly what we needed to know."

Small sparkles shimmered where Alonna's form had been only moments earlier and Gabriel nodded. "All right, it's agreed. I'll protect the ranch hands. You need to figure out what she *wasn't* telling us."

Ariel closed her eyes and breathed deeply in and then out as the pain slowly ebbed away to be replaced by a dull ache in every muscle in her body. "This totally and completely sucks." She opened her eyes to find only Dara and Logan left in the room. "How close are the were's?"

Logan downed another shot of whisky and then slapped the glass back onto the nightstand. "Too close."

Ariel brushed her sweat-soaked bangs out of her eyes. "How do you know? You can't hear Deda or James' thoughts can you?"

"No, but if they're on their way, they're too close."

Ariel looked next to her to ensure the shotgun and extra ammo was still within easy reach just in case any were's made it into the house. She wasn't about to let anything happen to her son. If the were's thought she was tough before she was pregnant, they hadn't seen anything yet.

"James!" Dara yelled from the window before racing out the door.

Logan bolted up and ran to the window. "Damn, get your gun ready." He turned back to her, his face grim.

"What is it?" She pushed up higher against the pillows, hoping the next contraction would wait for her to find out what was going on.

"Two dozen vampires who don't appear to be from James' kiss just landed behind him."

Relief for her child followed closely by concern for James, Odeda and now Dara flowed through her. None of the vamps could gain entry to the house or even the ranch house without being invited across the threshold. But people she cared for were out in the yard and she was helpless to help them.

A soft knock sounded on the door, startling her. She smiled as she realized Logan had jumped as well.

There in the doorway stood Jeb. "I hope I'm not interrupting, but I heard the shouting and wanted to make sure everything was okay."

Logan crossed the room to slap Jeb on the shoulder. "Jeb, you may want to stay in the main house for a while, it may be a bit of a war zone outside for a while."

Ariel gripped the comforter with both hands as the beginnings of another contraction slowly tightened her muscles. *Great, we'll have to really do a good scrub job on Jeb's memory when this is all over.*

"Why, what's going on outside?" Jeb asked. "Are those mafia-looking guys causing trouble?"

Logan's right hand cradled his stomach and he slowly made his way back to the chair at the side of the bed.

"Boss, you okay?" Jeb helped Logan settle into the chair.

"Long story, Jeb. I think I'm having sympathy contractions." His last word tightened with pain as pressure built deep inside Ariel's womb.

A low moan escaped her lips and her eyes closed against the wave of pain that engulfed her. She heard Logan grunt beside her and she reached out blindly until Logan's hand closed over hers. Even though she was in labor in the middle of a war zone, if this was only half the pain, she was glad Logan shared it. It had steadily gotten worse over the past few hours, and showed no signs of stopping.

As the contraction reached its peak, she sensed someone on the side of the bed opposite Logan and she opened her eyes. Her breath caught in her throat as light glinted off a knife blade plunging toward her pregnant stomach. The familiar tingle inside her that always prefaced her transformation to stone, made her hesitate and clench her muscles against the change. *Dear, God. Save my baby!*

Before she could react, pain sliced through her as the blade plunged through skin and muscle until Jeb's wrist jarred as if he'd hit a brick wall.

In the next instant, a shot rang out, the sound echoing through the small room. Jeb's mouth opened in a silent scream as a giant hole opened in his chest and he crumpled backward onto the floor. Ariel's head whipped toward Logan. Smoke still whisped from the barrel of the shotgun held in his white-knuckled grip. Their eyes met and he dropped the gun, rushing to Ariel's side.

"Logan..." He dropped the gun and rushed to her side. "Jeb..."

"Shhhh." He stroked the hair back from her face.

As the shock flowed away, pain ratcheted through Ariel's stomach in time with her panic. She glanced down, a sudden sensation of the surreal assaulting her as she saw the blade and hit of the knife sticking up through the now bloody covers and down into her stomach.

Please let the baby be okay! Using her gargoyle strength, she dug her fingers through the hole in the comforter and cloth all the way down to her shirt and ripped them away, so she could see the damage. She wiped the blood away from her flesh with the tattered comforter and then placed her hands on her stomach on either side of the knife blade as hot blood still welled through the wound, coating her fingers. She reached out with her senses, and a wave of fear and pain from her son answered her. She studied the sensation a little more, before she realized his pain had faded to discomfort. Her breath whooshed out in relief.

"Ariel!" came Dara's frantic voice from the doorway. Dara rushed to Ariel's side, stepping over Jeb before reaching out to examine the wound.

"The baby's okay. I can still sense him." Ariel sent up a silent prayer of thanks and another for all her extended family's safety.

"Logan, hold her while I see if I can pull out the knife." Dara's porcelain face assumed the calm demeanor it always did when she was in healer mode.

Logan kissed Ariel's forehead and cradled her hand in his. Dara touched the blade and Ariel winced against the pain.

"Did you turn to stone?" Dara asked, her voice laced with concern.

"No, when I saw the blade, I stopped the change. Why?"

Dara looked back and forth between Ariel and Logan. "I can't remove the knife. I need to check your dilation." Dara pulled back the ruined covers still covering Ariel's legs and lower body and moved down the bed in between Ariel's bent knees. After a few tense moments of silence, she looked up to study both Ariel and Logan in turn. "You're not going to believe this. The baby has turned to stone."

Logan squeezed Ariel's hand. "What does that mean?"

Fear and confusion radiated from her son. "Shhh, it's okay." She rubbed small circles over the side of her abdomen. "I don't think he knows how to turn back. I think he acted instinctively to the adrenaline and now he's stuck."

"So he's got gargoyle abilities. That in combination with some ancient vampire blood running through his veins means he can survive this, right?" Logan's question held hope, with a liberal dose of parental concern. "What do you mean he's stuck? How do we get him unstuck?"

Ariel swallowed hard against a lump of fear, she knew what Dara's answer would be.

"The fact that he has both gargoyle and vampire genetics will help, but that doesn't mean there isn't risk. We've only had to help someone back from stone form once, many years ago. It took the entire clan's combined power to do it. Without Kefira, I'm afraid we won't succeed – especially when the child hasn't ever done it before."

Logan squeezed her hand and she could almost smell his fear, pungent and thick in the room. "What happens if we can't get him unstuck?"

Dara sighed. "Normally, I'd say time wasn't a problem, but right now he's connected to a non-stone umbilical cord, which is still part of Ariel's body. If we try to cut the cord to

him, while he remains stone, I'm afraid the trauma would kill him, and that's if he doesn't starve and suffocate. He's still gaining all sustenance from that cord. So a C-section is out. If Ariel turns to stone, her body will most likely reform her as she was originally, without him."

"Meaning, he would die?" Logan's voice came out a mere whisper.

"I think he would cease to exist. When we turn to stone, wounds aren't really healed, they just no longer exist once we are reformed into our original forms. If Ariel reforms, he will no longer exist."

Ariel placed a hand against her stomach. "Dara, you must find Alonna and Dagan and tell them they have to bring Kefira back to us. It's the only way to save the baby."

James sensed the rival kiss before he saw them. Within minutes, two dozen vampires landed behind him, while he still faced Edward. He sensed none were ancient, so hadn't given them the satisfaction of turning around, which would show concern. Even if all of them attacked them in force, he was confident he'd survive the encounter. How damaged he'd be was another discussion entirely, but he would survive, which is more than he could say for them. The world of vampires ran on vampire posturing and politics, and he'd survived this long because he played the game well.

Low frustrated growls behind him brought a smile to his face. He slowly turned, feigning surprise at their arrival. "Hello, gentlemen. What can I do for you this evening?"

A stocky vampire with hair the color of wheat stepped forward. "If it were not for the mutual threat, we would wipe the smug look from your face and piss on your ashes."

James threw back his head and laughed, letting the sound echo around them. Precious minutes were wasted with this vampire posturing, but it was necessary to maintain hierarchy, or chaos would break out among their ranks and they would be left as easy marks for the were's. "Lofty words, since you are a mere fetus compared to me. Should we settle this now? Or should I allow the were's to feast on your innards, and save me the trouble?" He cocked his head to the side as if considering what to order for lunch.

A gunshot sounded from the house and only thousands of years of vampire posturing kept him from reacting. He pushed aside all concern and kept himself centered in the moment. All of their lives depended on it. Several others turned their heads to look toward the house, and James knew if he'd truly been their enemy tonight, they would now be dead.

The blonde vamp snapped his teeth together in frustration, but finally broke eye contact with James. "We pledge to fight with you against this common threat, but not beyond. Don't mistake our pledge for weakness." He stepped forward, invading James' personal space. "The Succubus Queen and her bastard offspring are a threat to our way of life. No more, no less."

James allowed his lips to curve into a wicked grin, allowing the silence to draw out while the tension built to an uncomfortable level. When a trickle of sweat made its way down the blond vamp's temple, he knew the time had come. "Agreed. There will be a truce until an hour past the death of every shifter who opposes us." Without waiting for a reaction, he turned on his heel and walked away, purposely exposing his back and showing trust in the new truce. As the only ancient in the group, the others would follow his lead. At least for now.

He stopped short when he spotted Dara standing on the back porch. *Had something happened to Ariel?* The breath backed up in his lungs. He veered over to the steps. "I heard gunfire. Is Ariel all right?"

"Jeb's dead. He plunged a knife into Ariel's stomach while she and Logan were having a hard contraction." Her voice was cool and competent, but her cat green eyes darkened with concern. "The baby is stuck in stone form. We have to find Kefira. I need the entire clan to help him turn back."

A fist closed around James' heart. "Ariel? Logan?"

"Both of them are fine and still having contractions. Ariel is almost fully dilated and should begin to push soon, but we can't risk it with the baby still in stone form, not to mention I can't get the knife out."

Guilt tasted heavy and bitter on the back of his tongue. He knew Edward might not have been able to command instant respect of the other kiss, purely because of his age, but in averting one near crisis, he'd almost lost everything. He closed his eyes and dropped his chin to his chest allowing himself a few moments to push aside his roiling emotions. He'd be no good to anyone if he succumbed to them. *How many more things can go wrong tonight?!* He ran a hand through his hair before raising his face to Dara. "I've failed them once already, I can't leave their side again tonight."

Dara's green eyes flashed and she pursed her lips. "We all trusted Jeb, including you. There will be time for self-recriminations later. We need Fi, and soon."

He gave her a curt nod. "Agreed. Your best bet is to have Dagan find her and bring her back. This was all discussed in the prophesy. If Dagan can bring her back from the brink, then together, they can save the child."

Dara squeezed his arm. "You watch over Ariel and Logan, and whatever you do, don't let her start to push—no matter what. I'll be back soon." She took three running steps and jumped off the porch, her wings materializing and catching the wind before she could plummet back to earth.

James stood in awe for a moment, watching her fly away before he turned to head up the stairs and assess the damage.

The red moon cast an eerie glow over the black hide of the horse Dagan rode toward Odeda and Alonna. He reigned his horse and stopped next to them.

"Man-thing, there is no time to waste!" Alonna wagged her tiny finger in his face.

He almost laughed at her slip even though his perimeter check had not brought great news. "Since I'm back to 'man-thing,' my news takes precedence."

She stomped her foot impatiently in mid-air, her long blonde hair whipping around her in agitation, reminding him of Medusa's head full of snakes. "Make it quick!"

His brow furrowed at Alonna's crisp reply. She'd always been impatient, but something must be truly wrong for her to react this way. "Something big is on its way. I'm not sure what, but the edge of the forest that surrounds the north pasture smells like wet dog. So my guess is shifters."

Dara landed lightly on her feet beside them, startling Dagan since he hadn't heard her coming. *I must really be losing my touch.*

"Dagan!" Her porcelain face was flushed and her breath came in choppy pants as if she'd run the entire way. "You must find Fi and bring her back, or the child will die!" She barely took a breath and she continued on, filling them all in on recent events.

Nausea roiled in Dagan's stomach as her words continued. A vivid picture of Ariel lying in her room with a long hunting knife protruding from her pregnant stomach flashed through his mind. He slumped in the saddle as the weight of the world settled firmly on his shoulders. He raised his chin to look at the three women who stared back at him. "My connection to Fi's been broken. I've tried all day, but I can't find her, and I'm not sure where to look."

Alonna fluttered close to land on the top of his horse's head between his ears. Much to Dagan's surprise, the horse held very still, allowing the small fairy to balance on her tiny feet. "I can't tell you where my giant cousin is, because that would be clear interference with the prophesy. However, we can talk about other things that aren't related to the prophesy."

Dagan's pulse quickened and he listened closely to the fairy, knowing she was about to skirt the edge of the line where interference started and stopped.

"Do you remember back before the crusades?" She stared at him expectantly and he suddenly felt like a dog expected to perform a trick.

"Yes, but what does that have to do with this?"

She glared at him and he snapped his mouth shut, praying for patience. She nodded her approval before continuing. "I happened to be at the Bad Ass Café the other night delivering prophesy to a Klatch Witch and I saw someone from your past."

"Everyone from that far in my past is dead. Get to the point!"

All three women glared at him and Odeda reached over to slap him on the back of the head.

"Ouch!" He gingerly rubbed the back of his head.

Deda leaned forward in her saddle. "If you don't shut up and listen, so help me I'll rip your guts out and feed them to you. Are we clear?"

He held up both hands, palm out. "My mistake. I'll listen more closely." He gestured toward Alonna. "You mentioned an acquaintance from my past?"

"I said 'someone,' but yes. I saw your step-mother."

All the blood drained from Dagan's face leaving him disoriented. Everything suddenly fell into place inside his mind. Why hadn't he seen it before, or even since? She had to be supernatural to turn father and son against each other all those years ago. Especially to have a man send his first and only son off to the crusades, which left no heirs to inherit. "Jeslyn..."

"Yes, I believe that was her name." Alonna reached out to pet the horse's ear, trying and failing for nonchalant. "She has great taste in houses, I believe she has a huge mansion-type house on the east side of the lake."

"The lake..." So, Jeslyn was the Succubus Queen. Wasn't it ironic that he'd thought all these years she'd ruined his life, and now he was about to ruin hers? "Thanks, Alonna. It's been nice chatting, but I think I need to go look for Kefira."

Dara grabbed Dagan's hand that rested on his thigh and looked up at him, her green blue eyes wide. "Please be quick. Ariel and the child's lives are at stake."

He placed his hand over hers. "I'll find her and bring her back, or die trying."

Chapter Fourteen

James burst into the room and stopped short. Dara'd told him what to expect, but seeing it first hand nearly stopped his heart. Ariel lay on the bed, writhing in pain through another contraction, a large knife protruding from her stomach. Logan sat beside her, doubled over, their hands clasped together, their knuckles white. Beside them, Jeb's limp body lay on the floor, a large hole marred his chest, a pool of blood darkened the area rug below him.

James stood over the lifeless body and wished he could wring the life from the man personally. He knelt to pick up the body and toss it out the window along with the ruined rug. He lifted and caught a familiar scent. Succubus...ancient succubus. "Damn me!"

"What is it?" Ariel asked in a gasping pant.

James rethought his plan to dump the body and rolled him up in the rug instead. "He reeks of ancient succubus. This wasn't done willingly—he was thrallled."

Logan scrubbed his hands over his face. "I should've known Jeb would never betray us willingly. I should've tried to wound him." He looked over at Ariel and then back at James. "I've killed one of my oldest friends."

Ariel hugged Logan to her side. "You did what you had to to protect me and the baby. If he was under deep enough thrall to make him betray us, he wouldn't have stopped until we were all dead."

James stepped forward and sat in the chair next to Logan's side of the bed. "Ariel's right. You did what you had to do to protect your family. I'm sorry I wasn't here."

"What's up with all the vamps?" Ariel began to blow out short puffs of breath one after another, and strain suddenly lined Logan's face.

"I'll wait..."

"No." Ariel puffed out a few more measured breaths. "Tell us..."

Logan nodded, then reached out to grab James' collar. "Tell us, then get me another bottle of whiskey. Maybe two. I'm not cut out for labor. Or even half of it."

Kefira studied the pregnant woman on the bed, as several images overlapped themselves inside her mind. They flashed so fast she couldn't make sense of them. She shook her head and huffed out an impatient breath. Something about this situation didn't seem right, but she couldn't put her finger on it. She vividly remembered placing her hand on a pregnant stomach and swearing to protect the child. She closed her eyes replaying the vision in her head.

When she lifted her hand away, the skin dimpled out with what looked like a tiny foot. She smiled and traced the small foot and heard laughter from the mother. It echoed through her soul, bringing with it pain and anger.

She crossed to the bed and pulled the covers back before raising the woman's shirt to study her stomach. Pale skin flowed over the swollen belly just as in her vision, but still, something niggled at the edges of her mind.

"What are you doing?" Jeslyn stalked in through the door, eyeing her suspiciously.

Kefira tossed her head to flick her hair out of her eyes. "You've got mini-me following me, so why are you worried? I'm just checking on the child."

Jeslyn's eyes glittered with irritation and Sarah stepped inside the room from the hallway. "What are you doing out there, Sarah?"

"I'm keeping an eye on *her*." She narrowed her blue eyes and Fi wondered if her eyes showed the tiny fan of lines when she made that same expression. "You may trust her, but I don't."

Jeslyn growled low in her throat. "All this is unnecessary. The child is fine, and Kefira will complete the ritual when it comes time." She turned her attention to Fi. "Won't you?"

A familiar red haze coated Fi's vision and she turned to face Jeslyn. "You're questioning my integrity, Queen of the Whores?"

Jeslyn's lips curved into a seductive smile. "You say that as if it were an insult. We all have our talents."

The edges of Kefira's mind tickled with an awareness, but of what, she wasn't sure. "I need to check the perimeter. You'd best worry about your daughter's loyalty and not mine."

Dagan stepped out of Jeb's truck and gazed across the lake at the white mansion that held the woman he'd hated for centuries. A myriad of emotions flowed through him and he let them come, unsure what to feel in such a situation. There wasn't exactly a Hallmark card for finding the succubus bitch who'd changed the course of your life and now held the woman you love's life in her hands.

He closed the door to the truck and slipped the keys in his pocket. A small surge of guilt tried to surface and he pushed it down. Jeb wouldn't need his truck or anything else any more. It was unfortunate for him that he'd been caught up in the prophesy, and ended up a disposable cog in a wheel. From what little interaction Dagan had with him, he'd seemed like a good man.

The breeze ruffled his hair and brought with it the scent of evil and death. Even without the gargoyle's abilities, he knew Jeslyn's house reeked of it. *Why didn't I recognize her for what she was all those years ago?* But he already knew the answer. Only after Gabriel saved his life and tasked him with protecting the gargoyles did he have the abilities he had today. Mortals weren't meant to recognize beings such as Jeslyn. And looking back, if Gabriel hadn't saved him, not only would he be long since dead, but he'd never have met Kefira.

No, he wouldn't change his life, even if he could. But that meant, no matter what the cost to himself, he had to bring Kefira home.

He took a sword he'd borrowed from Kefira's room out of the bed of the truck and slipped it into the sheath across his back. Staying to the shadows cast through the trees from the cloud-covered moon, he skirted the edge of the lake. The gentle lapping of the water against the shore was the only sound carried on the night air, and he could almost taste the brackish water on the back of his tongue.

As the house grew larger in his vision, he sensed her. Even though evil poured off her in waves, he'd recognize Kefira anywhere, no matter how warped her energy signature. He unsheathed his sword, holding it in front of him while he widened his stance and ensured he was balanced in a comfortable position. He never thought he'd draw a sword against her, but there would be no hope of bringing her home if he were dead. There was no way to know how the evil had affected her — other than her new sensuality he'd already experienced.

The weak moonlight glinted off her sword as she stepped into view.

"You." Confusion chased across her face. "I've seen you." She placed a hand against her temple. "In my head. Who are you?"

She continued forward until only a few feet separated them. His body reacted to her presence. Kefira was an extremely attractive woman, but the sudden reaction spoke to her new succubus powers. Blood rushed in a sudden tidal wave toward his growing erection, so quickly his vision swam and he swayed against a sudden bout of lightheadedness.

He caught his balance and swallowed hard. "You know me, Kefira. I'm Dagan. Do you remember?"

A seductive smile curved her lips and she stepped forward, dropping her sword to her side.

The closer she came, the more aware his body became to her nearness. He resisted the urge to crush her to him and take her right here on the ground, but his body's demands skyrocketed with each inch she neared.

"I know your face." She placed a fingertip against the sharp blade of his sword, slowly lowering it in front of him, so she could step close. She pressed her breasts against his chest and her breath feathered across his lips. "I know your smell." She nipped at his bottom lip and then pulled back just enough to smile up at him. "You're here to complete the ritual. I need you inside me, I need you to complete me." Her hand skimmed down his stomach and over the waistband of his jeans, to cup his aching erection.

Her words pulled a gauzy white haze over his mind. He couldn't remember what he'd come here to say or do. All that mattered was having Kefira, making her his in every way.

Before he could stop the signal to his brain, his hand opened, dropping the sword. He crushed Kefira to him, devouring her mouth, reveling in her taste and the way her full curves pressed against him. Blood pounded in his ears in a deafening staccato as he lost all control and let his animal urges run free.

The musky scent of her skin filled his senses and he breathed deep while he slid his hands under her shirt to cup her full breasts. The soft lace separating her succulent flesh from his seeking hands, only heightened his arousal and he groaned when her nipples hardened under his thumbs. He pinched the turgid buds and she moaned into his mouth, grinding her hips against him while their tongues dueled and mated.

She ripped open his shirt and dropped it to the ground, the small ping sound of a dozen buttons popping echoing around them. Then her hands were on him, tracing a warm path over his flesh and making him shiver when the cool night air once again caressed his skin.

He pulled her shirt over her head and tossed it to the side, before dragging her back for a searing kiss. She nipped his lower lip, driving his desire even higher. He slammed her back up against a nearby tree, grinding himself against her soft flesh. She wrapped her long legs around his waist and threw back her head to laugh, baring the long column of her throat.

Greedy, he accepted her offering and licked and nipped his way from just below her ear, down across her collarbone and finally down to her pale pink-tipped breasts. When his mouth closed over one lush peak, sucking hard through the lace, she groaned and threaded her fingers through his hair to hold him in place. When her breath came in frenzied pants, he switched his attention to the other breast, enjoying the primal sounds of passion spilling from her throat.

"Fuck me, Dagan. I need you to come inside me to complete the ritual." She unwrapped her legs from his waist and planted them firmly on the ground, and then moved her hands to unzip his jeans.

Ritual...stone...the baby! Memories flooded him, fighting back the white haze which her thrall had brought. He caught her hands in his and pinned them over her head before brushing his mouth over hers. "Let me help." *And give me some time to help you remember! One way or another you need my essence, I just hope you choose the side with your sisters once you do.*

Kicking off her tennis shoes, she looked up at him, her blue eyes dark with passion. "Hurry..."

He purposely fumbled with the button to his jeans. "I want you too, Fi. Then we have to go help your sisters. The baby has turned to stone and needs your help to survive."

Interesting, the child and mother are here.

She shucked out of her jeans and underwear and stood before him in only her blue lace bra. Her fingers fumbled on the front hook of her bra as he spoke the last words. When her chin raised, her lips thinned into a line. "I just came from the mother and baby, the child is fine. I've sworn to protect him."

Dagan slowly unzipped his jeans, drawing out the moment as much as possible. "Of course you have. But the child in this house is *not* the child you swore to protect. You swore to protect Ariel and Logan's child – your nephew."

"No! There is no other child. Charity's child must be protected and the ritual completed. I gave my word." She dropped her bra and then batted his hands away from his pants and finished unfastening his jeans before pulling them down over his hips. His underwear slid down under her insistent hands and his cock sprang free. A shiver marched through him as the cool night air hit his engorged flesh.

The thrall increased and he fought against the gauzy veil that would make him forget his mission. "Fi, you have to remember. Charity's baby is the child of destiny – a girl. You said you've sworn to protect *him*. Your sisters need you. Gabriel and Alonna can't interfere – only you can save the child of blood."

She pushed him backwards, and with his pants around his ankles, he fell on his bare ass into the soft dirt of the lakeshore. Before he could push up on his elbows, she'd crawled on top of him and impaled herself on his length. A gasp ripped from his throat as her tight heat closed around him, stealing all his rational thoughts.

As if of their own accord, his hands came up to grip her rounded hips as she rode him. Sensations swirled around him, slowly tightening the vortex within his body and mind. Distantly, the water lapped against the shore and cicadas buzzed in the distance, while the sound of heavy breathing and the slap of flesh on flesh rent the stillness of the night.

The weak moonlight dappled Kefira's skin in direct contrast to her fiery hair both on her head and her mons. She looked like a pagan goddess as she rode him. Her lips slightly parted, her passion-glazed eyes boring into his while she pleased herself. Her hands rested lightly on either side of his head and her soft breasts brushed his chest with every plunge to take him fully inside her.

Ever tighter around him, her movements became more urgent and she sat upright, bracing one hand behind her on his thigh and the other over his navel for balance. Her internal muscles milked him mercilessly and the combination of the erotic image before him and the exquisite sensations from her body's demands pushed him to the edge of his control. His balls tightened almost painfully against his body until he knew climax was imminent.

When she cried out her release on top of him, his body exploded, a release of his essence spewed forth inside her welcoming heat.

Kefira closed her eyes, allowing her breathing to return to normal. She enjoyed the sensation of him still inside her, even though he was no longer fully hard. She moved the hand resting lightly on Dagan's stomach and one of her fingers traced the small dip of his navel through the crisp hairs, which spiraled down toward his groin.

Once again, the vision of the pregnant stomach with the small footprint flashed inside her mind. *There was no navel! The woman inside has a navel.* She placed a careful hand over her own smooth stomach. God created all the gargoyles as fully formed adults, so none of them had a navel.

The pregnant stomach...Ariel! Memories flooded back and the haze of evil fell from her mind, allowing her to see clearly for the first time since her injury from the arrows. And for the first time, she remembered the other gargoyle clans and that she and her sisters had agreed to have their memories changed to help hide them. Which mean...she *had* lost something precious to her, but it hadn't been Logan's baby.

Dagan smiled up at her. *"I can hear you inside my head again."*

"Oh, dear God. What have I done, Dagan? You were protecting us and I almost turned evil."

He sat up, still keeping their bodies linked and brushed a tender kiss over her lips. *"You've done nothing that can't be fixed, love. Let's go home."*

"The ritual is complete, Kefira. Take your place at my side and we can sacrifice Dagan together." The voice startled them, and they both jumped.

Kefira turned to see Jeslyn and her two daughters surrounding them. The knowledge that they'd watched her make love to Dagan and had almost made her betray her sisters and everything she was, angered her.

She slipped off him and stood, as Dagan pushed to his feet beside her. *"As I said before, Jeslyn. He is mine. If anything needs to be done with him, I'll be the one to do it."*

Dagan stood beside her, not bothering to cover his nudity. *"Jeslyn. It's been a long time...since you sent me to the crusades to die."*

"Dagan, I see you've retained at least some of what I taught you about the arts of the bedroom. Or should I say, lakeshore, in this case?" She openly stared at his now limp member, licking her lips as if craving dessert. *"Such a pity you wasted it..."*

Kefira looked between them as events clicked into place inside her mind. So, Odeda was right—Dagan had been betrayed by a woman. Or in this case, a succubus. Jealousy rose in the back of her throat like bile and she ground her teeth together to keep it from flowing outward. Naked and without a weapon, Dagan was vulnerable. She wouldn't let her anger endanger him. Maybe this entire ordeal had helped her with control—wouldn't that be ironic?

Jeslyn crossed her arms under her full breasts and tipped her chin imperiously. *"Apparently, I should've kept the son and eliminated the father. We could've been good together, Dagan."* She looked him up and down as if inspecting a prime piece of horseflesh. *"However, you've chosen poorly again and I'm afraid your death is needed to finalize the prophesy."*

Kefira knelt by the pile of discarded clothing, hoping Jeslyn would think her modest. *"I'm sorry to interrupt your reunion, but I'm afraid you didn't understand what I said, Jeslyn."*

Her hands closed over the hilts of the two swords and she stood, tossing one to Dagan as she'd done thousands of times throughout the centuries.

He caught the sword easily and assumed a fighting stance behind her. "I don't think we've ever done this naked before, but there's a first time for everything."

Jeslyn's eyes glittered with anger. "You break your word, gargoyle?"

Kefira ground her teeth. "I swore to protect the child of blood, my sister's child, not the child of destiny. I've haven't broken any promise."

Jeslyn laughed and her daughters took a few steps forward, but halted when their mother held up a hand. "No need, daughters. Kefira is still ours, she has only to realize it. The reasons she came to us have not changed."

"I'm not evil," Kefira protested.

Jeslyn opened her arms, gesturing widely. "What of the lies Dagan told you and your sisters? Will you take him back so easily after that betrayal?"

Dagan stiffened behind her, but she knew it was from shock. He'd heard her words inside her head—he knew she now remembered and that the memory about their child hadn't been real.

"What are you telling him, gargoyle? More lies?" She turned her attention to Dagan. "She's always fought to control her emotions, Dagan. Do you really doubt that she could murder your child? After all, you did betray her. Did you expect her to carry your spawn after that? No woman could be expected to."

Dagan reached back to place his free hand on Kefira's bare back. "*Apparently the Dark One's sources aren't up to date. Let's keep it that way.*" He glared at Jeslyn "Whatever happened, I trust Kefira, and we'll deal with it between us. No one past decision turns anyone toward evil." He pointed toward Jeslyn with his sword. "You've lost. Kefira is on the side of good, and neither me or her sisters will ever abandon her, no matter her actions."

Jeslyn's eyes glittered with hatred. "You leave me little choice. Daughter's, take them."

Kefira winked at her doppelganger, knowing Dagan would take care of the other woman. "It's time we settle this. I owe you for pinning me to that damned cow."

The woman rushed Kefira, dodging to the side to avoid Fi's sword thrust. Seconds later, fiery pain lanced down Fi's side as the imposter's claws raked her. She immediately turned her torso and arms to stone, leaving her wrists and elbows unchanged, to aid her mobility. Her wings materialized on her back and she stepped back to allow Dagan to use them as protection from his attacker.

"Thanks!"

She smiled as the familiar adrenaline of battle overwhelmed her. The doppelganger kicked out, to sweep Kefira's feet out from under her. Kefira jumped and then kicked out her heel in midair—catching the woman hard on the jaw with her bare foot.

As Kefira landed lightly back on the balls of her feet, the imposter lunged toward Dagan, causing Kefira to shift her weight to protect him with her wings. As soon as she moved, she knew it was a mistake. Pain flared through her hand as vampire fangs sank deep into her fleshy wrist causing her to drop the sword as poison flowed into her body.

Even as blood welled from the wound around the woman's lips, Kefira turned her entire free arm to stone and plunged it through her attacker's back, grabbing the shriveled evil

heart and squeezing it to dust. Before Kefira could close her eyes, her doppelganger disintegrated into a noxious puff of green dust.

Burning pain pierced her eyes and she hunched forward trying not to rub them. She needed water, but couldn't move while Dagan used her wings for protection.

"Fi, hand me your sword!"

She crouched, feeling the ground around her until her hand closed over Lileth's hilt. "Incoming!" She stood, flipping the sword in the air so the blade landed harmlessly in her palm, then she tossed it up over her head.

A piercing female cry filled the night and then nothing but eerie silence. "Go to the lake, Fi. I'll watch our guest."

Slowly, she willed her wings into their tattoo form and followed the sounds of the lapping water and knelt in the mud to cup the water within her hands to flush her stinging eyes. "Why didn't you kill her?"

"We need her to help us heal before the poison affects both of us."

As the repeated splashes of water cleared her eyes of the vile dust, the pain receded and she sighed in relief. "I know I've been a bit out of the loop, but what the hell are you talking about? Finish her, we need to go find Jeslyn!"

"There's no time for Jeslyn. Time is running out for Ariel and the baby. We can take care of Jeslyn later. But we'll be no good to anyone if the poison starts infecting us again."

A wad of cloth hit her back and she grabbed it to dab at her eyes. By the masculine smell, it had to be Dagan's shirt. When she gingerly opened her eyes, her vision wavered for a moment before clearing. But when she turned her head toward Dagan, she thought she must be hallucinating.

The Odeda look-alike was pinned to the ground with the two swords, one through her neck and one through her middle. She struggled against them, but couldn't get free. Dagan, who had taken time to pull up his pants, sat on her legs, keeping her from kicking, and the woman was bare from the waist down. Dagan held her legs open and his fingers were buried inside her.

"What the *hell* are you doing?" She stood and rushed to Dagan's side.

"You asked me to trust you. It's your turn to return that confidence." He tipped his chin up to look at her.

She opened and closed her mouth several times like a fish before she finally nodded. She did trust him, but this had better be good.

He withdrew his fingers from the woman's core. A clear gelatinous substance coated his hand. "Give me your arm."

She recoiled and he glared at her. "You said you trusted me. Do you or don't you?"

She bit back a sharp retort and held out her injured arm. Logan slathered the stuff over her wound and immediately, the pain and burning sensation subsided. "Hey, it's working!"

"Dara had a theory that their...juices...could be used to heal succubus poison. When they dissolve their meals, usually the only part left in tact is the poor man's Johnson. It's because there are healing agents in their...uh...discharge."

"Can I just say, ack! Thanks, but I could've just turned my wrist to stone." She held out her hand to Dagan as cold white stone flowed over her wrist, closing and repairing the wound. Moments later, she turned it back to perfect, smooth flesh.

Dagan collected another handful of goo. "True, but I want to use this on the wound on your back. It's still there, I can even see it when you have your wings out."

Kefira knelt in front of him, facing away. She shivered with the cold goo touched her skin.

"Okay, now try healing your back wound."

She obliged and Dagan's relieved sigh sounded behind her. "Great, good as new. Let's go, Ariel and the child are waiting."

She placed her foot on the Odeda look-alike's chest and pulled the sword from her chest and then thrust it down through the woman's heart, this time closing her eyes against the noxious dust. When the cloud cleared, she slipped on her pants and then her shoes. "I guess the master race gets green dust whereas the rest of the vamp world gets boring gray."

Dagan wiped his hand on the grass after applying the goo to his own injuries. "That may be their only perk." He stood and faced her. "I've got Jeb's truck. Let's go."

"If it's that urgent, we fly." She thrust their remaining clothes into Dagan's arms and then grabbed him, tossing him over her shoulder like a sack of feed, then materialized her wings.

"Hey! Watch those things, you hit me in the head!"

Ignoring him, she flapped hard and took off.

Chapter Fifteen

Odeda swung both swords in synchronous patterns around her and then quickly sheathed them in the double scabbard criss-crossing her back. “Kefira would be proud—I’m actually going to use swords.”

Dara glared at her. “Only because Ariel told you it would be quicker to bypass your pride and chop through the shifters with swords than your bare hands.” The hilts of Dara’s dual swords peeked out from under her long blonde hair. “I should be upstairs with Ariel and the child! What if they need me?”

“Then she’ll call you and you can fly up there.” Pulling the small flask from her belt, she took a swig, letting the tingly orange liquid flow over her dry tongue. The scent of wet dog grew stronger and she could see the beasts in the distance—a wall of moving fur.

“You’re drinking?” Dara’s brows shot up into her hairline.

“Gatorade. You want some?” When Dara only continued to glare, she shrugged. “It fits on my belt and doesn’t get in my way. Besides—I think we’ll need a little hydration before the night is over.” She almost laughed at Dara’s concerns. After all, it would take literally a gas tanker’s worth of alcohol to even give a gargoyle a good buzz.

She clipped the flask back onto her belt and turned to her sister. “Look, our job is to fight the shifters and keep Ariel, Logan and the baby safe. Our minds have to be here, not with Kefira and Dagan.”

Dara bit her bottom lip, the pink flesh pillowed around her white teeth. “Who’s keeping *them* safe?”

Odeda smiled and drew her swords. “God, Herself. Have some faith, Dara. After all these centuries, you should trust our Maker’s master plan.”

Dara shook her head, and then slowly drew her own swords. “You’re right, and I’m not used to you being the optimist. It’s...disconcerting.”

“Don’t get used to it. I’m in a good mood because I finally get to do something to help besides standing around. I’m worried too, but kicking some ass will definitely take my mind off things I can’t affect.”

She raised her sword into the air, and all conversation among the vampires stopped. “Our top priority is to protect the child. May God bless all who help us tonight!” She smiled as several of the vampires winced at her mention of the Almighty. But then a deafening battle cry rose from all assembled which ignited the adrenaline rushing through her. When the shifters entered the pasture, half an acre from where she stood, she pointed her sword toward them, and the group rushed forward as if she’d thrown a switch.

Her wings billowed behind her as she half ran, half flew to close the distance between her and the oncoming enemy. Before she could pierce the closest shifter, a disembodied furry head flew in front of her face. “Hey!”

“Sorry,” Dara called from somewhere beside her. “Head’s up!”

“Not funny!” She thrust both swords into the nearest shifter, a were-leopard. He snapped his deadly fangs close to her face and she raised her leg and kicked him in the mouth. Her boot connected hard and a sickening crunch sounded before the animal slumped to the ground and reverted to his human form. More furry bodies surged forward to take his place, trampling the lifeless body. *No respect for their dead, I see.*

A were-bear pounced on her, knocking her back onto her wings, and inadvertently trapping one of the helping vamps. A slight pinch against her wings told her he'd tried to bite her. She brought her swords up, gutting the bear and turning her head just in time to avoid the snap of his teeth next to her ear. He lunged again and got a mouthful of her wing. "Just like biting a tire, isn't it boys?"

She hacked at the bear until he fell limp on top of her, and turned into a bloody mass of what used to be a human man. Suddenly, she found herself hoisted into the air and gently set back on her feet. While she turned to stone to heal the slashes down her torso from the bear, she yelled her thanks to the vamp before stepping forward toward a pair of werewolves.

"For centuries, I've wanted to see what it was like to have a gargoyle on top of me, but I must admit, it's not everything I'd envisioned." He bowed his head at the neck before he disappeared into the horde of moving fur.

Odeda couldn't help but smile. "Witty vamp flirting – who knew?"

To her right, a short vampire with dark hair slicked back into a 50's ducktail, tripped and went down under a mass of angry fur. Odeda pulled her bloodstained sword from the bodies of the two dying werewolves and started forward to help the downed vamp. Edward caught her arm as a burst of gray dust showed she was too late.

"We aren't used to help. If we're too weak to survive, then natural selection will take us out. It's the vampire way."

She glared at the scarred vampire until he released her arm. "That's why the side of good is winning. We don't leave anyone behind if we can help it. Our unity makes us stronger. That's the *gargoyle* way."

Edward shrugged, the healthy half of his face curving into a sardonic grin before he turned away to resume the fight.

Stepping close to Dara, Odeda attacked the nearest ball of fur and snapping teeth. For what seemed like hours, she continued the repetitive chopping and healing with dozens of different varieties of shape shifters, whose blood flowed into each other on the battlefield. Her bustier and leather jacket hung in shreds and she was thankful she had a thick sports bra on underneath. Not necessarily for modesty, but a woman of curves in battle could be quite uncomfortable without proper support. The thought of the jump-kicks alone made her shudder.

The metallic tang of blood slowly overpowered the stench of wet dog and a few of the vampires stopped for power snacks on those who were injured but not yet dead. Probably to help them heal wounds received in battle. Unlike the gargoyles, they had to wait for the sleep of day to heal them fully.

"Yuck! How can they drink from them? They're still in animal form – and they reek." Her stomach roiled at the thought.

Dara hacked the neck off a werehyena and dodged as his now-human naked form slumped at her feet. "They don't feed from the dead. From what I understand from James, it's like us drinking spoiled milk."

"Dara! Odeda! Shifters in the house..."

Three shotgun blasts rang out from the house, making Odeda's blood run cold.

Odeda jumped into the air, flapping her wings hard to gain altitude. She flew toward the second story window where Ariel and Logan were still in labor. Her steel-toed boot made

quick work of the window and she gripped the sill long enough to glamour her wings back into tattoo form so she could jump inside, leaving room for Dara to do the same.

Ariel and Logan lay propped against the headboard of the bed, clearly in the middle of a hard contraction, and both held shotguns aimed toward the door. A large charred-looking hole darkened the edge of the doorframe, showing where one of the shots she'd heard had gone.

"James...hallway...four shifters." Ariel's voice pinched with pain and she gestured with the shotgun.

"Injured..." Logan added.

Odeda motioned for Dara to stay with Ariel and Logan and she rushed forward into the hallway. James was buried under four attacking shifters – two lions and two leopards.

If she didn't know the tall dark-haired figure was James, she wouldn't have recognized him. Blood ran from so many bites and scratches, she couldn't make out his features. Even with ancient vampire abilities, there were limits to the amount of damage he could take. He held a lion's jaws open with both hands and continued forcing them apart until a sickening snap echoed through the hall. The werelion shifted to human form as he died and the other three howled with rage, increasing the intensity of their attack.

Odeda stepped forward and grabbed the two wereleopard's tails, dragging them off James and down the hall to the landing where she would have room to maneuver. As soon as she stopped, they swung around to snap at her wrists, both wincing away when their teeth skidded over the smooth stone of her arms.

"Damn gargoyle..." It was almost comical to watch the leopard's lips form words. They were garbled, but Odeda got the gist.

"Me? You're the ones who attacked us!"

The skin of their muzzles pulled upward and gave Odeda the impression of an evil smile. *Probably not too far off the mark!*

"We will have a place in the new order, while you and your stone sisters will be extinct!" They both pounced at the same time and she widened her stance, bracing for the impact.

Kefira jumped in through the ruined window of Ariel and Logan's room and dropped Dagan onto his ass in front of her. Both Ariel and Logan pointed insistently toward the hallway, but her footsteps faltered as she noticed the large knife protruding from Ariel's stomach. It had been wrapped in rags, but as blood soaked through them, they had fallen away to show the silver blade of the knife.

"Fi, help James. I'm fine." The connection broke, taking with it the small taste of her sister's pain. She ground her teeth in frustration and ran forward toward the sounds of battle.

Two wereleopards pounced toward Odeda and without thinking, Kefira lunged, trying to get in between them and Odeda. Her shoulder hit hard muscle and fur and she landed hard with both of them between her and the wall.

She immediately rolled to her knees and turned her hand and arm to stone. "Jeslyn's daughters are all dead, and so is any hope for the new order!" He snapped and fought, scratching her arm and her face, but each punch she landed against his head left less and less

fight in him. Her last blow sprayed dark blood against the cream paint of the hallway wall and he slumped to the floor before shifting back into human form.

The second shifter shook off his daze and growled and crouched, ready to pounce. A sword whizzed by, a hairsbreadth from her face and Kefira jumped back to avoid being skewered. A loud thunk echoed through the hallway and she turned to see the leopard impaled against the staircase banister. He took one last gasping breath and then returned to human form.

"It wouldn't have touched you," Dagan insisted, earning a glare from her.

"Don't worry about me, I'm fine. Help Odeda, who looks almost unscathed, not the vampire bleeding to death on the carpet." James' voice dripped sarcasm and Kefira stood to face him.

She studied him critically. "If you can't handle one little lion, then you shouldn't be the protector of the child. But you look like hell." Her lips curved into a small smile.

He raised one dark brow and looked her up and down. "Me?"

Kefira stood and looked down at herself. She'd forgotten she wore only blood stained jeans and tennis shoes. She blushed but refused to cover her breasts out of pure stubbornness. She gestured toward Dagan, who wore only unbuttoned jeans and no shoes. "There wasn't a lot of time to worry about our appearance."

Odeda rushed forward, crushing her into a tight bear hug. "I knew you'd never turn evil." She closed her eyes tight and accepted the comfort from her sister's embrace. "Didn't I tell you?" Deda whispered into her hair.

Fi nodded, then let go and stepped back. "Yes, you did. Everyone believed in me, but me. I've learned my lesson—I hope."

The sound of Ariel's cursing brought her thoughts rushing back to the child. "Let's go help our nephew into the world."

They piled into the bedroom and Dara immediately took control. "Deda, Fi, you know what to do."

Kefira only remembered helping someone back from stone form once, and that was centuries ago. A gargoyle had been so critically wounded, she made it into stone form, but didn't have enough strength to turn back. They'd been unsure then if adding their strength would help, but it had, and she had fully recovered. However, the child of blood had no memory of how to turn back to flesh, so it would be much more difficult to guide him.

Dara turned her attention toward Dagan. "I need you to help deliver the baby once he's born, he'll need blood to help turn the cord."

"What?" Dagan's face suddenly looked white and he took a step back. "Isn't that Logan or James' job to deliver the baby? I mean, they've already seen...well..." He trailed off and firmly clamped his mouth shut as if he'd finally realized what he'd implied.

If the situation weren't so serious, Kefira would enjoy Dagan's discomfort.

Dara placed a comforting hand on Dagan's shoulder as if trying to calm a skittish horse. "Dagan, Logan is still in labor and I need someone who isn't in pain to do this. I also need someone to rub their blood on the cord. We can help the baby change back, but the cord may not without help." She gestured to James. "As you can see, he doesn't have a lot left to spare after his fight with the shifters, and we need freshly offered blood purely for this purpose. So that leaves you." She pressed a knife into his hand. "Use this when I tell you to."

He glanced at Kefira and she nodded and smiled over at him. Even covered in blood and dirt, he looked wonderful. His sculpted muscles were enough to make any woman want to trace them with eyes, hands and tongue. The look of pure male helplessness made her want to kiss him.

Dagan accepted the knife and let out a long breath. "All right. I can do this."

Dara guided him toward the bed and then pulled back the covers and Ariel's oversized t-shirt. Her knees were open, allowing Kefira to see the top of a tiny head covered with golden brown curls, just crowning from Ariel's womb. But she could clearly see the scalp under the hair was the smooth white of marble.

"Bloody hell. I've lived for centuries without seeing this and now I feel like I'm peeking up my sister's skirt." Dagan knelt between Ariel's bent knees, his gaze riveted to the top of the small curly head.

Logan brushed Ariel's hair from her eyes and kissed her forehead. "We're almost done, darlin', then we can hold our son." He turned toward Dagan. "If it makes you feel any better at all, I won't punch you after this is all done since you inferred you think about her as your sister."

"Thanks." Dagan looked around the room before returning his gaze to Ariel's crotch. "But that doesn't make me feel any better."

Kefira joined hands with Dara and Odeda, who each took one of Ariel's hands. They would need her strength as well for this to work.

Dara nodded her head toward Kefira. "Fi, can you lead this so I can direct Dagan?"

Taking a deep breath, Kefira closed her eyes and blocked out all the sounds of battle still raging outside the house. She mentally reached out to connect with her sisters. The energy snaked around the circle like lighting until they all shared the connection equally. Following Kefira's mental nudge, they all pushed their energy toward the child.

Fear and pain radiated from the infant and they fed him reassurance and love from all sides. His tiny heartbeat slowed as he soaked up their comfort like a sponge. Kefira, pulled up a memory of the last time she'd changed her entire body from stone to flesh. She concentrated on the cool stone flowing away and the warm flesh materializing whole and healthy. Then she sent the child an image of the stone flowing away from his tiny body, leaving only pink perfect skin and organs.

Doubts came through their connection and more fear. "Shhh, little one." Her whispered words sounded loud in the quiet room. "We're all here for you. This is part of who you are, and we will all be here to help you. We are your family—all of us." Kefira pictured not only her sisters, but Logan, James and Dagan, all surrounding the child with love and support.

Determination rose up inside the child of blood's connection and he concentrated on Kefira's memory of returning to her flesh form. Kefira concentrated all her strength toward the child, not caring if she collapsed once she was done, as long as they were successful. She knew all her sisters did the same, including Ariel who was still weak from labor and blood loss.

As if from a great distance, she heard Dara tell Dagan to carefully pull out the knife protruding from Ariel's stomach.

A sudden surge of pain and fear spiked from the child and they all renewed their support and strength through their connection until he relaxed and the pain subsided.

Careful not to break the connection, Kefira opened her eyes and watched as Dagan sliced his clean knife across his wrist and smeared his blood over the portion of the umbilical cord that was still stone. Everyone, including the child pictured the cord and willed the stone to flow away.

Dara dropped her hands, breaking the connection. "Push, Ariel."

Kefira knelt on the bed next to Dagan as the newest gargoyle addition slid easily into his hands and Ariel and Logan slumped back against the pillows exhausted.

"Dear God, he's looking at me!" Dagan's voice held awe and wonder.

The tiny blue-gray eyes that were clearly Logan's blinked up at them, while Dara bustled about cutting the cord and wiping him clean of the blood and afterbirth. When he was wiped clean, he took a large breath and screamed out his discomfort until Dara bundled him in a blanket and handed him back to Dagan.

"What's wrong?" Ariel's voice trembled.

The squirming bundle grabbed Kefira's finger in his tiny fist and yawned before closing his eyes. "He was just cold. He's perfect, Ariel. But he's gonna have a small scar on his chin where Jeb's knife nicked him." She smiled and looked at Logan. "Right next to the tiny cleft in his chin just like his dad and grandpa's."

Dara brushed a sweaty lock of hair from Ariel's forehead. "You're not quite done yet, Ariel. Let's finish this and get you cleaned up before your son gets hungry."

Dagan took the child to Logan, and reverently placed him in his father's outstretched arms.

Kefira's throat burned at the thought of Dagan holding a child of his own. He'd looked so natural holding a child, and deserved to have one of his own.

"What are you going to name the little tyke, Logan?" Dagan kept his eyes riveted on Logan, most likely trying to ignore Ariel's delivery of the afterbirth going on right next to them.

Logan gazed down at the baby and chuckled. "We've been disagreeing for weeks. But sitting up here having contractions together for several hours gave us some time to hash it out." He looked up and Kefira followed his line of sight to see James sitting in a chair across the room.

Blood still seeped from some of James' wounds, clearly showing they'd come from a supernatural source, or they would've closed by now. There wasn't a spot on him that wasn't scratched, bruised or bleeding. It was a large contrast from James' usual look, which always reminded Kefira of someone who'd just stepped off the pages of vampire version of GQ magazine.

James looked up as if finally realizing everyone in the room had turned to look at him.

Ariel took Logan's hand and nodded for him to continue.

"We're naming him James Douglas McAllister, after his grandfather."

James' head snapped up in shock before a wide smile broke over his face. "I'm truly humbled." He sighed and then grinned, mischief dancing in his eyes. "But if you were going to truly name him after me, why can't his last name be Wellington?"

Ariel glared over at James. "Don't press your luck."

Jeslyn stood before Charity's bed, a sacrificial knife in her hand. It had been blessed by the Dark One, Himself, and was a fitting instrument to bring forth the child of destiny.

"Dark One, hear my prayer. I offer the life of this woman to you in payment for your blessing on this child who shall ensure your reign and shall be joined to my son, the chosen one."

She held the knife aloft for a dramatic moment, enjoying the fear in Charity's eyes as the knife plunged home. She made a guttural sound of protest, which Jeslyn ignored as she slit open her stomach, careful not to harm the child.

Jeslyn dug her hands into the severed flesh of Charity's stomach and pulled the halves open so she could reach the child. When she pulled the squirming bundle from her mother's stomach, the baby screamed and kicked. "Good, little one. You'll need all your strength to fulfill your destiny."

One swift slice and the cord severed and she walked away, leaving Charity to die. She was of no further value and had served her purpose. The child was quickly wrapped in a warm blanket as Jeslyn made her way to the other side of the basement.

She knelt and pulled the baseboard away from the wall to reveal a latch. She pressed the lever and the wall swung open. She rose and walked through, still carrying the child.

The room stood bare except for a platform with a large pod on top that resembled an egg of flesh the size of four basketballs together. "Dark One, I beseech you to join the child of destiny to this child of mine and Nicholas' that you animated with life. They shall be partners in life and in service to You." She took another ceremonial knife from the side of the platform, and sliced a shallow line along the child of destiny's wrist. The child screamed in protest and she squeezed the wound so that blood dripped down onto the pod. Slowly the child's cries quieted as Jeslyn waited impatiently before the pod.

The blood slowly soaked through the top layer and then the entire pod split open like a baked potato. Jeslyn stepped closer and peered inside the pod at the tiny man-child. "Welcome to the world, my son. Where your sisters have failed me, you will not."

Kefira and Dagan stumbled to bed just after dawn. It had taken only a few hours to help the vampires finish off the shifters and dispose of the bodies. It wouldn't do to have dozens of rotting corpses lying around Logan's ranch. Then they'd taken a quick shower, barely bothering to dry off.

Kefira sighed as Dagan spooned against her back, curling a comforting hand around her waist.

"I'm sorry that the implanted memories turned into you believing you lost our child. I can't imagine going through that pain for so long alone." Dagan's voice held pain and she placed her hand over his trying to comfort him.

"You had no way of knowing, Dagan. We all agreed to take the risk of being perceived as the last four gargoyles. We knew all of our enemies would see it as a chance to wipe us out, which in turn would save the others until their time was right."

He kissed the back of her neck. "I know all that, but seeing the pain in your eyes when you told me you thought you'd killed our child—I almost broke my vow and told you the truth." He rubbed his hand over her shoulder.

She turned over in his embrace so they faced each other, their bodies still pressed close. “What? My strong Paladin almost broke another vow?” Her lips curved and she nipped at his bottom lip playfully. Her smile widened as his body responded and his erection grew against her stomach. She traced his sculpted lips with her fingers.

“Ouch! That’s below the belt. You know I’m still sorry about how I acted in Romania that last morning. Now that you know about Jeslyn and how I was betrayed, you know why I took that vow of celibacy when Gabriel saved me. It was my way of swearing off women.”

“You were just saving yourself for me.” She nipped his lip again and sighed as the memories assaulted her. “When I woke up that morning in Romania to find you pulling on your clothes, I knew. Somewhere deep inside, I knew you regretted what we’d done. You’d chosen vows made for the wrong reason over love we’d denied for centuries.”

“You’re right. I was feeling sorry for myself, but more than that, I was terrified of trusting another woman—even you.” He brushed a gentle kiss over her lips. “But I hope you know now that I’ve learned my lesson.”

He kissed her again and tightened his arms around her. “I hurt you in Romania, and I’m sorry for that. If I would’ve handled our situation better, you wouldn’t have been alone with this guilt all these years.”

His words caused a tiny network of cracks in her wall of control. Not the control around anger—that she’d never had—this was deeper. His understanding and obvious regret threatened to bring down every shred of defenses she had. Her pain around losing their child hadn’t been real, but the pain around his betrayal in Romania still hurt. She buried her face against his hard chest and shook her head as if she could hold back his words. The crisp hairs of his chest rasped against her cheek and the backs of her eyes burned.

“I love you, Fi. Let me be here for you now, and for whatever time God’s slotted for us to remain on earth.” His deep rich voice vibrated through her, causing the cracks around her control to widen.

Moisture pooled behind her eyelids and it took her a moment to realize they were tears. She’d seen all of her sisters cry at some point in their long life—even Odeda. But Kefira had never shed a tear. Anger had been enough of a defense. She’d never had to face sadness and hurt as long as the whip-fire of anger beckoned when she called. Yet, here she was, over nine centuries old and a few simple words from Dagan had almost crumbled her resolve to bits.

The first tear escaped past her lashes and splashed against her cheek before dripping against Dagan’s chest. Panic rose in her throat like bile and she tucked her chin so he wouldn’t see her tears.

“What the hell...” His words trailed off and he placed a finger under her chin and gently lifted until she met his worried gaze. “Fi, you’re crying.”

His words broke the last remnants of her control and the floodgates of tears opened, streaming freely down her cheeks. “It’s your fault, damn you! Loving you has made me weak!”

She brushed at her tears with the back of her hand and turned in time to see a lopsided grin crawl across Dagan’s face.

Her temper flared, and she reached out and her hand closed around a pewter fairy statue on her desk that Alonna had given her. Dagan caught her hand, which only served to

irritate her more. Smashing something against his head right now would feel extremely good. "What are you smiling about?"

He placed the statue back on the desk and rolled on top of her. "You said you loved me."

She sniffled as the heat of embarrassment suffused her cheeks. "I never actually said that." She glared at him daring him to contradict her.

He pulled her gently against him. "Actually you did. Twice."

She slapped her open palms against his chest, stopping him from enveloping her again. "When?"

"Once when we made love and just now when you said loving me made you weak."

She opened her mouth to retort, but he silenced her with a soul-searing kiss. His arms closed around her and his insistent mouth, slipped past her anger, soothing her despite her roiling emotions. She couldn't help but relax against him. When her bones had melted to wax and her body hummed with heat, he pulled back, leaning his forehead against hers. "You're wrong. Loving each other has made us both stronger. I think nine centuries is long enough of a wait, Fi."

She swallowed hard before whispering, "For what?"

"For you to marry me."

A new batch of tears rolled down her face to drip off her chin and down onto her neck where he captured them with his tongue. "I throw things and I can't control my temper. I'm bossy and I like getting my own way. I..."

"You're beautiful, and my perfect match in every way." He cupped her face in his hands and wiped away her tears with his thumbs. "And I'm yours."

She pressed her cheek against his chest and held him close, enjoying the comfort his embrace always brought. She let out a long sigh. "I suppose there's no one out there crazy enough to put up with either of us, is there?"

He chuckled, and traced figure eights over her breasts with his fingers. "I'll take that as a yes before you have a chance to over think it and change your mind." He shifted and slipped inside her, stealing her breath and all her senses.

Epilogue

Gabriel smiled down at the small squirming bundle in his arms before raising his chin to face everyone assembled. "We gather today to christen the child of blood, James Douglas McAllister. He is truly a gift from God to this deserving family who served Her well for so long."

Logan hugged Ariel to his side as she smiled down at her son.

"The prophesy held many twists and turns, and may yet hold many more for all of us." Gabriel glanced toward Alonna who fluttered just over his right shoulder.

"What?" Her liquid lavender eyes studied him and she shrugged her tiny shoulders. "I don't have any more right this minute."

He rolled his eyes and returned his attention to the child. "However, amidst all the fights, evil and intrigue, we were graced with the presence of this beautiful child. A child who will look to all of us to help him grow and prosper."

He turned toward James. "James. As the protector of the child, as well as his grandfather, you will have the heavy task of ensuring his safety while still allowing him enough freedom to grow and learn. He will look to you for guidance as well as wisdom. Do you accept this task?"

James straightened the cuff of his suit jacket. "Yes, I do."

A sudden glow of light flowed through the stained glass windows of the church to paint a myriad of colors across the group, and Gabriel smiled and glanced skyward, acknowledging the timing of the phenomenon.

"Dara. As the healer of the clan, your newest family member will count on you to look after his health and well-being—much as you do for the rest of his family. As his aunt, no doubt he will also look to you for advice and comfort, not to mention your deep gift of compassion and caring. Do you accept this task?"

"I do." She tucked a strand of blonde hair behind her ear as a blush stained her cheeks.

"Odeda. The child will look to you to show him the world through different eyes. Your gift allows you not to take things only at face value, but to always question in the quest for truth and justice. This is a truly important skill for any child to learn. Do you accept this task?"

Logan leaned over to stage whisper in his wife's ear. "So, it's her special gift to seduce priests?"

Sudden coughing broke out as everyone tried to cover their mirth behind their fists.

"Hey, someone's got to take all the tough jobs." Odeda tossed her chin, moving her chestnut bangs out of her eyes before she winked at Logan.

Gabriel cleared his throat. "If everyone is quite finished?"

Odeda grinned but looked unrepentant. "I do, Gabriel."

The room fell silent, but Ariel and Dara still struggled to keep from smiling.

"Dagan. You're in the unique position to help the child understand how to straddle the mortal and supernatural worlds. Your loyalty and strength will make you an invaluable mentor and uncle. Do you accept this task?"

"I do."

The baby stretched a tiny arm over his head while he yawned before curling his fist under his chin and closing his eyes. Gabriel hugged him closer and the baby sighed in his sleep.

"Kefira."

She reached for Dagan's hand, her diamond engagement band winking in the multi-colored lights from the stained glass.

"As one who has walked the line of evil and pulled back from its brink, you have the unique perspective to understand any temptations and trials he will face, and help him navigate along his path."

He cleared his throat. "Not to mention your extensive knowledge of weapons and battle tactics."

"Especially the weapons." Her blue eyes sparkled with mischief as a quick smile flashed across her face. Dagan raised her hand to his lips, and for a moment, they lost themselves in each other's eyes.

Gabriel opened his mouth to bring them back to the moment, but before he could, Ariel elbowed Dagan in the side. "Eyes front, buster."

"Not that Jimmy isn't adorable, but I keep getting distracted by my fiancé. I can't seem to help it."

"Try. You two were the ones who wanted time to plan a wedding. The rest of us were ready to go today."

"We've waited for freaking nine centuries, Gabriel. I think we deserve a nice wedding after all of that."

Gabriel held up a hand, careful not to jostle the baby. "You're right. I think we were all surprised that you would even want such an event. However, both of you deserve it and will have it." He pulled the soft green blanket away from Jimmy's mouth, where he'd been sucking on the edge in his sleep. "But if you don't let me finish the christening, we'll never get there. So, Kefira, do you accept your task?"

"As long as I also get to teach him how to sneak out at night."

Gabriel raised his brows and glared down at her.

"Fine, yes, I accept my tasks—and all those other things that aunts should teach him," she added defiantly.

Saying a quick prayer for patience, he turned his attention to Logan and Ariel. "As the parents of the child of blood, the largest responsibility falls to you. Even though this child will truly be raised by a village, no one can take the place of his mother and father, to nurture him, to love him and always be the mainstays in his life and trials to come. I don't ask if you accept this task, because by creating this child in love, you have already so sworn."

He lifted the child into the air and everyone raised their eyes skyward. "Lord, bless this child and all those who love him." Sunlight streamed suddenly in through all the windows highlighting them all in multi-colored swatches from the stained glass windows. A light breeze flowed through the room bringing with it the scent of a flower garden, rich with roses, gardenias and lavender.

When Gabriel lowered the child, he gently handed him to Ariel and Logan and stood apart while everyone gathered around the baby offering congratulations and arguing over who he looked like most.

He turned to find Alonna watching him.

"Another crisis of prophesy has passed, Gabriel. You should be happy. This is truly a joyous occasion."

A large sigh escaped before he could stop it. "I am very happy, Alonna, but also a little sad."

Alonna laughed, the sound of small tinkling bells flowing from her throat. "You sound like a parent whose children are growing up!"

He smiled over at her. "Yes, I suppose I do."

"There are a dozen ranch hands with very fuzzy memories who could use some help."

Gabriel shook his head and smiled. "Yes, it will take a while for them to recover, but the McAllister ranch has enough love to go around."

She fluttered down to alight on his shoulder, swinging her legs lightly over the side so her heels bumped against his chest. "So, who is next to meet their destiny? Odeda?"

"God help us all when her time comes." He chuckled and winked at the little fairy.

A shaft of sunlight slanted down to glint off Dara's long blonde hair and Gabriel smiled. *Excellent, My Lord.* He turned his head to Alonna and said, "Dara has spent her entire lifetime serving others and watching over them. It will be most difficult for her to learn to put herself first at times. Her destiny will find her next."

Alonna nodded emphatically, her blonde hair gyrating around her wildly from the movement. "Look, Gabriel." She pointed toward the group where James watched Dara until she turned to face him, then he quickly looked away.

"Yes, Dara's destiny will be a challenge to the entire household, I fear."

A small lightening clap off in the distance almost seemed to say 'Amen.'