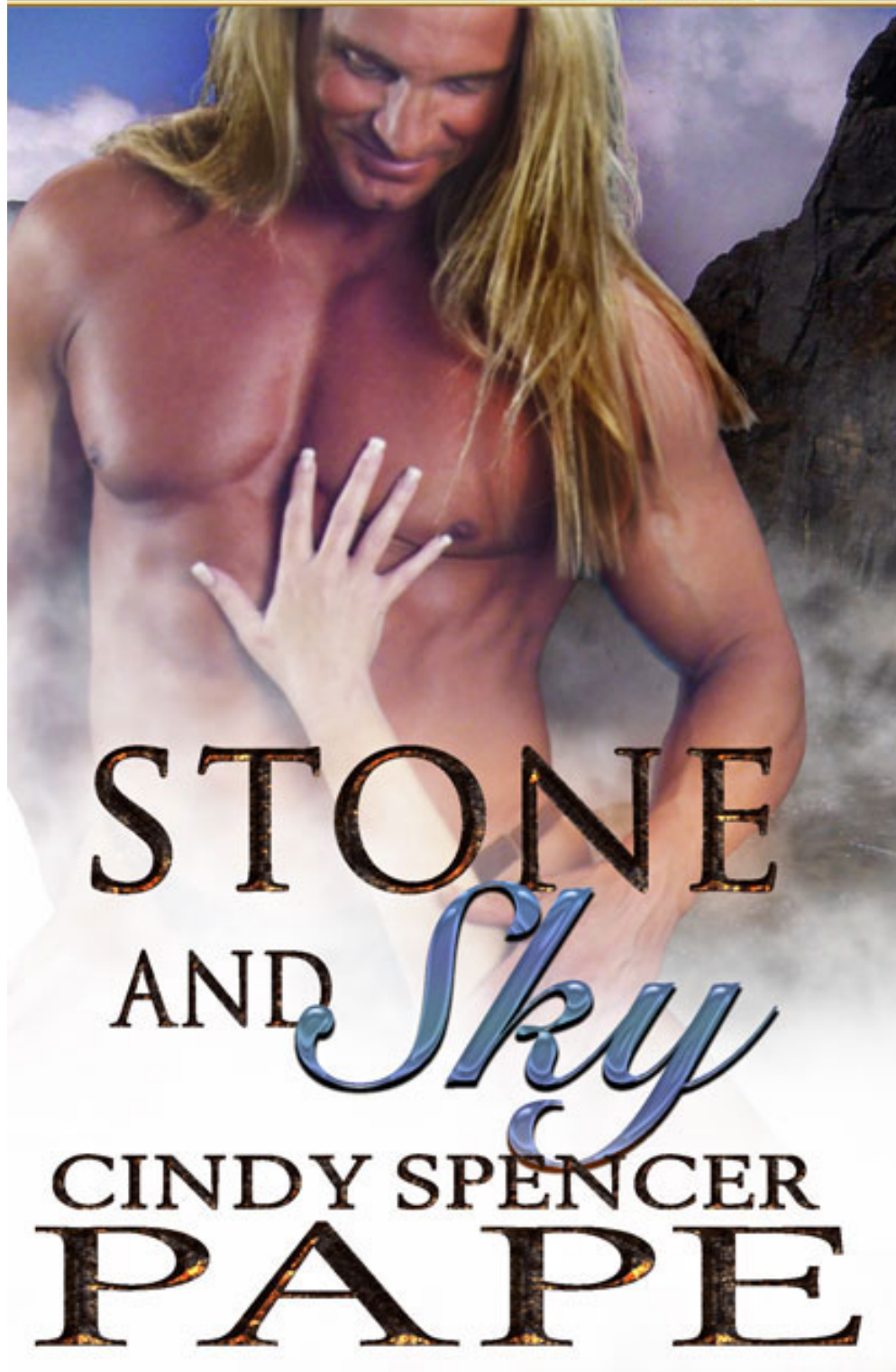


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



## **Stone and Sky**

*Cindy Spencer Pape*

*Heroes of Stone, Book Four*

Marc Armel is a gargoyle under pressure. It's up to him to find the fourth and final artifact necessary to save his race. When he goes off to think, what does he find instead but a gorgeous harpy, washed up on his beach in a tattered evening dress, no luggage and no memory.

Aldara knows she came to Canada for a reason, but she can't remember what. After one look at Marc, she hopes to heck that she's single because she wants him more than her next breath. As her memories return, her passion for Marc grows too powerful to resist.

Their nonstop sex may have to wait, though, when danger threatens to tear them apart. While Marc is determined to come through for his clan, he's even more set on saving Aldara. But perhaps she'll be the one saving him.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Stone and Sky

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# *STONE AND SKY*

**Cindy Spencer Pape**

### *Dedication*

This one is for my friend, author Kelly Kirch, who emailed me one day shortly after I wrote *Stone and Earth* and said she'd dreamed about a harpy who'd been rejected by her people because she was pretty. Her mate was a shape-shifting gargoyle. Kelly said, "It sounds like something you should write." Since I was right then plotting out the rest of the series, it seemed prophetic. Kelly, here it is — thanks for lending me a dream!

### *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

RCMP: Royal Canadian Mounted Police

## Chapter One

*I could just turn into a bird and fly the rest of the way to Canada.*

Aldara Cromlech leaned over the rail of the cruise ship and looked out over the infinite inky-black swells of the Atlantic Ocean. She wasn't going to shift her shape and fly. She was trying to put her harpy past behind her and live in the human world now.

She had only fifteen minutes until her next performance and she loved the fresh air as compared to the smoky atmosphere of the ship's lounge where she sang. It was going to take her much longer to reach North America this way than in an airplane, but she was enjoying the cruise and was proud of the fact that by singing in the lounge every night, she was paying her own way. The small sum of money she'd been bequeathed by her foster father wouldn't last very long and she'd been determined to fulfill Geraint's last wish—returning a priceless artifact to the clan his father had abandoned over a century before. By earning her keep as she traveled, she'd have enough left for a modest start in a new land.

Her stomach clenched as she thought about her foster father and she blinked back tears, careful not to mess up the heavy eye makeup she was expected to wear for her performances. She'd stayed by his side during his final illness, watched as he wasted away from the cancer that had spread throughout his body. He'd told her of a time when the gargoyle race had been immune to such diseases and made her promise she'd do her best to help restore the magic that had once been his birthright. Aldara wasn't sure that one diamond-studded antique crown was really going to save an entire race, but she'd made a promise to the man who had reared her and she was determined to keep it.

Aldara unscrewed the cap on her bottle of water and drained the last few ounces before tucking the empty bottle back under her arm. Time to go get ready for work. She

had three more sets tonight and then she was free for almost two days. By morning the ship would dock in Nova Scotia where they'd remain overnight before heading south to Boston and finally New York. New York, where she intended to find work and start a new life. From Halifax tomorrow she would try to contact Geraint's clan in Montreal and discharge her last responsibility. Meanwhile she had another set to perform.

She turned toward the garbage bin to throw away the empty water bottle. The small rear deck where the crew was allowed to walk was shady and dim, cast in shadows by the setting sun, but her vision was acute even in very low light. That and her voice were the two good things that went with her unusual heritage. Well, flying hadn't sucked, not when she and Geraint had soared about his isolated Greek islet together. Those were some of the happiest memories of her life. The elderly gargoyle had found her, a half-dead child with feathers and wings on his beach and he'd reared her as his own despite the differences of age and race. She owed it to him to remember the good times and to cherish his memory. She blinked rapidly, trying to avoid another round of tears, then leaned against the bulkhead and closed her eyes for just a moment.

She didn't hear anyone come up behind her, not until she felt the hot puff of breath on the back of her neck. She tried to spin, to see who it was, but an inhumanly strong hand gripped the back of her neck and held her in place. The next sound she heard was a whoosh behind her ear, which was followed by a sharp stab of pain. Then the world went black.

\* \* \* \* \*

He was such a loser.

Marc Armel sat on the rocky cliffs overlooking the north Atlantic, folded his wings behind him and sighed. The last of his close friends had just gotten married. Their wives had come from outside the clan, but all three had survived the conversion process that made them gargoyles like their mates. Each of the three gargoyle men had fulfilled the destiny foretold by their clan's seer at their birth. Only Marc was left and he hadn't come close to either one.

He'd stuck around the gargoyles' compound outside Montreal until Beau and his new bride were back from their honeymoon, and then until Damien's daughter Erin was born hale and healthy, leaving him free to return to his former duties as second-in-command. Though Damien had recently moved back to the compound with his mate, he was a brand-new father, so Marc had been the logical choice to fill in as head of security for the clan. Remy had offered but he was too happy drawing his graphic novels and Marc had actually enjoyed the work. Most of his time was spent managing the clan finances but the four had all gone into the security division together as young gargoyles and it felt good to get his hands back into it again.

Now, though, Beau and his wife were back, Damien was back to work and Marc was once again unneeded. His mother, the clan matriarch, was still healthy and in charge of things and his father was her primary advisor, leaving little for a prince to do. All the monetary transactions he handled for the clan were done online and actually took a fairly small portion of his day. So he'd packed up his clothes and his laptop and headed for his favorite thinking spot—a small island he owned off the shores of Nova Scotia. Before he left, he told his parents and the clan's seer Lady Helene, who'd sent each of his friends off on their quests. He supposed he'd secretly been hoping she'd tell him not to go and send him somewhere else instead, get him started on fulfilling his part of the prophecy. To his great dismay, all she'd done was shrug and remind him to take a raincoat.

It was beautiful here and rugged. It was also completely deserted, so a gargoyle could walk around in daylight with no one to see his tiger-eye-colored skin or his wings. He only had to be careful if a boat or plane went by and with his mottled brown coloring, he blended into the rocky shoreline well enough to hide in plain sight.

He stared out at the waves, wishing he could be as lulled as he usually was by the rhythmic motion. The late October breeze was chilly, but the damp cold didn't penetrate his thickened skin. Though not actually stone, his hide was tougher than



human flesh and kept out the chill along with the small hurts his bare ass might have otherwise gotten from the rocky ground beneath it.

It was almost sunset, when his body would revert to human form, if he wanted it to. He debated taking his motor launch across the inlet to the mainland where a small town offered a few shops and a couple of bars for entertainment after dark. This late in the year all the tourist traps were closed but he was usually fine drinking with the locals. Tonight, though, while he was low on groceries, he wasn't in the mood to deal with people unless absolutely necessary.

Out the corner of his eye, he spotted something in the surf, just at the edge of his vision. As the waves pushed it slowly toward the shoreline, it looked like a bundle of black rags but it was big, almost the size of a person. Curiosity broke through his lousy mood and he stood, hopping easily down the jagged cliffs toward the beach.

As he approached the object, now lying on the sand, it did indeed begin to look like a person, maybe wearing a black furry or feathered cloak. The lump didn't move, so there was little chance that it was a living creature but he moved faster, just in case.

He took the last hundred yards in a vertical leap, spreading his wings to glide the last few feet and land with his toes in the sand right beside the lump. Up close he could see that long black hair was tangled up in the feathered cloak and he reached out to wipe the sodden strands off a pale white face. As he did, a tiny moan escaped.

She was alive. And definitely female. Smoothing her hair back off her cheek, he saw fine, delicate features and long lashes. The water had smeared her makeup into a vulgar clown mask but he didn't care about that. A soft pulse beat erratically at her slender throat and her chest moved. Her heart rate and breathing were minimal but she wasn't dead.

He started to unwrap the feathery black cloak then gasped in shock. She wasn't wearing a cloak. In fact, the only garment she had on was a shimmery black sheath dress. It was torn in the back where her wings, big, heavy and black as night, protruded from her shoulder blades.

So much for calling for a rescue flight. He couldn't take a nonhuman to the emergency room.

"Keep breathing for me, *cherie*," he muttered. Picking her up was awkward with the wings. He really hoped she didn't have any broken bones because he ended up holding her in a fireman's carry over his shoulder. Picking his path carefully this time, he made his way slowly up the hill, back to the house he'd built nestled into the side of a cliff.

Looked as if his life had just gotten a whole lot more interesting.

\* \* \* \* \*

Consciousness didn't return with a flood, it was a more gradual ebb and flow, like waves lapping on a shoreline. She heard sounds first—a creaking chair, the hum of a furnace or air conditioner, the sound of someone breathing. Then she faded out and when she surfaced again, her eyelids tried to open but didn't. They were stuck, she thought, glued together somehow. Before she could move a hand to rub her sticky eyes, she drifted back to sleep. The next time she woke there were both sounds of someone moving and the smell of food. This time she tried to blink harder and the tug of her gummed-up eyelashes hurt enough that she cried out.

"Easy, *ma petite*." A big hand held her shoulder to the bed, the touch nearly as soothing as the deep voice. The accent was familiar and comforting as were the French words. But she couldn't place the voice. It was so husky, so...sexy that surely she'd remember it if she'd heard it before.

She opened her lips to speak but her voice was dry and cracked. "Water," she managed to croak.

"Of course." The bed dipped as he sat beside her and slipped one hand behind her back. His fingers caught in her wings and she instinctively drew them in. She wasn't supposed to let anyone see them. She knew that. He eased her up into a seated position with a warm, strong arm behind her now-bare back while she lifted a hand to rub at her eyes.

The first thing she saw was a glass of water held by a sturdy masculine hand. Broad and lean with a sprinkling of crisp dark gold hair, it lifted the heavy tumbler to her lips with exquisite gentleness.

Gratefully she sipped the cool liquid. She'd been so parched, so dry. What had happened to her? She couldn't remember how she had come to be so sore, so thirsty, so exhausted. A glance around the room told her that it too was unfamiliar. How had she gotten here?

When she swallowed, the man set the glass aside and eased her back down to the pillows. "Feel better?" he asked, this time in English.

"Yes," she replied, matching his language choice automatically. "Thank you..." her voice trailed off. She couldn't think of his name. Did she even know it? She let those thoughts drift away as she got her first look at the man. He was...magnificent. Tall, broad and classically handsome. Rich tawny hair with just a slight wave was swept back from a wide forehead and eyes the color of old, burnished gold. His face had high cheekbones, a strong roman nose and a tiny cleft in the middle of his chin. He could easily have been a movie star.

"My name is Marc," he told her. "Marc Armel. I found you on the beach, unconscious."

"The beach?" The more she tried to think about where she might be, the more her head hurt. She clung to the hand he offered, feeling as if she were still adrift and he'd tossed her a lifeline.

"We're on a small, private island off Nova Scotia," he said. "You must have fallen off a ship. We're too far out for you to have been swimming from the mainland."

"I don't remember... An island sounds right but I don't remember a boat." Pain lanced through her head as she tried to sort out her swirling thoughts. A glance down at her hands, clasped in his, showed that the sheet had dipped down and underneath it she was totally naked. Had she been that way when he found her?

"Don't worry about it," he soothed. "If you tell me your name, I can call the authorities and they can let your family know you're okay."

"No." She struggled to sit up and he immediately reached behind her to adjust the pillows so she could lean against the headboard.

"No you don't want me to contact the authorities?" There was no censure in his tone, just concern.

"No. I don't...have a family...I think." She bit her lip so hard it hurt. "I can't...seem to remember."

"You can't remember if you have a family?"

"No. I can't remember anything. Where I live, where I was, what happened." Her voice rose with every word until it was nearly a shriek.

"How about your name? Can you at least tell me who you are?" He gripped her hands, held her in place when she would have tried to leap from the bed.

"Of course. I'm..." Tears filled her eyes. "I can't... It's on the tip of my tongue but it just won't come out. *Mon dieu!* I can't even remember my own name."

"All right, *merlette*." Little blackbird. She almost smiled at the nickname. "Relax. Why don't you just stay here for the night and rest? Maybe in the morning you'll feel better and everything will come back."

"Yes," she cried, squeezing down on his hands. She was afraid that if she let go, this one piece of solid ground in an unstable world, that she'd be lost forever.

"And, *cherie*? It's all right if you show me your wings. I understand better than you might think."

"Oh!" She remembered her wings had been out when she first woke...she hadn't been in her full avian shape but apparently when unconscious she'd reverted to her native form—that of a woman with large black wings on her back. She was a harpy. She knew that much...and that was all she knew. "Why aren't you horrified?"

He smiled and his chiseled face was blindingly handsome. His gold eyes glittered with empathy. "I too have wings sometimes," he said. "Your secret is safe with me."

## **Chapter Two**

Later that night, Marc lounged in the armchair beside his own bed and watched his uninvited guest as she slept. She'd eaten some soup and a piece of toast. Physically she seemed to be recovering with a speed that would have been stunning if she'd been human. Harpy, she'd told him before she'd fallen back asleep. The one thing she could remember about her life was that she was a harpy. He looked down at her sleeping form and smiled. So much for his idea that harpies were ugly.

And she'd known about gargoyles. That fact had stunned him. She couldn't tell him how she knew but somehow she knew what he was the minute he'd mentioned his wings. She was proving to be a far greater puzzle than the book of Sudokus he'd brought with him to while away the hours. Did she really have amnesia? Or was it some kind of a hoax? He'd thought he was a good judge of character but one never knew. His unprecedented attraction to her could well be clouding his judgment.

He thought about calling his friend Beau who had a doctorate in Mythological Anthropology. If anyone could tell him about harpies, Beau would be it. But it was late evening and Beau would either be busy working or home with his new wife. Marc already felt like a loser for not holding up his end of recovering the artifacts. The least he could do was his own research.

He'd built his aerie on the cliff to house guests but none of the other rooms had been made up, so he'd put his guest in the master bedroom. She'd been so disoriented, he hadn't wanted to leave her alone in case she woke up again, but his laptop was in here. When in doubt, surf the internet. He sipped at a snifter of cognac and pulled up his favorite search engine.

An hour later he knew a lot more about harpies than he'd ever expected to. Apparently the ugly, murderous reputation was a fairly recent development,

mythologically speaking. Originally, harpies were described as minor goddesses of the winds in the forms of beautiful young women with wings. In some of the stories they had feathered bodies and the talons of a vulture then a few centuries later the accounts of hideous half-vulture, half-hag creatures arose. Marc couldn't come up with a reason why the image had changed or whether the change was a real or a cultural phenomena. Judging by the beauty currently snoozing in his bed, he'd bet on cultural.

So far he knew she spoke English and French fluently and he'd heard bits of Latin or Italian when she murmured in her sleep. Another language too, one he didn't know—maybe Greek. Marc wished he'd paid more attention in his classics education. He also knew she had a huge contusion on the side of her head but no other visible wounds. Either she'd taken a fall and banged herself on the side of a ship on the way into the water or she'd had some help. A fierce urge of protectiveness surged up out of nowhere. Time to do some hacking.

He couldn't find any missing persons reports that matched her anywhere up or down the maritime coast but he set some alerts to notify him in case any popped up. Then he crossed to the wastebasket where he'd put her tattered dress. Apparently her wings had torn out the back when they'd emerged. The black sheath was silk and the tags were in Italian—not a top designer but not cheap either. Her hose were little more than wet shreds of nylon but her black lace bra and panties had been intact, so he'd rinsed those out in the bathroom sink and hung them up to dry. They hadn't looked sturdy enough to run through the washing machine and they hadn't had tags, so he had no idea of their origin. She'd had no pockets, no ID or cell phone, not even shoes. Where could she possibly have come from?

She stirred again and he set his laptop back on the writing desk and returned to the chair by the bed. It had been maybe two hours since she'd woken and this time her ivory complexion was tinted with a healthy pink color. He only hoped she recovered her memory as her physical strength returned.

Her beautiful clear gray eyes flew open before she tried to speak. She glanced around fearfully then relaxed as her gaze settled on Marc's face.

"Hello again," he said. "Feeling better?"

She nodded then slowly sat up, moving much more easily than before. The sweats he'd loaned her to sleep in hid her luscious body from his gaze. "Yes, thank you." Now that her throat had healed, her voice was light and musical.

"How's your head?"

She reached back to touch the lump on her skull and winced just a little. "Better. Still tender but not much. Mostly I'm thirsty. I think I must have swallowed half the ocean. Even after rinsing my mouth last time I was awake, all I can taste is salt."

She'd made a quick, unsteady trip to the bathroom—just long enough to wash her face and pull on the sweats—before she'd gotten woozy and he'd helped her back to bed.

"You hungry?" It just occurred to Marc that he'd totally forgotten about dinner since he'd found her on the beach. Earlier he'd been too busy watching her to eat anything himself.

She tipped her head to the side as she thought then smiled and nodded. "Yes, I am."

"You like steak and salad?"

"Of course." Then her eyes widened and she grinned. "I remembered something. I *love* steak. Medium rare. And salad with vinaigrette dressing if you have it."

"Excellent." He held out a hand to help her to her feet. "Don't suppose you remembered your name?"

Straight black eyebrows scrunched together over her pert little nose. "No," she said after a long moment, her shoulders slumping. "I'm sorry."

"No worries. Maybe when the swelling goes down completely."



"I sure hope so." She took his outstretched hand and let him help her to her feet. His socks flopped loosely around her toes, tripping her up until she bent and pulled them up on her ankles.

Marc tried not to ogle her ass as she bent over but he was only a guy, after all. He looked. It was truly a world-class butt. Then he groaned as his cock hardened painfully against the fly of his jeans.

"I have a feeling that there is something I'm supposed to do, somewhere I'm supposed to go, but the harder I try to remember it, the further away it slips." She nibbled on her lower lip as she fretted.

"Don't push it," he told her as he led her out of the master bedroom and down the hall to the kitchen. "I'm sure it will come back to you in time. You've only been here a few hours. The fact that you didn't drown is enough of a miracle for one night."

"You're right." She looked around the kitchen with its sleek maple cabinets, black granite countertops and stainless steel appliances and grinned. "I love this place. Your wife must be quite a chef."

"No wife, little blackbird." He grinned at her obvious fishing. "Otherwise I could have probably found you some pajamas that aren't a foot too long."

"Well, I had wondered. So the gourmet kitchen is all yours?"

Marc laughed. "I can hold my own. I won't burn the steaks, if that's what you're worried about."

"I love to cook," she told him as she climbed up onto one of the chrome and black leather barstools at the work island. "Baking, especially. I have a horrible sweet tooth."

"More memories? See, I told you they'd come back." He opened the fridge and took out a couple of steaks and a bunch of fresh salad greens. Tomatoes and bell peppers sat in wire baskets on the counter so he handed her a cutting board and a medium-sized knife. "If you're up to it, dice a couple of those for the salad."

"You're right," she cried happily. "When I'm not trying, things seem to just float to the surface." She took a tomato and an orange pepper over to the sink to rinse then settled back on her stool and began to mince like a pro. Marc pulled a jar of his own seasoning rub out of a cupboard and sprinkled it on both sides of the meat. Then he turned on the ventilation hood over the range and fired up the indoor grill.

"Nice," she approved. "Always wanted one of those babies but my father..." She dropped the knife with a clatter and tears filled her eyes.

"What's wrong, *cherie*?" Marc rinsed his hands then strode around the island to put his hands on her shoulders.

"I don't know," she said, swiping at her eyes with the back of her hand. "As soon as I said the word f-father, I just suddenly felt so sad."

"*Pauvre petite oiseau*." Poor little bird. Sitting on the stool put her head on level with his shoulder and he stepped up to cradle her face against his chest. "You've been through so much."

Her arms looped around his waist as her shoulders shook with sobs. She had this coming, he thought, after nearly drowning this evening, if for no other reason. But when he added together her grief and her earlier statement that she didn't think she had a family, he wondered if she'd recently lost her father. Poor little bird, indeed.

He let her cry as long as she needed to, which wasn't all that long. When her sobs finally trailed off into sniffles a few minutes later, he handed her a clean dishtowel and stepped back, though he kept one hand on her waist. Then she snuggled up against his chest again and he knew he was a goner. He leaned his butt up against the counter and cradled her against him, burying his face in her tousled curls.

"I'm sorry," she repeated into the cable knit of his Irish fisherman's sweater. "I wish I knew what that was all about."

Somehow her hands had landed on the small of his back, just up under the hem of his sweater and the room went suddenly hot.

"I just wish we knew if you were involved with anyone," he muttered then squeezed his eyes shut and groaned. "And I can't believe I said that out loud."

Her laugh was shaky but it was a laugh and that was better than more tears. "Don't worry. I was thinking it too. I don't *think* there's anyone but, no, I can't be sure."

"Got it." He gently disengaged himself and stepped back, dropping a chaste kiss on her forehead as he did. "Now back to this whole food concept."

They didn't speak as he put the steaks on the grill then just for the hell of it scrubbed a couple of potatoes and popped them into the microwave. He was a big guy and he'd had a rough night. He was hungry.

She slipped off the stool and into the small lavatory that was clearly visible off the kitchen. He heard water run and splash before she returned with a determined smile on her face.

"So we know I'm a harpy," she said. "And you're a gargoyle. Do the two species overlap very much?"

Marc shrugged and rinsed the salad greens, turning his back to her tempting beauty. "Not at all as far as I know. Your first words were in English but I'm guessing by your accent you're not American, Canadian or even British. That leaves somewhere with a mixed European population—maybe in the Mediterranean? Your clothes were expensive so I'd assume your family has some money. The Riviera might be a likely starting point if we're going to search. Gargoyles, on the other hand, are a very contained population. I don't know of any in Europe and I thought I knew our entire community."

"Weird." She shook her head and began to toss the salad. "I remember things like novels, television and that I love fish but hate lobster. I like to read and am not good at math."

"Do you have any idea how old you are?" He asked the question in French, just to see how easily she responded.

"Non." She didn't even seem to notice the switch, just replied in the same language. Her accent was neither Quebecois nor Parisian but he couldn't tell any more than that.

"Does French feel more comfortable than English?" He flipped the steaks.

She paused, scrunching her eyebrows over her nose. "No."

"How about Italian?" He hoped not. That wasn't one of his better languages. "Or Greek?"

This time she just shook her head. "All four seem sort of equal, I suppose. Like I'm used to switching back and forth on a regular basis."

"Well educated, moderately wealthy and from somewhere with a mixed population. You had to have been on a ship—that's the only explanation I can think of for finding you this far from shore. It's too late in the year for there to be much activity on the beaches here." After taking down two black stoneware plates, he laid a steak on each, poured red wine into a pair of stemmed glasses and waited for the microwave to ding.

She wrapped her arms around her shoulders and shivered. "I think I'm from somewhere warmer than here, as well. I'm *freezing*."

The timer went off and Marc transferred the potatoes to their plates. "Let's see if food warms you up." He got out salad bowls and silverware then rounded the island to sit on the stool beside her while she refilled their wine glasses. "Cheers."

She clinked her glass against his. "*Salut*."

"How about music?" he asked, eyeing the satellite radio receiver on the counter. "Can you remember what you like?"

"Everything," she replied around a bite of salad. "Rock, jazz, folk, you name it."

He settled on some soft jazz, figuring it made better background music for a meal than the heavy metal he'd been listening to at lunchtime.

"This is fabulous," she said with a sensual little moan as she tasted the steak. "You may cook for me anytime, *monsieur*." She dug in with a fierceness that belied her tiny waist. "We only need my fresh raspberry torte to finish it."

"Sorry. I'm going to have to go into town tomorrow night to get some groceries. I can pick up raspberries if you like."

"Why tomorrow night?" She paused with her fork halfway to her lips and tilted her head. "Can you not go in the morning?"

He laughed. "Okay, you don't know a *lot* about gargoyles. From sunrise to sunset I'm big, brown and winged. Not the best time for going out in public."

"Really? No, I didn't know that."

She eyed his broad-shouldered form and wondered what he would look like with wings. The idea was oddly exciting—or maybe it wasn't so odd. Here was a man she could be with and not worry that her own wings would pop out if she got carried away. She didn't know if she'd ever been with a nonhuman—or a human for that matter—but she knew that being held against his chest while she cried had been almost as tantalizing as it was comforting. She wanted him and she hadn't even seen him with his clothes off. Just sitting next to him on the barstools, she could detect traces of his spicy, masculine scent and it was making her wet.

"So what do you do for a living so far away from everything? Are you a writer? An internet guru? Or just a hermit? Money obviously isn't a problem."

"This is just a vacation home, I'm afraid. It's the place I go to get away from it all. But nine to five in a crowded office would clearly be a problem. Nobody tailors suits to fit around wings or a tail. I'm an investments broker—I handle all the finances for the clan as a whole and for most of the individuals and families in it."

"You said you're not married," she noted, taking another sip of the mellow red wine. "Is there someone special waiting back in..."

"Montreal," he supplied. "And no. I'm not involved with anyone. Haven't been in years."

"Montreal. That sounds...familiar." She chewed the last bite of her steak and chased it with the last sip of wine just before a yawn erupted from her throat. The force and suddenness of it startled her, knocking her almost off her stool.

"Maybe it will come to you in a dream," he said with a sweet, slightly rueful smile. His lower lip was fuller than the top one and she fought back an urge to lean up and nip it with her teeth.

"Maybe." She actually thought her dreams would be filled with thoughts of *him*. But she was too tired now to do anything about the urges that coiled in her belly as he took her arm to lead her back to the bedroom. "What about the dishes?"

"I'll take care of those later. I'm not the one recovering." He paused outside the door to what was clearly the master bedroom. "Okay if I get a few things out before you go to bed?"

"Of course. But where will you sleep?"

"There are guestrooms," he said with that easy smile. She sat on the edge of the bed while he pulled out a clean pair of flannel lounge pants and collected his toothbrush from the bathroom and his laptop off the desk. "There's a fresh toothbrush on the sink. Towels are in the closet. Help yourself to whatever else you need."

"But I'm the guest," she pointed out. "Why am I sleeping in your room?"

He stood in the doorway, tipping his head to the side. "A very valid question. I guess it just didn't seem right to make you switch since you've been in here most of the night. Why don't we just leave it like this and think about it more after we've both gotten some sleep?"

"Oh, very well," she said—or tried to say around another yawn. "But the bump on my head will be gone soon and then you won't be able to boss me around. Immortals heal very quickly, you know."

"Looking forward to it, blackbird." He stepped up, brushed a kiss against her cheek.

"Will I see you after sunrise?" A glance at the clock said the night was almost over and she really wanted to know what he looked like in his natural form.

"Unless you'd rather not." There was a hint of caution in his tone, as if he were actually worried about her response.

"I won't be afraid."

"Then I'll see you in a few hours. Now sleep." With an upward quirk of just one side of his mouth, he turned and left the room, closing the door behind him.

## Chapter Three

Marc sat in the kitchen and swore at his computer screen after taking a break to watch the sunrise over the ocean—one of his favorite parts of the day. Still no missing persons report that matched his little blackbird. Surely *someone* had to have noticed the absence of such a vibrant young woman. Well, young-looking. He had no idea how old she really was. That was always an issue when hanging out with immortals.

A yawn caught him off-guard and he shut the screen. Time to grab some sleep. He stood, flexing his wings out behind him. The feathered tips brushed against a chair behind him and barely missed the tall ceiling. Grabbing some sheets from the linen closet, he made his way into a spare room—the one usually used by Remy when he borrowed the place to hole up and draw. It had a big, southern exposure window, a professional drafting table and, like all the others, an oversized bed. Very few male gargoyles were little. In his native form, Marc stood just under seven feet tall, from the claws on the tips of his toes to the top of his mane. In human form, he was only a few inches shorter—though without the claws, feathers or fur.

After making the bed, he tugged off his sweatpants—ones with a convenient hole added to the back for his tail—and fell face first onto the mattress.

Sleep was elusive, even though he was dog-tired. His mind kept trying to unravel the mysteries of his unexpected guest and that made sleeping on his stomach decidedly uncomfortable. His cock kept trying to poke a hole through the mattress. God, he wished he knew her name. It was downright embarrassing to have such a constant hard-on for somebody and not even have a name to think of her by. And he *really* wished he knew if she was married.

Counting sheep had never worked for him but he'd always loved numbers, so he let a bunch of profit margin curves and probability functions run through his brain. The



gargoyles had come out all right during the recent economic downturns, partly because of Marc's flair for numbers and investments. Today, though, even mental math wasn't helping. Visions of graphs kept being edged out by images of a raven-haired harpy – mostly *naked* images. She might not be the evil sorceress of some of the myths but she definitely had a body made for sin.

At first he thought the noise he heard was just the wind – the low moan could easily be the beginnings of an autumn storm. Then it rose to a piercing wail that could only belong to a woman. And if he hadn't known much of a harpy's power was in her voice, he sure would have now. Even Marc had to gather his courage to get up and go to her rather than hide from the horrible, heart-wrenching sound.

He barely remembered to pull on his sweatpants before gritting his teeth and moving toward the master bedroom. He'd read that the banshee of Ireland was a close relative of the harpy and now he believed it. When he entered the bedroom, he saw her writhing on her side on the bed, her black wings half tangled in the duvet and tears streaming down her cheek.

"Easy, *cherie*." He stepped over beside the bed, dodging a blow from one wingtip and laid a hand on her shoulder. "Wake up, blackbird. You're dreaming."

She continued to moan, making Marc sit down beside her to reach her better. He gently untangled her wings with one hand while he cupped her face in the other, rubbing away tears with the pad of his thumb.

"Come on. Wake up." He shook her, just a little this time and spoke a bit more sharply.

It worked, thank God. Her eyes opened and she stopped thrashing. Best of all, that terrible wailing ceased.

"Marc?" She struggled to sit then seemed to collapse against his chest.

"I'm right here, *petite*." Without even pausing to think about it, he gathered her close, snaking his arms beneath her wings to wrap around his waist. Then, cautious of

his own feathers, he leaned up against the padded leather headboard and pulled her onto his lap. "It was just a dream, nothing to worry about."

"Was it?" she asked with a snuffle. "It seemed so real. I was with my father—only somehow he wasn't *really* my father. He was sick—we both knew he was dying. He told me I had to go away. Then the next thing I knew I was on a ship and someone was chasing me. No matter how fast I ran or how hard I tried to hide, he kept coming closer. And he was taunting me, calling my name as if we were in a children's game. *A-l-l-l-da-r-r-r-r-r-a-a-a...come out, come out wherever you are*. Then he'd give this horrible laugh and I'd hear the footsteps getting closer still."

"Aldara?" He wondered if she even realized what she'd said.

"What?" Then she gasped, her hand flying to her mouth as her eyelids opened wide. "Aldara. That's my name. *Mon dieu*, I remembered my name!"

"So despite the nightmare being horrible, something good came of it, no?" He winced as she snuggled back into his chest, wiggling her delicious ass against the throbbing length of his aroused cock. *Aldara. A beautiful name for a beautiful woman.*

"No last name yet," she said with a sad little sigh a few moments later. Her breath was warm and stirred the curly hairs on his chest.

"But progress, nonetheless," he murmured, dropping kisses into her mass of tousled curls.

"True." She cuddled closer, winding her arms around his neck. Her wings withdrew, vanishing into her back without a trace. "I'm not wearing a wedding ring."

He laughed hoarsely. "Believe me, I noticed."

"And there's no mark from wearing one and then removing it."

He'd thought of that as well then convinced himself it didn't matter. "With the way your skin regenerates, that doesn't tell us much."

"Oh rats, I suppose that's true."

"Patience, little one," he counseled, though he had very little left himself. "Soon we'll find all the answers to your past. Then the future will take care of itself."

"Mmm," she murmured drowsily, already easing back into slumber. "Are all gargoyles this philosophical? I always thought Geraint was an exception."

"Geraint?"

"Geraint Cromlech. My father," she said. "Well, adoptive father anyway." Then she sat up so fast she smacked her head into the bottom of his chin. "Wow, that just came out of the blue. Geraint was a gargoyle. He reared me. And then he died."

"More progress, see? I'm so sorry about your father though." *Poor little lost bird.* Cromlech was a gargoyle name, one that rang a bell somewhere in the back of Marc's brain but he pushed it aside for now.

"There was something—something he wanted me to do..." She shook her head then leaned it back down onto his shoulder. "But I can't remember."

"Don't try too hard, you'll just make your head hurt. It's coming back in its own sweet time."

"You're pretty smart for a rock," she teased, leaning up to nip at his jaw. "Don't you think if I'm... If there was anyone special... Wouldn't I remember that? Remember him?"

"I sure as hell hope so," he said. Then he couldn't stand the temptation anymore as her lips fluttered along the skin of his face. He kissed her.

Marc was lost. She tasted of toothpaste overlain with a faint hint of seawater and underneath it all a flavor uniquely her own. It was so sweet he didn't think he'd ever get enough.

He deepened the kiss, bringing one hand around to slide up under her sweatshirt and cup a full, firm breast. She moaned into his mouth and arched her spine, pressing the mounded flesh farther into his hand. He squeezed gently, rubbing his palm against

the taut, beaded nipple. The tangy scent of her arousal filled his nostrils as he inhaled deeply through his nose as her lush ass rubbed against his painfully hard erection.

"More," she whimpered, pulling her lips from his to trail kisses over his jaw and up to his pointed, leonine ear. He hadn't been kissed in his gargoyle form since he was a randy teenager and he'd forgotten just how sensitive his cat ears were. Even in this shape, though, his lower body was all human and every male inch of him longed to shove her down on the mattress and fuck the living daylight out of her, right here, right now.

The fierce urge to possess her was enough of a shock to make him stop. What was he thinking? She'd been injured, couldn't even remember if she was married and he'd been about to ravage her like – well – an animal.

Pulling his hands from under her shirt, he gently lifted her off his lap. "I'm sorry."

Wide gray eyes gave him a glazed stare. "Why?"

"I can't take advantage of you like this."

Hurt registered in her trembling lower lip. "You want to stop? Why? You don't want me?"

He ran one hand through the silky tumble of her curly hair and tried not to think about the huge tent in his pants. "Oh *cherie*, believe me I want you. So much it hurts. But you nearly died today. You just had a nightmare. And if you *did* find out you've got a lover, you'd feel guilty about this for years." He already knew, somehow, that she wasn't the type to cheat – at least not knowingly.

"I see." She scooted a little farther away and smoothed the hair off her flushed face. Her eyes still avoided his. "Of course."

"Will you be able to go back to sleep now?"

A wry grin flitted across her face. "Perhaps. But I think my dreams this time will be very different, *non*?"

Dropping a chaste kiss onto her forehead, he stood. “No kidding.” He started to walk away then stopped in the doorway and turned. “And, angel? If I knew for sure you were single—neither of us would be leaving that bed for a long, long time.”

His blackbird—Aldara—smiled at that. “When my memory returns, I’ll hold you to that promise.”

“Can’t wait.”

He padded back to his temporary bedroom, threw himself down on the bed and sulked. He *had* to find out who she was, to know she was single. This need to fuck her, claim her as his own was unprecedented in his experience. Harpies were related to sirens—a tidbit he’d come up with in his research. Maybe it was just her innate magic that drew him so powerfully. Maybe he’d just been too damn long without a woman.

The sateen sheet felt like sandpaper on the engorged flesh of his cock and he flexed his hips, rubbing himself along the mattress. Then he realized how low he’d sunk—he was dry-humping the bed. With a groan, he stood and tugged off his lounge pants. After stacking two pillows, he lay back down, carefully arranging his wings out on either side of him before settling against the headboard.

Visions of Aldara filled his mind as his fist closed around his rigid shaft. Droplets of pre-cum were already leaking from his tip, probably had been since she’d been grinding on his lap. He remembered the weight of her breast, plump and ripe, begging for his touch and his mouth. His hand began to move, stroking up and down the length of his cock. He’d smelled her cream—she’d wanted him. She’d been totally ready for him to bury himself inside the wet heat of her soft pussy.

His hand tightened almost without him consciously controlling it, moving faster and faster on his shaft as he imagined the sensation of sinking into her moisture-slicked channel. Her gray eyes would be glazed with passion as he thrust himself into her. She’d be making little whimpers of passion that would swell into screams as he fucked her until neither of them knew where one body ended and the other began. Her walls would quiver around him, clutching him greedily and her nails would dig into the skin

of his back while her legs wrapped up around his waist so she could take him deeper. Then she'd cry out his name, her tight cunt convulsing around him, milking his cock until he came. Finally, he'd ram himself home, spurting deep within her body, filling her with his essence, marking her with his scent, claiming her as his. He heard her cry out as another spasm shook her...

Hot ribbons of cum streamed over his hand and splattered on his stomach and chest. He milked his erection until he was limp and would have sworn there was no fluid left in his body. Just *thinking* about Aldara gave him a stronger orgasm than he remembered from fucking another woman. Christ, he was in trouble.

Another breathy cry reached his ears. Oh shit, she was dreaming again. He darted into the bathroom and wiped the cum off his skin then hurried down the hallway to her room. He hadn't closed either bedroom door tightly for just this reason.

Moving silently, he pushed open the door to her room and stopped, shocked by the sight that met his eyes. She wasn't dreaming. Instead, she was sprawled back against the pillows with the covers down around her ankles. And she'd lost the sweats. Lying on his bed, gloriously naked, she lay with her legs splayed, her spine arched and one hand fingering her pink, glistening pussy.

She hadn't noticed him. Her eyes were closed and her plump lower lip was caught between her pearly white teeth. A small whimper escaped her as she rubbed her clit, spreading the thick, rich moisture around the engorged nub.

Mesmerized, Marc stepped closer. She squirmed, her hips pumping up and down and he simply couldn't help himself. He crawled onto the bed between her spread legs and laid his hands on her knees.

"Want some help?" He heard the roughened tone of his voice and hoped he didn't scare her.

Her eyes flew open, locked with his. "Please," she whispered. "I need you so badly. It *hurts*."

"Can't have that." He meant it. He'd cut off his own arm before he'd willingly cause her the slightest pain. He hooked one arm under each of her knees and lifted her to his mouth, inhaling deeply. "God, Aldara, you smell like ambrosia. I could eat you for hours."

"Yes," she moaned as she shimmied, trying to press her cunt into his face.

Marc licked her slowly, a long slurp from anus to clit. "And you taste fucking incredible too."

Aldara let her head fall back against the pillows. This was what she'd been yearning for. Somehow she'd known, just known, that his touch was going to be unlike anything she'd ever felt before. No man had ever touched her like this. She wasn't sure how she knew that but she did. There was no one she was betraying by being with Marc and she'd be betraying herself if she wasted this opportunity.

She fisted her hands in the sheet and moaned as his tongue stabbed into her pussy. The small invasion was hot and welcome but it wasn't enough. She flexed her hips, trying to draw him closer, take the touch deeper. His tongue was slightly raspy, like a cat's and the friction was incredibly erotic. Finally, he pulled his mouth away and tested her opening with one long finger.

"More," she cried. She opened her eyes to enjoy the sight of his tawny head buried between her thighs. He was magnificent in his gargoyle form. His hair was curly, almost like a lion's mane and his ears were higher and more peaked than in his human shape. She couldn't wait to explore his wings and tail but not until after her raging need had been sated.

He added another finger, stretching her almost to the point of pain.

"God, you're tight, blackbird. Are you sure you've done this before?"

"No," she admitted, panting heavily as he stroked his digits in and out. "I'm not... Not sure... Oh yes, please, right *there*." Then she couldn't speak anymore. His tongue had begun to rub against her swollen clit, sending lightning bolts of pleasure zinging

from her cunt through the rest of her body. She didn't think she'd ever been this aroused in her life.

Her breast ached so she took one in each hand and pinched the peaked nipples between her fingertips. How she wanted him to suck them deep, chafe them with that raspy tongue. But not if it meant making him stop what he was doing to her pussy. His fingers fucked her, going deep, and curled up to touch a spot inside her she hadn't known existed. At the same time he closed his lips around her nub and sucked—hard.

Fireworks exploded behind her eyelids. Every muscle in her body went taut as her womb spasmed and her legs squeezed down on Marc's shoulders. As the tension broke, she screamed his name, sobbing out her release. The tremors went on and on, longer than she'd have dreamed they could. Through it all, Marc continued to pet her with his fingers and gently lick up the wash of cream he'd brought forth.

"Beautiful," he told her when she finally opened her eyes, still quivering, still gasping for breath. "Can you sleep now?"

She shook her head. "No. I need you, Marc. I need your cock inside my pussy, filling up all the empty spaces."

"Are you sure?" He scissored his two fingers open, stretching her vagina a little farther. "I think you're a virgin, Aldara. I don't want to hurt you and I don't want you to have any regrets."

"No regrets." She opened her arms, inviting him to move atop her. "Only joy."

"More than I ever dreamed." He came over her, leaning up on his elbows and pressing her pelvis into the mattress with his. His erection prodded her hip, hard and thick and long. "Let me know if my weight is a problem. I'm a lot heavier right now than in my human form."

"Your weight feels perfect," she told him honestly. Her hips tilted up to cradle him and her knees were bent on either side of his hair-roughened thighs. She wrapped one arm around his waist, below his wings, and the other around his neck to pull him down for a kiss.



He came willingly, his lips meeting hers in a kiss so carnal that her blood began to heat all over again. She tasted the salty tang of her own juices on his lips and that made her want him even more. When his tongue plunged inside her mouth, she wriggled her pelvis, wanting his cock to plunder her cunt with just the same assurance.

Just when she'd forgotten how to breathe, his mouth left hers, blazing a trail of sucking kisses up to her ear then down to the hollow where her neck and shoulder met. He sucked harder there, drawing blood to the surface to leave a mark—for a little while at least, until her body regenerated. She wished it would last. Nothing would make her prouder than to be marked as his.

"Mine," he muttered, just in case she hadn't understood.

"Yours," she whispered in reply. "Now take me." Her cunt felt empty, ached to be filled by him and him alone.

"Soon." He had more patience it seemed than she did. "First there's more I have to taste." He kissed his way down her collarbone to her breastbone, down into the valley between her heavy breasts. "I've been wanting these in my mouth since I pulled you out of the surf."

A wail broke free from Aldara's throat as he circled one beaded nipple with his rough tongue. She'd been wanting that too, at least since she'd awoken to find him sitting beside her. Her breasts were so tender, so hungry for attention that even such a slight touch was devastating. She clasped one hand in his mane of hair, holding him to her chest. With the other she lifted the heavy globe toward his mouth, like an offering.

"Beautiful," he said again, blowing a soft puff of air across the wet tip. "So lush, so responsive." He licked it again then closed his lips around it.

"Marc!"

The strong pull as he sucked sent more tremors through her body, as if a live wire ran straight from her nipples to her cunt. He drew on her powerfully then caught her other nipple in his hand and pinched.

The orgasm this time was slight, really just an echo of the one she'd had before but it was still amazing. And she wanted more. "Please!"

"Soon, *petite*." To her immense frustration, he shifted off her, switching his mouth to her other breast and bringing one hand up to cup her mound. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Don't care."

"But I do." He slid two fingers back into her dripping pussy then slowly, carefully added a third.

It hurt. She felt a sting as her tender flesh gave then the pain was gone. He held his hand still for a moment, waiting until she started squirming against his fingers.

"More."

"No pain?"

"No." She wouldn't have admitted it if there was. A small hurt was nothing compared to the ache of wanting him to make her fully his.

"There's no risk," he informed her seriously. "Gargoyles are only fertile with other gargoyles so we've no need of contraception. And I imagine you're immune to human disease."

She nodded. "Thank you for letting me know. Now no more talking."

He shifted his mouth up to hers, kissing her again, tenderly at first then with increasing ardor as she responded eagerly. Without breaking the kiss, he moved back between her legs, took his erection in one hand and guided it to her entrance.

Their eyes locked as he pushed inside. It did sting, more than a little, but she dug her nails into his sturdy skin and held him in place, refusing to let him withdraw. When he was fully seated, she gazed up at him in wonder.

"There was never anyone else." She'd waited her entire life for this. She knew that, no matter what else she remembered or she didn't.

"No," he agreed huskily. With exquisite gentleness he began to move.

His powerful cock stroked all her sensitive tissues as he rocked in and out of her core. He was almost too big—she hadn't known a touch could go that deep—but he was also somehow just right for her, as if their bodies had been designed to match one another perfectly.

Soon she was climbing again, her body tensing in anticipation of yet another cataclysm. Sweat slicked both their bodies, making it hard to grip his skin. The rough, curly hair of his chest rasped at her tender nipples, adding another layer of stimulation.

"You're so hot, so tight," he whispered against her throat. "You fit me like a fucking glove."

It was his voice, deep and rough with passion, that pushed her over this time. She came hard, her muscles squeezing down on his cock in a grip that she hoped didn't hurt him. Her legs wrapped around his waist, holding him deep while her body convulsed around his rigid, pulsing cock.

He cried out her name, thrust just a little deeper than she'd thought possible, then cried out her name as spurt after spurt of wet heat splashed into her core. She wanted to hold him there forever, filling her with his cum, holding her close. She desperately wished that this beautiful moment would never have to end.

Finally, though, her tremors faded and they both began to breathe normally again. Marc pulled the covers up over their damp skin and rolled aside, bringing her up against him with her head pillowed on his chest.

"Thank you," he whispered, dropping a kiss on her cheek.

"Thank you," she returned with a shaky laugh. "I believe I'm the one who begged."

"I would have," he replied, smoothing her hair off her overheated cheeks. "If I'd had any idea how wonderful that would be, I'd have groveled on my knees." Then he seemed to think of something and he started to move. "I suppose we should go clean up."

"Later." She didn't want to wash away the evidence of his passion. She wanted to wear his essence on her skin, at least for a while. "I don't want to move."

"Then we won't."

He arranged himself and she couldn't resist one sleepy caress of his feathered wingtip where it stuck up above his shoulder.

"Pretty," she murmured. It was feathered and glinted almost golden in the sunlight peeking through the slats of the window blinds.

"Glad you think so," he chuckled, settling her back onto his chest. "Yours are pretty too."

Aldara smiled to herself as she drifted off to sleep. She hadn't meant just his wings.

## **Chapter Four**

Something tickled Marc's nose, making him sneeze. The sound of his own head exploding woke him and was closely followed by a female giggle.

"Bless you," Aldara said. She rolled over to look at him and Marc realized it had been her hair tickling his face.

He sat up and reached for a tissue beside the bed to wipe his nose. As he tossed it into the trash can, he noticed a brown smear of dried blood on his hand and wondered for a moment, if he'd cut himself or something while he slept. Then he remembered and he looked down at Aldara, still awed by the gift she'd given him.

"How are you feeling?" He searched her face for any sign of pain or regret.

Her smile was blinding. "Fully recovered. From both the ocean and from losing my virginity. Thank you, by the way, for making my first time a beautiful experience."

"I still can't believe...how did someone like you manage to stay untouched? Are all the men in Europe blithering idiots?"

"I lived on a very tiny island with my adoptive father. I did go to a school in a nearby village but there were only girls there."

"You remember all that?" His relief was genuine. He wanted her to stay but he didn't want to wonder and worry if there was someone out there missing her.

She nodded happily then her face clouded. "Almost everything, up until Geraint's passing. I don't remember that day at all but the rest is perfectly clear. When I was a small child, maybe five or six, Geraint found me washed up on the beach of his tiny island, even smaller than this one. He thought I was dead at first. Some of the other harpies had – abused me before they threw me in the ocean."

"Why the hell would they do that?"

She shook her head. "I was too little to really understand but I *think* it was because I was different—not cursed like most of the sisterhood. A long time ago, the harpies were cursed. Instead of being normal-looking women with wings, they became the half-vulture hags you see in the stories."

"That makes sense but it doesn't explain...you."

She smiled at the implied compliment then continued. "But when I was born, I was different—more like we'd been before. At first everyone was happy, thinking the curse was broken. There were a few who claimed I was a freak but my mother protected me, I think. Then another little girl was born and she wasn't like me. Her mother was furious and I'm not sure but I think she killed my mother and tried to kill me."

He wanted, badly, to go find this harpy and destroy her. Instead, he pulled Aldara close to his side and tucked his arm around her. "So you have no idea why you were different?"

"Geraint and I talked about it a lot. He thought that perhaps greed and vanity had been the reasons for the curse in the first place. My mother wasn't like that, so she broke the curse, not for herself but for her descendants." She took a deep breath and gave him a forced smile. "But I survived and Geraint took me in and raised me as his own. Getting thrown in the ocean and washing up on just the right island seems to be a habit with me."

"As long as this was the last time, I'm not going to complain," he said. "I'm sorry for all you've been through, blackbird, and especially about your father. Do you have any other family?" He toyed with her hand where it rested on his thigh, so small and soft against his tough hide.

"Not really. Geraint has—had—a son but he and I never got along. That's why I had to leave Stone Island. Yves inherited it of course. Geraint left me a small amount of cash, enough to start a new life somewhere else. We talked about it before he died. I was going to go to New York and see if I could get work singing in a club."

"That's why you were on the ship, then. I wonder why you didn't fly."

"I don't know." She shook her head. "Hopefully the rest of my memory will trickle back in. But I do know one thing that's very important."

"What's that?"

"There isn't anyone in my life, Marc. I'm one hundred percent unattached."

"Thank God," he said with a chuckle. "Though we'd suspected as much."

She wrinkled up her pert little nose. "Told you so."

He had to laugh. "So you did. You want a cookie?"

"Wrong consonant."

He raised one eyebrow.

"What?" she asked, rolling over to land on his chest with an adorable pounce. "I thought you'd be familiar with the term 'nookie'. Don't tell me they don't say that in Canada?"

"Oh, I'm familiar with it, *mademoiselle*." He settled her astride his legs and leaned back against the headboard, stretching his wings out to the side. His tail was tucked under the pillow. "I'm just surprised you were."

She shrugged. "There were a few American girls at school." Her damp pussy rubbed back and forth along the ridge of his cock, making him hard as a ship's mast.

"School," he mused. "Just how old are you, *cherie*? I have the worst feeling that I'm robbing the cradle."

"Twenty-six," she answered readily. "I went to the mainland for school but came home right after college. Geraint was unwell for several years and I didn't want to leave him. Yves was only there occasionally so I stayed on the island with my father."

"Of course you did." Reassured that she was an adult, he kissed her, deeply and with all the enthusiasm of a teenager. "Good morning, *mon coeur*."

"Mmmm. Good morning indeed." Taking the initiative this time, she kissed him, hard and fierce.

His cock, already hard on waking, swelled to the point of bursting as she rubbed her damp cleft along it while they kissed. He let her lead, even welcomed her tongue as she explored his mouth. Since the position offered the opportunity, he reached up and cupped both her breasts. The generous flesh overflowed his hands and pebbled nipples stabbed into his palms. She was so ripe, so responsive that he could already smell her fresh arousal mingling with the scents of last night's passion.

Aldara broke the kiss to nip a line from his chin, along his jawbone and up to his ear, bringing one of her plump nipples perfectly in line with Marc's mouth. He latched on to the taut bud with his lips and sucked deeply, relishing the taste and textures of her skin. She moaned into his ear just before she used her sharp canine tooth to gently nip the pointed tip.

"Fuck!" Marc's pelvis lifted up off the bed as a bolt of lightning shot from his ear straight to his groin. He was hard enough to hammer nails and her wet cunt was right there, hovering just out of his reach. He let go of her breasts then used one hand to hold his shaft in place while his other guided her down to impale herself on him.

She pushed up with her hands on his shoulders to angle her body then lowered herself slowly, her drenched tissues parting around him, then gradually enclosing his aching cock in a hot, wet clasp.

Marc groaned. She was so tight, so perfect. "*Oui, mon ange*. Just like that."

"Oooohh." Her little whimper was breathy and sweet. "I feel so perfectly full—like we're interlocking parts of a jigsaw puzzle."

"We are, *cherie*. Made to fit together like this." It was true, though he'd never thought it before, not with any other female. No one had ever matched him like this, curve for curve, inch for inch. The sensation encompassed more than just his cock—his whole being felt as if it were enclosed in a warm, moist hug. Last night he'd been too worried about hurting her to really enjoy it but this morning he wasn't thinking about anything but the pleasure. His eyes rolled back in his head. Nothing had ever felt so intense in his life.



Then she started to move.

“Marc!” She cried out as she rocked forward on his shaft, figuring out how to ride him. He used his hands to guide her hips, help her find the rhythm that suited them both. Once she’d established that glide, he took her breasts in his hands again, pinching the nipples lightly between his fingertips. The corresponding clench of her pussy let him know she approved so he continued, rasping them with the pads of his fingers then rolling them in time to her movements on his cock.

Her tight inner muscles gripped him, making sure he felt every bit of friction, even though she was extremely wet. His balls drew up close to his body, full and tender, ready to explode into her welcoming cunt.

Her pace quickened gradually until she was riding him hard, gasping for breath with every stroke. She was close and Marc desperately wanted to hold out until she came but he didn’t know if he could. He was fighting to hold on when everything in him wanted to burst. He let go of her left breast and slid his hand between their bodies to find her pussy. His fingers wound through the small tuft of damp black curls to find her slit then deeper still to finger her clit, which was as hard as a pearl, standing erect as if begging for his touch.

“Yes,” she moaned as he gently rubbed. Her movements speeded further and he matched her, rasping his finger on her clit with a firmer, stronger touch. Soon her breathing was nothing more than a series of fractured whimpers and then she froze, her spine bowed as she bore down on his hand and his cock and let out a long, keening cry.

As her pussy convulsed around him, Marc lifted his hips from the mattress, driving up into her with all his strength. Her nails dug into his shoulders and that little pain just fueled his climax further, making him roar like the lion he resembled as he erupted into her waiting heat. Over and over he emptied his swollen testicles until he should have been little more than a desiccated husk.

Her orgasm lasted through his, rippling over his flesh and milking him of every drop. When they finally finished, she fell onto his chest and Marc didn’t even have the

strength to roll them to their sides or pull up the covers. Her weight didn't bother him—he couldn't breathe anyway, so what did a tiny woman on his chest matter? All he could do was wrap his arms around her and hold her close.

\* \* \* \* \*

When she opened her eyes, it was nearly an hour after she'd woken the first time and she was lying in a heap on Marc's chest. She'd either fallen asleep or passed out—she had no idea which. The sex had been that intense. While she had no firsthand experience to tell her that wasn't always the case, somehow she didn't think it was. She was a lucky woman indeed to have a man like Marc be her first. No matter what else happened between them, he'd given her memories to last a lifetime.

Marc's breathing was still deep and even beneath her cheek so she guessed he'd fallen asleep as well. She paused a moment to take in the simple pleasure of waking up—again—with her lover. His chest was covered with a thick mat of golden curls, as were his arms and legs. In his human form he had only a light dusting on his chest and legs, she remembered. She looked forward to exploring him in that form as well.

"Good morning...again."

Aldara lifted her head to see him smiling at her, his golden eyes crinkled at the corners. "It's nearly afternoon."

"Does it matter?" He pulled her up his chest for a kiss, brief but thorough. "We're not going anywhere until evening."

She giggled and rolled to the side, sitting on the bed next to him. "Except, perhaps, into the shower. I seem to be a mite...sticky...this morning."

"I wonder how that happened." Marc's laugh rumbled in his chest as he stood and stretched, the feathered tips of his wings brushing the ceiling before he held out a hand to help Aldara from the bed. "Come on, blackbird. Time to get clean."

She grinned up at him as she took his hand and let him tug her to her feet. She hadn't felt so young, so carefree in...forever. The momentum of the pull brought her

flush against his chest and she burrowed her face in the mat of tawny curls for a moment. Already his winged, leonine gargoyle form seemed natural to her but she hadn't really had much chance to explore his uniqueness.

"I saw the shower last night," she remarked, reaching a hand behind his back to stroke one feathered wing. The plumage wasn't as soft as her own, more eagle-like than her ravenesque feathering. "Wise of you to have built it large enough for an entire football team."

"What do you know about football?" he taunted, ruffling her hair. His tail came up to tickle the backs of her calves and she giggled.

"Football. You play with goal nets and a black and white ball. Popular all over the world." She snaked a hand down to grab the furry tuft on the tip of his tail. It was strong, ropy muscle covered by a coat of fur with a tassel on the end that matched his hair—or mane. His skin was a rich shimmer of golden brown tones. She imagined that when he was solid stone, he would be tiger's eye quartz.

"Ah. Soccer. Real football is played with an oval pigskin and lots of padding." They both knew what the other was talking about—that was part of what made the teasing fun. "Besides, hockey is a much better sport than either."

"Typical Canadian." She tugged on his tail. "Anyway, I was complimenting your foresight in building an oversized shower. There's plenty of room for both of us in there even with your big wings hogging the space."

"Well, I did have the wings in mind when I designed it," he admitted, giving her a little push toward the bathroom but making no move to pull his tail out of her hand. "No interest in the football team though, European or American. Just one small, winged female."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I found you," Marc crowed over the screen of his laptop computer a few hours later.

"I'm right here across the table from you—I wasn't trying to hide," she teased, looking up from the book she was reading. After their shower they'd enjoyed a leisurely brunch on his deck. Now that it was daylight, she could really see the house and the island he'd claimed as his retreat. The man had wonderful taste—and he tasted good as well, though she had yet to really *taste* him. She was looking forward to experimenting with that.

"I meant, I found a report of you missing," he said. "The cruise ship *Aegean Star* docked in Halifax early this morning. When they set sail again, one of the crew had apparently gone missing—a singer in one of the nightclubs, Miss Aldara Cromlech of Stone Island, Greece."

"Stone Island," she mused. "Yes, that's it. It's a tiny island, even smaller than this one, where I grew up. Geraint named it in English since that was the native language of his wife. She died before he found me."

"The ship left Halifax but we can call the cruise offices. Either they can ship your things to you or we can get someone to meet the boat down in Maine at their next port of call. I imagine your passport and clothing have been boxed up and stored somewhere."

"Everything I own was on that ship," she told him, chewing on a thumbnail. "Clothes, books, mementos. And there was something else—something that's been nagging at the back of my mind since I woke up this morning. I think the Fates may have had a hand in our meeting, Marc. I remembered why I was on my way to North America and I think it was to find you."

"Me?" He flipped the lid to his laptop down and leaned his elbows on the table as he looked at her. "Why?"

"Geraint asked me to do one last favor for him before he died. He collected antiques but there was one thing that he never displayed, always kept locked in a safe in his den. He told me a few days before his death it was an artifact his father had stolen. He'd always meant to return it to his father's former clan but he never did. I guess there was

some pretty bad blood between the Cromlechs and whomever was in charge back in Montreal. But the guilt weighed on him and he begged me to return the crown to its rightful owner. Once we retrieve my belongings, would it be possible for you to take me to Quebec, so I can give it to your ruler?"

Marc shook his head, an enigmatic grin playing across his slightly leonine features. "Of course—I should have known. We can go as soon as we collect your things. Though it's not the way I imagined taking you home to meet my mother."

"What?" He'd completely lost her. "How could you know? And what do you mean, meet your mother?"

"You want to talk to our leader, right? That would be the matriarch—better known as Lady Genevieve Armel. The title is of French origin and not technically legal in Canada but the clan still uses it. I call her *Maman*."

Aldara hid face in her hands. *His mother?* Great. She'd finally found a man she was comfortable with and he turned out to be a prince. Still, it did seem that the Fates had guided her to where she needed to be. "She isn't liable to punish the messenger, is she?"

"Not at all. We've been searching for the missing regalia for a long time. You'll be a heroine for returning the last piece."

He told her a story that left her shaking her head in wonder. Apparently Geraint's father had stolen the crown over one hundred fifty years earlier. She'd known that. What she hadn't known was that three other magical items belonging to the gargoyle clan had vanished at the same time and with their loss the gargoyles had become a dying breed. "Things are improving greatly now that three of the four have been returned. But the crown is perhaps the most important of all. It helps strengthen the magic that holds our race together and without it, none of the others work quite as well as they should. It's also said to grant additional wisdom and magic to the wearer. In the past, our leader could weave protective spells and even the occasional illusion so we could walk in public unnoticed if we had to. Without it, life has been much more difficult for my people."

"Then I'm very glad I brought it back," she said simply. "Does it say there when and where the ship docks next? I can fly there and meet it."

"The next port is in Maine," he said. "Without your passport, I'm afraid you wouldn't be able to go—and I can't if it's daylight. But we can have someone from our New York enclave go as your representative."

"That's another thing," she said, puzzled. "I don't understand why you have to change during daylight. Geraint didn't do that. He only changed when he wanted to."

"That's because he'd fathered a child," Marc replied. "It's one of the loopholes in the curse that created our race. The sorcerers who created the gargoyles wanted us to continue to reproduce. So there is an incentive. Once we've had a child, we aren't forced to change by daylight. All of our New York group, for example, are couples with grown children."

"Okay." She turned that over in her brain for a while. It made sense in an odd kind of way. "And explains why I never saw Yves during daylight. But here's a question. How does your body know you've reproduced? I mean, I understand how a woman's system can tell—pregnancy, hormones, childbirth. But the man? How does that work?"

"Good question," Marc said with a laugh. "Our biologists spent a good while working that one out. Apparently we males have receptors under our tongues. The hormonal changes happen immediately after conception. Then the chemicals are in our mates' saliva and...other bodily fluids, and when we're exposed to them, our bodies change as well. That's actually how most couples get the news. According to a friend of mine who just had a daughter, they just woke up one afternoon and there they were, no wings or tails in sight. So they knew."

"Beats peeing on a stick, I guess," she said with a laugh, remembering a girl in school who'd been terrified until the minus sign had appeared on the plastic wand. "So the men don't have to actually reproduce—just kiss a pregnant gargoyle."

That made him laugh. "If you've ever seen a male gargoyle with his mate, you'd know it isn't worth it. Kissing someone else's woman would just get you killed. We're a pretty possessive and protective bunch."

Somehow she wasn't surprised but it was time to get back to business. "So the first thing we have to do is notify the Canadian authorities that I survived and contact the cruise line to hold my belongings."

"Right. And I'll call New York to let them know and see who's available to act as your representative. Pauline is an attorney so she might be the best choice." He frowned at her, his forehead creasing. "I'm still concerned that somehow you were helped into the water. You're too graceful to have fallen overboard on your own. Could someone have known you were transporting a valuable artifact? Or is there anyone else who might have wanted to hurt you?"

Hurt her? She didn't really have many friends or any enemies since she'd kept so close to home these last few years. The only one who might have known about the crown was Yves and he couldn't have been on the ship. They'd boarded in daylight, so surely someone would have noticed a gargoyle checking in.

"So don't be surprised if I don't let you out of my sight until we reach Montreal," he warned.

"I don't mind. Are we still going shopping as soon as the sun sets? I promise I can pay you back as soon as I get my purse."

"Don't worry about it. The clan will cover your expenses, including the trip."

"But I didn't pay for the passage. In fact, I even earned a small salary for singing."

"Trust me, the elders will make sure you're well rewarded. And you'll be welcome to stay in Montreal as long as you like. Maybe you could even make your new start there instead of New York." He turned his face back down to his computer screen before she could read the expression on his face.

Had he been inviting her to stay? With him? As if a prince of the clan could really be involved with a member of another race. "According to Geraint, the gargoyles didn't

associate with other races. He always said that was one of the reasons his father left the clan to start his own enclave.”

“I’ve heard that too but either the gargoyles responsible for that way of thinking are long gone or they’ve come to their senses. Actually, the clan has welcomed several new members in the last year—a witch, a selkie and a half dragon. Though I think all of those have been converted to gargoyles by now.”

“Really?” She studied his face, trying to read between the lines. He was holding something back but it didn’t matter. She’d enjoy their interlude for as long as it lasted then she’d strike out on her own with some beautiful memories. She wondered about the last half of his statement too—that these others had been converted to gargoyles. How was that possible?

“Really.” Then he smiled and she quit caring at all.



## Chapter Five

The mega-market he took her to was like nothing Aldara had seen in Europe. The enormous building carried everything from fresh bread to lawn tractors. In the middle was a big section of low-priced clothing.

"I know the quality isn't what you're used to but they're open all night. In Quebec, we have a few clan members who own shops, so they tend to keep very late hours."

"Your people have had to be very self-sufficient over the years, haven't they?" she asked. She picked up a couple of pairs of jeans and some sweaters. Canada in October was cold compared to the sunny coast of Greece.

"Very. But we're slowly working to make connections with other paranormal beings and create a network to help each other out. My friend Damien used to be a police officer in Philadelphia. They actually have an entire task force of supernaturals."

"That's amazing. I knew a few other immortals in Greece but there was no real network—nothing organized. I think it's brilliant to try to forge those connections."

She tried on the clothing, refusing to buy more than a couple very basic outfits along with a pair of low-heeled boots and a sturdy jacket. She'd have her own things back in a day or two and she didn't want to be any more indebted to Marc than absolutely necessary. As soon as the items were paid for, she ducked into the ladies' room and changed. What a relief to finally wear something that actually fit. Especially on her feet.

"You look remarkable," he told her when she emerged. "Now are you ready to go talk to the officials?" He'd called in some favors and managed to have her interview with customs *after* they got her some clothing. Apparently the gargoyles also had some contacts in the Canadian government. Her attorney—they'd handled by fax machine this afternoon—would be meeting the ship in Maine first thing tomorrow morning.

"You don't think I'll be in trouble?" she asked as they drove to the local police station where the official had arranged to meet them. Marc apparently kept an SUV at the marina here for when he visited the island, along with the motor launch that had brought them to the mainland just after sunset.

"Not at all. If I did, believe me, you'd be out on that island until an attorney showed up—namely my father. He's the chief legal officer for the clan and I promise, there's no one better. And if he can't manipulate the legal intricacies, which is rare, he also knows where all the bodies are buried."

She was reassured but only a little. She still held his hand tight as they walked into the police station.

\* \* \* \* \*

They both breathed deep sighs of relief as they left the RCMP post. The authorities were satisfied, provided Aldara showed her passport and visa once they were returned. The cruise line had agreed to hand over her belongings to the gargoyle's attorney when the ship reached Portland, Maine. After stopping for a late dinner at a local tavern, there was nothing to do but wait for morning.

Well, Marc mused as he guided the launch back to his island retreat, not exactly nothing. He had every intention of making good use of the time. There were dozens of ways he still hadn't made love to Aldara and now that he was in human form, some of them were a lot more feasible. The night wouldn't be long enough for him to get to everything he wanted to do to her but it would certainly make a good start.

He'd been stunned to find out earlier that she had the crown but deep inside he'd accepted it. Now he knew why Lady Helene hadn't objected to his "vacation". While he felt a little used, he was glad he finally got to do his part. And if he got the girl as well, just like his friends had? Well, that wouldn't bother him either. He'd been well on his way to falling for Aldara before she'd remembered the crown, so he didn't have any

worries that his emotions were tied to the mission. No, they were all tied to her, period. The crown was merely a bonus.

She helped him dock the launch with the practiced ease of someone who'd grown up around boats. Carrying groceries and her minimal clothing purchases, they climbed the steep path to the house side by side.

"I wish they'd let us go on to Quebec tonight," he grumbled as they entered the house. "We could have dealt with customs there as well as here."

"I'm just grateful not to be waiting in a cell until my paperwork arrives," she said with a laugh. "I don't mind one more night to build up my courage before facing your entire clan."

"They're not that bad," he teased. Remembering her childhood, he scowled. *At least we've never brutalized one of our children and left her for dead.* He was itching to get his hands on a certain group of harpies, though it was probably better if he never did. "I'd think your history with gargoyles would have given you a positive outlook on us as a group." He set the bag with breakfast groceries down on the kitchen counter and turned to face her.

"Actually, I'd say my experience was a fifty-fifty split. I adored Geraint. Yves, on the other hand..." She shuddered as she set down her bag of clothing. "Let me just say there was a reason I left Greece before he could return and claim his property. He never actually *did* anything—Geraint wouldn't have tolerated that. But he was always watching me and making these innuendoes..."

Oh marvelous. Now there was someone else he needed to kill and of course it was another gargoyle. Ah well. Since he hadn't actually touched her, Yves Cromlech could live, Marc supposed, as long as he stayed in Europe and never came anywhere near Aldara again. He didn't even stop to question his protectiveness or possessiveness when it came to her. She was quite simply *his* to protect and care for—even if as an immortal she really didn't need much defending. But everyone, immortal or otherwise, needed someone to watch their back on occasion and he'd be there for Aldara for as

long as she'd let him. While that should have scared him, somehow it didn't. It was just a fact.

"Are you tired?" He put a small carton of milk and a half-dozen eggs into the fridge while she tucked some croissants into the breadbox.

"Not at all." She smiled and winked. "I was just thinking that I'd enjoy a soak in your hot tub. Of course, I didn't buy a swimsuit."

"You didn't wear one last time and it was daylight then," he pointed out, rinsing a bowl full of strawberries. "Why start now?"

"I didn't really think it was a problem. Besides, it will give me time to run these clothes through the laundry. Putting them on without washing them was a little unsettling but better than going to the police in your workout garb."

"Good. Washer and dryer are in that closet." He pointed to a pair of louvered doors off the back of the kitchen. "Help yourself."

While she dealt with her laundry, Marc checked his email and sent a note to his mother with the latest developments. He flipped the lid closed just in time to see Aldara strip off her sweater and drop it into the washing machine. Fascinated, he watched. How had she gone from being virgin to siren in less than twenty-four hours? Totally unselfconscious in his presence, she peeled down her snug jeans as well. Marc's mouth went dry. She tossed her jeans and socks into the washer then started the machine. Marc's cock strained against the fly of his jeans as she unclipped her bra and laid it on top of the dryer. Her full breasts bounced freely as she pushed her panties down her hips and wiggled. *Oh God!*

He managed not to leap on her from across the room, though the temptation was considerable. She knew it too, he realized. A wicked little grin flitted across her lips as she sauntered across the room to rummage through her shopping bag.

"Well?" She pulled an object from the bag then lifted her arms over head to twist her long hair into a loose knot and clip it on top of her head. "Are you joining me in the hot tub or not?"

The movement lifted her breasts even higher and Marc could not keep his mouth from falling open. He wanted, no *needed* to taste them again.

The kitchen opened into the great room of the house and one had to pass through the sitting area to get out to the hot tub. Aldara started walking toward the French doors but Marc moved swiftly to intercept her. He caught up to her just as she moved past an oversized sofa and he grabbed her around the waist then fell back onto the couch, pulling her down on top of him.

She gasped with surprise but then gazed into his eyes with smug approval. "Nice catch."

Her legs straddled his and she rubbed her crotch against the ridge of his erection. The fly of his jeans had to be rough against her tender skin but she didn't seem to care.

"I wanted you all evening," he told her, his hands automatically coming up to knead her breasts. "In the store, in the restaurant, hell, even at the RCMP post. You're an addictive drug, Aldara. The more I have you, the more I want."

"It's the same for me," she admitted. Her fingers began to fumble at the buttons of his black dress shirt. "As if I'm more nymph than harpy. All I can think about is you. Is this normal?"

"Not even close, angel." He sat up so she could push his shirt off his shoulders and run her hands along the skin of his chest. While she'd checked out every inch of him in the shower this morning, she hadn't seen much of him in human form, he remembered. He gently lifted her off him so he could stand and strip off his pants and shoes.

"Your body is different at night but this is the same," she murmured, reaching down to grasp his cock. She tugged gently, pulling him toward where she sat on the sofa. "But I didn't get to taste it this morning and I wanted to, very, very much."

*Holy shit.* He'd died and gone to heaven. He stepped closer, between her creamy thighs and prayed that his knees wouldn't give out on him. Her free hand came around to grip his buttocks and position him in front of her then trailed a path up and down the back of his thigh.

He watched in fascination as her pink tongue darted out to swirl around the tip of his engorged cock. She traced a damp line around the underside of the crown while her hand encircled the base of his shaft, her fingers not quite meeting. Then she lifted his erection to run her tongue along the thick ridge from base to tip, finally dabbling her tongue into the slit to taste the fluid already beading there.

"Does that feel good?" She moved her circling hand up and down on the shaft.

"*Oui, petite*. It feels amazing." He fisted his hands in her hair and clenched his jaw.

"The flavor is different than I expected," she admitted. "Strong, a little bitter but not unpleasant." She dipped her tongue again for another taste and Marc's eyes rolled back in his head.

"Suck me, *cherie*," he begged.

"Let's see if I can remember how the girls at school said to do this." Obediently she slurped the whole crown into the hot cavern of her mouth. She sucked gently, pumping her hand up and down his shaft in the same rhythm.

"I'd say they knew what they were talking about." Sparks ricocheted through his body. "But just a little harder. I won't break."

She drew his tip deeper into her throat, added more suction and swallowed, caressing him with a rippling sensation. He canted his hips and thrust into her mouth, lost in the pleasure she was so unselfishly giving him. Her hand tightened on his shaft while her other dipped down the crack of his ass to press against his sphincter.

The added sensation of her delicate fingertip on his asshole was nearly enough to push him over. "Getting close," he muttered, giving her fair warning if she wanted to stop before he came down her throat.

All she did was give a contented hum and increase both speed and suction. The vibration of her humming around his swollen cock finished the job and he pushed deep into her mouth as he climaxed, shooting his cum down her throat while she swallowed over and over, drinking down every drop. Finally, when he was drained, she eased back and daintily licked him clean.

Marc dropped to his knees and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her off the couch and onto his thighs. She straddled his legs and the wet rub of her pussy had his cock hardening again, impossibly soon. He tasted his cum on her lips and tongue as she returned his ravenous kiss and she tunneled her hands into his hair.

"What I should do is keep you tied to the bed," he growled. He just couldn't seem to get enough of her. "You're too dangerous to be left on the loose."

Then she shocked the living hell out of him. With a little wiggle of her hips that had him groaning into her ear, she murmured, "Sounds like fun."

"We're going to kill each other." His words only fueled the desire in Aldara to be truly naughty for the first time in her life. If she only had this one night, she wanted to stuff as much pure carnal pleasure into it as she possibly could.

"We're both awfully hard to kill, but I'm willing to give it a try." She leaned up and nipped his ear. "Did you mean it about tying me up?"

"I wouldn't be opposed." The slight pulse of his revitalized cock against her wet slit let her know he meant it. "I don't have a vast collection of toys here, but I'm sure I can come up with something that will work."

"You mean this isn't the love nest you usually bring your women to?"

"Actually you're the first, besides my mother or my friends' wives. This is usually where I come to be alone."

"Sorry for the interruption, then." She wiggled her ass, rubbing her wet curls against his erection.

"No you're not, witch. But neither am I. Shall we go see what I've got for restraints?"

"Oh yes," She shifted off his lap to stand. "I've always thought that sounded...hot." She might have been gone to an all-girls' school and been overprotected by the big,

eccentric Frenchman all the boys were scared of, but that didn't mean she hadn't had fantasies.

"I've fucking gone to heaven," he muttered, standing and pulling her by the hand. He strode down the hall so fast she had to run to keep up with him.

Excitement fluttered in her stomach. This was really going to happen. The idea of being completely at his mercy was an unbelievable turn-on. She could feel her juices coat her pussy lips and her upper thighs, and her breasts were so aroused and swollen they actually ached for his touch.

When they reached the bedroom, Marc picked her up and twirled her around in his arms. "All you have to do at any time is say stop and I will. Understand?"

"I'm not afraid, Marc. Now what should I do?"

"Just lie in the center of the bed." He pulled the covers down and watched her settle onto the mattress, his gaze intense enough that she could almost feel its warmth against her skin.

"Now what?"

"Close your eyes and wait." His tone dropped to a husky whisper. She obeyed then heard him move, followed by the opening and closing of a couple drawers. "Crap. Now – aha!" His footsteps moved into the bathroom then back, and she heard a ripping noise. "One beach towel makes a noble sacrifice." There were two more rips before she felt the mattress dip by her left foot. "Let me know if anything feels uncomfortable."

Soft cotton wrapped around her ankle in a knot that was snug but nowhere near painful. He moved her foot a bit until it was positioned the way he wanted it then he scooted across the bed to her other foot. Funny how she could tell all of that without using her eyes.

He secured her other ankle then moved up to her hand. Picking it up, he dropped a sweet kiss into her palm before tying that to the upper corner of the bed. She tested the knot, pleased when she discovered she was really held in place. Goose bumps covered



her skin in anticipation of what Marc would do while she was under his complete control.

When her final limb was secured, she lay spread-eagle on the bed, listening to Marc rustle around the room. He came back a few moments later and she felt a light, feathery touch tickle her nipples. The sensation was delicate but intense. What was it? A feather? A brush of some sort? She had no idea, but he traced it across her collarbones then down between her breasts to tickle her bellybutton before running it along the creases of her hips, making her giggle.

“No laughing,” he said, tapping her lightly on the nose with the brush—she’d finally decided that’s what it was—a soft paintbrush or makeup brush of some kind. “And no talking unless you want me to stop. All I want to hear from you are sounds of pleasure.”

“Then don’t tickle,” she said.

Marc responded by ticking both sides of her rib cage with his fingers. “Who’s in charge here?”

“You are,” she laughed. “But I’m still ticklish.”

“We’ll have to try something else then, won’t we?”

She started to speak but was stopped by his kiss. It was gentle at first but quickly deepened. His tongue thrust into her mouth, searching, claiming while one hand cupped her breast, gently kneading the sensitive tissue.

“Ah, you are so hot,” he said after he finally pulled his head away. He kissed her jaw, her ear, then nipped her neck in a way he’d quickly learned made her gasp and cream. Then he dipped his mouth lower and captured her nipple, which was hard and so tender she moaned at the caress. He sucked it deep into his mouth and worked it thoroughly with his lips and tongue while his fingers rolled and tweaked its mate.

Aldara tried to pulse her hips, but the restraints made that difficult. Somehow the limited movement only heightened her arousal. Her eyes were still closed, partly because he’d said to keep them that way, partly because she was too turned-on to force

them open. Every sensation seemed magnified as she lay there helpless while Marc made love to her.

“You have such perfect breasts,” he told her as he crawled over her to switch sides. “Pale and full and so ripe for my touch. Those little pink nipples just begging for my mouth.” Then he sucked on the other one until she was whimpering with need.

“Your skin is like satin and so sweet to taste.” He shifted to between her legs and slid his hands under her ass. “And you have the prettiest pussy I’ve ever seen—all wet and puffy and pink.”

One finger penetrated her dripping channel and Aldara cried out. She felt so empty she couldn’t wait for him to fill her all the way.

“Your clit is hard, a sweet little pearl.” His tongue circled that tender bud, drawing another moan from her throat. She wanted to tell him to just fuck her now, but he’d ordered her to stay silent. “You like that, don’t you? Your body is so wet for me, so ready for my tongue and my cock.” He flicked the tip of his tongue harder against her clit.

“Y-y-yes.”

“Ah! Bad girl. No talking, remember?” He tapped the side of her hip lightly with two fingers. “If you talk, I stop. So unless you want to be lying here, frustrated, you need to hush.”

Oh no, he couldn’t stop. She nodded her understanding and was rewarded when he slid another finger deep into her hungry cunt.

“That’s the way.” He fucked her slowly with his two thick digits while his tongue strummed her clit.

She found herself straining against her bonds, even more inflamed when she couldn’t move. All she could do was cant her hips, pushing into his hand and mouth while he continued the onslaught.

"Time to come for me, blackbird. I want you to clamp down on my hand and flood it with your juices." Then he pulled her clit between his lips and sucked deeply.

"Marc!" She couldn't help but squeal his name as she crested, spasms of pleasure gripping her entire body as well as her pussy. He held his fingers deep, rubbing against her inner walls in a way that kept the orgasm rolling on and on until she could barely breathe, barely lift her eyelids.

When she did open her eyes, it was to find Marc poised between her legs, coating his cock with her cream.

"Ready?" His voice wasn't entirely steady either. Her stomach clenched at the thought that he was as affected—or even nearly as much—as she.

"Very," she gasped then closed her eyes again as he slid this thick erection into her still-pulsing sheath. "Take me. Please."

"God, you're so tight." He pushed all the way in then held himself still while her walls rippled around him. Finally he began to slowly move, bending down to plant little nibbling kisses on each of her nipples as he did.

She was still so aroused it didn't take much to have her climbing again. Her legs were still held in their splayed position, so she couldn't wrap them around his waist. She couldn't hold him to her, dig her nails into his back. All she could do was lie beneath him while he fucked her slowly and deeply. His iron hardness filled her completely, as if he were the other half of her being.

As his thrusts sharpened and picked up speed, he sucked harder on her already-swollen nipples. She was gasping again, on her way to an even more staggering peak, her passion fueled by his ragged breathing and the sweat that coated both their bodies. Her eyelids fluttered open and she took in the tense cords of his neck, the whiteness of his clamped jaw. She sucked in a breath and shifted her hips, just a little, which brought his cock just a tiny bit deeper.

And then she shattered, wailing out her pleasure in a scream that probably shook the rafters. Marc's own hoarse cry of completion followed immediately, and hot, wet semen filled her core, washing her in his essence.

Long moments later, he kissed her tenderly before removing the ties from her wrists and ankles. "How about a bath?" he asked, chafing her skin, though it didn't hurt a bit.

"Mmm. Sounds good." She let him help her to her feet, ducked into the bathroom for a moment then they padded, naked and unconcerned about it, out to the hot tub on the deck.

"I wish we could just stay here," he said as he cuddled her against him in the warm, bubbling water. They sipped at a white wine he'd poured and looked up at the stars.

"So do I," she said, laying her head on his shoulder. "So do I."

Should she have told him what she'd decided? Probably. While she knew she was far from his first liaison, she didn't think he was completely uninvolved emotionally. Whatever the spark was that had flared between them, it seemed to have acted on him as well as her.

If only she really was the sophisticated woman of the world she'd been pretending to be for the last twenty-four hours. But even though she was part of a race of feminine beings who reveled in unfettered sex, she wasn't like them, never had been. While this time with Marc had been possibly the most wonderful experience of her life, she couldn't travel with him to Quebec as his mistress. That simply wasn't how she wanted to meet the rest of her adopted father's clan. Especially not since her lover was their prince. However tolerant the gargoyles may have become, surely they'd never tolerate their future leader being in a serious relationship with an outsider. No, it was far better to end the relationship here and now, relegating it to a weekend fling. Even if doing so ended up breaking her heart.

## **Chapter Six**

“What do you mean, the crown isn’t there?”

Marc gritted his teeth as he spoke into his cell phone just before noon the following day. He looked across the room to where Aldara was brushing out her wet hair after her shower. She sat on his bed cross-legged in just a pair of boy-short panties and a matching blue cotton bra. The ensemble shouldn’t have been sexy but on her it was downright seductive.

“Somebody trashed her room,” the voice on the other end patiently repeated. Pauline LaRoche was one of the calmest, most unflappable gargoyles Marc had ever met, which was why she made such a good attorney. “Her passport and visa are torn but recoverable, her wallet is empty and there’s no crown anywhere in her luggage. I went through her cabin myself to make sure she hadn’t hidden it somewhere. Nothing.”

“But you’ve gotten her things and you’re flying them up now?”

“I’ll be there in the helicopter about six thirty—just after sunset. Customs is meeting us at the RCMP post, so she can be officially checked into the country. The cruise line is sending her full salary plus a bonus in the hopes that she won’t sue them for her fall. Now we just have to figure out who took the crown—and probably who tossed your friend into the ocean as well.”

“Exactly,” Marc grumbled. “I’m having Beau and my father come here for the meeting as well. Extra security and a second attorney never hurt anything. Whomever has the crown doesn’t know she has amnesia, so Aldara could still be in danger. Thanks, Pauline. See you tonight.”

He flipped his phone shut and turned to Aldara. “We need to figure out who could have known you had the crown.” He quickly relayed his conversation with Pauline, watching while Aldara’s skin grew pale.

She shook her head and bit her lower lip. "It wasn't mentioned in Geraint's will. He gave it to me a few days before he died, complete with papers proving my ownership. The only one I can think of is Yves and he can't have been on the ship. It boarded in daylight."

"But he *could* have hired someone," Marc pointed out. "Or he could have stowed away the night before the ship sailed or any number of things. Do you know how Yves felt about his father's decision to return the crown?"

Her grimace said it all. "He was opposed of course. There was magic in it and Yves was always a power-hungry bastard."

Her shudder roused something deep in Marc's gut. Yves might not have raped her but he'd done *something* to Aldara and Marc was rapidly coming to the conclusion that he was going to have to make sure it never happened again.

"Okay, what I want you to do is write down everything you can think of about the crown, from what Geraint told you about it up to where you packed it in your luggage. I know your memory of the actual trip is still lacking but maybe you'll come up with another fact or two that will help us find it."

"I remember packing," she said. "Geraint was starting to fail and he made me promise I'd leave the day after he was gone, so I was mostly packed before his death—afterward, I only had to add my clothes and other everyday things. I sent my trunks ahead to a friend's in Athens then I stayed with them for a couple of days until the ship was ready to sail, I remember that."

"Do you remember where you packed the crown?"

She started to shake her head again then paused and smiled slowly. "Yes. It's in one of my trunks, hidden inside a secret compartment. It's an old steamer trunk—Geraint used it to smuggle his things out of France during World War II. If we're lucky, your people just didn't find the compartment and the crown is still there."

"Brilliant!" He got out of his chair and crossed to the bed to take her in his arms. "I should have known you'd hidden it well." After kissing her, just because he could, he

pulled himself away and went back to his desk by the window. He immediately called Pauline back and discovered that the trunks, which had been in the ship's cargo hold and not in Aldara's cabin, did indeed look untouched. Sending up a mental sigh of relief, he called Beau and his father. Someone had still broken into her room and he was more convinced than ever that someone had hit her and thrown her overboard. Backup was still a good idea. Besides, someone had to bring the amphibious plane to take him and Aldara back to the compound. It might as well be his dad. Flying was one of Etienne Armel's favorite pastimes.

"We'll be there in about four hours," Beau told him. "Then we can go with you to the mainland at dusk."

"Perfect," Marc replied. "And, Beau? I don't know how I know this but be prepared for trouble, okay?"

"Understood. See you soon."

"They'll be here about four." He hung up and turned back to Aldara, who sat watching him with a strange look on her face. The hairbrush lay idle by her side and her hands were clenched in his lap. "What's wrong, blackbird?"

"Your father will be here soon, right?"

Ah. She was worried about meeting his parents. Marc knew they'd adore her, so he hadn't considered that she must be nervous, especially since she'd never had a lover before. He crossed the room again and sat on the bed beside her. "He's going to love you, *cherie*. I know my parents being our leaders makes them seem a little imposing, but they are good, caring people. My father likes to fly planes and go fly-fishing, though he never catches anything. My mother has a whole room crammed with romance novels we're not supposed to know she reads." He picked up one of her hands and squeezed it in his own.

"I'm sure they're every bit as wonderful as you say they are," she began. "But..." She pulled her hand away from his and stood, beginning to pull on her jeans and a soft lavender sweater.

"But what?" He watched regretfully as she covered herself up.

Finally dressed, she backed up against the dresser and gripped it in her hands as she studied his face. "These last few days have been...indescribable. I can't begin to tell you what it meant to me to have a man like you for my first. But the whole point of moving to North America was for me to make a fresh start. I don't want to start my new life as your mistress, Marc. I don't want that to be my introduction to your people."

"Mistress?" He'd never thought of that word in respect to her. His lover, yes. His girlfriend, maybe. Possibly even more. But mistress? It sounded so seedy, he didn't know whether to be more offended by the word or by the fact that she was rejecting him. His stomach cramped at the thought.

Rejecting him? No fucking way.

"Aldara, you can't really mean that. I find it hard to believe that what happened between us in the last two days was just sex for you. If you'd been the kind of woman who didn't need emotional involvement, you wouldn't have been a virgin when I met you."

"Of course not." Her skin flushed a vivid rosy hue but she kept her shoulders square and stared him down. "But neither of us went into it planning on a long-term relationship. Think about it, Marc. If one of your friends found some stranger washed up on the shore and just two days later brought her home as his fuck-toy, what would your impression be of that woman?"

She had a valid point but she was starting to seriously piss him off. "Stop calling yourself names. We're both adults. We're attracted to each other. Maybe even more." He couldn't believe he'd said that out loud. "And my family and friends aren't stupid. They're going to notice the sexual tension between us, whether we're still involved or not."

"Marc, please..." She lifted one hand in supplication and her clear gray eyes were dark with emotion, glossy with unshed tears. "I've thought about this a lot. And I just can't do it. If you have any respect for me at all you'll agree to put this behind us."



You've asked me to stay in Quebec and I don't know if that's a good idea but I think I might just because it would be really nice to start my new life in a place where I know some other nonhumans. But I can't do it if everyone is laughing at me behind their hands."

"Fine," he sighed. At least she was thinking about staying. He could work with that. Once she got to know his people, she'd get over this crazy idea that there was nothing between them. "I understand the word 'no', and I can respect it. But I'm still sticking to you like glue until we're sure you're not in danger."

She nodded, staring down at the carpet. "Thank you. I don't *think* I'm in any danger but I do feel safer with you watching my back."

Her back, her front—he'd be watching every damn inch of her. But all he did was nod crisply and turn away. "I'm going to take a shower. Pack up your things and then we'll make lunch."

Lunch. Maybe by the time he got clean his stomach would have settled enough for him to eat.

\* \* \* \* \*

Aldara managed to keep from crumbling during lunch. She could have handled it if he'd seemed angry but behind his calm acceptance of her decision, she glimpsed something that looked a whole lot like *hurt*. And hurting him made her feel lower than the tiny sand crabs she'd seen scuttling along the beach last night. After their meal, she methodically helped him clean and close the house up. She appreciated him cutting his holiday short for her sake. Even if she didn't want to go to Quebec as his lover, she'd feel much better knowing *someone*. One thing she was absolutely certain of was that Marc was an honorable man and that he'd do his best to make sure both she and the crown were safe.

"There's our ride." His words broke into the well of bleakness she'd been caught up in as she switched a load of sheets from the washer to the dryer. Sure enough, the

sound of an airplane engine reached her ears just a second later. She forced down the butterflies that seemed to be slam dancing in her stomach and finished the task.

After she started the machine, she straightened and nodded. "Great."

"Aldara—" He paused, shook his head then turned toward the door. "Never mind."

She followed him out as far as the wooden deck that circled the house and watched him as he loped down the hillside toward the dock, which was in a small cove on the ocean side of the island. He wore nothing but a pair of running shorts with a hole cut out for his tail, which bounced behind him along with his wings. Last night after their soak in the hot tub, they'd flown together over that same slope. It had been such a treat to swoop and soar with him. She hadn't since Geraint's cancer had weakened him too much to fly and that had been nearly a year earlier. Even then it hadn't been nearly the sensual experience that flying with Marc had been.

Before he quite reached the dock, the plane had landed in the water and taxied to the dock, which had clearly been built to accommodate it. She'd expected something small, but this was more of a corporate jet, only with pontoons. A door in the side opened and someone tossed Marc a mooring line. Once he guided the plane up to the dock, he tied it off and stepped back so the occupants could debark.

Several tall figures began to emerge from the plane. The first was another gargoyle, carrying a gym bag over his shoulder. He was a pale gray color with long silver-white hair and big batlike wings. Though a little shorter than Marc, he was also somewhat wider in the shoulders—which would have been frightening if he hadn't also worn a big grin and wrapped Marc in a friendly, one-armed hug. Following him came a man who looked human, though he had to be nearly seven feet tall. He had long hair that matched his black motorcycle leathers and mirrored sunglasses.

"What the hell are you doing here?" She heard Marc bellow as he thumped the biker on the shoulder. "Shouldn't you be home with your wife?"

The black-haired man shrugged and said something Aldara couldn't hear then stepped up onto the shore as two more men emerged, closing the plane door behind them. Both were human in appearance but the silver-haired one looked so much like Marc that Aldara was sure he was Lord Etienne while the other man was just—scary.

In his human form, he was as tall as Marc in his gargoyle shape and almost as massively built. Even through his tailored shirt and trousers he radiated pure masculine power. His dark brown hair was cropped short and his face was craggy. He looked up at Aldara and even though she couldn't see his eyes from this distance, she shuddered at the intensity of his regard. Then he too clapped Marc on the shoulder and they all started up the hill.

Marc and the other man in gargoyle form scampered up the hillside while the three in human form followed nearly as swiftly. Aldara stood ramrod stiff beside the steps, waiting. As they approached, the gray gargoyle shouldered Marc aside and bounded up the last few steps to hold out a hand to Aldara. His wide, engaging grin eased some of her fears. At least they weren't *all* aligned against her.

"Hel-ll-lloooo, gorgeous." The gargoyle stopped right in front of her and held out his hands. "I'm Remy Rocher. If any of these other stuffed shirts gives you any trouble, you let me know. I've got enough dirt on all of them to keep them in line."

"Knock it off, Remy," Marc muttered from behind him. "You're married, remember?"

"Never forget it. Very happily too." He winked outrageously at Aldara. "But that doesn't keep me from appreciating a work of art when I see one. Besides, Mari's excited about having another shifter come visit for a while. I'm under direct orders to be nice to Ms. Cromlech." Another wink.

Aldara laughed—she couldn't help it. Under the charming exterior, Remy's eyes glinted with shrewd intelligence. She could see him taking stock of everything and filing it away. He might indeed be a clown but Remy Rocher was nobody's fool. Aside from that, the raw adoration she saw in his granite gray eyes when he mentioned his

wife was more than enough to win Aldara over. This Mari was one very lucky woman indeed. "I'm very pleased to meet you, Mr. Rocher." She accepted his gentle handshake.

"Get out of the way, Remy." The man in the biker garb shouldered the gargoyle aside, pushed his sunglasses up and stuck out a hand. "Damien St. Pierre."

"Good afternoon, *monsieur*." She returned his cautiously friendly smile. Now she remembered Marc telling her about his three friends, the men he'd grown up with who were as close as brothers. Damien, she thought, was the one whose wife had just given birth—which would explain why he was human during daylight hours.

"And this is Beau DuMont," Damien continued. "He's the head of security for our clan—at least for the time being." Beau was the one whose daughter had died, years ago, trying to make her first transformation, after which his wife had committed suicide. He was now newly remarried, she recalled. She'd been glad to hear his tragic story had such a happy ending.

Marc's brow furrowed. "What? Oh, never mind. Can we just all go inside please? And why on earth are all of you here?"

"To keep you out of trouble of course," his father said smoothly, nudging Damien toward the door. He stepped up to Aldara and lifted her hand to his lips in a formal gesture. "*Enchanté, mademoiselle*. I am so pleased to make your acquaintance." Then he offered her his elbow and tipped his head toward the door and his visibly impatient son. "Shall we?"

"Of course." Standing tall—which still left her well below shoulder height on most of these men—she took his arm and let him escort her back into the house.

\* \* \* \* \*

Marc passed out cans of soda and bottles of water as his friends and his father settled onto the great room sofas. Aldara had opted for one of the leather club chairs and sat with her feet curled up in the seat beneath her. The symbolism of her self-imposed isolation wasn't lost on him. He was also unsurprised, though, when his father

took the sofa seat nearest her chair and sat on the very edge. He'd expected Etienne to take the young female under his wings—though Marc's father was one of perhaps twenty percent of gargoyles who didn't actually *have* wings.

"So catch us up on everything," Beau demanded. His own mistrust was obvious, though veiled by his proper manners. "Why do you think there might be trouble?"

Marc sat down across from his father, and replied, "Because whoever tried to steal the crown may well know that once it gets into the hands of the clan, it will be much more thoroughly protected. He didn't find it—we hope—on the ship. So he's got to be looking for it. The only time it will still be vulnerable is between now and when it arrives in the council chamber in Quebec."

"Agreed." Damien nodded. "Up until Erin was born, Katie worked with Lady Helene and Dana to strengthen the protective spells on the compound. Between that and the additional electronic security we've put in place over the last few months, any thief is going to have one hell of a hard time getting in or out."

"Both of their wives are witches," Marc informed Aldara. "Though Beau's wife Dana is also a half dragon."

"And a gargoyle now," Beau corrected. "When other shifters are converted to join the clan, they seem to retain all their original shifting abilities as well, so Dana is both gargoyle *and* half dragon. Katie and Dana are also the holders of two of the regalia artifacts, so they have a vested interest in seeing them protected."

"We've been very fortunate to have such lovely and powerful ladies join us," Etienne added. He turned to Aldara. "And though each of them has chosen to be converted, it made no difference in our willingness to accept them. Marc told us you were reared by a gargoyle, so we're hoping you'll be comfortable in our midst. You're welcome to stay with us for as long as you choose."

Marc had to credit his father—even at a hundred years old, wearing chinos and a golf shirt, the man could still ooze charm and diplomacy. He'd obviously picked up on

the strain between Marc and Aldara and was letting her know that any relationship with his son was beside the point. He only hoped the little harpy got the hint.

"Thank you." She gave his father a warm, genuine smile. "I'd like that, my lord."

"Etienne, please," the older man said. "We only use the title during official sessions. Now why don't you tell us about Geraint Cromlech. His father left the clan long before I joined it, so I don't have any memories of either of them."

Marc listened while she talked for some time about her adoptive father then about Geraint's father Claude. Apparently Claude had been part of the conspiracy to wrest the throne from the then-patriarch, Marc's maternal grandfather. The coup had failed and the conspirators all fled, along with many of their sympathizers. Claude Cromlech had taken the crown, another the cup and yet another the ring, which had been found at a country house in Scotland. The cup had wound up in a shipwreck and spent over a century at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. The belt had been given to a witch for safekeeping, to be returned at the appropriate time. With the retrieval of the crown, the gargoyle regalia would once again be intact and the future of their race secured. Marc only hoped he was up to whatever task was involved in protecting Aldara and securing the crown. His friends had all proven their mettle and done their parts. Marc really didn't want to be the useless, spoiled prince who screwed everything up for their entire population in the last minutes of the game.

"Let's get their luggage loaded onto the plane," Remy said to Damien, breaking into the silence that had descended after Aldara finished speaking. While drinks were passed out, they'd decided to take the plane over to the marina so they could leave directly from the mainland. Damien and Remy would wait with the plane while Beau and Etienne would escort Aldara and Marc to the meeting.

"There isn't much," Aldara said. She pointed to the backpack she'd borrowed from Marc to put her one change of clothing in. It sat next to Marc's single suitcase and his laptop bag. "I'm traveling very light for this part of the trip."

"But before you get all impressed, just remember she mentioned trunks—plural, coming in the chopper," Marc added, unable to resist teasing her.

She wrinkled her nose and grinned. "I was moving, not taking a holiday. There are only three trunks and only the bottom six inches or so of each are filled with books."

Remy groaned. "Not another one. What is it with you women and books?"

"Says the writer," Damien retorted. "Who married a librarian."

Remy threw a cushion at Damien and everyone laughed, even Aldara.

It felt so good to have his friends all around him. He'd been thrilled that Damien and Katie had moved back to the compound to rear their child but now that he was the only one single, he still felt like he had as a teenager—the one who couldn't quite keep up. It was the story of his life. Beau and Damien were both bigger and stronger, both brilliant strategists and geniuses in their chosen fields. Remy was a successful artist and writer. All Marc had ever been best at was numbers and that was nowhere near as sexy—just ask his former fiancée. After a few too many margaritas one night, she'd admitted that she was only marrying him to be the heir's consort—which explained why she was his *ex*-fiancée.

Aldara though—she was different. She'd given him her virginity without even knowing who he was. He'd never met anyone like her and didn't think he ever would again. Part of him wanted to scream and say she *had* to be his. Each of his friends had found their mates along with one of the artifacts. It seemed horribly unfair that he should be denied his. Especially when he'd already gone and fallen in love with her. Somehow he had to win her back.

## Chapter Seven

"All right, Ms. Cromlech. Your papers seem to be in order and your luggage meets all the legal requirements." The customs official handed Aldara back her taped-together passport, which she took and tucked into her equally damaged purse. The vandal had slit the lining but left the leather exterior mostly intact—unlike some of her clothing, which had been shredded. Whoever had ransacked her room had not only been looking for something, he'd been angry when he hadn't found it. "I do have one more question."

"Go ahead." She tilted her head at Mr. Coufax, the middle-aged, sandy-haired man who spoke to her from across a desk borrowed from one of the Mounties.

Marc leaned against the wall and watched from his position beside the door. His father sat in the chair beside Aldara while Beau and Pauline waited out in the lobby. The lieutenant whose office they were using leaned against a file cabinet in one corner, pretending not to watch the proceedings.

"Why did you obtain work visas for both the United States *and* Canada?"

Aldara opened her mouth to answer but Etienne cut her off. "Ms. Cromlech has family in both the States and in Montreal," he told the official. "She's still not sure where she intends to reside. Though she's visiting with us here first and we hope, of course, she'll decide to stay."

"So it was family who delivered her belongings in the private helicopter?" Coufax asked with one raised eyebrow.

"Actually, yes," Etienne said pleasantly. "Ms. LaRoche is a cousin as well as a colleague of mine. I am the senior partner of Stoneman Legal Services while Ms. LaRoche manages the New York offices. Ms. Cromlech's adoptive father was a distant relation. So you see, she has strong ties both here and in the States."



"Makes sense to me." Coufax slapped a couple of stamps on a handful of documents, pushed one set of copies at Marc's father and stuffed the other into his nylon briefcase. "Not a very pleasant way to get here, falling off a boat, but apparently you're a very lucky young lady. You washed up on the very island owned by your relations." He shot Marc a suspicious look.

"Well, I was supposed to meet her in Halifax the next morning," Marc inserted. "As to the other? I'm French, *monsieur*. I believe in miracles. And we're all too glad she survived her ordeal to question the Lord's purpose in saving her." Marc wasn't in the least religious, though he did believe, a little, in fate, but the customs official didn't know that. Marc would use any weapon he could to keep Aldara safely in the midst of his clan.

"Fine." Coufax shook his head as if washing his hands of the whole business then extended a hand to Aldara. "Welcome to Canada, Miss." He stood and shook Etienne's hand as well. "We're all set here. Good night, everyone."

His eyes followed them as they left the tiny office but he didn't make any move to follow them.

"Her trunks are in the SUV," Beau told them as they met him in the lobby. "All cleared. After looking through the books in the first one, they never even checked the ones in the second or third. It's going to be a tight squeeze heading back to the marina." The false compartment was in the bottom of her middle-sized trunk, under a slightly shorter stack of books.

"It's a short trip."

"Easy for you to say. You're driving."

The vehicle was crowded. After they waved Pauline off, Aldara ended up squeezed between Marc and his father in the front seat while Beau squished into the back along with a trunk that took up three quarters of the bench seat. Marc would have laughed but he was too busy enjoying the feel of Aldara's thigh pressed up against his. *Then* he was too busy trying to drive with a raging erection.

They reached the marina and made short work of loading Aldara's luggage onto the plane. The three trunks didn't quite fill the rear cargo area but a fourth would have. Still, it wasn't much for being everything she owned in the world. He knew Cromlech had treated her well while the old gargoyle was alive, but he sure hadn't left her in a great position.

"Would you like to sit up front, my dear?"

To Marc's dismay, Etienne offered Aldara the copilot's seat and she promptly accepted. So Marc was stuck in the passenger area along with his friends, though it was only separated from the pilots' section by a clear dividing wall and a door that was left open. Talk immediately turned to all the wonderful things little Erin St. Pierre had done in the week Marc had been away. At least Remy rolled his eyes behind Damien's back, so Marc didn't feel too bad for being less than enthused about his goddaughter's sleeping habits.

About ten minutes into the flight, the plane hit a small patch of turbulence. Remy had popped in a set of ear buds, Damien and Beau were discussing a new alarm system for some of the buildings at the compound and Marc was staring hopelessly at Aldara's back. Something rattled in the cargo area, so as soon as they leveled out, Marc stood to go see what it was.

There were only two rows of wide, comfortable seats with two on either side of an aisle for a total of eight possible passenger spots, so of course each gargoyle had claimed a pair of seats for his own. Marc was in the front left, directly behind his father, with Remy behind him. "Either of you want something to drink?" he asked his father and Aldara, pausing at the door to the cockpit. The small galley was between the passenger compartment and the rear cargo area, so he'd have to walk through it on his way.

"Water would be nice," Aldara replied with a smile that made Marc's stomach lurch. "*Monsieur?*"

"Etienne," his father admonished then shook his head. "Nothing for me."

"Got it." He made his way back toward the galley, making a drinking motion at Remy, who nodded.

"Cola," he said, his head still moving to the beat of his music. "Thanks."

"Water," Beau called as Marc moved past.

Damien added, "Ginger ale."

"Your stewardess will be back in a moment with the drink cart," Marc called over his shoulder. "Please have your tray tables in the proper position."

He stepped through the galley into the cargo area, shutting the restroom door as he passed where it was tucked just off the galley. Had that been what he'd heard rattling? It was supposed to always be closed during takeoff. There were no lights on in the cargo area, so he blinked, waiting for his vision to adjust.

He heard a soft popping sound and stared at the back corner of the compartment. Was that a man? Then a freight train slammed into his rib cage and he was hurled off his feet. The last sensations he felt before the world turned black were his wings ripping out the back of his shirt and his extremities turning to stone.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Marc hasn't told me much about your home. What's it like?" Aldara asked. Etienne had proven to be surprisingly easy to talk to.

"The compound?" He gave her an understanding smile. "It's really a village based around the idea of a medieval walled city with the chateau in the center and all kinds of homes and businesses around it. For obvious reasons, our clan has purchased a lot of the surrounding land, so while we're only about thirty minutes from Montreal on the highway, it's really very isolated."

"Sounds imposing."

"It can be, at first. When I first saw it, right before my wedding to Marc's mother, I was a little overwhelmed. After a while, though, it just becomes home."

"So you weren't originally a gargoyle?" Aldara had heard Marc's friends mention converting their mates but she didn't understand the process.

"No, I started life as a very normal human being," Etienne told her. "My father was a physician in Quebec City. I met Genevieve at a nightclub in 1928, when I was a student in Montreal. We spent several evenings together before she explained why I could never meet her during daylight. By that time I'd already proposed. When she explained the process, I agreed, though we waited until I'd completed law school."

"Was it worth it? To give up your family and friends? To have to hide all day until after you had children?" Not that it mattered to her, she told herself. Still, the fact that the current matriarch had married outside the clan gave her a little spark of foolish hope.

"Worth every bit of it, my dear. And there was a good bit of time when I couldn't enter a courtroom by day. We spent the first twenty years together before she conceived."

"So Marc has an older sibling?" He hadn't mentioned one but maybe he wasn't the heir – that was even more heartening.

"No. Unfortunately, miscarriages became common after the artifacts were lost. There were two before Marc was born." The older man's voice was filled with regret even though the losses had been more than half a century earlier since Marc was over fifty.

"I'm sorry." The words were inadequate but she didn't know what else to say.

"Don't be. Every life has its trials, dear, and on the whole, mine has been a very good one. And you..."

There was a loud thud from the compartment behind them, she whirled to see a slate-gray, winged gargoyle turn his gun from Beau, who was already down on the floor, to shoot both Damien and Remy in quick succession.

"Marc!" Aldara screamed. Yves' gargoyle shape was big and bulky, with protruding horns emerging from his forehead, long, vicious claws on his massive hands

and black scaly wings. As he picked up a fire ax in his free hand then stepped up the aisle between the fallen gargoyles, she hurriedly slammed the door to the cockpit shut. "Etienne, we're in trouble." She fought down a wave of nausea when she realized Marc hadn't returned from the galley.

"So I gathered," he said calmly, though there was a quaver to his voice. He did something to the controls then turned to her. "There's a pistol in that compartment under your seat."

Yves reached the cockpit door and pressed the intercom button. "Where is the crown, Aldara?"

"Yves, what are you doing?" She scrambled to retrieve the pistol from under her seat.

Before she'd found it, the intercom switched on again. "Either turn it over or these gargoyles die. They're probably not dead yet but I have an axe. Even we don't recover from having our heads severed from our necks."

"She doesn't have it." Lord Etienne pressed the intercom button and spoke calmly. "She shipped it ahead to our compound. It's already there in the safe."

"I don't believe you," Yves replied. "My father would have never trusted the post. He trusted *you*, though, you little whore. Now come out here and get it for me or your friends start to die. And we'll start with the one back in the cargo hold."

If she'd been standing, her knees would have given out at the news that Marc wasn't yet dead. She could see Beau's slumped figure behind her, saw that he'd shifted into his gargoyle form and turned to stone—the way their species healed injuries.

"Or maybe I'll open the hatch and throw them out one by one," Yves continued. "You know if a gargoyle is destroyed in stone shape, they can't come back."

Yes, Geraint had mentioned that. And the ground was a long, long way down.

"Get the gun," Etienne whispered.

"And when he takes me back to the trunks, I can look for a moment to shoot him." She fumbled under the seat, grabbed the gun and stuffed it into her purse.

"Five, four, three..."

"I'm coming," she yelled when Etienne pressed the intercom button. Unclipping her seat belt, she stood and stepped toward the door. She took a deep breath then cracked it open. "I can show you where it is. Don't shoot me."

"Not yet anyway. First I have other plans for that hot little body of yours. Daddy isn't here to protect you now."

"Fine. Just don't shoot." She opened the door wider and stepped out of the cockpit just as a shot whistled past her side.

Aldara screamed and fell to her knees as Etienne slumped in his seat and began turning to stone.

"Sorry, love," Yves said with a wicked smirk. "I didn't say anything about not shooting him. Now get up. You're getting all bloody." He grabbed her arm in a painful grip and hauled her to her feet. At least, she thought, he'd had to set down the axe to do it.

She looked at her legs and realized she'd fallen into a pool of blood next to the jasper boulder that was Beau DuMont. He'd lost so much—would he really be able to recover? From here she could see the lumps of marble and granite that were Remy and Damien as well. Both were petrified but both had also taken devastating wounds. They'd all been hurt because of her and she was very afraid that none of them were going to get out of this alive—especially since now nobody was flying the plane. Clutching her purse tightly to her side, she allowed him to pull her back toward the rear of the plane, praying to every god she'd ever heard of that Marc was still alive and that somehow she'd be able to get them out of this.

"Where's the crown?" Yves asked again as he pushed her ahead of him toward the hold.

She stumbled but righted herself and kept moving, ever mindful of the gun in his hand. "In one of my trunks," she told him. "There's a secret compartment. How did you find me?" In movies, it always helped to keep the villain talking, right?

"All I had to do was hack the cruise line. They turned up the address you were using, along with the delivery instructions for your luggage. Then all I had to do was fly up here last night. The island was easy to hide on and when I saw the plane land, I stowed away in the restroom. Simple as could be." He pushed her through the galley.

"Which trunk?"

"The green one," she answered without thinking then cursed herself. Yves chuckled and nodded toward the cargo compartment.

"Good. Now open it up."

The first thing she saw was a pool of blood on the floor of the hold with Marc's inert stone body lying beside it.

"How did you get on the ship?" She fought back tears as she stepped carefully around Marc's body and knelt beside the trunk, her heart breaking.

"Flew onboard at night. Wasn't difficult. Wish I'd known harpies can't die by drowning."

Aldara slid her hand into her purse.

"What are you doing?" Yves barked, raising his pistol.

"The keys are in my purse," she told him. But her hand closed around the stock of the handgun instead. She didn't even pull it out of her bag, just raised it and pulled the trigger, shooting him right through the damaged leather.

"Bitch!" Hit in the shoulder, Yves squeezed off a shot before he dropped his pistol but it went wild, slamming into a storage bin. "Why the hell didn't you die the first time I killed you?"

"Because I made a promise to your father," she retorted. She darted away from him as he lunged toward her. "One I intend to keep."

"Fine, bitch. Now the gargoyles die." He leapt aside to unlock the cargo hatch. His one arm hung mostly useless but there was still a hell of a lot of power in the other.

"No!" Aldara trained her gun on him for another shot, only to have him swipe out at her with his one good arm and knock the weapon out of her hand. Then he backhanded her into the bulkhead before turning back to wrench open the door.

Her arm felt as if it had been ripped out of its socket and her ears were ringing from the force of her skull connecting to the steel bulkhead wall. But she couldn't stop now, couldn't let Marc's stone form be flung from the plane. She looked around for a weapon then picked up a fire extinguisher and flung it at Yves, throwing him off balance right in front of the open hatchway.

One more thing to throw might push him out, but Yves could fly, so that wouldn't help. He righted himself and advanced on Aldara, his enormous fist drawn back and menace gleaming in his black eyes. The punch might not kill her but she couldn't fly if she was unconscious and the fall just might. She readied herself to duck when she heard a roar then suddenly there was another loud shot. Yves' eyes widened just as a red circle blossomed on his forehead.

"Aldara," she heard Marc gasp. "You...okay?"

Yves crumpled and hardened simultaneously or nearly so. By the time she'd inhaled her next breath, he was a kneeling statue, an expression of outrage frozen on his jet-black stone face, the angry hole still seeping blood from between his eyes. The force of the bullet had thrown him back into the open doorway. As he solidified, he teetered then slowly toppled out the hatch.

"Marc?" Aldara shifted her gaze from the empty doorway to her lover who still lay on the floor, chest heaving. He'd moved, though, and her gun – well, his father's – was clutched in his golden-brown hand. "You're alive?"

"I might not be as big or strong as Beau or Marc but I've always been faster," he joked. His breathing was ragged but as he sat up, she could see the hole in his chest had



already closed, identifiable only by the torn and bloody gap in the shirt around it. "The others?"

"All shot," she said.

"Stone or flesh?" She ran over to help him as he struggled to stand.

"Stone, all of them," she assured him, which didn't mean much, she realized, thinking of Yves. There shouldn't be any way he'd have recovered from a bullet right between the eyes.

"Then there's hope." Marc leaned against the bulkhead, wrapped both arms around Aldara and crushed her to his chest. Burying his face in her hair, he murmured brokenly. "Thank God you're okay."

He tipped up her head and his lips ravaged hers for a kiss that was as possessive as it was brief. His body still trembled and his breathing was still ragged but then so was hers. "Who's flying the plane?"

"Nobody. I think your father put it on autopilot before he was shot."

"Okay. We can check on them and then I can fly this puppy home."

"You know how to fly a plane?" She lifted one hand to wipe her tangled hair out of her face and felt the stickiness of blood where she'd been slammed against the wall.

"My dad gave me lessons."

"What do we do about...?" She pointed to the open hatch.

"He won't have survived the fall, not in his stone shape," Marc said. "And I can't say I give a shit. He tried to kill most of the people I care about in this world. Gargoyle justice tends to be pretty brutal since we can't exactly turn one another over to the human authorities."

"I've got no problem with that at all." She didn't think she'd have ever felt safe again with Yves running around free.

"We'll write up an aviation report saying a hatch malfunctioned and a slate statue fell out of the plane to explain when people find the rubble," he added. "Right now I

want to go check on my father and my friends." He cautiously stepped over and closed the cargo hatch then drew in a deep, ragged breath, took her hand and went back into the passenger part of the plane.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time Marc reached the cockpit, he was almost breathing again. None of the wounds his friends had suffered looked fatal. They were all serious injuries, to be sure, all torso shots, but nothing their gargoyle healing mechanisms shouldn't be able to take care of—though Damien, at least, would probably be stone for a good long while since his injury had likely punctured a lung, based on location. He must have stood when he saw one of the other gargoyles go down. The other good news was that it looked like most of the rounds had gone all the way through, so they wouldn't be healing with a bullet still inside them, like Marc. He'd have to have that taken care of when he got back to Quebec, but having to re-heal after the surgery would be a small price to pay.

Finally, he leaned over the pilot's chair and checked on his father, his stomach a tight leaden knot. Aldara stood next to him, her clothing and hair spattered with blood. At least the knot on her head had already started to heal.

"Looks like maybe a broken collarbone," Marc said as he examined his father's petrified form. His knees nearly gave out on him with relief. "But too high, I think, to have hit anything vital." His parents had been married for over eighty years but were still devoted to each other. He didn't want to imagine how his mother would deal with Etienne's death.

"Thank the gods," Aldara whispered. "I'd have never forgiven myself if any of them had been killed because of me."

"None of this was your fault, sweetheart." He crushed her close, reveling in the fact that they were all alive and that at least for the moment she wasn't fighting off his embrace. He needed to hold her for a moment, needed to feel her, all warm and healthy and next to him. "I'm just glad it's over."

"Me too." She tilted her face up to his and cupped the back of his head with one hand. "I was afraid you were dead, Marc, and part of me wanted to die too, right then and there. I have no idea how you've come to mean so much to me so quickly but you have. When I thought I might never get to kiss you again, to feel your arms around me, I realized I was a fool earlier today. I love you, Marc Armel. I fell in love with you before I knew you were a prince and I was already part of the way there before I even remembered who I was. I hope you can forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive, blackbird." His eyes stung as he looked down into her beloved face. "I love you too."

"I'd be proud for your people to know I'm your...lover," she said.

Marc smiled and used one thumb to wipe a tear off her cheek. "I'd rather introduce you as my fiancée. Think you could live with that instead?"

She tipped her head to the side, studying his face. "You mean...?"

"I mean, will you marry me, Aldara Cromlech? Will you stay with me in Montreal and be my wife, my consort, my best friend for as long as we live?" He couldn't believe he'd proposed standing next to his injured father on a pilotless plane filled with blood and bullet holes. *Way to go, idiot!* How romantic was that?

"I'd love to," she whispered. She went up on her tiptoes and squeezed him tight. "Yes, yes, yes!"

\* \* \* \* \*

It was a long night, and by the time they got back to Marc's townhouse it was nearly dawn. His people had their gold and diamond crown back, his friends were healed and everybody was happy.

"I like your house," she said around a yawn the minute they crossed the threshold. "Where's the bedroom?"

"Upstairs." Marc took her hand, kicked the front door shut behind them and towed her toward the stairway. They'd at least been able to shower and change earlier when

the gargoyle medics had checked over Aldara and dug the bullet out of Marc's side. Thanks to Mari Rocher meeting them at the airstrip with the healing cup, he hadn't had to revert to stone to recover. His father and friends were all fully restored as well, though somewhat chagrined that Marc and Aldara had defeated the bad guy without their help. Without Marc's rapid healing ability—and the fact that he'd pivoted just enough to catch the bullet between two ribs instead of inside his chest cavity, they'd all have been dead. Now that it was all over, Marc was just dog tired.

"I think your mother liked me," she said hopefully as she climbed the stairs beside him. "She's rather imposing at first, but beneath it, she was very kind."

"She adored you," Marc corrected. He led her through the doorway into his large master suite. The sleek modern décor was similar to his home on the island, though a little less stark to blend with the character of the century-old house. "And she was thrilled to know we're getting married. She doesn't wear her emotions very close to the surface, but believe me, she's genuinely happy to have you for a daughter-in-law."

"What kind of gargoyle will I be, I wonder?" she mused. "I hope I still have wings." She peeled off her jacket and tossed it on a chair, making herself right at home. The easy gesture gave Marc a happy little thrill. She *was* home. And for the first time in his life so was he. Home with Aldara.

"You plan to convert?" He'd hoped she would, of course. Though she was already immortal, he knew that his people would be happier in the long run if their leader's consort was one of their own.

Her laugh was soft and tired but sweet. "Of course I do, silly. Your parents would be devastated if we didn't give them grandchildren somewhere down the line."

Yeah, that would be nice too—eventually. Right now he wanted Aldara all to himself. "Both Dana and Mari retained their original shifting abilities as well as becoming gargoyles. I'd think it would be the same for you."

"Good." She paused to watch him take his shirt off. "I talked to Dana DuMont. She said we should do the conversion tonight. Apparently once she lays hands on you with the ring, the conversion is easier but the magic only lasts a few hours."

"Already conspiring with my friends' wives behind my back, huh?" Chuckling at that notion, he tossed his shirt in the general direction of the chair with their jackets. He was delighted to see that she'd hit it off right away with Mari, Katie and Dana as well as with his parents.

"Of course." Her sweater joined the growing heap of clothing and she toed off her shoes then began to shimmy out of her jeans. "The four of you have had decades to bond. We females have a lot of catching up to do."

"You can plot with them all you want, my love." He drank in the sight of her in just a black cotton bra and panties set. Standing beside his bed, nearly naked and inviting, she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. "As long as you're here, in my life and in my bed, you can do anything you damn well please and it won't bother me a bit." He kicked off his sneakers then pushed his jeans down to the floor. Since he hadn't bothered with underwear, his cock sprang free, thick and ready. Obviously it couldn't care less how tired he was. Sometimes it was good to be a guy.

"I'll need to find some kind of career," she warned, though her gaze was riveted on his body as he stepped toward her. She licked her lips and continued. "I don't want to be just a hanger-on."

"Whatever you want," he agreed with a growl. "But can we talk about it tomorrow?"

Her hands reached out and slid across his chest and shoulders to circle his neck as she leaned up into his kiss. "Tomorrow sounds perfect. Maybe even the next day."

"Smart woman," he murmured, swooping down to capture her lips. "Talking can wait. Making love to you can't."

He turned and fell backward onto the bed, drawing her down on top of him without ever letting go of her mouth with his. Reaching behind her back, he unclipped her bra then ran his hands down to slide underneath the stretchy fabric of her panties.

"Mmmmm," she agreed, sitting up astride his stomach to wiggle out of her bra. Then she rose to her knees to tug her panties down before rolling aside to pull them off. "I love you, Marc."

"Love. You. Too." He sat up and rolled her to her back, kissing a line down her spine. After all they'd been through today, his need for her was raw and primitive, and he needed this possession to be just as primal.

It felt like forever since he'd had her, even though it had been less than a day. And this time was different, having admitted that he loved her and knowing she loved him back. He wanted to take it slow, to make this time a memory to last a lifetime, but his body was demanding that he hurry and claim her fully as his own.

"We can do slow later," she urged, as if she were reading his mind. She pulled her knees under her, lifting her ass and wiggling it in invitation. "I need you *now!*"

"Soon, blackbird." He ran his hands down the smooth skin of her back then his tongue. Her rich, feminine scent filled his nostrils and her taste was subtle and sweet—natural rather than overladen with perfumes or lotions. He nipped the crook of her neck lightly, delighting in her soft moan before he moved lower to taste one sweetly curved ass cheek.

"So lovely," he murmured as he traced her crease with the tip of his tongue. His hands came under her to cup and knead her breasts. They were already taut and swollen. "So responsive." He nipped one of her cheeks. "And all *mine.*"

"All yours," she agreed, arching her back to thrust her pussy closer to his mouth. "Don't tease."

Hungry for more, he licked her from asshole to clit, tasting the rich cream of her juices and reveling in her readiness. Her lips were pink and swollen for him, her clit

erect. She was already soaked with desire. He stabbed his tongue into her entrance, teasing the sensitive walls of her channel.

“Now, *agape mou*, please!” My love, she’d called him in Greek. Marc couldn’t resist her plea any more than he could wait himself. If he didn’t fuck her now, he was liable to explode all over her skin instead. And while that was fine for another time, tonight he wanted to be buried deep in that sweet little cunt when he came.

“Now, *cherie*.” He leaned back on his knees just enough to align his cock at her entrance then slowly pushed inside, reveling in the feel of her warm, tight channel tenderly gripping his engorged flesh. When he was fully seated, he settled down over her and bit her neck lightly again, letting her feel all the love and need and passion that filled his soul.

Aldara matched each plunge of his penis with an upward pulse of her hips, ensuring maximum penetration on every stroke. The muscles of her pussy clenched around him, holding him tight even while her generous cream eased his movements. Their tongues dueled in the same syncopated rhythm while her hands fisted in the sheets beside her head.

Finally, her breathing quickened to a series of fractured gasps. He felt the tension in her body as she strained for her peak and he thrust harder, deeper, rotating his hips just a little to add another dimension to his strokes. A low moan began deep in Aldara’s throat, that rose to a crescendo as her whole body tightened then shattered.

The force of her orgasm gripped his cock like a fist, demanding his release. He pounded into her, unable to breathe, unable to think. His balls drew up close and full with the force of his impending release. Just a few more thrusts—one, two... And then he detonated in a powerful wash of sensation that tingled along his skin and caused all his muscles to clench. He held himself deep inside her welcoming flesh, pouring hot streams of cum into her. The orgasm went on and on until he couldn’t see, couldn’t hear, couldn’t speak.

Finally drained, he collapsed onto the bed with barely enough strength left to roll aside. If he fell asleep now and woke after daylight, he didn't want to crush her.

"Thank you," she murmured breathlessly, snuggling her ass into his groin. "But weren't we supposed to exchange blood?"

"*Merde.*" He'd forgotten she wanted to be converted tonight. "Tomorrow?"

"No way." She sat up and leaned down to tap his nose with the tip of one finger. "I don't want to wait another day to be fully yours. What do we need to do?"

"Well, first I have to recover enough to see straight." He wasn't sure that was likely to happen any time soon, but he'd give it a try. Slowly, laboriously, he sat up. "Then we need something sharp and something to tie our hands together."

"Got it. You recover. I'll be right back." She hopped out of bed and ducked into the adjacent bathroom. A few moments later, she returned. "So a knife and some kind of rope." She opened a small cosmetics case and rummaged inside it, coming out with a pair of manicure scissors. "How about these?"

Marc sat up against the headboard, having recovered enough while she was in the bathroom to enjoy the side of her padding through his bedroom, unselfconsciously naked. "There's a pocket knife on that silver tray on the dresser," he told her. "And I think there might be a handkerchief in the top drawer. My mother keeps giving them to me for Christmas, but I never remember to carry them." He idly stroked his cock while he watched her, bringing it back to full arousal. They had to be joined for the conversion process, and just a few minutes ago he'd have thought it was impossible. Watching Aldara's hips sway while she walked, watching her full breasts bounce would make a dead man hard and while Marc was tired, he was far from dead.

"This one okay?" She held up a white cotton hankie with his initials monogrammed in one corner.

"Perfect. Now grab the knife and come back over here, if you're sure you want to do this right now."



She pulled his penknife from the dresser tray and scurried back to the bed. "Yes," she said. "Now."

Marc laughed, thrilled by her eagerness to be his mate. "Easy, sweetheart. First I have to make sure you're wet again." He took the items from her hand and laid them on the bedside table.

"I'm always wet when I'm with you," she admitted huskily.

"Well, that's only fair since you make me hard all the time." He tugged her down onto the bed and rolled her to her back. Then kneeling between her legs, he bent his head to taste her pussy.

The flavor of his semen mingled with the sweetness of her juices was enough to bring his erection back to aching fullness. Her lips were pink and swollen, her clit distended and hard. He toyed with it lightly, just flicking it with the tip of his tongue while he slipped two fingers up inside her snug sheath.

"Enough." She grabbed a hunk of his hair and tugged, just sharply enough to get his attention. "I don't want to forget again."

Marc laughed and crawled up the bed, wiping her juices off his chin with the back of his hand. Then he registered what they were about to do and sobered instantly. "It's not easy from what I've heard. It can be pretty painful, though it shouldn't be dangerous, not for a shifter and not after you've been touched by the ring."

"I know," she assured him. "Mari and Dana were very clear. I'm ready."

"Okay." He propped a pillow against the headboard and sat, leaning back against it. "Come here." He patted his thighs.

"Oooh, I get to be on top," she said, straddling his legs and easing herself down onto his shaft.

"Anytime you want, *mon amour*." He pumped gently a few times, just to enjoy the sensation, then reached for the knife and the handkerchief. "Sorry about this part."

"You know I'll heal, just like you will," she assured him, holding out her left hand. "It's worth a little pain."

He kissed her palm before cutting a small gash in the pad just below her thumb. Then he did the same to his own right hand and pressed the two together, lining up the open wounds. Together they tied their wrists with the cloth and interlaced their fingers.

"I love you," he whispered then slowly started to move inside her.

"Love you back," she said, catching his movements and matching them. Leaning forward, she caught his lips with hers.

Tears stung the back of Aldara's eyelids as she rocked back and forth on Marc's thick erection. She could just about feel the magic coursing through her veins, adapting her body to be a gargoyle. Not a trace of regret or trepidation marred the beauty of this joining. She knew with every fiber of her being that this was the course she was meant to take. As a harpy, she'd always been an outcast. At heart, she'd been a gargoyle since the day Geraint had found her lying broken on his rocky beach. Meeting Marc, loving him, only made her more certain that she'd found her place in the world at last.

This joining was slower and sweeter than the one that had come before. Partially because they'd already sated their frantic need to reassure themselves that they were both still alive and in one piece, partially because they were both tired, and partly just because. Joy shone from Marc's tawny eyes as they gazed into hers, radiated from the touch of his hand on her back and from their linked fingers. Most of all it was there in the magic that flowed between and around them.

Finally, the slow pace of their coupling wasn't enough for either of them. Marc lifted her and rolled them both until he was above her. She wrapped her legs around his waist to take him deeper, urging him on with every twitch of her pelvis. His tongue thrust rhythmically into her mouth. She sucked on it and tightened down her vaginal muscles around his cock.

Marc groaned and pulled his head back from hers. "Little witch," he gasped. He pushed up with the arm not linked with hers and used the additional height to add force to his thrusts, making her squeal with delight. Just a few short, fast strokes of his cock later and Aldara felt her body go taut as her climax approached. She squeezed her eyes shut and arched her back, gasping for a breath.

"Just like that – right there – oh yes, yes, *yes!*"

Marc's hoarse shout of completion echoed her own and a hot wash of semen filled her pulsing core while the fireworks burst behind her eyelids.

Before she'd even caught her breath, the first rays of sunlight filtered through the slats of the blinds and dappled Marc's shoulders. Aldara felt the change begin to tingle along the skin of her back as Marc pulled out and rolled to the side, his own wings erupting from his back. He sat on the edge of the bed then pulled her arms, helping her up into a seated position as well, freeing her wings.

"Mornings are going to be interesting," she joked. Her whole body trembled, but so far, the only change she'd noticed was her own wings emerging.

"So far you look almost the same," Marc told her. "Your wings look normal and there's a line of fluffy white feathers down your back. How do you feel?"

"Okay." It wasn't quite a lie. She was shaky, but it hadn't really hurt, not the way she understood it had for Mari or Katie, who'd been changed before the ring had been recovered. Apparently the magic of the clan's strength talisman really did ease the transformation process. "It seems to be almost done – the tingling has stopped."

"Wow. You're the most beautiful gargoyle I've ever seen." Marc's voice was hushed and awed.

Aldara stood, though on somewhat shaky knees and approached the full-length mirror across the room. Before she'd taken a step, Marc was there beside her, his arm around her waist. The feathered tips of their wings brushed one another in back. She studied the floor, noticing her toes had tiny talons on the tips. Okay. She could live with that. When she reached the mirror, she drew in a deep breath and looked up.

At herself – with a few additional feathers.

The only changes she saw were the talons on her toes and the soft, downy white feathers that covered her shoulders and ran in a line down the center of her back, ending in a tiny tufted tail at the base of her spine. Experimentally, she wiggled her butt, shaking the tail, and giggled.

“Cute.” Marc laughed with her, ruffling the tail feathers. “Wonder what stone you’re going to be. I’m guessing some kind of quartz.”

“The others said I might go into my stone shape right after the transformation, but no one is quite sure—it seems to be different for every shifter.” She was a little nervous of that, but as long as Marc was here to watch over her, she could cope with being totally helpless for a while.

“I think you are.” He looked down at her feet, which Aldara realized had gone numb. “Here, why don’t you sit down?”

Marc carried her over to the chair, shoved their clothes off onto the floor and eased her down into it just before her knees solidified.

“Love you,” he said, kissing her lips. “Try to sleep – you’ll get the hang of it.”

“Love you too,” she murmured. Her fingers and arms were now leaden too. Then moments later even her lips and eyelids were frozen in place.

“You’ll be all right, blackbird.” She could still see and hear, which seemed odd. “At first I thought you were a crystalline quartz but...” He swallowed hard. “It’s so clear, so pure, you just might be diamond.”

Diamond? She tried to shake her head then remembered she couldn’t. Just as that occurred to her, her toes started to tingle. Then sensation flowed back into her body and she blinked. “Wow. That was quick.”

“Apparently you also have my fast-healing ability,” he said, pulling her up off the chair and into his arms. “Welcome to the clan, my love.”

## Epilogue

Aldara stood beside Marc in front of her new in-laws, and the elderly soothsayer Lady Helene—the three gargoyles who made up the Council who ran the clan. She and Marc had returned from their two-week honeymoon at his island retreat, and she was settling in to her new job as a music teacher at the clan's small private school. She'd also made friends with Mari, Katie and Dana, who stood beside her, along with their husbands in the great hall of the matriarch's chateau. There was another woman there, one she'd only met a few times, Lady Helene's apprentice Charlotte Fortis.

"I'm sure you're all wondering why you're here," Lady Genevieve began. The diamonds of the crown she wore twinkled in the light of the chandelier.

Aldara smiled up at Marc's mother, knowing she'd get to the point eventually. The matriarch did love to stand on ceremony.

"You know, love, this might be better handled in the conference room," Lord Etienne interrupted. "Don't you think?"

"Right." Lady Helene nodded to Charlotte. "Come get me out of this chair, please. Let's go talk somewhere comfortable."

"I seem to be overruled." Genevieve Armel rolled her eyes and smiled wryly. "How about we go into one of the sitting rooms instead? Then we can all get comfortable."

The whole group followed as she and Etienne led the way into a formally decorated parlor. They all arranged themselves on the couches and chairs except for Marc and Remy, who stood behind the loveseat Aldara and Mari shared.

"Now. There are some things about our history that not everyone in the clan knows," Genevieve began. "But those of you in this room need to be aware of them."

"Go on, *Maman*." Marc squeezed one of Aldara's shoulders. It was evening, so all of them were in their human forms.

“Damien and Katie, Beau and Dana, Remy and Mari, Marc and Aldara—you have each played a role in the continued survival of our race. Our four newest gargoyle women all bring unique skills and connections to the tribe. The fact that each of you is a gemstone gargoyle is a wonderfully hopeful sign. Lady Helene assures us that adding magical and shapeshifter blood to our gene pool will only make us stronger and that the four of you are just the beginning. Now that the dark days of our people have passed a new era of rebuilding and prosperity will begin. And each of you has a part to play in the days to come.

“You all know the four regalia artifacts as belonging to the matriarch or patriarch of our clan—you’ve all seen the painting of my father with all four. But once upon a time, they were each held separately, and the Council believes this is the way it should be again. Dana already wears the ring and Katie the belt. I also believe the cup is meant to be in the hands of Remy and Mari, leaving only the crown to the current ruler.” She gestured up at the crown she now wore on official occasions.

“Additionally, in times past, the council was much larger than it is now. It consisted of the holders of each artifact, plus the clan’s seer and their spouses, for a total of ten members in addition to the ruler.” The numbers didn’t quite add up and Aldara quirked her gaze up to meet Marc’s, who shrugged.

“Finally, I wanted each of you in this room to know that Etienne and I have decided to retire. This is another tradition from before when it was normal for us to live for several centuries. It kept our leaders from being assassinated by their offspring in bad times and made for a more dynamic culture in good. My son Marc is more than ready to be in charge and his wife Aldara is perfectly suited to stand by his side as his primary advisor.”

Hushed silence greeted this pronouncement. Marc’s fingers tightened almost painfully on Aldara’s shoulders, but she just reached up and covered his hands with hers. He would make a wonderful patriarch, and she’d do everything she could to help and support him.

Slowly a sound filled the room as Beau then Remy then Damien began to applaud, quickly joined by their wives and the two seers. Aldara felt tears stinging her eyes at the unconditional support she saw Marc's friends showing him.

"Don't applaud yet," Lord Etienne warned, beaming proudly at his son. "That means more work for all of you. You'll be the Council—every one of you, including Charlotte since Lady Genevieve says she's retiring as well."

"I've been doing this job for far too long," the elderly gargoyle agreed with an exaggerated wink. She was dressed as a goth princess tonight in black and pink and sparkles with thick black eyeliner. Aldara had already grown fond of the quirky old lady. "It's Charlotte's turn."

"But that still makes only eight on the council, in addition to myself," Marc pointed out. "Who do you recommend for the other two? Yourselves?"

"No, son, though of course you can come to us whenever you need to, and the transition won't be overnight." Genevieve smiled and arched an eyebrow at Helene.

"You'll know when the time is right, children," the seer agreed. "Now somebody said something about there being ice cream down in the kitchen. I think we're done here." With a quick flurry of her layered black and pink skirts, she got up and scurried to the door.

She turned to Marc and Aldara on her way out and winked. "You'll be fine. Don't sweat the small stuff." Then she pulled a pendant off her neck, a beautiful clear crystal orb held in a silver dragon's claw mounting. Almost carelessly, she tossed it to Charlotte. "There are actually five artifacts, but we don't advertise this one. It's yours now. Have fun, kiddo." Then she ran out of the room with all the energy of a five-year-old, leaving the others shaking their heads in her wake.

A little later, Marc and Aldara walked home through the crisp, cool November night. "You realize, my little diamond harpy, that this means we'll have to move into the chateau." Marc squeezed her closer to his side. "I hope you can stand French provincial furniture."

"It doesn't matter to me. I can live anywhere as long as I'm with you. I think after all these years, your parents have earned some time to play, don't you?"

"Yeah." He was silent for a moment then shook his head. "I'm just not sure I'm ready to be anybody's leader."

Aldara laughed. "You're kidding me? You've got more brains, guts and compassion than anyone I've ever met. You're going to be fine."

"As long as I have you, I guess I can handle anything."

He paused beneath a streetlamp and turned her in his arms. Even through their clothes and coats, she swore she could feel the warmth of his hands on her shoulders.

"I love you. Thank you for washing up on just the right beach at just the right time."

"Smartest thing I ever did, even if I was unconscious at the time." She leaned up into his kiss, knowing that wherever he was, she was home for good.



## About the Author

Cindy Spencer Pape has been, among other things, a banker, a teacher and an elected politician, though she swears she got better. Her degrees are in zoology and she currently works in environmental education, when she can fit it in around writing. She lives in southern Michigan with her husband, two teenage sons, a dog, a lizard and various other small creatures, all of which are easier to clean up after than the three male humans.

Cindy welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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