

TABITHA SHAY

A Winslow Witch's of Salem novel ~ Book 5

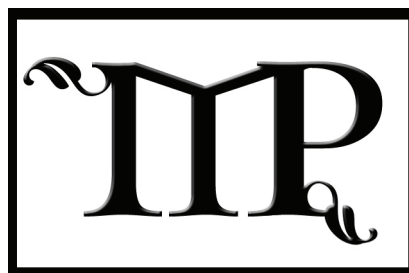
WITCH'S FIRE

*In a world where magic is dying,
two strangers collide....*

Witch's Fire

*Book Five of the Winslow
Witches of Salem Series*

Tabitha Shay



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Dedication

To the ladies at Western Shamrock and Covington Credit, you know who you are...for always taking time away from your busy days and inquiring about my books.

Acknowledgements

A special thank you to Symbra Toney for “allowing” me to borrow her beautiful name for one of my characters in this book. Thanks for being a great fan, a new friend and for telling everyone you know about my books. This one’s for you!

A Note from the Author:

Dear Reader,

I'd like to take a moment to explain a bit about Kirrah's story. While all the other events were taking place around her from the previous books, she was deeply emerged in her own problems, blissfully unaware of the tragedies taking place around her. She's catching up in this story so the first five books can hit the highest point at the same level of time for the story unfolding in book six. Although Hannah Miller's story has already been told in Witch's Heart, it was necessary to bring her back in the opening pages of this book before her tale was told.

The first few pages will take you back in time, to the early days of Kirrah and Hannah's friendship and the bond that forged between them, a time when neither girl realized how important a role magic one day would play in their lives. Witch's Fire will also take you to the time to just before Hannah met Sage and the events that led up to the night to place her in the bakery to meet her destiny.

I hope you enjoy the wild crazy ride that leads Kirrah down the path to her Winslow heritage, her love of life, her magic, but most importantly—to her hero. As always, I strive to give you, my readers, a few laughs, the occasional tear, and a great romance that makes you sigh and leaves you anxious for the next book. I hope I've made the grade.

Happy reading,

~Tabitha Shay

Kitty's Broom

*When Kitty glides into the room—there I contrive to stay,
And watch her while she, with her broom, sweeps all the dust away.
For bright-faced slender Kitty's such a comely sight to see,
She grasps that broom with magic touch and waves it witchingly.
And with her white and shapely arms, where dimples love to play,
She wields that magic wand and charms dull care-and dust-away.
All life's care and sad concerns no longer darkly loom,
All shadow into sunlight turns—when Kitty 'does' the room.
Along life's thorny path of gloom I'd wend a cheerful way—
Did heaven send Kitty, with her broom, to brush the briars away!*

~Harry Breaker Moran

Part One

The Beginning

The devil is a cross between a really good used-car salesman and a game-show host, but with a lot more style and charm. There's a little Cary Grant thrown in there too.

~Ray Wise

(American Way Magazine)

Chapter One

And ye harm none, do what ye will.

~Dorene Valentene

*Near The Mojave Desert
Halloween
Mortal Realm*

It was the time of year when all the beasties crawled from under knobby hills, hidden deeply in the shadows and pushed their way from the dark world into the realm of mortals. When trolls and goblins climbed on top of the broken down bridges they slept under and walked among mankind.

After what just happened, and pitiful though it was, Kirrah Walker knew she had to face some glaring facts about herself. Unfortunately, the plain God-awful truth as her best friend Hannah Miller pinky-swore to, she simply wasn't like other little girls.

"It isn't your fault, Kirrah," Hannah stated matter-of-factly. "You didn't know you could do weird things like that."

Of course Hannah supported her in this hour of tragedy. Kirrah expected no less from her dear, sweet best friend. It didn't change the fact that Kirrah's entire life had just shifted around her in a whirling, twirling, crazy, out-of-control spin that left her feeling a bit light-headed and off-center.

Dramatically, she laid the back of her hand across her forehead and declared, "I'll never live this down, Han. I'll be an outcast at school."

"You're already an outcast."

She ignored Hannah's blunt statement. Another ugly truth she could hardly deny, so why bother? "Did you see her face, Han? I think I killed her."

Hannah snorted. "You didn't kill her. Clarice took off like a ghost was hot on her fat ass."

Kirrah sniffed. The second truth stared her in the face: Hannah was right—*she* never knew she could do such odious things, but there it was, glaringly obvious—*she was different*.

With hands shaking, Kirrah prowled through their Halloween booty, tore the wrapper off a piece of gum and popped it in her mouth. She needed sugar. Fast. Or she was going to have a meltdown. "I'm different, Han. How different?"

Hannah looked at her, puzzled. "Haven't I just been telling you, Kirrah? Snap out of it! You're a witch. A magical, spell-casting witch and you just scared the shit outta those three."

A horrible thought jetted its way into her sluggish brain. "Oh, my God, Han," she cried. "What if I'm allergic to water? What if Clarice tosses a bucket of water on me at school Monday and I melt?" She narrowed her eyes. "It would be just like her to do something awful like that."

Hannah giggled. "Good grief, Kirrah, you aren't the Wicked Witch of the East...or—or—is it West?"

"West," Kirrah snapped. "Stop laughing. I'm serious. I might melt. You don't know I won't."

"Yes, I do. You take showers all the time. Long ones."

Kirrah gasped as her wad of Bubblicious jammed the back of her throat. She coughed, gagged and finally managed to dislodge the sticky goo. Kirrah spit it out, her eyes watering. "Oh, shit! Now that I'm a witch, I'll have to stop taking showers. I can't risk the meltdown." Her face crumpled. "Oooh, I love taking long showers."

"You don't have to stop taking them, Kirrah. You're hysterical. You're not thinking right."

"I dare not take another shower."

"You dare not *not* take one."

"You want me to melt?" Kirrah busied herself prowling through the pumpkin Hannah held out to her. "The other kids knew, Hannah. They've always called me names—weirdo, fruit-loop and spastic, just to name a few—but I've never been called a witch...until tonight."

Hannah slowed her pace, grabbed the miniature Snickers Kirrah had managed to fish out of their plastic pumpkin and ripped apart the wrapper. She shoved the candy bar in her mouth and chewed. "Crap, this doesn't have a number either," she said past a hunk of nutty chocolate. Hannah eyed the wrapper as if she thought she could make the number appear from the sheer force of her glare. "I think those candy companies just say there's a winning number. Have you ever known anyone who actually won?"

"I don't know, Han," Kirrah said curtly. "The Snickers contest isn't important. I have a serious problem here. I'm a witch!" Halting to catch her breath, Kirrah swiped away the tears streaming down her face and mulled the tragic truth over in her mind. She kicked a small pebble across the street. "Poop!"

Hannah froze beside her, doubled over and braced her hands on her knees. "I don't think they're chasing us anymore. Is that a new word for dunghill?"

Kirrah nodded and sniffed. "Yes. I prefer poop over dunghill." Although she knew she shouldn't have said *any* bad words, they sometimes slipped out of her mouth at moments of panic.

Hannah wrinkled her nose. "I don't like either word or the big nasty word. But I tell ya, Kirrah, tonight, we've said the nasty one a couple of times. We're going to be in so much trouble if your Aunt Penell ever finds out."

"She won't."

"Come on, Kirrah, stop crying. It was funny."

"No, it wasn't," Kirrah said.

"Would I lie to you?"

"No, but I didn't mean to do it. It was an accident." Kirrah swiped the tears from her face with the back of her hand.

Hannah giggled. "You left a smear of chocolate on one cheek." She wiped the smudge off Kirrah's face, snickering. "It was still funny. Give me another Snickers bar."

Kirrah fished out two Snickers. She passed one to Hannah and held the other to her scrawny girlish chest. Kirrah looked down at her flat chest and felt her tears returning. It wasn't fair. Some of the other girls in her class were already growing boobs, but not her. Not only was she a witch, but she was a witch without boobs. Heck, even Hannah wore a training bra.

Kirrah sighed. She wasn't wearing a training bra 'cause she had nothing to train. Dang it! Her life was just miserable and tonight topped the top of her wretchedness. It was like having a double dip sundae without any of the goodies on top and double scoops of vanilla. She felt cheated. Life was so unjust. Kirrah turned her gaze to the stars dotting the sky. "I wish I had nice boobs, just the right size to—to please...me. I wish for the lucky number to be on my Snickers and if it can't be on one of mine, please let it be on one of

Hannah's."

Hannah's brows furrowed. "Who are you talking to?"

"No one."

"Yes, you were. You were talking to a goddess. Weren't you?"

Kirrah adamantly shook her head, her eyes bugging out. "I don't know any goddesses, Han, honestly. I was thinking out loud."

"Oh. Well how big do your boobs have to be to please you?"

"Bigger than yours." Kirrah giggled and tore the wrapper off her candy bar. "Poop! I must not be a witch after all or I would have the winning number."

"You're a witch." Hannah patted her on the shoulder. "You just didn't cast the right spell. You should say something like, '*Eye of newt and lizard's tongues. Look out bitches, here we come.*'"

Kirrah gasped, then giggled. "Oh, Han, you better start watching what you're saying or we're going to be in so much trouble with your parents and my aunt."

"I'll be careful, but you have to admit, it's a great jingle."

She shrugged half-heartedly. "I don't wanna be a witch. I wanna be normal, like you."

Hannah Miller was her best friend since kindergarten. At the senior age of ten and in fourth grade, their friendship was sealed, especially after tonight. Nothing could destroy the sisterly bond between them—not even the probability that Kirrah was, indeed, a hex of a witch.

Trick-or-treating together was something they'd done since kindergarten too, and was just one thing they'd spit in the palm of their hands and shook on to do together, forever, even when they were old grown-ups, like Hannah's mom and dad and Kirrah's aunt.

Kirrah sighed and eyed her friend. They were complete opposites in coloring and personality. Hannah's hair fell in a tangled mass of gypsy-black curls that bounced to her hips like coiled springs. Her eyes, surrounded by thick dark lashes, were the color of rain-washed violets in spring. She always looked fresh-scrubbed, her clothes neat and clean, the perfect little lady.

She, on the other hand, was a petite daredevil—"completely hoydenish" as her aunt was fond of saying. Kirrah's jeans always sported a rip. Her red tennis shoes bore ancient scuffmarks. The frayed laces never stayed tied and inevitably ended up in knots it took her hours to untangle.

Her wealth of long straight honey-gold hair refused to stay in place.

Right now, however, none of this mattered. They were off again, racing for Kirrah's home as fast as their skinny legs would carry them. Or they had been, until they paused to catch their breaths and mull over what had happened earlier. Huffing and puffing, Kirrah looked around to see if the girls were giving chase.

"I told you, they aren't chasing us, Kirrah. They're too cowardly to tangle with your magic again."

"I don't have any magic."

"Oh yes, you do. You can bury your head in the sand and deny all you want, but I know what I saw and you performed magic. It was freakin' unholy!"

"Don't say that," Kirrah cried. "I didn't mean to be unholy."

Only moments ago, Kirrah and Hannah had been having fun. Tonight was the night. Halloween! The odds of finding the right Snickers rose sharply. They'd collected tons of candy. Lots and lots of sweet, sugary, melt-in-your-mouth treats—but the winning Snickers was their main objective.

And ghosts.

Ghosts were a must on Halloween—at least that's what her Aunt Penell told her. Goblins and ghosties, trolls and gnomes, witches and warlocks, werewolves and vampires—an absolute must.

And demons.

Her aunt had looked at her strangely when she uttered that word to Kirrah. "Oh dear, it looks as if there's a handsome demon in your future, child. Most unexpected."

Kirrah had no idea what her aunt meant. Demon in her future? Not likely.

But when she'd shared this information with Hannah, they decided to keep their eyes peeled for

the things that went bump in the night, but all they'd seen were several little green goblins race past them shouting and wailing as they tried to out-scare each other.

Kirrah and Hannah weaved in and out of the older kids who tended to group together and pick on the smaller ones. She and Hannah walked up and down the sidewalks of their small town that bordered the Mojave Desert. Once their pumpkins were brimming, they glanced at one another, laughed, and took off in a dead run for Kirrah's house. They wanted to escape the crowd, get home, dump the candy on Kirrah's bedroom floor, and pick out the best pieces. They planned to rip the wrappers off every Snickers bar they had and find the winning number.

Then they were going to watch the scariest movie they could find and gorge on the rich bounty that filled their glow-in-the-dark orange plastic pumpkins.

Kirrah couldn't wait to sink her teeth into one of the chewy caramel-covered apples her aunt had made that morning.

The night should have been perfect. It *had* been perfect, until they'd rounded the dark corner and run smack into Clarice Yates and her two friends—Linda Sue and Carmen Louise Butler—all three unholy terrors of the fourth grade class.

It was the end of their fun for the night and the beginning of Kirrah's doomed life.

Clarice was huge. She'd started growing in kindergarten, but her rise in monumental girth hadn't been upward. Instead, she was as rotund as the Pillsbury Doughboy, with spirals of vivid orange curls sticking up all over her head. Pale blue eyes bugged out from behind round wire-frame glasses that constantly slid down her sweaty nose. Her chipmunk cheeks grew rounder with each passing year. Tons of super-sized freckles dotted her chubby face.

What Clarice did best was bully. She wanted Hannah and Kirrah's candy, especially the Snickers. They weren't inclined to hand anything over to her yet another year.

"Give it to me," Clarice demanded, holding out her pudgy paws for the treasures they'd worked so hard to collect.

Clarice, dressed in pale pink tights and a hot pink angel costume, grinned evilly, flashing her new silver braces and the overbite that would never correct itself even with the mass of metal.

Kirrah sucked in a sharp breath and stared at Clarice, pretending to give her the 'Evil Eye.' She fully believed one day Clarice would be possessed by the demon from *The Exorcist*, and Clarice's head would spin around like a top out of control, all the while she'd yell in a deep ghoulish voice, '*Candy! I want more candy!*'

In her opinion, it would be much more fitting if Clarice wore a devil costume and carried a pitchfork.

Kirrah scrunched her nose. Enough was enough! She was fed up with Clarice's bullying tactics. "If you keep stealing everyone's candy, Clarice, one of these days you're going to be so huge, your freckles will stretch from side to side and become one big brown blob. Your face is liable to explode like a punctured balloon."

Always protective of her friend, Kirrah pulled Hannah behind her because she knew Hannah was a little afraid of Clarice. She stepped forward, because *she* wasn't—not that much anyway. "Go away, Clarice. You're not taking our candy this year."

"Yes, I am." Clarice sneered, adjusted the pink feathery wings on her back and stuck out her tongue. "I take your candy every year. It's tradition. Now, give it to me."

The Butler sisters stood beside Clarice chanting like cheerleaders, "Give it to her, Kirrah. Give it to her, Kirrah."

That's the exact moment when all Kirrah's troubles rained down like fire and brimstone.

Why was she determined to keep her candy? She should have simply handed it over like she did every year, but no—she'd wiggled her fingers at Clarice and shouted, "Clarice Yates, you're nothing but a tyrant. I wish a bunch of—of spiders and snakes would cover your head."

Blue sparks flew from her fingertips and danced around Clarice's head. Kirrah gasped, jumping back as little bitty crawly snakes wiggled all over Clarice's thick red curls, some dropping onto the sidewalk and

slithering away into the dead grass.

And spiders, hundreds of teeny-tiny, black furry spiders with glowing red eyes crept in and out of her tight ringlets.

Clarice opened her mouth and a mind-numbing screech split the air. She dropped her plastic pumpkin stuffed to overflowing with Snickers and wet her tights.

For a moment, Clarice's friends stood there wide-eyed, then they belched out matching shrieks that vibrated with Clarice's. In their scramble to escape, the sisters stumbled over each other before digging their feet into the sidewalk and hauling butt.

Hannah bent over holding her belly. She laughed so hard, Kirrah thought she just might wet her pants, too. "Hey, Clarice, Kirrah really gave it to you," Hannah quipped, giggling.

"Stop it, Hannah," Kirrah cried. "It's not funny!"

Laughing hysterically, Hannah slapped her leg, paused long enough to point at Clarice's wet pink tights, then doubled over, laughing some more. "It is so. It's a hoot! She—she—peed her pants." Hannah snorted. "Look at her face."

Kirrah stared at her fingers instead. "I barely wiggled them. Did you see the sparks fly from my fingertips? I didn't mean to do it." She knew she sounded pitiful. If she didn't stop making such a fuss, Hannah would nail her for sounding like a weenie.

Clarice screeched louder and backed away. "Stay away from me, Kirrah Walker. You're a witch! Just like that crazy old aunt of yours. A witch! Witch—witch—witch!" She whipped around and tore off down the street after her friends. Her angel wings flapped wildly behind her.

Kirrah grabbed Hannah by the hand and whirled in the opposite direction from Clarice. "Stop laughing, Hannah. As soon as Clarice catches up with her buds, she'll bully them into giving chase. They'll come after us. We gotta run. Now!"

But Hannah kept right on snorting and hooting with laughter. "She's not coming after us. You scared the bejesus outta her." Hannah jerked free long enough to run back and grab Clarice's bulging pumpkin, then the two of them took off, running as fast as they could, until they paused to rest.

"Come on," Kirrah said. "Let's go. I want to tell my aunt what happened."

They hurried the rest of the way to her house.

She spotted her Aunt Penell waiting for them on the front porch. Kirrah raced around the three bales of hay, the pots of yellow and bronze-colored chrysanthemums, and dodged the dozen or so plastic ghosts hanging from the big tree in the front yard. Reaching her aunt, she skidded to a stop, breathless. Sweat dampened her face. Her heart raced so hard, it felt like it was going to explode right out of her chest. Kirrah's mouth worked, but she couldn't get the words out as she stared at her aunt with wide eyes.

Her aunt stood there beneath the porch light, decked out in a long flowing black gown. A tall pointy hat stood on top of the red-gold hair that flowed across her narrow shoulders and down the middle of her back. She held a broom in her hands and glory be! A black cat sat on its haunches right beside her, licking its paws.

Her aunt *was* a witch!

Kirrah sucked in a deep breath and slowly released it. If her aunt was a witch, then it had to mean it was okay if she was a witch, too.

Didn't it?

Feeling suddenly lighthearted, Kirrah raced up the three steps and threw her arms around her aunt's skinny waist.

Slender arms closed around her, holding her close. "And what's this, child? What have you been up to on this All Hallows' Eve?"

Kirrah grinned, sucking air between the gaps where she'd recently lost two top teeth. "I just used magic, Aunt Penell. I covered Clarice Yates' hair with snakes. I pointed my fingers at her and little blue spar-

kles flew out and snakes jumped all over her. Spiders, too. I especially wished for the big red eyeballs on the tips of my fingers, but I didn't know they'd look so scary, so I wished them away." She paused to catch her breath, then continued. "Clarice screamed and wet her pants! I—I think she broke one of her wings."

Kirrah expected her aunt to smile and be pleased since—well—since her aunt was so obviously a witch.

But Aunt Penell didn't smile. Her russet brows drew together in a deep frown and her icy blue eyes glittered with anger—or were they filled with fear?

"We shall discuss this tomorrow, Kirrah. Come along, girls. I do believe you have a movie to watch and candy to eat until you're sick." She held the door open for them and shooed them inside.

They stepped inside the house ahead of her aunt. Kirrah looked over her shoulder in time to see her aunt draw several glittering green symbols in the air, then Kirrah and Hannah sighed and toppled onto the floor.

Kirrah blinked, fighting the black vortex dragging her deeper and deeper. She couldn't see, not through the inky darkness sucking away her will, but she heard Aunt Penell chanting softly over them. She heard her low whispers and incredibly, saw the green symbols dancing around their heads in brilliant circles.

"You will not remember your use of magic, Kirrah, nor will you recall it for many years, not until the time is right."

Kirrah sighed and repeated the words. "I won't remember my use of magic."

And she didn't—however, she wondered for years where the extra pumpkin filled to overflowing with candy came from, the one with the winning Snickers bar worth several million dollars.

Later, she recalled Aunt Penell settling them in their beds for the night. She thought she remembered her aunt summoning a broom and taking off into the sky from the bedroom window.

"Now to make certain those three little bullies learn to play nice and never recall Kirrah's use of magic as well."

Those words her aunt muttered floated around inside Kirrah's head while she slept, but of course...it was all a dream, one she wouldn't recall for years to come.

Chapter Two

Beltaine, Beltane, Beltanee: Also known as May Day.

*Ru-Noc
Magical Forest
Near Sanctuary
Immortal Realm
Beltane*

Kirrah Walker soared high in the sky.

Literally.

On a plain, ordinary, everyday, purchased-at-the-Dollar-Store-broom. A simple item made of straw, wood and a bit of wire.

Nothing magical about it.

Right?

Kirrah moaned. "Right, except for the rider."

However, her lack of control of the magic at her fingertips was pretty ugly. The broom might not have started out charmed, but it was now. So charmed, its entire features had morphed.

The straw was now switches. The handle was broader, longer and darker, and polished to a shine so rich she could see her reflection in it.

Or she could if it was daylight.

No wire to hold the switches in place. So how did they remain? She had no clue. They were attached to the broom and it was all that mattered.

This broom definitely was not from the Dollar Store.

What happened to the one she'd purchased months ago?

Did it still exist on some other plane?

Not only was this new broom bursting with energy and magic, it had turned into a speed demon from hell. It went from zero to eighty in one point two seconds, a flash across the night sky easily mistaken for a shooting star.

The problem was she didn't know what she'd done, what she'd said, to hex it.

Kirrah sighed once again. Well, those weren't the *only* problems. They were simply part of the big picture of her clumsy use of magic.

It was all the broom's fault!

She hadn't done a single thing to encourage its crazy antics. For heaven's sake, she knew very well there hadn't been one thing special about the broom when she purchased it.

Hah! Try telling it to the ferocious beast racing through the night sky like an over-fueled jet with a pilot hell bent to reach his destination.

For a moment, she and the broom hovered above a tree top. Kirrah puffed a tangled curl that drooped over her left eye, out of her field of vision.

"I feel the need for speed. Woo hoo!"

Kirrah widened her eyes. "Oh, my goodness, you didn't just steal that line? You did not just speak."

"Did too."

"No, you didn't."

"Did."

"Didn't."

"Okay. Have it your way, witch, but you better hang on to your ass, it's the only warning you get from speed junky broom."

"Ohh! Oh, holy crap, broom! Slow down!"

"Can't. Got a itch for speed."

Oh! Oh! This wasn't possible. A talking broom? A *flying* broom hooked on speed? She'd lost her ever-loving-mind. Kirrah breathed deeply. She panted. She chanted, though God only knew if what she chanted simply encouraged the broom to show off. "I don't believe in witches. I don't believe in witches."

"How you not believe in witches when you are one? When you fly on back of broom?"

"It's a dream. It's all a bad dream."

"Real dream. *Good* dream."

"Shut-up!"

"Humph."

Kirrah decided it wasn't so much the flying that created problems, although that too had its moments. The problem was landing. Now that she was higher than a kite on the Fourth of July, she hadn't a clue how to get herself and the maniac broom back on the ground.

So here she was, racing among the clouds, looking down on rooftops, treetops, feeling dizzy—with no earthly idea how she got here.

Apparently her plain, ordinary, run-of-the-mill broom was in no hurry to cooperate with a landing. Even if she knew the right words to bring it down, it had stopped listening to her commands the minute it soared away with her.

Zoom!

"Ahhhhhhh," Kirrah screeched as the broom revved up its speed another notch. She hadn't known the broom had warp speed. "Ohh! Oh, damn, broom. Slow down! I'm getting dizzy."

"Told you to hang on."

"Stop speeding."

It totally ignored her.

Oh, dear. She heard its evil cackle. The darn broom was up to more tricks. It streaked across the sky faster than a speeding comet. Sure, it was frightening. Okay, a lot frightening, a little on the chilly side, and every now and then she had to spit out some kind of attack bug, but it was fun, energizing, exhilarating—even if it was scary.

She wasn't used to flying. Hah! That was saying a lot. It was even scarier when the broom rocked unsteadily, like now, and kicked in passing gear. Kirrah choked her fingers around the scrawny handle, which only seemed to make the broom even more unsteady.

Amazed, she stared at the broom. Was it gagging?

"Release me." Cough. Splutter. Cough. Cough.

Kirrah thought her eyes might bulge right out of their sockets. "You really do talk? It wasn't my imagination?" She stared at the handle. No mouth. "Nah, you can't talk."

"Can—too. You're—choking—me—you—dumb—shit."

"Oh, oh, poop—poop—poop! You can talk."

"Told—you. Re—lease—me," the broom said in a strained voice.

Kirrah eased the choke-hold she had on the handle.

"Weeee," the broom chortled. It whirled and spun as if it'd been given a new lease on life and climbed even higher.

Kirrah controlled the urge to tighten her fingers around it again. What if she killed it in mid-flight? They'd crash.

What was she thinking?

It wasn't like the broom was actually alive. Was it?

What a miserable night this had turned out to be. One minute she'd been standing in her kitchen doorway gazing at the dark sky, intoxicated by the frigid night air and admiring the tiny sliver of moon playing peek-a-boo with the clouds.

She'd been talking to herself—a terrible flaw she'd recently developed—and wishing aloud for a closer view of the moon. The next moment—the mundane little broom propped in a corner transformed and *swooshed* beneath her butt. It took off into the night with her perched precariously on top of the handle.

"Good heavens," she'd shrieked, so startled, she barely had time to grip the broom before it soared off into the dark and *zoomed* over the treetops with her held captive. That was when she realized—she was a for-sure-and-certain witch. It was one of those *ah-ha* moments she sometimes had.

Oh, yeah, she'd suspected for a month or so she might be a witch. *Might* be. Maybe. No proof, though, other than hearing a man's deep accented voice summoning her for the past week.

Yeah, that had raised her suspicions. But hell, she'd read every single one of those Christine Feehan vampire romances. She thought a fanged creature was using a mental link to summon her. She wasn't about to acknowledge a real live breathing vampire. She frowned. Or a real dead *non-breathing* one, either. *Eewww*.

Kirrah tried hard to convince herself the fireplace didn't roar to life, that flames didn't shoot up the chimney like happy fireflies every time she walked past it. Candles didn't light up for no apparent reason and the burners on the stove didn't flare to life.

What was it with fire—and her? It was like she had some kind of mysterious power over it or maybe over the objects that burned. She didn't know.

But it wasn't just fire. Light switches flipped off or on. Inanimate objects floated through the air simply because she wished for them. Now that had spooked the poop outta her the first time it happened. But she'd convinced herself things were merely short-circuiting around her.

But *here* was proof. Genuine proof. Oh, yes. It was a red-letter day—er, night. Yes, siree. She was a fricking-screaching-cackling-full-fledged-certified-broom-riding-witch!

Should she wear black?

Wear a pointy hat?

Blacken her teeth?

Search for ruby slippers?

Kirrah shivered as the cold night air *whizzed* through her tangled mop of hair. Nervously, she gripped the handle of the broom a little tighter, but not so tight she strangled it. Every now and then her ears popped with the change in altitude.

Her skin felt clammy and cold.

She bet she was pea-green. Oh, heavens. Puke-green and vertigo didn't go well with her outfit. Oh. Oh, dear. If she fell off the broom, she'd be nothing but a little puddle of . . .

Dizziness swept over her.

Kirrah choked the broom.

It coughed. Sputtered, but charged on like a rocket.

"I want down, broom. Now!"

She was deathly afraid of heights. The way her stomach bubbled, she was sure to throw up. Again. Kirrah prayed the broom from Hell wouldn't decide to do another loop-de-loop.

Uh-oh. *Too late!*

Satan's little toy-of-joy must have read her mind, because it shot straight up, did a stunning acrobatic spin, belly over belly, and left her belly somewhere behind.

"*Oh-my-God,*" she wailed. "Go down! Down, I say! I want down!"

The broom performed another spectacular gyrating spin, then plunged straight down in a suicide spiral, before leveling off at the very last second. It wove through the woods like an out-of-control rocket-straight toward a man who stood innocently gaping at her and the wild-ass broom.

He wore one of those I-don't-believe-what-I'm-seeing expressions, eyes wide, lips parted with utter disbelief. Speechless.

Oh, yes. He was properly impressed, all right.

He was also standing in a danger zone.

"Get out of the way!" Kirrah flapped one arm, motioning for him to move, but the warning came too late. She slammed into him at a peculiar angle, side-swiping him on the side of his forehead with the broom handle.

Splat!

Heavens. It sounded just like a watermelon struck by a baseball bat. *Eeewww.*

"Oops." Kirrah wrinkled her nose in dismay. Squeezing her eyes tightly shut, she clenched her teeth. She really didn't want to see this, but knew she should check on the man. Kirrah opened one eye and shot a glance over her shoulder as she barreled past him like a speeding bullet—just in time to see him do a perfect flip-flop, head over heels.

"Ohh! Oh, dear." But she didn't have time to consider the injuries inflicted on the poor soul. No. She needed to concentrate on the wicked broom. It sputtered, hacked, sputtered. She eyed her hands. She might wish to, but she wasn't choking the broom, so it must be running out of gas. "About time, too."

Kirrah yelped and clutched the broom handle. Swear to the stars, the thing suddenly swerved, rocked unsteadily, then shot straight toward a giant *Ark* tree like a heat-seeking missile.

"*Oh, no.* No, broom. Change direction. I command you to change direction."

The broom, as usual, ignored her. She tried pulling up on the handle. No use. There was only one choice left her. She bailed. "Ouch!" Rubbing her bruised and aching backside, Kirrah watched the broom make a big loop and head straight toward her. Quickly, she ducked and swore under her breath. It whistled past her head and crashed head-on into the massive tree. "Tyrant! Maniac! You could have killed us!"

The broom wilted. It clattered to the ground at her feet, gave one final sputter, then stilled.

"Don't you ever do that to me again." Kirrah shook her finger at the dejected broom, eyed her finger and thought better of it. What if she hexed it again? Magic lay in her fingertips. Crazy magic she'd never been able to control and that always involved snakes, spiders or other nasty little beasties, now, a runaway broom.

She couldn't help herself, though. Kirrah laughed and clapped her hands in delight. Her body felt exhilarated, her face flushed. The sheer joy and incredible thrill of the wild ride had to feel like getting struck by lightning. Every nerve in her body tingled. Pumping a fist in the air, she cheered, "Woo-hoo! Oh, my, but that was fun, broom." A low moan snared her attention and snapped her out of her cheering mode. "Oh, goodness." She'd forgotten all about her hit-and-fly-victim. "Uh-oh. I think we might be in a spot of trouble here, broom."

Hmmm. How was she going to explain flying on a broom? She didn't have Aunt Penell here to put a

hex over *her* latest victim.

And *she* was simply awful at casting spells.

Kirrah pushed herself up and limped over to where the stranger was laid out cold as a corpse on a mortuary slab. She cut her gaze over him. "Holy smokes." Her eyes widened with appreciation. "When the gods passed out bodies, you ordered a big one."

The man was at least six-foot-four. His biceps bulged, bared by a loose fitting, sleeveless, brown leather vest. He looked scrumptious. Thick hair the color of a ripe wheat field, lightly sprinkled with a cinnamon color, fell across wide shoulders. Tawny-colored stubble dusted his chin and jaws. Apparently wasn't into shaving regularly. He looked rough, untamed and like a big lion.

Snug brown leather pants hugged his lower body. A smattering of dark blond hair lightly furred his chest where the vest fell apart. The trail of silky hair narrowed into a straight line to the waistband of his leather pants and disappeared.

Kirrah licked her lips. Holy crap. The man was seriously ripped, a sexual beast in smokin' leather. A soft head, though, for the blow from the broom handle had knocked him out cold.

Still, he was a rugged, raw, take-me-home-with-you-and-I'll-give-you-my-babies, alluring, wicked male.

Huh. What was she going to do with him?

Kirrah chewed on her lower lip as she puzzled over this latest problem inflicting her life. He reminded her of someone. Who? She gnawed on her upper lip and mulled it over. Travis Fimmel! A Calvin Klein underwear man and a deliciously handsome male model, oh, yeah, baby! Talk about a hottie! She should know. She'd drooled enough staring at pictures of the Aussie cutie on the internet to last a lifetime. Man, she'd had the biggest crush on the hunky model a couple of years back.

Oh, but this man looked even yummier. More mature. Muscular. Sexy. Had she thought sexy already? Never mind. Her mouth watered. It was just incredible the way the handsome hunk was served up to her a-la-carte—and only slightly damaged.

First chance she got, she was taking a bite of this forbidden fruit. All she needed was some whipped cream. Or she could just go for licking the ice cream cone, lots of slow, delicious licking.

Kirrah moved closer and leaned cautiously over him. "Oh!" She gasped as his lids suddenly snapped open. He stared at her, but his eyes didn't look all that focused. He blinked and moaned deep in his throat.

Uh-oh. Oh, dear. He really looked confused, his gaze cloudy and unsteady, his face pale. Worse, he sounded hurt. This wasn't good.

How bad were his injuries?

Would her automobile insurance cover the damages? Poop. She'd have to go over her policy when she got home, but she was pretty sure there no were clauses covering accidents while flying on a broom.

Should she abandon him and leave him as a hit-and-fly victim? The thought had possibilities. In her mind she saw the imaginary ice cream cone melting into a milky, useless puddle. No sweets tonight, she thought. Anyway, he probably thought she'd tried to kill him.

"What...happened?" he asked, lifting a hand to his forehead.

He didn't remember? How cool was that?

Kirrah grabbed his hand. "Don't touch it. You're bleeding."

"Bleeding?"

"Only a little." She winced. Damn. She hated confessing her responsibility, but her inner angel insisted she come clean. Drat the little guy, always interfering in her life. "Uh...there's also a—a teensy-weensy bump."

"Teensy?" The man's voice sounded baffled as he touched his head. "What the hell does teensy mean?"

"Ooh. You don't understand English very well? Teensy means uh—uh, miniature, smaller than miniature...sort of."

"I speak proper English, not the jumbled-up butchered words you spit out of your mouth."

How insulting! Butchered-up, indeed. Kirrah's temper—which she swore was always mild—revved up a notch. *Well, I'm not a redhead for nothing*, she thought. "Jumbled-up? Butchered? Hah! You speak proper English, my patootie."

"It doesn't feel tiny."

"Huh? What doesn't feel tiny?" She gave a half-hearted shrug when she realized what he was talking about—and it wasn't her patootie. Guilt slapped her again and her temper deflated. "Well, maybe not so little, but not real big, either," she quickly added. "It might be somewhat...er—bigger than a...duck egg?" she ended with a questioning note.

"Bigger than a duck egg? Is that your idea of tiny?"

"It's better than it being large as a goose egg...right?" There was no call for him to yell. Kirrah decided to forgive his rudeness. After all, his slight injury was her fault. She'd forgive him for being grumpy, too. He probably had a slight headache. "Do you remember what happened?" *Please say no*. "Better yet have a long lasting case of amnesia," she blurted before she could stop herself.

"What?" He glanced around as if trying to figure out where he was and why she was praying out loud for him to have amnesia.

Did he know what amnesia was?

The man looked very discombobulated to her.

Did amnesiacs look discombobulated?

"Uh...let's try this again. Do you remember what happened?"

His tawny brows knitted in a deep scowl. "No. I haven't a clue."

No? The man said, 'No'? *Yes*. Yes-yes-yes! Kirrah grinned. Happy days! She barely stopped herself from jumping up and dancing a jig across the forest floor. *Amnesia!* Her new best friend. Woot-woot! Oh, yeah. This little problem was going away real fast. "Aww, what a shame," she clucked sympathetically. "I'm so sorry you have no memory and all because of a little lump the size of a chicken egg on your poor, too soft head."

"Yeah."

Kirrah frowned. He sounded bewildered, but since he agreed that his head was soft, she decided she loved his strange accent. He thought her English was jumbled? His words were so thick he sounded like-like—*who*? A little like—yes, that was it—Count Yorga or was it Count Dracula? Oh, dear. Weren't they both vampires?

In any case, he sounded just like the male voice in her head the last few days. The voice she'd totally ignored, but been creeped out by. So far as she knew, only vampires entered a person's head uninvited and chatted with them or lured them into their arms for sex and a snack.

Maybe he'd been following her. Stalking her?

Why else had he been here, right in her flight path?

What if he was an axe murderer?

Kirrah glanced around. Until now, she hadn't paid much attention to how creepy it was in the forest. They were in the woods, the dark woods, and except for the big ol' shiny round moon hanging like a perfect globe between the nests of clouds, very little light penetrated the inky black around them.

Could he change into a bat? *Would* he?

Did he have fangs?

Rabies?

Whoa! Did he bite?

"Are you a vampire?" She narrowed her eyes. "I'm warning you, mister, I have powers that would scare a demon. Yes, I—I can conjure snakes and red-eyed spiders, the kind that bite. Hard."

"What?"

"Ah, a man of few words."

"Man?"

Darn it! Her mystery man didn't seem to have many words in his vocabulary. He sounded more bewildered by the minute. He struggled to sit up, but collapsed back onto the ground, groaning. "Are there any other kind?" he asked a bit drunkenly.

"Any other kind of what?" Kirrah bit her lip, worried about the slur in his voice. Blast it! She must have knocked him for a loop. Oh, Lord. He was moaning so pitifully. All the color had bleached from his face, except for the little lump that was honest-to-goodness, barely the size of a bird egg—a humming bird's egg. Admittedly, it looked ghastly with all the purple-grape color spearing across his forehead like a wine stain.

"Snakes and spiders? Don't they all bite?" he asked, falling back again.

"Oh. Yeah. All mine bite. Rabidly."

The glance he flashed her clearly stated he believed she'd lost her mind. Ignoring his speaking look, Kirrah frowned and assisted him to sit up. "Are you sure you don't remember anything?"

"No."

"No?"

"Yes," he snapped, sounding quite cranky. "No, I don't remember a thing. Yes, I'm sure. And dammit, my head hurts like hell. You *hit* me!"

"I thought you didn't remember," she said accusingly.

"I don't remember. But you did. Didn't you? You hit me with a—a club."

"I did not! Why would I hit you with a club?"

"I don't know, but you hit me with something. Didn't you?" he asked, as if not quite certain of his accusation.

"I can't be sure. My memory, you know, a bit out there."

"A bit out there? Female, *you're* a bit out there!"

"No need to get nasty just because you have a slight headache."

"Slight headache?" he muttered. "Did you or did you not whack me with a broom?"

"Boy, for someone who can't remember, you remember too darn well."

"Did. You. Hit. Me?"

"I'm. Not. Admitting. Anything. And you can't prove I hit you. No witnesses." She glanced around, shivering. "It's awfully dark out here. So-oo, Mr. Vampire, let me help you to your feet. You can be on your merry little way. No harm done. Happy hunting."

"Hunting?"

"Yeah, happy hunting for your next meal."

"My next meal?"

"You know, fangs, blood, veins? Yummy."

Once he was on his feet, he leaned heavily against her. "I'm not a vampire. I'm a *wa-wa*..." he paused, drawing a shaky breath.

"You're a wa-wa? What's that?"

"No. I'm a *wak-wak*..."

"A wak-wak? Are you spoofing me?"

"Not—spoofing—I'm a *wa-wa*—"

"Yeah, I think I got that part." Kirrah grinned. "Come on, Mr. Wa-Wa. Let's get you to the house. I can't leave you wandering alone in the woods when it's plain you don't know if you're a wa-wa or a wak-wak."

"I don't know what I am," he admitted, stumbling against her. "Oh, *sheeah*ta!"

"*Sheeah*ta? What does that mean?"

"Shit. It...uh...means shit. I—I'm going to—" he broke off with a deep retch.

Kirrah screeched, did a little side-step jig and wrinkled her nose at the awful sour smell now clinging

to the front of her white cotton tee-shirt. "Eeeewww. Well, Mr. Wa-Wa, I think we may have a teensy-weensy problem here."

"Teensy-weensy?"

"Uh—no. We aren't going to the jumbled, butchered English thingy again."

"We aren't?"

"I think maybe you have a concussion. Not a big one, you know, little, like the lump on your forehead, but still, maybe, a—a wee concussion. How many of me do you see?" Kirrah waved her hands in front of his face when he didn't answer right away. "How many, Mr. Wa-Wa?"

He lifted a brow and directed a steely gaze at her.

Gosh, he had pretty eyes. They glittered like topaz jewels now that they weren't quite so cloudy with pain.

"Half," he said.

"Half?" Kirrah wrinkled her brow in consternation. "I don't think seeing half a person is part of the test. Oh, dear. Maybe I *accidentally* fractured your very frail skull. Now look closely and try again. How many of me do you see?"

"Half."

"You're supposed to see double."

"Okay, two halves."

"Ooh, that's not right, either."

"Yeah? Well there are barely enough of you to see a half, so how could I see a whole, much less two of you? Not much to you, button."

"Huh. A joke? You make a joke at a time like this?" Kirrah tossed an accusing glare over her shoulder. "This is *your* fault, broom. You're just plain evil. You knocked Mr. Wa-Wa plumb cuckoo. He doesn't know if he's wound forward or backward." She frowned, watching the broom fall into step behind her. "Stop pouting, broom. I am *not* taking responsibility for this. I told you to stop doing all those insane zig-zags and belly rolls. Did you listen? Nooo. You're the one who crashed into him, dashing about like—like a winged creature of the night, except you haven't any wings. If you were flying for crap, you wouldn't get a turd."

Kirrah stilled, her footsteps dragging to a sudden halt. "For Pete's sake," she said as a sudden thought hit her. "You probably don't even have a pilot's license."

"Who Pete?" the broom asked following behind her. "Don't know any Pete. Is this big fellow Pete?"

"No! I don't know," Kirrah snapped. "And stop talking. You wanna get us both in trouble?"

"Who are you talking to?" Mr. Wa-Wa asked.

Kirrah jumped and pasted a quick innocent smile on her mouth. "No one. Are you hearing things, too?" Drat, the man. He'd just scared ten years off her life with his nosy question. "See? There's no one here beside me but you, nothing in front of me, but the trees."

"Uh-huh." He leaned heavier against her.

Kirrah gave a delicate shudder as wariness tripped down her spine. "Are you feeling sick? Please don't throw-up on me again," she requested earnestly. "Could you give me a little more warning besides the words, 'oh, dunghill?' Which simply aren't informative at all as to what to expect is coming up? No pun intended."

He slanted a disbelieving gaze at her. "Dunghill?"

"Yep. Instead of *sheeaha*? Dunghill is the word my friend Hannah uses, instead of," she shrugged. "You know."

"I'll try," he assured her. "No promises, though. It's a foreign word to me, won't come naturally."

"Well *sheeaha* is a foreign word to me."

"Who were you talking to?"

Kirrah sighed. "What?" He sounded suspicious to her. She was certain he thought she was up to some

kind of trickery. "Back to that, huh?" The man had a one-track cracked mind. Should she tell him? Yeah. She hoped he wouldn't remember their conversation, but honesty compelled her to tell the truth. She never lied. At least, she almost never lied, except in an emergency and that didn't count. "The broom that's following behind us," she blurted, before she changed her mind.

"The broom that's—"

Mr. Wa-Wa attempted to glance over his shoulder, wobbled unsteadily, then moaned and clutched his head. "Oh, *shee*—uh...dunghill!"

"What? No! Don't you *dare*," Kirrah shrieked.

"That's the word you told me to use when I'm feeling—"

His sentence broke off sharply. His eyes bugged and Mr. Wa-Wa blinked like an owl at her. Then his eyes rolled to the back of his head. He promptly collapsed, slumping heavily against her.

Kirrah winced as the full force of his weight toppled against her. She wasn't strong enough to hold him up, and she wasn't about to let him crash-land on top of her. She'd be buried beneath at least two hundred twenty pounds of pure muscle.

She let go and jumped back.

Mr. Wa-Wa hit the ground like a felled tree.

Kirrah's jaw dropped. She covered her eyes with her palms and scrunched her shoulders. "Oh! Oh, this awful. Forget *sheeah*. Forget dunghill. This is an, *oh shit* day!" Slowly, she dropped her hands to her sides and opened one eye. Much as she dreaded facing it, Kirrah made herself look at him.

His face was pale as death. A ribbon of blood trailed past his ear and along the right side of his neck. From where she stood, he looked horrible. "Oh, goodness gracious, broom," she wailed. "I think I killed poor Mr. Wa-Wa." She kneeled beside him and slipped her hand beneath his head. "Oh, broom. This is bad. Stop snickering. It isn't my fault he hit the back of his head against a rock. I didn't see it when I let go of him. I swear I didn't." She looked up, saw the broom dance a little jig. "Stop that," she scolded. "Why are you so happy? I could get the electric chair for this. This is just awful. At least his head didn't make that *splat* sound this time. He didn't even moan, broom. No, you—you couldn't really call it a moan. It was more like a—a-long, drawn-out, *Oomph*."

Kirrah prized open one of his eyelids and examined his pupil. "Oh, dear, I think maybe he's really concussed this time." She wrung her hands. "Of course he's concussed. Why wouldn't he be? Don't panic, Kirrah. It's not like you killed him. He's alive. It's really too dark to tell how his pupil reacted. Maybe he's not concussed. Maybe he's..."

She bit her lower lip. Of course it was too dark to be certain about anything. "The blood, well, I bet he's a bleeder. He probably isn't concussed. No sense making snap judgments. Maybe he's just a big softie with an even softer head."

And maybe brooms could fly. Oh. Yeah. Brooms could fly.

"Well, broom, we've certainly done it this time. He's out for the count." Kirrah turned him to his side and gently rubbed her fingers over the knot on the back of his head. She drew back her hand, aghast at the amount of blood on her fingertips. "I hope you have a sense of humor, Mr. Wa-Wa. I think you're going to need it."

Wrapping her arms tightly around the man's broad shoulders, Kirrah spoke quietly to the broom, "Take us home, broom. No dive bombing. No loop-de-loops. We wouldn't want Mr. Wa-Wa to awaken and be frightened out of his slightly addled mind. Or toss his cookies all over me again, so no showing off."

Kirrah held the man close. If he remembered anything at all when he woke, he'd be frightened enough. He'd probably shout and cringe with fear when she confessed she was a real live, cauldron-stirring, spell-casting witch, one prone to minor accidents. He'd probably run all the way to the next town. As near as she could determine, he seemed to have a weak constitution. Two teeny-tiny blows to the skull, and he was out like a light bulb. The only thing in her favor was the fact he had difficulty remembering she'd flown into him. Kirrah winced. With any luck at all, maybe this time when he woke, his memory would be worse.

Maybe he'd never recall what happened at all. She grinned. Yeah. That sounded good. Kirrah smothered a moan and considered whacking him on the head again just to make sure he retained his questionable amnesia. "Better not." She'd be in enough trouble as it was when he regained his memory. "Home, broom," she ordered tersely, struggling to drag Mr. Wa-Wa to his feet. "Gods, he weighs a ton," she grunted. "Take us home. And don't even think about showing off or I'll ground you. If you had wings, I'd strip you of all flying privileges." She sniffed with righteous anger. "I'd rip off your wings."

"Witch mad at broom?"

"You could say that, yeah." Kirrah tossed her tangled mass of auburn hair over her shoulders and sighed.

She swore she heard the broom heave a disgruntled sigh and mutter, "Well, dunghill."

Chapter Three

Through indiscriminate suffering men know fear, and fear is the most divine emotion. It is the stones for altars and the beginning of wisdom.

~Zora Neale Hurston
(Their Eyes Were Watching God)

Romania
Vlad Salt Mines
Mortal Realm

Bad as she hated to think it, Shasta LaVeau Radu knew Dragos and Ann were in poor shape. Worse, she had to include herself. She was in pretty bad shape, too. But then, silver and *weres* didn't mix.

Not that she was a full-blooded *were* anymore, she wasn't, not since Valerian bit her. Come to think of it, she'd never been a full-blooded *were*, but certainly that part of her bloodline had been the most dominant—up until the bite.

Now, her bloodline was so infected, she was more Vampyre than anything else. Vampyre, *were*, and witch, a hell of a combination. She felt the constant pull of all three lines. She imagined traces of the three bloodlines co-existed in her veins, but she wasn't so sure they dwelled in harmony. The *were* part of her didn't like the silver-tipped athames lodged between her ribs, sharp blades broken off so she couldn't remove them. She didn't much care for them either.

Her insides felt like ice cubes slowly dissolving under heat. Knowing the damage silver did to a *were*, it was probably true. It was sort of like being popped inside one of those microwave ovens human females were so fond of using. Silver caused a *were's* temperature to skyrocket. As it rose higher and higher, the *were* literally cooked from the inside out.

Worse, without her full powers to change into a wolf, she could do nothing to help herself, let alone Dragos or Ann. If she could, she'd use her witch magic, but she didn't know how. Having never attempted to pull that source of energy from her soul, she wasn't about to try now when all three of their lives were already in jeopardy.

What if she failed? She'd cause more harm than good.

The two silver-tipped athames jammed between her ribs were like something alive inside her, edging

closer and closer to her heart. Probably charmed, she thought, hexed to crawl at a leisurely pace. She'd die a measured, agonizing death.

Why hadn't she learned how to use her witch powers? Or signed a contract with a witch doctor? Witch doctors, once a formal and binding agreement was made, knew every time a witch was injured. If the doctor didn't instantly appear to treat the witch, such actions violated the contract and were brought before the thirteen members of the Witches' Coven. The witch doctor lost her license to practice medicine.

Shasta frowned. Now that she considered it, she didn't think there had been a full-fledged coven of thirteen since the Salem witch trials in 1692. So there was no one to keep tabs on what the witch doctors did or didn't do. Shit! She had to think positive. She didn't know that for certain.

When her best friend Princess Kali had tried to teach her about the witches and their rules, she brushed her off, stating she preferred to learn about being a *were* over a witch. She still did, but right now, it would be *so* nice if she knew just one little chant.

Sadly, the neglect of that part her education had also been encouraged by her eldest brother, Creed. He'd always said she wouldn't need her witch magic, because her *were* abilities were so much stronger and more useful.

Of course, he hadn't foreseen she'd be *zapped* into a vampire and her *were* magic destroyed.

Perspiration poured down her face. Her hands shook. Swear to the gods, she was going to upchuck all over the demon forcing her arms behind her back. It would serve him right, too, if she turned in time to nail his stinking ass. He couldn't smell any worse. The stench of sulfur rolled off the demon in lethal waves. Vile creatures!

She hated feeling helpless. Worse, she hated to actually be helpless. Shasta glanced at Dragos. Her lover. A few hours ago, she'd spent half the night in bed with him at her mate's command.

Shasta couldn't deny she'd enjoyed the sex with Dragos. The vampire had taken care of her, seen to her pleasure, but she couldn't set aside her feelings of betrayal by Valerian or get over the hurt, the burning rage at him for agreeing to let another male breed her. Dragos' son rested in her womb. That had been the entire purpose after all—make her pregnant, regardless of her wishes.

Of course, deep inside, she was angry at Dragos, too. Like Val, he'd done what he was ordered to do by Dracula. Dragos hadn't been a gentle lover, but then, neither was Valerian. And when it came right down to it, she didn't want gentle. It wasn't bred in her to be handled with kid gloves.

With vampires, it was inevitable that biting was involved in the mating process, and the way a male vampire's cock remained inside a female and then they floated during copulation was a mind blowing experience.

Valerian. Would he attempt a rescue? Was he worried about her? She didn't think he loved her enough to bother. After all, he'd given her to another male, he couldn't possibly love her and do that to her.

"He loves you," Dragos said faintly, coughing. Crimson liquid oozed down the corner of his mouth and stained the front of his shirt.

"No talking!" the demon said, reaching for the dagger at his side, "or I'll finish the both of you."

Shasta ignored the demon's warning and met the vampire's steady gaze. "You're coughing blood. Breathe shallower. And don't read my mind."

The demon twisted her arms. "I said no talking."

"Fuck you!" Dragos snapped. "Stop hurting her. We aren't going anywhere."

"Maxus, release her. We do not torture females for the fun of it."

Shasta faced the demon in charge. So far he'd remained silent, mainly watching them with a deadly curious gaze, but she knew if she or Dragos made an attempt for freedom neither demon wouldn't hesitate to kill both of them.

The leader was dangerous and intense. And built like a freakin' war lord. In his way and in the eyes of his females, he was probably considered very attractive. She hated to admit it, but even in her eyes, he was sexy as hell. What the hell? It was a sad day when a *were* thought a freakin' demon was hot!

"You're in heat. You think every male is hot right now," Dragos snarled.

Shasta gasped. "I told you to stop reading my mind."

"Can't help it, love. We're connected. We always will be."

The demon holding her released her and she hurried to Dragos. She traced her fingers over his body, aware his injury was critical. The demon holding Dragos captive set him free and backed away.

Dragos slid his arms around her and nuzzled her hair. "Don't be angry with me. I can't help reading your mind. I'm burrowed inside there, a part of you. We exchanged blood."

"Yeah, well, that isn't all we exchanged."

A smile slipped onto his lips, then vanished in a blink. "Believe me I know very well what happened between us. I'll never forget it. It felt good and right. It wasn't wrong, Shasta. Not by Vampyre law."

Shasta sniffed. "Come to it, it wasn't wrong by *were* law either, but—"

"You feel like he gave you away?"

"More like abandoned. He should have fought harder for me."

His derisive snort sounded frighteningly weak. "One doesn't fight Dracula. His powers are unbelievably vast. He can burn another vampire to a crisp with just his eyes, and he's our king. His word is law whether we agree with him or not. He commands—we obey. What are you really pissed about? The fact that you liked what I did to you or the fact that you liked what *both* Val and I did to you? That you responded to both of us equally, or the fact I slipped past your mind block and made you pregnant?"

"Yes."

Dragos laughed. "Well, if it makes you feel any better, when they catch up with us, Val will probably kill me for touching you—if I wasn't already dead and dying."

Shasta swiped the angry tears from her eyes and stared incredulously at the blood on her fingertips.

"Vampires cry blood," Dragos informed her.

"I see that," she said, sniffing. "Don't say you're dying. You aren't dying and damn it, it's his fault you touched me. He sent me with you. He knew you were going—to—to—"

"Fuck you?"

"Don't be crude, but yes." Shasta glared at him, her heart aching. He looked terrible. His face grew grayer by the minute. Blood seeped from the corners of his eyes, nostrils and ears. She knew the damned worms infesting his heart chewed away at the valves and chambers. "I'm sorry you were hurt while you were attending me. I distracted you or you would have known someone was there."

Dragos tilted her chin and pressed a gentle kiss against her mouth. "Baby, you've distracted me since the moment I laid eyes on you." He turned his face and coughed weakly. When he faced her again, he was paler. Blood flecked his lips. His body trembled against hers. "It wasn't your fault and don't feel like it was. You're the sweetest thing that's ever happened to me." He clasped her hand, his fingers linking with hers. "I want you to know—I wanted you desperately, but I didn't just use you, Shasta. I wanted you from the moment I saw you there in the Inn with your hair all aglow, the passion so alive on your beautiful face and the challenge in your eyes flaming like fiery jewels. The outrage and innocence so obvious, it was an allure all on its own. The first time you called me Fang Face, I knew I had to have you."

She laughed softly. "You glided across the room, but somehow managed to make it look like a strut. You looked so tough. So powerful. I had to bring you down a notch or two."

"I love you."

"Don't say that. Please." Shasta held one of his hands to the side of her face. "Please don't say that."

"Why?"

"Because it's your way of saying goodbye and I—" she broke, weeping. "I can't bear it."

"I want you to know I loved you. I can't leave you with the thought you might think you were used. You weren't."

She wept openly, her shoulders shaking. "I know, but—"

"You love Valerian. I realize that. I knew it all along, sweetheart. But I think maybe there's a little

room in your heart for me, too. You gave me what I needed. I think you would have done so even if Val hadn't ordered you to. You knew I wanted you."

"Yes."

"You realized my need was urgent."

"Yes."

"So how could I not love you?" He smiled faintly. "And when I'm gone, there will still be a little piece of me alive—our son..."

"Shhh. You aren't going to die."

"I think I am."

"No. I won't let you die. I swear it."

Ann stood beside them, still and silent and clasping her side. Shasta figured it had been awhile since the human, now vampire, had fed. And like her, she was pregnant. They both needed to feed and there was no one to see to their hunger.

They couldn't feed from Dragos, but he could feed from them. Perhaps their blood would slow down the parasites, give him a chance to survive until Val and the others could come for them.

The side of Ann's pale blue shirt was saturated with a dark red stain, wet and shiny. The woman was bleeding badly. Ann swayed. Shasta hastened to her. "Careful. Lean on me. Hang in there. Valerian and the others will come for us."

Ann shook her head. "Not for hours. The sun is rising. They'll have to sleep, just like us. Then they have to find us."

"They know where we are. As soon as the sun sets, they'll come for us."

Ann studied her. "You're the woman from the Inn, the one who sat toward the back?"

"Yes." Shasta nodded. "You're the human. You were shot?"

Ann smiled faintly. "Not one of my finer moments. I *was* the human. Now I'm a vampire slave to a vampire prince."

"You aren't his slave. You're his mate."

"Ciprian had no choice but to make me his mate."

"That's not true. He had a choice. He chose to give you life."

"Yes. He made me Vampyre, but it's not like he's in love with me. He did it out of the kindness of his heart."

Shasta snorted. "Word of warning, I doubt there's much kindness in the male species of Vampyre. They're hard, tough, and they take what they want when they want. He could have let you die. He chose to give you life because he wanted you."

A wistful look settled on Ann's pale face. "Ciprian was already taken. He had a First Bride waiting for him."

"And he chose you over her. You're important to him."

"Not important enough. Ciprian will never remain faithful. He planned to claim his second bride and breed her this night, after just mating with me. I hate him! I hate being Vampyre and I hate the whole damn race."

Shasta grinned. "I know the feeling. At least he didn't give you to another male to breed."

"No. Not yet, anyway. What the hell kind of men give their mates to other males to bed?"

"Vampires."

"Ciprian has a few things to learn about me. He claimed me, now he can suffer the consequences. I will not share him with another female. If he touches another woman, I'll—I'll—how does one kill a vampire?"

"Not by driving a stake in their chest. Trust me. You don't want to go down that path."

"I'm so angry at him, I could spit silver crosses at him and I just might."

Shasta clamped a hand over her mouth to keep from laughing. Like Dracula, Ciprian was a bit on the

stiff side, and she didn't mean that as in like a corpse. She thought before the cowgirl from Texas was finished with him, he'd lose a bit of his rigid upper crust formality.

Ann's eyes suddenly widened and she stared at the black satin sheets layering Brasov's king-sized bed. She pointed with an unsteady finger and stumbled toward the foot of the bed. Black netting was tied to the posts and draped around the brass headboard.

Shasta frowned. What the hell was Ann doing? She watched her pick up a thin chain with a glittering initial dangling from it and stare at it. The vampiress turned icy eyes on Brasov as he swaggered in and preened around in front of them and the demons guarding them. He flashed his fangs and licked blood off his lips. Their blood.

For the past half hour, he'd taken turns feasting on the three of them, then he'd go outside for about thirty minutes, return and feed some more. Shasta wondered if like a bat, he had to go outside and piss away the excess before he came back for more.

But in actuality, she figured he went out to check if Val and his clan had followed them here. Vaguely, she wondered if he was aware that Dragos' heart was infested with worms and they were dangerously contagious.

"I know, bitch! You think me a fool? My new best friend Zebus gave me the antidote."

Her gaze flew to the sexy demon lord who'd settled in a high-back black and white Harlequin patterned chair and watched with obvious relish the show Brasov staged for free.

"Peacock," Shasta snapped. She didn't bother to hide the scorn in her voice. "I can't believe you're Val's twin."

The demon king grinned. "Ahh, this one is spirited. You should get rid of the babe in her and put your own son in its place."

Shasta glared daggers at the demon. "He can try and I'll rip of his mating tool and stick it up his darkest cavity."

The demon tossed back his head and laughed. "I like her, Brasov. She's feisty. On second thought, she's way too strong-willed for you. She'd be perfect for my baby brother. Zearmus is rather shy and quite lonely. He needs a spirited mate to give him sons. This female will make a wonderful addition to the royal family."

Brasov crossed the room, paused in front of her, and with a sudden movement that was little more than a blur, backhanded her. Shasta staggered back, hitting her left shoulder against the stone wall.

Her stomach churned with frustration and rage. She rubbed her smarting cheek, but she refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing her cry. "You think it makes you tough to strike a female? It shows exactly what a little male you truly are. Even if you manage to steal Val's right to the crown, you'll never be half the male, half the leader he is."

"Maybe not, but I know how to beat the spirit out of a rebellious bitch."

Shasta spit the blood out of her mouth. She sneered. "Come on. I'm not going down without a fight." She looked around and saw terror in Ann's eyes, the silent warning on Dragos' face, but hell, "I only live once," she muttered, "or in the case of some species, twice."

She launched herself at Brasov, sharp claws extended. Shasta raked them across his left cheek and scraped them across his chest, shredding his shirt and flesh. He screamed with pain, but when he punched her, the blow was fast and hard.

Shasta lost her footing and fell. Her ears rang. Her vision blurred. The pain in her head was agonizing. Brasov leapt on top of her, jerked her head to one side and sank his fangs deep in her throat.

She screamed and pummeled her fists against his back and shoulders, but he fed from her until she was too weak to fight anymore. Shasta whimpered beneath his vicious feeding. Her body grew colder and colder until it felt as if nothing but icy thin slush ran through her veins.

Slowly Brasov retracted his fangs and released her. He licked his lips and rose to his feet. Shasta looked up at him, her vision wavering, too weak to fight anymore. Brasov snarled and kicked her in the

side. The kick drove the athames deeper in her side. She felt one of the tips scratch the side of her heart and cried out from the sheer anguish piercing her body.

"Leave her be, Brasov. Did you not hear me when I said she'll make a wonderful addition to my family? I claim her for my brother. Do not touch her again. She now belongs to my family."

Brasov spun around and attacked Dragos. Shasta pulled herself to one side and used the bumpy wall to drag her weakened body to a standing position. She wobbled drunkenly and discovered she had to lean back against the rough stone wall to keep from falling. What had the demon king said? She now belonged to his family? Bullshit! She'd die before she let a demon touch her.

She saw him grin at her. "You will only think you have died from the exquisite pleasure of being bred by a demon. When it comes to planting our seed, demons are very good at it. You will know nothing but how wonderful it feels when Zearmus mates with you."

"It will never happen."

Zebus chuckled. "Never say never, my dear, or even think it."

What a jerk. Shasta decided to ignore him. She refused to lower herself to his level and converse further with the demon king. How had she thought he was sexy?

He laughed. "Because the mating scent from a demon male lures a female. It's extremely intoxicating and a powerful aphrodisiac. You will willingly give yourself to Zearmus and beg him for more."

"Hah!" Shasta turned her back on him and clenched her fists in frustration. Turning away from Zebus and watching Brasov was even worse. To say Valerian's twin was gluttonous when it came to feeding was a misnomer. By no means was he a connoisseur or delicate sipper. The evil vampire was an out-and-out hog. He fed from Dragos like a ravenous pig, as if he hadn't already feasted off her, off all three of them earlier.

Tears streamed down her face. Dragos was already weakened by the parasites in his heart. It grieved her to see him fading even more. Brasov grunted and finally released him. The ill-treated vampire lay there on the floor, gray and still, his chest barely rising.

Brasov looked from Dragos to her and back to Dragos. A satisfied smirk twisted his blood-stained lips into something evil and grotesque. "I can't decide which of you tastes best."

He locked his claws in the front of Dragos' shirt and dragged him across the floor. Brasov paused, waved his hand and a huge round hole opened in the cave floor. The evil vampire shoved Dragos over the side and into the black pit.

"No!" Shasta clenched her fists at her sides. "Don't!" She ran toward the shaft, knowing in her heart she was too late to help Dragos.

Brasov jerked her up short and spun her to face him. "Not quite yet. You may join him momentarily, after I've had another drink from you." He thrust her head to one side, turned it so he had a better angle and stabbed his fangs into her throat, brutal and cruel, his intent to cause as much pain as possible.

His piggish slurps and greedy swallows gurgled inside her head. Darkness whirled through her mind, a muddy, oozing evil as he fed and fed. Dizziness swept over her, leaving her limp and her knees shaky. She slumped against his chest, pathetic and exhausted, and still he drank.

"Brasov, enough! You will drain her dry. She carries. And I have chosen her to become one my own. I will not watch you murder her or a child, not here, not like this, not when you have no intention of filling her womb once it's empty. Release her."

Faintly, Shasta realized the command came from Zebus, the demon lord. Why did he care if she died or if her baby survived? Oh, but he didn't, not really. He had other motives, and she wondered distantly, how bad it would be to mate with a demon, to conceive a child with one of the loathsome creatures.

Agonizingly aware of the erection Brasov ground against her feminine mound, she made a feeble attempt to put some space between them. Slowly he freed her and backhanded her across the mouth.

Helpless, Shasta crashed to the salty floor like a broken doll. She tried to push herself up to her hands and knees, but her arms felt about as strong as stems of straw. She toppled onto her back, unable to gather enough strength to climb to her feet. Tears blinded her. She wanted her mate. Angry at him or not, she

needed Valerian far worse than she'd ever thought she could or would.

Val, where are you?

I'm with you. In my heart, I'm there beside you. Gods, I wish it was fact, for you. Hold on, sweetheart. Survive. Be strong. Be brave. I know where you are. I'll be there to bring you home as soon as the sun sets tonight. I swear it!

Valerian's words soothed her and filled Shasta with hope. He'd come get her. All she had to do was live.

Brasov wiped away the blood staining his mouth with the back of his hand and whirled to face Zebus. "You will not interfere with my feedings. I will drain them if I wish to."

"I didn't bring the females here for you to suck dry. Kill the male if you so desire, but I'm warning you, leave the females alive."

"Warning me?" Contempt etched Brasov's face. "No one warns me. I take what I want."

"If you desire my help taking control of your brother's castle, then you leave the females alive. Demon males are in dire need of mates. Every female captive is given to one of them to breed or become a permanent mate. You will not waste them for your selfish pleasures."

Brasov said nothing to Zebus' ultimatum. Instead, he twisted his fingers in Shasta's hair and yanked her to her feet. He half dragged, half carried her across the spacious chamber to the open mine shaft he'd created. "Join your dying lover, bitch!"

Shasta's scream died in her throat. She wouldn't let him know how scared she was. He licked the side of her neck and grinned. "Come nightfall, I'm going to sex you. I fucked Val's last female and I'm going to do you—all night—come dawn, the demon can have you." He shoved her over the side into the black hole.

She couldn't silence the scream any longer. Terror gripped her in its sharp claws. Her arms flailed helplessly. Wind whistled past her ears as she dropped through the Stygian darkness. Her screams echoed around her. The descent felt endless, but in reality, it wasn't a long drop. The shaft was much shallower than she'd thought, but she landed clumsily and hard on her left side.

"Shasta?"

Dragos sounded so frail.

She burst into tears. "It's me. Where are you?"

"Here. I'm here." He embraced her and held her close. "Are you all right? The baby?"

"I landed on my side. My ribs are bruised. I broke my left wrist."

He pressed a trail of kisses over her face, finally settling his mouth on hers. Slowly, reluctantly, he released her lips. "When I heard you scream, my chest tied into a knot. Are you sure the baby is okay?"

"I think so. I don't know. I've never been pregnant before."

"I know, sweetheart. I've never fathered a child before, either. But you'd know if he wasn't. Are you hurting? Cramping?"

"Mostly my pride. It wasn't that long a drop, just—"

"I know, just black as pitch and you lose your bearing."

"Other than hurting all over, I'm okay."

"What about the athames?"

"The silver's cooking my insides, but it's a slow process. They knew what to use to bring us down."

His chest heaved against her breasts. His breath dragged, ragged and labored. He settled her between his legs, her back to his chest. He locked his arms underneath her breasts. "Lean back against me."

Shasta rested her head against his wide chest and sighed. "I'm so tired. It must be nearly dawn."

"It is. And yes, they knew how to bring us down." He pressed a kiss to the back of her ear. "Where's Ann?"

Shasta relaxed and released a tight breath. "She's still up there at his mercy. She found something that belongs to her sister, a necklace or something. What do you think he'll do to her?"

"Ann? At best, he'll sex her. At worst, he'll drain her dry. He's dying to kill one of us. I don't think he's particular which of us he destroys. So far, Zebus is the only thing holding him in check."

"Yeah, and why? Demons have no love for anyone."

"Demons cherish females. Zebus will not let Brasov kill either of you. I have no idea what Val's brother has planned for me, though. Probably stake me in the sun. I know he's capable of very cruel things, but it's nearly dawn. If he was going to stake me in the sun today, I wouldn't be here in this hole with you. He can't do much to Ann. The lethargy will begin in about fifteen minutes for all our kind."

"Where are we? Will we be safe here?"

"We're inside the Vlad Salt Mines. This has to be Brasov's lair. He must be planning to move somewhere else, probably already has a new nest set up, else he wouldn't have brought us here." Dragos took a minute, drew in several breaths. "We're in some kind of warded mine shaft. Not a very deep one, but since we're so weak, it's deep enough to keep us prisoners."

"Can't we just materialize out of here?"

"You know how?"

"No," Shasta replied, panicking. "Don't you?"

"Baby, I don't have enough strength to materialize two feet, let alone change into something that can fly out of here and all the way to the castle before the sun rises. It will take me months to heal, if I even survive. My powers are so compromised I can barely extend my fangs. Besides, this is a prison of Brasov's making. We're stuck here, just as he planned. Even if we were at full strength, we couldn't escape his hex on this place. The question is what the hell else does he have planned?"

Shasta rubbed her aching wrist. "I thought vampires mend instantly?"

"Not always instantly. It depends on how severe the injury is and the injured vampire's strength and capabilities at the time." Dragos brushed her hair behind her ears. "Try not to think about it. I'm guessing we'll survive the day. It's not the most comfortable of places, but it will remain dark enough so we can sleep safely. Brasov has plans. He isn't ready for us to die yet."

"I'm hungry."

"I know you and Ann both must be starving since you're pregnant, but I dare not feed you."

"I know. I just want to go home."

"Me, too. I'm beat." Dragos slumped against her, resting his face alongside her shoulder.

Shasta closed her eyes. She was tired, too, but terror gripped her heart. Dragos sounded strained and weaker by the minute. If they didn't get out of here and get help, he was going to die.

At that moment, his son stirred in her womb. She spread her hands across her belly and gasped.

"What is it?" Dragos asked.

"Our son. Here, feel him." She grabbed one of Dragos' hands and aligned it over the light, quivery movement inside her stomach. "Feel him?"

"Yes. It's so faint. Are you sure it's him? It feels like soft butterfly wings fluttering." For the first time since their capture, Dragos sounded strong.

"It's him. Our son."

He pressed his fingers against her middle. "Samhain, but he's beautiful. He's pure vampire, Shasta. He looks like me, except—he has your green eyes."

Shasta laughed. "He does?"

"Yeah. He's going to be a lady killer."

"Has he said his name?"

Dragos frowned. "Vampire babies don't communicate with their fathers the way a *waken's* baby does."

Shasta laid her hand over Dragos' and stilled. She closed her eyes, seeking to communicate with her son.

Hello, Mother.

Hi, my son.

You wish to know my name?

Yes, if you would share it?

I am Grigore.

"Grigore," Shasta whispered. "His name is Grigore."

The baby stretched and yawned beneath their hands.

Dragos laughed. "I heard him, through you. Thank you for sharing this with me."

Goodnight, Mother. Please, don't let Father perish. I do so want to meet him.

"I won't. I swear it. Goodnight, my son," Shasta said softly. "Sleep well."

Dragos squeezed her hand and swallowed hard. "You won't what?"

"Let you die."

"I love you, Shasta. I know I shouldn't say such things to you, but I can't help myself. I will always love you, and for as long as I live, I'm yours. I love our son. Please—don't keep him from me. I—I thought I could handle leaving you, leaving him, but I can't. I know Valerian will send me away. He won't want me to be a part of your lives and I understand it. I'll go wherever he sends me, but I ask you, let me see my son-sometimes."

Shasta blinked, but still hot tears slid down her face. How could she ever be cruel to this vampire? How could she forbid him access to his son? Her heart couldn't take hurting him. But she'd have to be disloyal to Valerian. The two of them were already on shaky ground. Val had betrayed her in a way she wasn't sure she'd ever forgive him for—but her love belonged to him.

But Dragos—the vampire was important to her, too. He'd fathered her child. She owed it to her baby to see that his father lived. She'd say anything, promise anything, *do* anything she had to do to ensure Dragos' will to live remained strong. "I promise. You can see our son whenever you want."

"No, sweetheart, it doesn't work like that. Valerian will never agree to my being a part of my son's life. Neither will the Ancients. For all intents and purposes, Grigore is Val's child."

"No. Val and the Ancients forget I'm the child's mother. I have some say in his raising and I'm telling you, I will see to it, you're a part of his life. Always. I swear it."

"Sweetheart, you can't make a promise like that. Val—he'll feel you dishonor him."

Shasta twisted around until she faced him, then leaned into him and pressed a kiss against his mouth. "It's done."

She meant the kiss to be comforting. Reassuring. But Dragos cupped the sides of her face and closed his mouth over hers with wild hunger. The soft pressure of his mouth parted her lips. He pushed his tongue inside, capturing hers.

In seconds, he had her shirt over her head, her breasts bared to his touch. Her nipples tightened, aching beneath the slow rub of his palms across the tight buds.

Shasta pulled away. "Dragos," she whispered shakily. "We can't."

He captured one of the little berries with his tongue and drew it inside his mouth. Reluctantly, he released it and tilted her face to his. He searched her eyes, his gaze steady and fierce and filled with desire. "Gods, Shasta, you know what we've just done? What we're doing?"

"I know. I've made you a part of my life."

"I shouldn't touch you again."

"You're not touching me—well, only a little."

"Not yet, but gods, I want inside you so badly. I need you. Love you—if I take you—there will be no going back to the way things were. If I take you, it changes everything."

Shasta shuddered at the soft touch of his mouth on her breasts again. If she let him sex her, they'd be crossing lines from which there was no return. Damn. She'd just promised her son she'd do whatever she had to do to guarantee his father's survival. If having sex with Dragos renewed his energy and his will to live, then so be it.

Having sex with Dragos was no hardship. She wanted the vampire with every fiber of her being. How could she feel this way? Had she fallen in love with him? She had to have fallen at least a little, or she

couldn't have a weakness for the feel of his mouth on her body, couldn't ache for him to be inside her. She was going to bear his child. There was no escaping the fact that Dragos would always be a part of her life.

He settled her across his lap. Dragos groaned and moved her bottom against his straining cock. Shasta wiggled, rubbing it through his jeans. He nuzzled her throat and trailed kisses down her cheek. "This is insane," he whispered.

"You're hurt. And weak."

"I'm not dead—yet." He fumbled with her clothes, worked her shoes, jeans and thong off and tossed them aside. She freed his straining cock and slowly sank down on it. Dragos shuddered. "We'll pay for this, my love," he whispered. "This—this isn't like before."

"I know. I have a right to choose who I give my body to. They tried to take that from me. I won't let them have that kind of control over me again. This is my decision."

"Our decision. We're in this together. You feel so good. You have no idea what you do to me." He captured her mouth while his fingers rubbed her aching nipples to life. "I can't give you up, Shasta. I thought I could. I thought it'd be so easy to walk away from you once I'd had you, but I—I can't—I'd die without you—"

"Shhh. Now you don't have to walk away."

"No. Now I don't have to walk away—and I won't. Ever."

"I commit myself to you. Love me, Dragos. This moment may be all we ever have. Love me."

"I do. I swear to the gods I do."

A soft whimper rose to the back of her throat. For better or for worse, she'd just handed herself into Dragos' keeping. Shasta flung back her head and clenching her teeth, rode his hot shaft. She tried to take her time, to savor what was likely the last time Dragos would ever touch her. Fierce need built quickly, faster and faster, higher and higher until they were both at fever pitch.

Dragos groaned and closed his big hands over her aching breasts. "Now, sweetheart, come with me."

Shasta dug her fingers in his shoulders and clenching her thighs, went under and over, tumbling helplessly into an orgasmic heaven. His cock swelled even more, grew harder and then his seed ruptured inside her, hot and wet and incredibly wonderful.

Helplessly, she pressed kisses against his chest. "Feed from me," she whispered.

"No."

"It's okay. I want you to feed from me. Do it."

"I won't risk infecting you."

"You might have infected me just now."

He looked aghast. "Shit. I didn't think. I wasn't thinking. Oh, gods, what if I—"

"You didn't infect me, and you won't."

"Shasta—"

"Do it, take what you need. It will help make you stronger. Our son needs you in his life. You must fight to survive. I need to know we've exhausted all avenues that can save your life. So feed, dammit!" Shasta scrubbed the tears from her face. "Do it!"

"Forgive me, love, I fear if I do not feed, I will not survive this day."

"I know." Shasta's hands trembled as she cupped the sides of his face. "I know. You must have nourishment. I feel your hunger and your weakness. I offer my blood freely just as I offered my body. Feed."

Dragos gripped her upper arms and dragged her closer. He lowered his head and sank his fangs in the tender flesh of her throat. He drank deep, gulping the rich, nourishing elixir. It flooded his body with the strength he needed to survive the day. Dragos moaned, pain slicing across his heart. The parasites squirmed deep in the chambers, fearful of the new energy bursting inside him. Gods, it hurt. Their burrowing ripped apart new muscle.

Still he drank and small portions of his heart healed. He fed until Shasta's head lolled weakly against his chest. Slowly, he retracted his fangs and licked the wounds on her throat, sealing them. "Thank you," he

whispered, kissing her. "Shasta, I want you to know..."

His voice trailed away as she pressed unsteady fingers across his mouth. "Shhh. Don't say it. You're inside me, so damned deep inside me. For this moment, it's all that matters. We'll sort out the right and wrong of it some other time. You needed this to survive. I needed it to soothe my wounded heart and pride."

Dragos grabbed her palm and kissed it. "You don't understand. What we did just now can cost both our lives."

"I know."

"If anyone ever finds out I touched you without Val's consent and you let me, we'll be staked in the sun."

"No, we won't. I took you, you didn't take me."

"Our laws are complicated. It's one thing for me to sex you with Val's consent, quite another to fuck you without it."

"They have no one to blame but themselves for what has happened between us. I gave you the right to mate with me. There is nothing they can do about it. I have laws from my side of the family as well. Val, Dracula and the Ancients will have to honor my decision. I'm a princess, you know, not some lowly cur wolf they can order around, ordered bred at their whim."

His cock was still buried deep inside her. Dragos moved his hips and felt the ache in his shaft. "I want you again," he whispered. "He didn't know where this was all going to end, but there was no one standing in his way, not at this moment. Not Brasov. Not Valerian. Not even Shasta, since she made no attempt to move away from him."

She groaned when he set a new rhythm and buried her face against the dip of his shoulder. This time when he took her, they knew there would never be redemption in the eyes of Val or the Ancients. Not now. Not ever.

Shasta might belong to Valerian, but she now belonged to him too. He wasn't sure she comprehended the laws of Vampyre, but by mating with him of her own freewill, she'd given him the right to fight for her. If they got out of this alive, he was going to face the Ancients and demand his rights and everything was now in his favor. She'd granted him the power to claim her and make her his First Bride.

Dragos snapped the chain around his neck and slipped the small sized ring with intricate cuts of Celtic symbols onto her right ring finger. He slashed a deep cut across his chest and pressed her mouth to it. "Drink, my love. Drink and be one with me."

Shasta glided her tongue across his chest, then latched onto the wound and fed.

Dragos shuddered. The flick of her wet tongue and the tiny suction she used to feed from him drove him mad with desire. "Shasta...baby. Listen to my words." He couldn't lose her. Not to Val, and not because of Brasov or Zebus' evil intentions. "With my blood, I claim you for my First Bride. With the mingling of our blood, we are. Our lives are bound together for eternity, until one of us dies."

Dragos slid the ring off his right hand and onto his left. He couldn't remove the ring Val had placed on her left finger, but Val could never remove the ring *he* placed on her right finger. Dragos watched the ring tighten on her finger as did his, binding them together through the magic of his vows. No one could break the oath he'd spoken. Not Val. Not Dracula. Not the Ancients. Not Shasta. Although it was a rare occurrence, by Vampyre law, Shasta now possessed two legitimate mates.

He sighed. Scorching heat burned within his heart that had nothing to do with the parasites feeding off him. Shasta belonged to him as much as she belonged to Val, but now she also belonged to him in a way she hadn't before. She carried *his* child. And she'd given herself to him willingly. Combined, it gave him the justification to petition the Ancients to break Val's claim on her. He could insist his vows were the stronger, his claim to her the strongest of the two.

Dragos sighed with relief. He had every right to take her from the future king. And unlike Val, he'd die before he shared her with another male. When he filed the petition for her freedom before the Ancients,

they had to honor it. All that was left to do was for him to mark her.

Without even thinking about the further consequences of the dangerous twist his life had taken, Dragos ordered Shasta into the deep hypnotic state of the *Razure*. Slowly, he lifted her off his lap and laid her beside him. Weakened from the boring parasites, he gently parted her thighs and fanged his initials, D.F. on the inside of her thigh directly above the V. R. of Valerian's claim.

When he was finished, he fell back, the last bit of his strength gone. He drew several deep breaths, short inhalations, and shorter exhalations. Like a beacon, his gaze was drawn to the site of his initials above Val's. As of this moment, *his* claim was the dominant one of the two.

Dragos grinned faintly, overwhelmed by the love and relief he felt. Shasta had given him two precious gifts, his son and the right to claim her. For the first time since this all began, he felt alive. Revived. He intended to live.

He had a mate and a child on the way.

They were both worth fighting for and he had much more to lose than Valerian. No one was taking them from him.

In a single smooth move, he lifted Shasta back onto his lap and guided his cock inside her. His internal clock told him it was just seconds from dawn. Soon he'd sleep, but he intended to fall asleep buried inside her. It was one more way a male vampire strengthened his claim on a female. If they were discovered locked in a mating clutch, everyone would know she belonged to him.

Dragos closed his eyes and savored the feel of her sleek warm channel gloving his shaft. He would not allow her to awaken at dusk. Not until Val had a picture of them like this branded in his mind.



Zebus watched Brasov grab Ann, twist his fingers in her long blonde hair and shove her face down on top of the big bed in the vampire's chamber. Brasov stood behind her and fumbled with his zipper. "You, I'm going to suck and fuck." Brasov worked his cock free, stood with his fingers wrapped around the long length and laughed.

"No." Zebus rose to his feet. "Put it back in your pants. She's not for you." He'd stomached about all he could of Brasov's constant drive to feed or mate. The vampire was high with the ingestion of too much blood. Nothing would satisfy him until he digested some of his meal. He was crazy.

Unfortunately, the vampire was crazy like a fox, sharp, cunning and ruthless, especially with females. Zebus didn't like it. He didn't like Brasov. The bastard was merciless. There were better ways to use the opposite sex than draining them of their blood.

The vindictive vampire shifted his weight from foot to foot and turned to face him. His eyes glowed in his skull like red-hot coals, impossibly shiny from his gluttony. "Who's she for then? Don't tell me she's for your brother, too?"

"I want her. She's beautiful. Sexy. This one is mine."

"She's already bred. She won't do you much good."

Zebus shrugged. "It doesn't matter. Demons make room for their seed to grow. I will have her."

Brasov dragged Ann off the bed and shoved her toward Zebus. "Take her, then. I give her to you as a gift. Go."

Zebus closed his fingers around Ann's slender waist, but kept his gaze on Brasov. "You give me nothing. I take what I desire. Come, my love. Don't struggle so. I have just the thing to make you feel better."

Ann twisted and screamed. Zebus laughed. "Do not fight so hard sweet, Ann. I promise you, you'll love what I give you."

Chapter Four

Beltane is when the Land, represented by the Goddess, is ripe and fertile.

*Ru-Noc
Sanctuary
Beltane
Immortal Realm*

It wasn't easy lugging someone more than twice her size. Kirrah told herself she was perfectly justified in allowing Mr. Wa-Wa to collapse onto her bed. She took a step back and glared at the big jerk's handsome face.

Collapse was the right word.

His knees buckled and he folded onto her bed like a broken accordion. Lying half-off, his long legs dragged over the side.

Jeez. Such a wuss! She'd never heard so much moaning and groaning in all her life. It wasn't as if she'd run his head into the door facing on purpose or anything. Was it her fault he was taller than her doorframe? No. In no way was she responsible for the wonderful genes that made up his tall, spectacular body.

Nor was it her fault his too thin skull just happened to get in the way of said doorframe. She'd merely tried to guide him into the bedroom. He didn't have to swear at her.

Or yell.

Or threaten to rip her head off her shoulders and stuff it in a sack if she bumped his head one more time. Such threats! As if he could actually rip off her head. And here she could have sworn the man had no violent tendencies. At least he hadn't exhibited any when she'd broom-sticked him.

Kirrah smothered a snort of laughter. *Broom-sticked?* That had to be a new term, unless of course, other witches had had the bad luck of cracking a pedestrian upside the head the way she had.

But she was getting off track here. Mr. Wa-Wa had not displayed any violent tendencies. So why now?

Maybe he was off his medications? Perhaps they needed adjusting? Maybe he had meltdowns when his mind snapped or his head sustained a minor injury?

Or maybe she'd done big time damage to his brain?

Eyeing him, she wished fervently he'd stop moaning and holding his head. Swear to the gods, if he

upchucked on her one more time, she was going to do some head ripping of her own. Or smack him on the head with a dough roller. Yeah, that'd probably finish him off but good. "Good grief, Kirrah, where are these homicidal tendencies cropping up from? Behave!"

Kirrah grunted and studied the gorgeous hunk on her bed with a disgruntled eye. She admired the wide shoulders beneath the open vest. The muscular thighs encased in snug leather hugging his hips like a lover's hands were to die for.

She sighed, shoved her sleeves up and went to work dragging off his low-heeled boots and socks. Carefully, she swung his legs on top of the bed. Only—somehow her legs tangled with his. She stumbled and fell clumsily across the poor man's chest.

His eyes flew open. A half-smile flirted at the corners of his mouth. Kirrah glared at him. His smile widened. The big dope! How the heck did he manage to look so darned appealing with a big ol' purple bruise smeared over his right eye?

Slowly, he slid his arms around her hips and squeezed her buttocks. "Well, helloo, sweetness."

Oh, crap, that's all she needed, a concussed Romeo with a sexy voice hot enough to curl her toes and set her thighs on fire, a voice that both compelled and could easily lead a woman astray, and hot hands that latched onto her ass like vice grips.

The man looked at her as if he'd never seen her before and had just discovered his favorite new treat. "Aren't you just a delicious little beauty?" he purred. He sounded for the world like a hungry cat whose appetite had just been stimulated, and he couldn't wait to satisfy it.

Sweet little beauty?

Kirrah blinked. Oh, yeah, the man was definitely off his meds. Obviously he was no stranger to seduction 101, either, if the way he massaged her butt was anything to go by.

And damn, did he have to have such dreamy bedroom eyes? Tiny gold specks sparkled like angel dust in the warm tawny depths. Thick yellowish-brown lashes completed the allure of his heavy lidded gaze. He had the kind of gold-flecked irises that attracted a woman and sucked her right in. He might as well wear a sign around his neck that read: *Come and get it, sinful indulgences right here.*

Boy was she ready to go get it!

Her brows knitted together. What was wrong with her? All of a sudden her hormones were zig-zagging out of control. Her skin felt hot and prickly. She wondered if her face was as red as it felt. With her fair complexion, she blushed as easily as she sunburned.

His gaze wandered from her hair to her lips. Oh, my. Those tiger-colored eyes fixed on her mouth. He licked his lips. Yep. He'd just discovered a delicious snack he contemplated nibbling on.

Startled, Kirrah gasped as he suddenly tugged her closer. Her hands splayed across his wide chest. Her fingertips curled in the whorls of hair on his manly chest. She snatched her fingers back as if she'd been burned. "Uh—Mr. Wa-Wa, I think you might be getting a tad bit carried away here. Unhand me."

"No." One hand slid up her back and his fingers coiled round her nape, holding her in place. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?" She blinked.

"You belong to me," he whispered, and took her mouth.

It was the only word for it. *Took.* He ravaged her mouth with a slow, steamy, gut-wrenching kiss. Warm and wet. Hot and melting. Plunder. Plunder. Yum-yum-yum. He might be half dead, but his mouth was in the best of health, and he knew how to use it. He knew how to use his tongue, too. Said object slipped right past her defenses and ravished her mouth in a wild, hungry exploration.

Kirrah hoped the powers that be helped her, because she knew if she depended on her hormones—the traitors had abandoned ship. They were doing the rumba, the samba and the hot, hot tango. She decided she'd remain right here, where his must be doing the mambo.

With tongues tangled and their bodies rubbing together in a sinuous dance, Kirrah thought they must be like two lovers locked in a supple, twisting mating ritual. Any second now, the big bang. Only, they

weren't lovers. They were strangers, and she needed to get control of the situation.

She belonged to him? Was that what he'd said just before he closed his mouth over hers?

Clearly there was something wrong with her hearing. Ooh, but she couldn't think about that now, not with his mouth plundering hers. Too stunned to protest or move away, Kirrah let him work her mouth, let the flowing power of his kiss wind around her and hold her captive.

So what if he was turning her into a wreck? What a way to crash and burn!

His hold on her was magic all by itself. He made her feel like she truly belonged to him and that she was in the midst of something rare and beautiful.

Then he set her mouth free.

His hands crept down her back and took possession of her deserted butt cheeks once again. Kirrah swallowed hard and pulled back. He moaned, but allowed her the small space between them she claimed.

"I don't belong to you," she whispered.

His eyes glittered feverishly. "I just proved you do."

"No," she denied. "We need to get this clear. I'm not yours."

"If you say so." He flopped back on the pillow and locked his gaze with hers. A slow grin curved his moist lips. His palms relaxed on her ass. He sighed softly and his lids fluttered closed.

"Holy crap!" Kirrah blinked. "We can discuss this like rational adults. You don't have to just...heck...pass out on me again. You can't stop now, Mr. Wa-Wa. It was just getting good. Come on, are you finished playing? Don't you wanna help yourself to dessert?" She waited for a second. Waited. Waited.

"Huh. Guess not." Once she realized he really was out, she pushed herself off him. He didn't make a peep. "You're a kiss-and-run kinda fellow, huh? Grab the ass, smooch the lips 'til they're numb, then leave a lady wanting. Sheesh!"

Kirrah glanced down at his face. Heavens! Thank the stars he'd passed out again. The man was simply too much for her to cope with. One lip-lock and like a sex-starved idiot, she wanted more. *Have some pride, girl. Don't just lie down for him. So he's a great kisser. Big deal. So he's the best kisser who ever locked lips and tongue with you. So what? So you're tingling all over and you feel like stripping and running through the woods. You're insane. Get away from the man. Now!*

Kirrah licked her lips, savoring the faint traces of his masculine flavor still on her mouth and tongue. Touching her damp lips with trembling fingers, she sighed. She had a feeling she was going to have her hands full with Mr. Wa-Wa and his electric lips.

Feeling the sensual energy and excitement in her body and on her lips, she wondered if he'd zapped her with a powerful electric cable. *Yeah, electric lips all right.* Even her teeth tingled.

The bottom of her stomach dropped with the suddenness of someone who'd plummeted off a high cliff and crashed hard and fast. Kirrah squeezed her legs together. Her inner thighs felt as soft and pliant as warm wax. She squirmed, helpless to stop the ache burrowing its way through her body.

Whoa! What had he done to her?

Even though he was no longer kissing her, *touching* her, Kirrah was acutely aware of the urgent need building and spreading through her feminine channel. She was achy and wet—from one kiss?

She'd never been wet for a man before. The inner tissues felt swollen, alive, as if he'd licked her clit and set off a spark deep inside her.

What sorcery was this?

This urgent need to jump a man's bones wasn't something she'd ever come remotely close to feeling before—not like this.

Surprised her skin felt clammy, Kirrah swiped her forehead with the back of her hand. She curled her fingers into her palms, amazed to discover her body was trembling. The sudden compulsion to strip him naked and have her lustful way with the hunk in her bed, while the poor man lay defenseless, was overwhelming.

She snorted. Ridiculous! What? Horny was her new middle name?

All right, Kirrah, so the man can kiss. So he flips your switch, revs your motor, heats your hootie. It isn't necessary to make a big production out of it. He's injured. He probably won't even remember kissing you. She drew a deep breath and licked her lips. You know he wouldn't kiss you in a million years if you hadn't knocked him into next week. You're not exactly the man-killer type—at least not in the romance department. You have nothing in common with the man. You're short. He's tall. He's muscular. You're skinny as a string of spaghetti and you have freckles across your nose. Freckles, for Pete's sake! No man gets turned on by little dots sprinkled like brown sugar across a woman's face.

Kirrah paced the length of the room and back to the bed, paused to stare at the hottie, then nibbled on her thumb. What the heck was she going to do with him?

Who is he? Where did he come from?

She knew very well there were no males living in Sanctuary. That was a fact drummed into her head by her aunt. *No males in Sanctuary—except during—*

"Oh, shit!" Kirrah's eyes bugged and she stared at the man who'd already managed to land in her bed—her stupid fault. "You're here to mate...aren't you?" She blinked. "I—I mean—uh—well not with me personally—but here—well, not right here—"

Poop, this wasn't coming out right. She paced some more, shook her hands as if they tingled, nerves shot to a frazzle, oh yeah. She waved her arms to relieve the prickles racing up and down her arms, stopped to glare at the dangerous looking male lying there so innocently. "I mean here at Sanctuary because it's—it's—freakin' mating time for witches! I'm not a witch!"

Oh, no. No way was she going to believe all those wild tales her aunt had filled her head with when they arrived in Sanctuary. "When it's Beltane, the young males come from Droth in search of young, beautiful witches. They're like bees in search of sweet nectar. They're horny. Their one true goal is to mate with as many females as they can. Mate, child. It's the purpose of Beltane for our species. But be wary, never allow a male witch to kiss you. He'll suck your soul right out of your body."

Hah! Too late. She'd already been kissed—and her soul was still intact. Guess her aunt *had* made up those tales, just like her friend Hannah had laughed and said, "I hate to say it, Kirrah, but I think your Aunt Penell is losing it. Whoever heard of such a thing—suck out your soul? Yeah, good thing she's leaving on vacation. She needs it."

Kirrah studied the man. Obviously he wasn't here to suck out her soul. He'd already had the perfect opportunity to indulge. So *what* was he doing in the woods outside the witches' colony?

How much was he going to remember once he regained his faculties? "Face it, girl, his brains are probably leaking out of every one of those little knots on his head. He's senseless. So what if you're attracted to him? Even if his memory is wiped clean, you can't keep him, for pity's sake. He doesn't belong to you."

Oh, yeah? Then why is he laid out like a virgin sacrifice on my bed? 'Sides, if I belong to him like he said, then he's darn well going to belong to me.

Kirrah shook her head. She didn't need the impish voice in her head causing her more trouble. *No. He's not mine. He's not my private stock.*

If he was awake and alert, he'd probably spout accusations again. "You hit me. Didn't you? Admit it. Didn't you?" Kirrah mimicked, waving her hands in the air for added drama.

She jerked, startled that five candles across the room burst into flames and sizzled. "Oh. Oh, dung-hill!" She dropped her hands to her sides and hurried over to blow out the flames before she caught her house on fire. She eyed her hands. Lethal weapons? "No waving the hands." Crap. Her magic was plain nuts-o.

Kirrah turned, slanted her gaze at the man lying so still and smothered a groan. Jeez! When he was awake and thinking straight, he was going to ask questions. He'd grill her worse than a prosecutor. Kirrah swallowed. She suddenly realized she'd unconsciously moved back to the foot of the bed. She stood there like an idiot gaping at his bare toes and panting like a perverted heavy breather.

Oooh. He had incredible toes. Sexy toes. Long. Broad. Masculine and—well—sexy. She licked her dry

lips. When the heck did she develop a toe fetish?

Against her will, her gaze traveled up. Not too far, just past his muscled calves to his powerful thighs encased in tight, thigh-hungry leather. It was *there*—just like a jammed zipper, her ravenous gaze was trapped. Or rather, her voracious stare stuck like glue on *his* zipper.

'Hung' filtered through her mind.

Kirrah rubbed her sweaty palms on the outer seams of her jeans. Uh-huh. She detected a definite noteworthy bulge behind the little teeth there. Impressive, but not so big as to be...too much, at least, she didn't think so.

How the heck was she supposed to know? It wasn't like she had x-ray vision.

And how much was too much, anyways?

So there was a nice-sized bulge. It wasn't all *that* big. As far as she knew, what she saw was what she got. Kirrah felt her face flame. She wasn't in the habit of eyeing a man's—er, healthy package. For that matter, she wasn't used to eyeing an *unhealthy* package either. Heavens! What was wrong with her? She *never* paid this much time or attention to a...a--blooming bulge! Her mind rambled on in its weird little way, like it had suddenly hopped aboard an idiot train or something. Maybe she should have gone with her aunt on vacation.

She'd never been one to indulge in sexual fantasies. It simply wasn't her habit to stare at what lay below a man's waist. "For heaven's sake, girl, get a grip." She gasped. "No! Not that kind of grip. *Do not seize!* Don't even think about seizing. It might only be mildly imposing, but the thing looks big enough to bite off your fingers—if it had teeth. *No...gripping!* Don't look at it. Look at the wall. Hum. Whistle. Sing a song, but *do not seize!* Stop looking!"

No matter how hard she tried, her eyes refused to cooperate. Her gaze remained fused to the outline of his private pole to paradise and snubbed all orders to slide past the thrice-damned *zipped* zipper.

Kirrah blinked. Swallowed. Blinked again. Stars above, what was wrong with her? She was never this intrigued by—well, she was just never. Oh, but—what red-blooded female could resist looking? Touching? *Seizing?*

Kirrah gave in to the appreciative groan filling the back of her throat. *My, oh, my, but 'it's' certainly packed in there.* She jerked back as 'it' suddenly moved. *Gods, help me, what does he have in there? A mini-monster?* She laughed. *Mini-monster, my ass.* She released a long pent-up breath through pursed lips. *Lordy girl, it's not like it can escape and attack you. It's tucked safely away behind doors...sort of. But damn, if it wasn't alive!*

Her gaze shot to Mr. Wa-Wa's pale face. Relief punched its way into the pit of her stomach. There wasn't much life there on his face. He was still out for the count. Hmm. She really needed to do something about taming the little devil hitch-hiking on her shoulders.

But she couldn't resist returning her curious gaze to the exciting bulge resting cozily behind the zipper. *Had it grown?* "Yes. I do believe it has."

Curious, Kirrah glided a fingertip up the firm length.

Exactly how big is it? Inquiring minds want to know.

Though she'd never actually measured one, and she certainly was no expert on these sorts of things, she took a wild guess. "I'd say at least eight inches." She drew a sharp breath and slowly exhaled. Was eight inches a nice size? Too much? Too little? Perfect? She had no idea what was considered just right.

If she had a bit of experience, she wouldn't be so freakin' curious. If her hormones weren't flip-flopping around like circus acrobats on holiday, she wouldn't even be eyeing the man's zipper or the prominent protuberance.

Slowly, she drew her fingertip down the length. Up. Down. Up. Down. Her finger marched like a little soldier. She hummed a soft tune. Up. Down. Her eyes widened as 'it' lengthened even more. "Holy, dunghill!" Her finger stilled, right in the center of the miracle bulge.

Abruptly strong fingers locked around her wrist. "You keep licking your lips and stroking, button, and I'm gonna want to do a little licking and stroking of my own. Only—it won't be up and down to that

sweet little tune you were humming. I'll make my own sweet music, do my own dance to the sound of a different rhythm. Believe me, buttercup, I know how to put every inch of it to good use."

"Eek! Shit! Oh, gods!" Kirrah squeaked and jerked free of his grasp. Leaping off the bed, she glared at him. "You could have said something," she cried. "You scared the crap outta me. You didn't have to just lie there and let me track up and down...it."

"You were enjoying yourself, cupcake. I thought for a moment there you were going to play it like a flute. Of course, I have no objections to a little blowjob."

"Why didn't you tell me you're awake?"

"And ruin your fun? Nuh-uh. But consider yourself warned. You touch. I touch." He frowned. Sniffed. "Man, what a stench. Is that you?"

Kirrah shifted uncomfortably. Heat scalded her face. "Hey, it's your fault. You're the one who threw up all over me, so it's your stench, not mine. It's just on me." She glanced at the front of her shirt. "Everywhere—on me. I'm going to take a shower. Don't move. I'll be right back to help you out of your pants. I—I mean—" She gulped, "Help you out of your clothes—er—you know what I mean."

His topaz-colored eyes crinkled at the corners with amusement. "Sweetheart, you can help me out of anything you desire. Just remember, you touch. I touch. What's your name?"

"Why?" She narrowed her eyes. Suspicion oozed down her spine. Was he going to press charges against her for smacking him with a broom?

"Why?" He sounded puzzled that she'd asked the question. "When a female strokes certain parts of my anatomy I sort of like to know her name." He frowned. "I think."

"I wasn't touching anything. Your—uh—zipper looked very interesting. I've never seen one put so—er, put together so well, a tight fit. Every little tooth meshes together perfectly. No danger of it breaking apart. No way. The little guy's tucked in safe and secure. Snug as a bug and all that—"

"Little guy?" He glanced at said perfect zipper and arched a sandy brow. "Uh-huh. I suppose it's so unusual, it's an attention-grabber all right. *Who* are you?"

"Ah-ha! I *knew* it! You're going to press charges because I whacked you with the broom handle."

"What?"

Kirrah frowned. Might as well 'fess up her name, he looked determined enough not to give up until he discovered who she was. "Kirrah Walker. And I just might want to press charges against you for failure to yield the right away."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You could have ducked, for heaven's sake! *Who* are you? I want your name right this minute."

"I'm—" he frowned, his words breaking off sharply. "I'm—uh—I don't know."

"Oh, right. I forgot Mr. Wa-Wa can't remember his name. Your amnesia is mighty handy—for you."

"Didn't I hear you ask me to lose my memory?"

"Your hearing is as bad as your memory."

"I'm not faking. I swear I can't remember. Have we met before?" He lifted his gaze, studying her closely. "No, I don't think so."

"Are you in the habit of answering your own questions?"

He thought that over and shrugged. "I don't know. The only thing I know for certain is my head is killing me and it's your fault, but I forgive you." He slid a lazy gaze up and down her. "And I'd never forget you." He scowled. "Do I know you?"

"No. We've never met." Kirrah turned, headed across the room toward the bathroom. She turned back in time to see a slow grin of appreciation spread across his sensual lips. "You're looking at my ass," she accused. "Aren't you?"

A brow lifted. "No." He clutched his heart as if he was shattered by her accusation. "I was just noting the sweet sway of your hips as you sashayed across the room light as a fairy."

"What a load of dung. You were eyeing my ass. So stop it! Don't attempt to get out of bed and don't

try to leave. You'll fall flat on your face if you do. You aren't fit." She marched into the bathroom, mumbling beneath her breath.

"Don't slam—" Too late! "—the door..."

He grabbed his head, wincing as sharp pain burst through his skull. It settled to a dull throb, but it made him feel nauseous again. In spite of his discomfort and sick stomach, his lips twitched with amusement. "I'm not going anywhere, button."

Thoughtful, he mulled over what had happened to him in the last few hours and the odds of getting run down by a wacky female clinging to a runaway broom.

He grinned. Damn, but she was cute. He liked her and her fruitcake personality. He'd struggled to keep from laughing when she'd kept downsizing the first knot on his head. The light spray of freckles across the bridge of her nose reminded him of *ley*-sugar drops. Sweet. He adored her cute freckles and couldn't wait to kiss each and every one of them. Kirrah. Hell, he even liked her name. It sounded exotic. He rubbed a hand down his face, scowled and tried to stir a spark of memory to life. Somewhere, he'd heard her name. Where?

He was positive he'd never seen her before. Puzzled, he rubbed the bump over his eye and worried with the biggest question on his mind—why hadn't he found it strange she'd been astride a broom?

Did he believe in witches? Accept without question the possibility of magic—and witches?

The dull throb across his eyes turned into a roaring headache. What about the strange word he'd used? *Sheeahtha*? He'd grabbed it out of thin air, but he didn't know where he'd heard it. Gods, his head hurt. Maybe if he ignored it, the pain would go away.

Why couldn't he remember his past?

His name?

Dammit, no one should forget their name.

Who was he?

More importantly...*what* was he?

Was he a magical creature? Why did the question even cross his mind? Because he'd seen the witch flying on the broom? Could he even believe his eyes? Probably not. Not with his mind all scrambled like it was. A sense of unreality clung to him.

Something wasn't right.

He didn't feel right. He wasn't comfortable in his own skin anymore. He felt as if he was leaving his body behind, emerging like a butterfly from a pupa shell. Changed. Altered in some significant way he had no control over. The feeling wasn't new, that much he remembered. For some time, he'd felt as if everything inside him was shifting, that he was becoming something else. What?

He didn't understand why of it. He was pretty sure he still looked the same, except maybe for the knots on his head. Had getting whacked upside the head a few times totally turned his brain to mush?

Was he hiding from something or someone?

A vague uneasiness, like ghostly fingers tripping down his spine, settled over his mind. There was something important he was supposed to do. What? Hell, this was getting him nowhere. He could think his problems to death, but he didn't see a solution in sight. His memory wasn't even halfway attempting to return to normal, and his imagination had flipped. So he might as well think about something else.

The witch?

His heart did a little flip. *Witch!* Yes-yes-yes. She was a witch. It explained her ability to fly on a broom. However, it didn't explain her *half-assed* ability to fly on a broom.

And all this was a normal thing for him to accept?

He puzzled the questions over and decided maybe it was. Huh. Strange. She was a witch and the fact wasn't startling. What was surprising was her inability to control her besom. The witch intrigued him. He couldn't deny his attraction to her. He'd enjoyed kissing her too.

What was it about this particular female that turned him on?

Raising his head off the pillow, he eyeballed the bulge that had so intrigued the little imp. Smiling, he folded his arms behind his head and whistled softly. The rest of his body might be one big aching mystery, but that part of his anatomy was fine. "Alive and kicking."

He grinned. The sweetheart with the do-me eyes and sweet mouth was in for a surprise. "Ah, you're a tad short with your projection, button. At a guess, I'd say a couple inches over your estimated eight—and ready for action."

Content to discover that at least one part of his body had retained its memory and working ability, he leaned back, a wide smile on his face.

And damn if he wasn't going to put those extra inches to good use with the lovely Kirrah Walker.

He licked his lips. Oh, yeah. The little witch was in for a few surprises. He wanted to do all sorts of things with her, starting with skinning those tight jeans off her sweet little ass and exploring what lay underneath the denim.

Chapter Five

It takes in reality only one to make a quarrel. It is useless for the sheep to pass resolutions in favor of vegetarianism, while the wolf remains of a different opinion.

~William Ralph Inge
(Outspoken Essays-first series, Patriotism.)

Na-Cyl
Wolfe Bayne Hollow
Immortal Realm
Beltane

Creed LaVeau folded his arms across his chest and turned away from the Map of the Immortals displayed on the east wall of his den. He scrutinized his brother, watching patiently as Ransom shape-shifted from *were* form to immortal male with a clumsiness all new *Narks* possessed.

His brother had only recently reached his first *Lu-Nark*. Changing forms was painfully new for him and a bit untidy. Ransom tended to lose a bit of bone, fur and teeth in the process. Messy.

Creed shook his head as a long leg bone dropped off Ransom and dissolved. It was the way for all beginners. Luckily parts regenerated instantly.

Even after the transition, Ransom's eyes still glowed fierce and red. Ransom blinked a couple of times and they reverted to their natural color, green as the forest their pack ran in.

Reaching for the clothes he'd discarded before Creed sent him off to locate Shasta's trail, Ransom pulled on jeans and slipped a plain white tee-shirt over his head. "Shit. Does it always hurt like hell? Am I going to keep falling apart like that?"

Creed grinned. "Yes. Bones snapping and changing form, new teeth rupturing through your gums, pointed ears shooting straight up, claws bursting from the tips of your fingers and toes...yeah, it always hurts like hell. The falling apart will improve with experience."

"We picked up her trail at the border."

"Which border?" Creed turned back to the map and tapped it.

The map, edged in gold, was extremely rare, and one of the six originals known to still be in exis-

tence. It spanned the entire wall from the ceiling to almost half-way to the floor and across. The immortal realms spread across a tremendous amount of rich land, abundant rivers and snow-capped mountains. The lands were divided into numerous realms, kingdoms ruled by one king or one queen or both from each race.

Villages sprawled near and far, some modern, some medieval.

There were two exceptions to the rules. One: Mortal man. Some of their nations had no king or queen, but were ruled by presidents or whichever rebel bands possessed the most weapons and men. Their world was covered with cities and countries, the poor and the hungry, pestilence and disease and constant wars. However, their numbers were plentiful.

The one thing all immortals agreed on; *their* survival depended on secrecy. Their realms had to remain cloaked, and the existence of magic masked from mankind.

As big as the world of mortal man was, the realms of enchantment were more than double the size.

Each immortal king, Fairy, Demon, *Were*, Vampyre, *Waken* and—Death, possessed an original map. Copies were made for lesser princes, but only the first born son, the reigning king of an entire realm, possessed an original.

Two: The Vampyre race was the only magical race who resided among mortals and that was because of their dependence on human blood for nourishment. Still, their existence was considered superstitious folklore and the vampires encouraged this falsehood.

Ransom stepped closer to the map. "You won't like it."

Creed lifted a dark brow. "Shit. Don't tell me that. Which border?"

"Mortal."

"Vampyre?"

Ransom nodded. "I don't know all the details. I just know she's in Romania."

"I want the creature that kidnapped her."

"She wasn't taken across the border against her will, Creed."

Creed stared at his brother for a long moment before inhaling. Releasing the deep breath, he asked, "You're sure?"

"She chose to cross the border."

"Why the hell would she willingly enter the mortal realm when she knows how risky it is for our kind?" He shuddered. "Why would she do such a perilous thing right here at her time to change?"

Ransom shrugged. "I spoke to Principal Wing at the academy. She insisted Shasta packed her bags and left to search for Princess Kali. Shasta didn't go because of a curiosity about mortals or vampires."

"Yes she did. By the gods, it was a bonus for her, one she couldn't ignore. She used the excuse of Kali to go there. It gave her the perfect opportunity to study humans and vampires up close and personal. Something she's always wanted to do." Creed thrust fingers through his dark shaggy hair. "The vampires will scent her immediately."

"Yes. I agree. She's put us all at risk. When we get her home, you must choose a mate for her. It's the only way she'll ever settle down."

"I won't force her into a relationship. She'd—"

"I know. It would break her heart and crush that wonderful spirit she possesses, but if you don't do something, she's going to get into serious trouble one of these days. Forge is looking for an excuse to challenge you for the throne. He'll use Shasta against you if given the chance. He and his pack won't stop until they have their way with her. Once he does, he'll kill her."

"No, he won't kill her. He wants her. He'd like nothing better than to be king of Na-Cyl and make our sister his whore-bitch."

"She's in danger."

Creed nodded and rubbed a hand down his face. "I know. I know Forge is gathering his own pack and it grows daily. One day, there will be a showdown between him and me."

"And Shasta will be in the middle of it."

"Most likely."

"He's resentful of the fact you're king."

"I know, and I know the reasons why, but right now, he's not what's important. Shasta knows nothing about defending herself against a wild pack. She knows even less about the realm of Vampyre or the *Razure* the males use to ensnare females. She'll succumb to their will."

"She's been missing for three nights. Vampires don't hesitate to lay claim to females they want to breed, especially one who has no male to protect her. We have to go after her." Ransom paced the long length of the room, growling beneath his breath.

"Calm down. As a rule, vampires have but three goals in life."

Ransom swung around and eyed Creed. "What? What three goals?"

"Suck, fuck and make baby vampires. They cherish children. They aren't a cruel race, not like the demons can be." Creed pushed a button and calmly waited for the map to lower into the floor panel.

"They drain their victims of blood," Ransom snarled. "How can you be so calm about it?"

"I'm not calm. I'm furious with Shasta. It isn't the vampires' fault she entered their realm alone. They'll see it as an invitation, just as you or I would if a female from another species entered Na-Cyl. And no, vampires don't drain their providers of their blood. Humans are food for them. They need them. Rarely do they kill one or change one. They don't want competition for their meals or for females. Besides, it's already too late. By now, Shasta's mated, possibly bred, probably changed."

Ransom stilled. "*Changed*? You don't mean *were*—do you?"

"No. She'll be Vampyre by now."

Ransom sighed and flopped down on a sofa. "*Na-she-da wal-ka-nee*."

"Speak the mortal language. You know it's mandatory to speak it."

"Fuck, I feel absolutely drained."

Creed's lips twitched. "I should have known you'd learn the worst word first."

"What? Drained?" Ransom teased. "I didn't know it was the worst word in the mortal language."

Creed's eyes narrowed. "You know it isn't."

"And you know there are other words just as bad. I don't see why we need to speak a language we'll never use anyway."

"You don't know that we'll never need to use it. What if the walls crashed down between our worlds?"

"The walls? Of all the worlds? Or just ours?" Ransom sounded incredulous.

"It'd be bad enough if only one realm fell, but what if all of them collapsed?" Creed gnawed on his bottom lip, contemplating what would happen if such an event occurred. "Can't you feel the disturbance in the air? Smell the sulfur? Our air has become static. Unstable. Explosively charged. What if the walls exploded? The mortals would learn of our existence. We'd need to be able to communicate with them."

"Why? So right before they shoot us, we can say, 'Please don't?' The English language is difficult enough, but they have so many different tongues, it's mind boggling."

"*Why*? Because there's no way we could re-erect the walls fast enough to keep us from being discovered—hunted—slaughtered. We'd be annihilated in a matter of weeks. Most of the magickal species are on the verge of extinction already. We don't need a war with mankind."

"You don't believe we are powerful enough in *were* form to survive?" Ransom asked.

"I know we aren't. We don't have the kind of weapons they have to fight back. We have teeth, claws and speed. They have bullets, knives and only the gods know what else. It isn't just silver that kills us. A well placed sword can take off our heads, instant death follows."

"Damn, Creed. Why do you contemplate such a thing as the walls failing?"

"The demons have declared war. Not verbally. Nothing so obvious, but Zebus is taking baby steps. Each day he succeeds in something. He goes about it slowly. Subtly. But I put nothing past him. When he gets ready to make his major move, he will do it so suddenly no one will see it coming. He wants to rule all

the realms. He will let nothing stand in his way. We must be prepared for the worst."

"How can we prepare for the worst when we have no idea what his worst is?"

Creed frowned. "I don't know. I just know trouble is headed our way. I feel it."

"He's made no attack on our realm."

The *were* king held up his hand. "You're right, but this war is coming and it's going to be daunting. It grows larger by the day and it steals the magic from the air. If something doesn't change, the enchanted fairy-tale world we love and are bound to will completely die. When it does, all our walls will topple. All the realms will collide like planets in the heavens. Few will survive the explosions. Those of us who do will be revealed and vulnerable to mortals. The Salem witch hunts will be nothing compared to what the next war with humans would be like."

"Gods, you make me jumpy just thinking about it. I feel completely drained."

"It's the shape-shifting that's exhausted you. It sucks you into a vortex and uses up every ounce of your energy. Help yourself to those chocolate covered rolls. You need the sugar rush. Start keeping a pot of hot chocolate and a tray of sweets in your room. You'll need them."

Ransom grabbed one of the treats and scarfed it down. "I didn't realize shape-shifting burned up so much energy."

"It'll get easier, but you'll always need the sugar rush after shifting. Our sister should have asked for our help before she took off on some harebrained rescue mission doomed for failure. Shasta did it her way, like always. And like always, without us to intercede--it will land her in more trouble than she can escape from." Creed marched back and forth the length of the room, restless, edgy. "Na-Cyl is no longer her home."

"Creed, don't banish her."

"I have no choice. Whatever has happened between her and any vampire she crossed paths with has already happened. Whether we like it or not, she's no longer *were*. The vampire's first bite would have immediately removed her ability to change into *were* form. She no longer belongs in our realm."

"We can't just leave her there," Ransom said around a bite of chocolate cake.

"The pack will not welcome her back. For her safety, I can't accept her back here. Shasta now belongs to the Vampyre," Creed declared, "but no, we won't just abandon her. I want to know she's happy and safe. Find Bane. I think we must pay a visit to Romania and find out what Dracula is up to these days. We leave at first light."

Chapter Six

Beltaine is a time of joyous reveling as the first flowers of summer are gathered in honor of the Goddess. This occurs on May 1.

*Ru-Noc
Sanctuary
Immortal Realm
Beltane*

Kirrah entered the Sugar-N-Spice bakery she owned with Hannah Miller and sighed. Leaning back against the closed door, she took a moment to clear her thoughts, a task that was becoming monumentally impossible since the arrival of Mr. Wa-Wa into her life.

Heavens above, the man could kiss. Worse, she enjoyed kissing him back. Worse than worse, every time they kissed, her body turned into a raging inferno. She swore she actually felt the sparks and crackles at her fingertips, and if she wasn't careful, every candle in the house ignited when he released her. In seconds, she was ready to rip off his clothes, rip off her clothes, and have her wicked way.

She simply had to have a firm discussion with him about *not* kissing her. But every time she got near him, and he was awake, he pulled her on top of his muscular body and kissed the freakin' life out of her. All her good intentions flew right out of her head.

How was she supposed to tell him no when everything in her said yes? Even now her lips tingled, and it had been at least—oh say—an hour since he last stole complete control of them. The electricity between her and the man—well, it had to stop!

Kirrah scowled and pushed away from the door. "Han, where are you? You're never going to believe this."

Hannah emerged from the bakery's kitchen, wiping her hands on the white apron choked around her waist. "I'm making rolls. We ran out. What are you doing here?"

"I need to ask a big favor."

Hannah eyed her suspiciously. "What?" Hannah thrust a dark curl behind her ear leaving a trail of flour along her left cheek. "If you're here this late in the day, it can't be good. What have you done? Has your magic backfired again?"

Kirrah winced. "Sort of—kinda—yeah, I guess you could say that."

Hannah fisted her hands on her hips. "Kirrah Walker, tell me this instant what kind of trouble you're in. Did you set another house on fire?"

"No. Of course not."

"Turn the neighbor's dogs into monkeys again?"

"No."

"Turn the neighbor's cats into dogs?"

"No!"

"Then what? That's all the bad things I can think of you've done lately."

"I clobbered a man—"

"What?!" Hanna shrieked. "What do you mean you clobbered a man?"

"I broom-sticked him."

Hanna's eyes widened. "God, that sounds awful. How do you broom-stick someone?"

"I whacked him upside the head with the broom handle."

"Deliberately?"

"Hannah, you know I'm not a violent person. I wouldn't injure someone deliberately."

"Injure? You hurt him?" she squeaked.

"Sort of. Don't look at me like that, Han. It's only a little knot—about the size of a bird's egg—the first one."

"First one?"

"I sort of dropped him on his head and there was a sharp rock poking up out of the ground—it was number two."

"Oh, my stars, how many times—let me rephrase that. How many knots does he have? And is he still breathing?"

"Three. Yes, of course he's still breathing."

"You're sure? You didn't kill him?"

"No! I wouldn't kill anyone."

"Is there a 'but' in there?"

"Uh—yeah."

Hannah sighed. "What else did you do to him?"

"I tied him to my bed so I could come here."

"Oh, my gosh," she shrieked. "You kidnapped him, Kirrah? Are you insane?"

"I didn't kidnap him. I couldn't just leave him lying there on the forest floor, moaning and bleeding. He's hurt. I couldn't risk leaving him alone without using some sort of safety restraints. What if he woke up and left the house?"

Hannah laughed. "You're sure he's still breathing?"

"I'm sure."

"Did you smash his brain up all nice and tidy?"

"Good grief, Han, you make me sound like a mad scientist or something. I'm not a ghoul. And how on earth does one smash a brain all nice and tidy?"

Hannah snickered. "Beats me. Okay, sweetie, so, his brain is intact? No damage?"

"Not unless you think his kissing me every time he wakes is a sign of a brain injury."

Hannah arched a brow and grinned. "No. I'd say it's a healthy sign from a male. Is he a good kisser?"

"The best."

"Kirrah Walker, you're impossible. Who is he?"

"I don't know."

"Didn't you ask him his name before you kissed him?"

"He can't remember it. I mean, I did sort of knock him loopy."

"With the broom?"

"Yes, of course, plus the other two times he was injured. And *I* didn't kiss him. He kissed me."

Hannah shook her head. "Is he okay, other than his loss of memory?"

"No," Kirrah said. Her voice wobbled and she burst into tears. "I think he might die. Oh, Han, he's hurt badly, three huge knots on his head, one deep cut. His poor head looks like some sort of—like a—a knotty, deformed mushroom or—or worse. He can't remember a thing. I think I hexed him. I wished for him to have amnesia and he does! It's awful." She buried her face in her hands and wept. Kirrah lifted her head and sniffed. "He keeps kissing me. I know he can't be in his right mind."

Hannah patted her on the back and made comforting noises. "Aww, sweetie, you're a beautiful woman. I think there'd be something seriously wrong with his head if he didn't kiss you. Come on, Kirrah. It can't be that bad. Why didn't you just take him to see a witch doctor?"

"What?" Kirrah looked up, scrubbed the tears off her face and dropped her hands to her sides. "I couldn't do that. I'm the one who injured him. You know as well as I, we don't know all the laws here. What if flying on a runaway broom is illegal? It's good for me he can't remember, but it's bad he might die from injuries I inflicted."

Hanna blinked. "Why did you hit him with your broom? You didn't hit him on purpose, did you?"

"No, I didn't hit him on purpose any time. It just happened—sort of."

Hannah pushed a tissue in Kirrah's hands, guided her to one of the small tables reserved for customers, and pushed her onto the chair. "I'll get you a nice hot cup of tea. Stop crying and tell me exactly what happened."

By the time Kirrah finished her woeful tale, Hannah was snorting with laughter. "Stop worrying so much, Kirrah. If the man is able to kiss you, he can't be hurt too badly."

"Ooh, but he promptly passes right out, Han, and he's been out cold most of today. I can't stay away long, that's why I came here to ask if you'd work my late shift tonight. I can't leave him unattended for hours. My broom doesn't like him. It blames him for getting into trouble."

Hannah giggled. "You talk like your broom comes to life and turns into an attack dog or something."

Kirrah's eyes rounded. "It does! Don't laugh. I swear it does. I caught it jabbing the poor man's arm with one of its switches this afternoon. I had to order it to go stand in a corner. It sassed me, told me I didn't know what I was dealing with having that *thing* in my bed."

Hannah wiped tears of merriment from her eyes. "I swear you live an exciting life. I wish I was a witch."

"No, you don't. Being a witch is terrible." Kirrah released a pent-up breath and dashed fresh tears from her eyes. "You never know what spell is going to go berserk or what inanimate thing is going to leap to life and attack, talk, or catch on fire. Okay. So will you close the shop as soon as you finish the rolls, then come back tonight to make tomorrow's goodies?"

"Oh, Kirrah, you know I hate that shift. It's creepy here late at night."

"Please? Just this once? I can't leave him alone all night. He might hurt himself—worse than he already is. Tonight's the only night, then it's the weekend. We can close up the shop after tomorrow and you can take the vacation you wanted to take."

Hannah nodded. "All right. I'll return tonight and stock the shelves with fresh goods, but who's going to open in the morning?"

"Ooh, I hired that pretty young witch with the cute little boy—what's his name? Lamb Chop? You know the one I mean, the kid who's always skipping and falling?"

"Lamee. That little boy is a menace to himself. He's going to get in serious trouble one of these days."

"Yes, that's the one. His mother agreed to open the shop for me tomorrow."

Hannah nodded. "Looks like you have it covered. Okay. So, if I disappear for a few days, don't worry about me. I'll be somewhere on a beach soaking up rays and suntan lotion."

Kirrah swallowed the last of the lemony flavored tea, stood up and hugged her friend. "Thanks, Han. I owe you one."

"You do. You owe me several, but who's counting? How did you get here? I don't see your car out front."

"Broom."

"Broom? Kirrah. You don't know enough magic to deliberately get on a broom."

Kirrah shrugged. "How else am I going to learn how to do loop-de-loops without falling off? I need more practice. Besides, the last time I drove the car here, I got a ticket from the meter witch. You'd have thought I committed a major crime driving the car into Sanctuary."

"What?" Hannah frowned. "What did she say to you?"

"She looked me up and down like I was an intruder, sniffed, and called me impure."

"Oh, my God, what did you say?"

"I told her I was pure as snow."

Hannah giggled.

"She upped the amount of the ticket, told me just because I was one of *those* Winslow witches didn't mean I got special treatment."

"She knew you're a Winslow? How?"

"That's what I asked her, 'How do you know I'm a Winslow when I use Walker for my last name?' She gave me the once over again, sniffed, and said, 'You're the spittin' image of your ma, 'cept for the hair. Reckon you get that red color from Queen Shy-Ryn.' Then she sniffed, as if I smelled bad or something, and said, 'Not that it matters much now, with the queen murdered and all. Your family's fault, too. We all know

your ma lay with that mortal, two-timing man, had three young-uns by him before he left her for that sorry-ass MeLora. You smell, *Impure*. All half-breeds stink!"

Hannah gasped. "Why, that old witch, the nerve of her. Oh, that reminds me. I met the owner of the magic shop yesterday."

"The young woman who has all that pretty silver-blond hair?"

"Yeah. Gosh, Kirrah, you and her look enough alike to be sisters."

Kirrah rolled her eyes. "Please, Han, I'm a redhead. Aunt Penell said it's a Winslow color and so did the meter witch. If the magic shop owner is blonde, we can't possibly look anything alike."

"Yes, you do. Up close, you favor—kind of..."

Her voice trailed away as Kirrah shook her head. "You're the closest thing to a sister I've ever had. I don't know any other Winslows."

"I'm not a Winslow, hon."

"Neither am I. I'm a Walker who happens to be a Winslow. Besides, you're a Winslow to me."

"Yes, well your aunt kept a lot of things secret from you. You need to pin her down first chance you get, find out about your sisters."

Kirrah frowned. "She didn't keep secrets from me."

"Yes, she did, Kirrah."

"Name one?"

"The fact you're a witch?"

"That one doesn't count. I understand why she kept it secret. Name another one."

"She kept it hidden from you until the day you turned twenty-one."

"Well, yes, of course she did. It doesn't mean she lied to me about anything else."

"I'm not calling her a liar, sweetie. I'm just saying she kept things from you to protect you."

Kirrah's eyes burned with unshed tears. "I miss her so much. I'll be glad when she returns from her trip abroad."

"Well, when she does, you need to get some answers from her about your family. You didn't sprout from a bean. And you need instructions on how to use your magic. A little help from her wouldn't be amiss, you know."

"I know. I will. I was just always afraid to ask her questions."

"Why?"

"I was scared I wouldn't like the answers. I'm especially scared now that that old witch said those things about my birth parents. It sounds like things were really bad between them."

"You don't know the entire story, and you don't know if the witch even knew what she was talking about."

"She knew, Han. I saw the truth in her eyes. She said my father murdered my mother. What if deep inside I'm a wannabe killer? Maybe that's why I broom-sticked the man in the woods. Maybe I can't control the urge to murder, mutilate and smash brains."

"Kirrah," Hannah snapped. "Stop it. One, you didn't kill, mutilate him or smash his brain. Two, I'm sorry, sweetie, but I think there's more to the story about your parents than the meter witch knew. She was being mean and gossiping and bent on ruining your day. You need to hear what your aunt has to say about it."

"Maybe. I have to go, Han."

"You be careful with that *person* in your bed. Don't let him pull anything over on you."

Kirrah grinned. "I have my rolling pin. He tries anything, I'll clobber him."

Chapter Seven

And he asked him, What is thy name? And he answered, saying, My name is Legion; for we are many.

~Mark 5:9

*Transylvania
Radu Castle
Mortal Realm*

Control of Radu Castle was lost in but a single heartbeat. Prince Valerian, future king of Vampyre, blamed Dracula. Dracula shrugged, sipped warm blood from his wine chalice, and let it all roll off his back.

Valerian clenched his fists and glared at his grandfather. It was plain the ancient didn't give a shit that he'd wrecked his grandson's life. "If you hadn't ordered me chained and drained my powers, I would have known demons had invaded my castle."

Dracula stiffened. "Posh! Do not take that tone of voice with me, youngling. I am still your king. You're so enamored with that *were*, she'd have you standing on your head or bouncing your balls on the floor before you ever bred her. You're merely upset because Dragos was upstairs impaling your mate when all hell broke loose. And he's with her now, and you think it should be you. You're afraid Shasta liked his sexing her and will allow him to sex her again, with or without your permission." Dracula nodded. "Your frustration, *your* anger is against Dragos, not me."

Valerian held up a hand. "Do not go there. Why wouldn't I be upset that you commanded another male to breed my female? I don't fault Dragos. Neither you nor I gave him a choice. We both made demands on him. I trust Dragos and Shasta."

Dracula snorted. "More fool you. The *were's* in heat. All she wants to do right now is hump and be humped."

"They will not dishonor me."

Dracula snorted again. "They are both horny. They've already sampled each other. It took them the entire four hours to finish. That tells me they liked it. They aren't going to be thinking about your honor."

"I blame you. You've ruined all our lives."

"Everyone blames me for their woes. Is it my fault you chose such a stubborn, horny wench for your

First Bride? Was it my fault she refused to let you breed her? She needed to be taken under control."

"No one will ever control Shasta. Not even the haughty Dracula."

"I got her bred, didn't I? Be glad it wasn't me with her upstairs. I would have taught her a thing or two about impalement."

"You're revolting!"

"And you have to toughen up if you expect to be king. Do you have any idea how many females I've bred over the centuries?"

"Do you?"

Dracula chuckled. "I remember every single one of the little darlings and I impaled them good—"

"Whether they wanted to be or not?"

Dracula's vivid blue eyes twinkled. "Trust me, son, I've never used force to persuade a woman to my bed."

"No, just a glib tongue, and I'm not your son, right now, I'm not your grandson, either."

"Never had a single complaint when I used my tongue, and you're nearly my son. Your mother, after all, was one of my daughters—somewhere down through the ages."

"You're disgusting. How the hell do you keep up with those who carry your blood?"

Dracula lifted a brow. "I know who I've sexed and bred. Maybe you need lessons from an expert, then your female would have cooperated and let you breed her."

"I don't need lessons. I would have bred Shasta, given time."

"Time? The last thing you had was time. If you want to be king, it was necessary she be bred immediately. So don't bemoan Dragos fucking your bride. He might have done some hard poking, but I'm certain he didn't harm her. She looked fine to me, except for the athames in her ribs—"

"You know Dragos didn't harm her."

"Yes, I know. I'm also quite sure things went very well between them. A lot of sexing went on in the four hours they were upstairs. I think Dragos might have a thing for your mate."

"You're an impossible asshole."

Dracula's eyes widened. "Totally true. However, you knew that when you chose to wake me from my *Druze* sleep. I did try to drive you away. I'm very cranky when my rest is disturbed."

"Huh! You're cranky all the time. You always have been."

"You're upset," Dracula said, benevolence lacing his voice. "I don't blame you, son. However, you need to calm down and look at this through my perspective and through the eyes of the future ruler, and not as a besotted mate."

Valerian stiffened. "Why is it I'm besotted because I love my mate?"

"Do you think I do not love my mate as equally as you love Shasta?"

"I doubt you love anyone but yourself."

"Val," Ciprian cautioned. "You're angry, justifiably so, but Dracula is still our king, my father, and your grandfather. Be gentle. He's ancient."

Dracula held up a hand. "This is between Val and me—and I'm not ancient—merely old as dirt."

Valerian lifted his chin in an effort to conceal his pain and fear of what Brasov might do to Shasta and the others. He knew his twin brother was involved in the attack on the castle. "Go on."

Dracula nodded. "I love my mate with all my heart, but we were so few. We are still very few. Your grandmother understood the necessity that I spread my seed." He toyed with straightening his black tie. "If I hadn't sexed other females, you wouldn't be here. What you must understand is, it wasn't the women who interested me but my offspring they conceived. As soon as a female conceived, I returned to my mate. Tonight, I taught you an important lesson, one of many you will learn."

"You call that a lesson, demanding I give my bride to another male to bed?"

"You will always, *always* put the needs of your clan first or you will fail as king. Dragos was at a dangerous stage in a vampire's life. He had no mate nor does he have any prospects at this time. He had not

sought a female to sex in years."

Valerian lifted a brow.

Dracula shrugged. "He wanted to fuck your mate. He would never have betrayed you and taken Shasta for a night, but if his need hadn't been relieved, he'd have turned to gluttony to compensate. Brasov is a warrior to reckon with. We did not need Dragos joining forces with him."

"Dragos would *never* join on the side of my brother."

"The urges he'd feel after gluttony are beyond a vampire's control. If he changed, yes, he'd go to Brasov. He wouldn't be able to help himself. And wearing a crown, doesn't give you special privileges, son. It doesn't make you immune to the needs of those in your nest. Your entire rule will be mostly sacrifices for them. There will always be males who want your mate, but there will be those whom it is an absolute necessity you allow to bed her, even breed her."

"No. I can't do such a thing to her."

"Yes, you can. And for the greater good, you will see it is done. You may die inside a little each time, but you will turn and walk away, and leave her with the male who needs her."

"Even if I agreed to such a thing, Shasta wouldn't and I would never ask her."

"You don't ask. You command. And yes, she will obey. In fact, she will need those males as much they need her. I know her breed. *Were*-females are used to mating with packs. Multiplicity is part of the *were*-female's life. She will agree. It's a natural thing in her blood."

"Shasta isn't like that. She hadn't previously mated with members of her clan. She isn't a full-blooded *were*. She's half-witch. I won't do it."

"You *will* do it. Your mate is now more Vampyre than any other species. And being king comes with painful moments of yielding that which one loves most. If it means forfeiting your female to another male to sex in order to save his soul, then—you—*sacrifice*! If one day you have a daughter, if it means giving her to two males from another clan to fuck in order to maintain peace and gain their loyalty, then you will surrender her to them and walk away. Being King of Vampyre isn't just about wearing a crown. You sacrifice everything, anything—everyone. You look upset."

"Do I?" Valerian asked abruptly. "I assure you I'm not upset just because of the fact Dragos enjoyed the mating session with my bride. Hell, I didn't expect him to hate it, but I saw the glow on Shasta's face. She liked it, too."

"Uh-huh. Would it make it more acceptable if she'd hated it? It would make you happy to see her miserable?"

"No. Certainly I wouldn't want to see her unhappy."

"I chose Dragos because I knew he wanted her and would take care not to hurt her. The glow came from the fact he did a damn good job sexing her and the fact she conceived. Every female glows when she conceives, and didn't I just explain she'd crave other males? It doesn't mean she doesn't love you. She does. I read her mind. She's crazy in love with you. Shasta doesn't see it as betrayal. You will not accuse her of this. Ever. She will always return to you. For her, mating with other males is natural. Every child she gives birth to may not necessarily come from your loins, but she will only mate with males that come from your bloodline. My bloodline. That is acceptable to the Ancients and every child another male puts inside her will always be considered your seed by ancient law."

Valerian shook his head, his eyes dark with fury. "You better understand one thing, Grandfather, if you believe the crown is more important to me than my bride or any children we have in the future, then you need to give it to Brasov. I will not share my mate, ever again. I will not allow her to be bred by another, ever again. I will not mate with other females. I swore this to her and I intend to keep my oath. Yes, you should give the crown to Brasov. This throwing away one's mate sounds more like him than it does me."

"Pish-posh. Brasov would have the crown trampled in the mud in no time, the kingdom destroyed. *You* are the future king. It doesn't mean the crown comes without a price."

"Brasov is behind this invasion. He and the demons are working together."

"Careful what you say. Your accusations are without proof and ungrounded. We were attacked by demons. The entire fucking army of demons waited outside on the castle grounds. They waited for Zebus to give the command to attack. I didn't see Brasov or a single rogue vampire among them. Your allegations will fall on deaf ears in court. You must have proof."

"My mate was taken, as was Ciprian's."

"But you don't know where they were taken. Zebus could have taken them to his realm. If that is the case, they are lost to us forever."

"No. I've communicated with Shasta. They're inside a mine with Brasov."

"Where?"

"I don't know. The countryside is riddled with salt mines and ice caves."

"There you go. Zebus dwells deep within Noddon Caverns. To your mate, it would seem like a mine. By tomorrow night, both she and Ann will have mated with a demon. It would do no good to try to rescue them. Once a female mates with a demon, she will never mate with her own kind again, unless the demon allows it, which he rarely does. Demons are very possessive. They do something to the woman's mind and body that binds her to them and their realm forever."

"Dragos is gravely wounded. We need to find him quickly and get him underground. He needs time to heal." Val's impotent rage quivered in his voice. "I know in my heart they're still here in Romania somewhere. I feel it."

"Careful we do not debate these issues too long and bring death upon Dragos and the others by doing nothing. None of them are in good shape," Dragomir said fiercely. He paused beside Valerian, his dark face furious. "My brother is dying while we stand and chatter away what night hours are left to us. Shasta and Ann are at grave risk and vulnerable. We stand here and talk the hours away."

"What would you have us do?" Dracula asked. "Dawn is upon us. Now is the time for talk and caution. We cannot rush into the approaching sunlight and commit suicide. We can do nothing but wait for next nightfall. The good thing is: if Brasov has them, he can do nothing, either. He must give in to the need of our kind and slumber. I suggest we move Dracul and his mate to a bed filled with the healing earth of our realm. By dusk, they will be much better."

Ciprian glared at Dracula. "There are parasites feeding off Dracul's heart, as well as Dragos'. The worms won't stop boring just because it's daylight. How do you think either of them is going to feel better? These are two of our finest males. They are dying! We have to do something!"

Dracula lifted his head, pride in the arrogant tilt of his stubborn chin. "You're my first born, Ciprian, the son who is nearest and dearest to my heart in which I find no fault, but Dracul is my youngest. My baby. He is the joy of my life. He suffers. I suffer. Do not think I do not grieve for his pain. I love my children, all of them. Besides, if I let anything happen to either of you, your mother would drive a stake through my heart. And believe me, she's getting better with her aim. Last time I pissed her off, I spent months in the ground healing." His eyes flared red. "Dracul's bride carries my granddaughter. Your bride carries my grandson. *My blood!* Do you believe I will contemplate any of them dying?"

Ciprian closed his eyes, shook his head. "No." He opened his eyes and stared at his father. "So I'm your first born? I always wondered, but you've always been so secretive about your life and descendents."

"It pays to keep secrets."

"Uh-huh. Out of curiosity, how many children have you fathered?"

Dracula's blue eyes twinkled. "Last count? One thousand five-hundred, but in the last couple of centuries, I've slowed down a bit. I spend more time with your mother, besides I stopped counting my offspring centuries ago. Come, we must sleep. When we awaken, we go for our loved ones. Once Dracul has rested and had time to mend a little, he'll be able to fight with us. When I rise, I will feed from him and take the remaining parasites from his heart."

"No!" Valerian and Ciprian both shouted. "It's too dangerous for an Ancient," Valerian concluded.

Dracula smoothed a dark eyebrow, straightened his white silk shirt, then softly snorted. "Younglings,

you lack faith in me. Do you honestly think this is the first attack I've dealt with from demons or their ugly-ass parasites? I learned the secret long ago how to remove those tiny embedded creatures from a vampire's heart. I will cure Dracul and Dragos."

Valerian stood in the huge entryway of the castle and swore viciously beneath his breath. "It's intolerable Zebus attacked us in my home. We've done nothing to provoke such an assault."

Dracula shrugged. "Zebus is not a creature that requires provocation. He has always had a clanking set of balls. Over the centuries, he's dared many things." Dracula drew his silk cape on and pulled it close around his shoulders. "But he has reasons for the things he does. We need to prepare for the worst. I received an urgent message from Prince Talon yesterday. Zebus attacked his home, stole his female, a witch named Saylym Winslow. Of course, we all know too many hours have passed now to recover her. She is lost to the prince forever. Even if Talon somehow rescued her, by now, she will have already been mated with a demon, already bred."

"Zebus attacked Prince Talon?" Valerian rubbed a hand down his face. "We must help him find his mate."

"No. We will not interfere in this war. It is between the *wakens* and the demons."

Valerian growled roughly. "For Samhain's sake, the war has been brought to our door and dumped on our heads. Do you think for a moment Zebus will not return for more of our mates?"

"I'm certain he will. But he will not find us so vulnerable next time or even defenseless while we slumber. I've posted a dozen stone gargoyle hounds around the perimeter of the castle since our invisible protection spells don't ward off demons. If anything or anyone attempts to intrude, the hounds will come to life and attack"

"You're changing the subject."

"No, I'm merely taking up one I can do something about."

"Well you might not want to help Talon, but I owe him. He's a friend."

Dracula frowned. "You will not get involved. I forbid it! Besides, I'm not certain as to the right or wrong of it. Zebus had a fair reason to attack Prince Talon and capture his mate."

"You're making excuses for the demon after what he just did to us?" Valerian knew he sounded incredulous. He couldn't help it. How could his grandfather condone Zebus' attack on Talon?

"I condone nothing, but when one's mate and child are murdered, it tends to drive a male a bit insane. You should understand his feelings, Val. Your mate and child are at risk at this very moment."

Valerian's brow crinkled. "I did not murder Zebus' mate and child."

"No, but you are friends with Prince Talon. He did."

"I don't believe that. Talon would never be so cruel, not even to a demon. We are allies with the prince, with the *wakens*. We have to help him rescue his mate."

"Talon was doing his job. He didn't know the witch was with child or that she was mated to a demon. Zebus has waited many years to seek vengeance. He will have given Talon's female to the most virile demon in his command, perhaps even to his son Kyma. Zebus might send her back to Talon, but he will make certain she is heavy with a demon baby first."

Valerian swore harshly. "Talon will need my friendship more than ever."

"Being a friend to Talon makes us Zebus' enemy. He is at war, not only with himself, but any and all species who befriend the *wakens*. Why do you think he attacked us? You know well the *wakens* are a dying race, more so even than all the others. Most of their problems were created by their own arrogance and ignorance from assassinating their females."

"But they no longer do that—do they?"

Dracula nodded. "Under certain circumstances, yes, a *waken* would not hesitate to steal a witch's soul which is why their females turned to males from other species to mate with. Not only that, but King Kalibus has slowly, but methodically been wiping out the *waken* bloodline. Witches who give birth every year are birthing demon babies, not *wakens*. Rest assured, if Talon regains Saylym, he will not want her or the

child she carries. He will kill her, before he allows her to birth a demon."

"Why? How do you know this?"

"Would you accept a demon for your child? Would you want your mate back after she's been fucked by a demon? Don't say yes, because the answer is no. Even if you wanted to sex her, she would not respond to you. She would meet with the demon who claims her. Every breeding season, he'd plant his seed inside her and every child she births, from her first mating with him to her last, will belong to her demon mate, unless something happens to prevent the breeding."

"How do you know this?"

"I've watched it happening for centuries. King Kallibus made certain the witches were sterile, except when mating with a demon. Demons perform certain rituals when they mate, much like ours. They mingle their blood with their chosen female. If they saturate the witch with the flow of demon blood through her veins, eventually she takes on the characteristics of a demon. Believe me, the demon ensures this process happens quickly. He also breeds her as soon as she's fertile. No opportunity to breed a female is wasted or passed by, no matter if it's out of season. For demons, it's always breeding season."

"Samhain. It's horrible!" Valerian thrust unsteady fingers through his hair. "We have to stop this from happening, not only to Talon's mate, but gods, if demons can breed all year round, and the rest of the races have to wait for the right season, our realms will soon be over run with demons."

"I do believe that is King Kallibus' intent, especially in the *waken* realm."

"We have to rescue Talon's mate."

Dracula shook his head. "Have you not listened to a word I said? It's already too late. Prince Talon's female has been missing for over twenty-four hours. She already belongs to another. She is carrying a demon's babe."

"We have to try."

"No. It's too late for Talon and Saylym. There's no going back to what they had. Ever."

"But, Saylym loves Talon. I was at their wedding. They're crazy in love with each other."

Dracula's eyes filled with sadness. "No. Her love for Talon will have been wiped away. Her sexual appetite has been changed. The blood exchange with a demon alters a witch, but the drugs play an important part as well. It's given to enhance the witch's sex drive. The aphrodisiac is so powerful, only a demon can satisfy her now. To the witch, the demon becomes the perfect lover. The perfect mate. By the time the drugs are halted, the witch is so indoctrinated into the demon realm, her body so in tune with her new mate, her physical appearance so changed to match his, she will not leave him. She will have spent years in the demon's bed, conceived several children with him. Her feelings for him and their children will be as solid as stone. She will never leave them, except at All Hallows' Eve when it's time to give birth to another child."

Aghast at what had happened to Prince Talon and within the walls of his own winter home, Prince Valerian Radu knuckled his eyes. He couldn't bear the thought of his twin brother Brasov having Shasta under his control or that of a demon's. His brother was as merciless as a demon. Brasov would do anything to claim the crown and the bastard had *his* female.

His heart sank. A knot formed in his chest. Valerian couldn't remember a time when he felt so defeated. He could only imagine how devastated Talon felt at the permanent loss of Saylym.

Dragomir's eyes reddened with temper. "If Dragos dies, I swear to Samhain, there will be nowhere safe for Brasov."

Val nodded his understanding. "Do you think I feel any differently? He has my bride."

A muscle ticked wildly in Dragomir's firm jaw. "Do not pretend you have any love for my brother. Dragos sexed your bride. She conceived his son. You cannot feel anything for him but anger, hatred and his betrayal."

"I'm angry, yes, but I don't hate him, and this discussion will continue no further. It's between Dragos and me."

"Dammit, Valerian, my brother is in love with your mate. You know as well as I, he spent way too

much time with her upstairs. It would never have taken him more than one mating to breed her. You know it. I know it. You act like it's nothing that he took the full four hours granted him."

"No. No. Not nothing." Valerian's voice cracked with emotion. "It was everything. Why do you think I allowed him to take her up there? I would not have tolerated any male touching Shasta, except for one who cared for her. I didn't grant him four hours, Dracula did. Dragos will walk away from Shasta when the time comes."

"No, he won't. You *knew* my brother is in love with your mate and still you let him sex her? You don't know Dragos as I do. He will not walk away from his son. He will not relinquish the hold he now has over Shasta."

Valerian gave a slight nod. "We'll work it out. I don't want to fight with one of my own, but I won't surrender Shasta to him ever again or permanently. She belongs to me. Her child—her child isn't mine. For that, I'm sorry. Dragos is the real loser here. I'll help you save your brother, but when it's done, I ask that you take him and go. I don't ever want to see him again. There can be no contact between Shasta, him or the babe."

"You forbid him to see his own son?" Dragomir's face tightened with fury. "You can't do that to him. It'll destroy him. Could you turn your back on your child?"

"It isn't me we're discussing here. The child will not be his, but mine. It would only make things harder for all of us if he's permitted to be involved in our lives. There would be nothing but unrest and distrust between him and me and confusion for the child. Dragos can never see his son."

Dragomir shook his head, his dark hair spilling around his shoulders. "I will not leave you to fight Brasov and the demons alone. My clan will help, as we have always helped. Dragos is a man of honor, but he loves Shasta. If he wants her and the babe for himself, my loyalty lies with my brother and the child. I will stand by them."

Valerian tightened his lips, displeased with Dragomir's declaration. "You will split our clans if you do that. It will leave us all vulnerable and weak."

"Don't. Although it might be difficult, we'll survive. My allegiance belongs to my brother and his son first—and his chosen female."

"Dragomir, don't do this. I don't doubt Dragos' honor."

"Val, I fear where your mate is concerned, my brother no longer has any honor. He has bonded with your mate in a way you have not. They created a child together. Her hold on him will be phenomenal. He will take her and the babe with him when he leaves here. I have no choice but to offer them my protection."

"I can't allow him to do that."

"And I will not let you stop him."

"Dammit, Dragomir—"

"I have no choice."

"They made a child together, yes, but Shasta loves me."

Dragomir lifted his head, his eyes cold. "They spent hours mating. Did you hear any objections coming from up those stairs? No—and neither did I. She might love you, Val, but she will go with the father of her child. Her ties to Dragos are now just as strong as her love for you."

"It is why I must break the hold they have on one another quickly. Once they are back here, the only way is to keep them apart."

"You're making a mistake. If you try to push Dragos out of your life, out of Shasta's, it will only make them more determined to be together. If you send him away, he will be shamed that he no longer holds your friendship. He will feel you no longer trust him."

"I don't trust him any longer. I can't risk him being around my bride. I'm sorry. It will hurt him worse to see her, to know I mate with her nightly. It will destroy him to see his son and not be able to claim him and I—I'm afraid I will kill him if he touches Shasta intimately again. You must take him away."

Dragomir nodded sharply. "It will be as you command, but do not think we remain friends."

"There are too many demons for us to become enemies, Dragomir."

"We are already enemies."

Ciprian held up his hand. "Val, you cannot send Dragomir and Dragos from here when we need them the most. If you involve us in this war of Talon's – and I know you will, no matter what Dracula commands to the contrary – we need the full support of every prince and his warriors."

Sunlight bounced through the windows and off the inner castle walls with a rapidness that alarmed Valerian as well as the other vampires. "Val, we have to join Laura and Dracul underground. Our native soil will give us strength. There's little time before *Leeth* comes upon us." Ciprian yawned, making his point.

"*Leeth*?" Val felt too numb from the attack on his home, the kidnapping of his bride and friends to deal with the heavy urge to sleep that struck at approaching sunlight. *Leeth*. It sucked all vampires dry of the will to remain awake. "They took Shasta." His voice cracked. "They just marched right inside my home and took my mate. They severely injured my guests, mortally wounded one of our females. Do any of you believe this is only Talon's war? It's our battle, too. We either band with him and help, or we'll all perish, one species at a time."

"She's alive, Val. They took my bride, too, and they murdered Crina, but tonight is the time to save the ones we can, the ones here now need our help. We don't have enough warriors to get involved in a war. We must think of our own and leave others to solve their own problems. We need to see to Dracul and Laura. They're here and they need us."

"Yes. Uh—" Val shook his head, too tired to even think straight. "In the dungeons, deep below the castle, there are a dozen coffins filled with our native soil. We'll rest there today and guard over Dracul and Laura. We'll know instantly if they worsen."

Dragomir scowled deeply. "And we'll still be helpless to do one damn thing to save them. It's a good thing Dracula already retired. Good thing he's leaving for Austria soon to oversee Apostol and Amee's safety or else I'd be tempted to shove his royal ass out the door and into the sunlight. This mess is his entire creation."

Valerian shook his head. "If you seek to blame someone, then blame me. I woke him from his rest. I thought he'd be of some use against Brasov. Instead, he's made things worse."

Ciprian's face darkened with disgust. "I could have told you Father would only make a muck of it. He's always been a hazard. You'd have been wiser going to Mother. She's a shining example of a vampire queen. And no matter what Father says, Mother never condoned his sleeping around."

"Good gods," Dragomir chimed. "Does he ever tell the truth?"

Ciprian snorted. "The truth is beyond him, as it is most vampires, unless it suits them to speak honestly. Let's check on Dracul and Laura before we retire. I heard Laura's screams as the athames were removed from her side. I know Dracul must be worried to death for her."

"Dracul? Worried?" Dragomir raised both brows. "I can't believe he fell so quickly for the human."

Ciprian lips twisted with wryness. "It isn't true to character for him, but he took one look at Laura and toppled like an oak. He chased after her all the way to the ladies' restroom at the Inn. Never seen Dracul chase a female before, that's why I believe he fell hard for her. She was so mad at him over Ann getting shot when he was clearly not to blame, I'm surprised he managed to talk her into his bed and knock her up, too."

"*Knock her up*?" Valerian shook his head. "Really, Ciprian, you must stop hanging with the mortals. You're beginning to use their terrible slang."

Ciprian reared back, a look of horror darkening his face. "I don't hang with humans. That was the terminology Dracul used. I merely repeated what he said. Hell, he grinned and strutted like a proud peacock when he announced it. 'I knocked her up, Cip. Laura's carrying my baby. One time, it's all it took and bam, she was preggers.'"

Dragomir choked on his laughter, then sobered when he saw the pain in Ciprian's eyes. It was plain the older vampire loved his younger brother.

"There's nothing we can do for Shasta, Ann or Dragos," Val said, changing the subject in order to

give Ciprian time to get his emotions under control. "Dawn holds us captive, but it also holds Brasov hostage."

"Yes." Ciprian agreed. "But it will not stop him from staking them in the sun. Remember, he has demons to help him. The sunlight does not slow *them* down."

Ciprian patted Val's shoulders. "We must wait for evening. Then we'll find out what has happened. Let's get some rest."

Valerian nodded, but he knew the day would not be restful, not as long as his bride was held captive.

Chapter Eight

It's important to face down your demons.
~Stephen Jenkins

*Ru-Noc
Annu Mountain
Noddon Caverns
Immortal Realm
Beltane*

Black Drayke took his time dropping to the cavern floor from the deep crevice near the bumpy ceiling. The dark cranny between the upper limit and uneven ground left him less exposed to any demon that happened by.

It allowed him to lie down, instead of hang from the ceiling, which had become old fast. He didn't rest well with his blood rushing to his head. He wasn't a bat, for the gods' sake.

He took a moment to allow his vision to adjust, not that he had great vision anymore, then slowly unfurled his wings. The Stygian dark within the deepest region of the caverns he now called home was the only thing that soothed the eternal fire in his eyes.

The more he used Black Magick, the darker his eyes became. The darker his eyes, the less color in his surroundings. He'd lost all ability to distinguish brightness and diversity in colors. He saw only grays and blacks. It might not be very pleasing to the palette, but he didn't care. Who needed such things anyway?

He laughed. He'd given his body over to the demons, first King Kallibus to breed Queen Helayne, then King Zebus for nourishment, among other things. Demons were fond of a magical's blood, especially the supernatural blood of a witch, warlock or *waken*. Not only was it a sweet aphrodisiac for demons, it strengthened their weak conjuring, revved their powers and sexual energy to a whole new level.

Black Drayke scowled his frustration. Rage churned in his gut. It left a sour taste in his mouth and an acidic burn chewing away at his insides. So far as he could determine, he'd done both demons' bidding and the only thing he'd gained from it was a loss of vision and in its place he'd grown scales, wings, fangs, and--oh, yeah--a hair-trigger cock that stood if a faint breeze blew across it.

It wasn't only his eyes that were black. His soul was darker than Hades. Black Drayke shrugged. He didn't care. He'd always known he'd sit on the right hand side of Satan one day. As long as his reward was the female he wanted most to punish and fuck--Saylym Winslow--he'd make any sacrifice.

Black Drayke rubbed his engorged shaft. He owed the bitch. She'd made him feel small and cowardly

the day she held him prisoner by using the charmed athame. He'd been scared shitless the blade would stab him in the eyes and make him blind. He'd stood there, too frozen to move, shaking with terror. His balls had tightened to useless nuggets and his cock curled into his belly like some kind of brainless earthworm.

From that day, until now, all his plans had gone down the shitter. The witch had hexed him. He knew it! Somehow, she'd ruined his life. He wanted revenge. There were ways of teaching witches like her a lesson. He wanted to fuck her until his balls turned blue and his cock stopped aching.

Somehow, *somehow*, he knew she was the only witch who'd ever satisfy this constant hunger. Irritated, he rubbed the aching length of his hard shaft. Yeah, he had something for Saylym, all right, and he couldn't wait for the day to arrive to give it to her.

And that bitch MeLora had it coming to her, too. Oh, not his dick. He'd humped MeLora so many times over the years she was old news, used up, and certainly she'd lost the ability to excite him.

Besides, she belonged to Zebus now. The demon king was welcome to her. But she'd betrayed *him* by choosing the demon to be her mate and making Zebus king of Ru-Noc. As far as Black Drayke was concerned, he felt the two of them deserved each other.

One day, when the right opportunity came along, he'd kill MeLora—but not now. Unfortunately, she still had some uses. Hell, he'd even mate with her if he became desperate enough. The way his cock and balls hurt, right this moment he felt pretty damn desperate. At least screwing her would give him a temporary break from this continual need.

He knew damn well, that like Saylym, MeLora, the evil witch, had somehow cursed him. He stayed horny. No matter how many witches he mated with, he obtained fleeting relief.

No matter how many witches' souls he sucked from their bodies while mating, he would never, *never* steal enough of their magical energy to supply his boundless need to inflict pain and death on others and achieve sexual gratification for himself.

At this moment, however, finding a witch to relieve the scalding ach in his balls wasn't at the top of his to-do list. No. Zebus, the godforsaken demon king of Dymus, owed him. He intended to collect his due....



Zebus Angel, king of all he surveyed, took the three marble steps up to his ebony, diamond-studded throne in one step and sat down. He smiled and folded his muscular arms across his chest. Today was a marvelous day. The future looked bright.

Last night, he'd helped Brasov, Prince Valerian's twin steal some of the vampire's females right out from under Valerian and his followers' noses.

Ahh, but it was a wonderful feeling to know the attack had gone as smoothly as planned, and without the loss of any of his demons. Not that he cared, or even cared if any of the vampires had been eliminated. He didn't.

He had no regrets the female vampiress had died. She shouldn't have jumped between the athame meant for the male. Still, things had a way of coming back to haunt one. The vampires would surely seek revenge for the loss of the female's life. It meant a bigger mess to clean up, a chance of an all out war he wasn't quite ready for. It also meant it might be wise to move his plans forward sooner that he'd originally intended.

Yes, he vowed silently. Very soon.

Even better was the fact that amongst the vampire females, he'd spotted one he felt an instant attraction to. He'd never considered mating with a vampiress, but then, life held many surprises...pussy was pussy. It was all the same in the dark.

However, right now the sun was shining and the vampiress he'd taken from Brasov slept the deep sleep of her kind. But tonight—ah, yes, tonight promised to be one of pleasure for him.

It had been centuries since he'd felt genuine attraction. He'd mated, sure, certainly with the females of his race, though it usually required he put a veil over their face. From the neck down, they were tolerable.

He'd mated with MeLora, the witch-bitch who claimed Ru-Noc's throne. On the outside, she was a beauty—inside—she was blacker than the devil's soul and uglier than his species of females. When he fucked her, he felt contaminated. Him—blackest of the races, a heartless demon, and the witch made him feel stained.

But she'd served her purpose. She carried his son, and she'd played a big role in helping bring down King Darak. It had given him the utmost satisfaction to rip out the king's heart. As far as he was concerned, it was an easier death than the *waken* king deserved.

Ah, but he didn't want to remember unpleasant things this morning. He wanted to remember the vampiress, her lovely face, and the ultra-sensuality of her sweet body, the honeyed taste of her lips when he'd kissed her just before she fell to sleep. The vampiress—plain and simple, he wanted her and he always got what he wanted.

He'd taken the one thing he wanted most urgently from Brasov. He wanted to keep his dealings with the insane vampire to a minimum, but he'd have to return for Shasta. She was perfect for his brother. As for the male vampire Brasov held prisoner, Zebus could care less what Brasov did to him. If Brasov killed the male, even better, the job would be done. However, the vampire prisoner's time was short at best. The parasite Zebus had taken great pleasure in implanting in Dragos' heart would do the job in a matter of hours.

Zebus heaved a sigh, pleased with the progress of his plans. Once he brought Shasta here, like Say-lym, she was here to stay, but the other female, Ann, he'd free her to return to her mate, but he wasn't releasing her until he'd had his fill of her.

A smile touched his lips as he anticipated the night, the pleasures yet to be his. MeLora, the evil witch he'd mated with at the beginning of Beltane flitted through his mind. He snickered, feeling not even a twinge of sympathy for her. Her belly was already swollen double, mainly because she carried not only his son Yorbus, but King Darak's brat as well.

When he looked at MeLora now, all he felt was disgust. Her belly and face were bloated almost beyond recognition. Inside, he chortled with glee. At the beginning of Beltane, the witch had begged him to mate with her.

He'd given her much more than she bargained for.

When he pumped his seed in her the first time, he'd also released a very slow moving parasite, one that took forever to slink its way through her veins. As the tiny creature inched along, it left a minute trail of green slime, just enough to make MeLora's skin burn and itch. The blind parasite was non-contagious. It had no other purpose in life other than to travel throughout her body and make her miserable. It fed very little, taking tiny sips of blood as it crawled. It didn't reproduce, except inside his balls. Once released, the fact the miserable little parasite survived for months inside its new host was an added bonus.

Zebus rarely released an *Oomba* inside a female and did so only if he felt she deserved punishment. Demons produced one *Oomba* a year. If it wasn't set free within that year, it died leaving a single egg behind.

As a rule, Zebus allowed his *Oomba* to die yearly. Or sometimes, like in the case with MeLora, he passed it to the bitch he was fucking for the sheer pleasure of knowing how miserable she'd be for a very long time.

Silently, Zebus laughed. He detested the evil witch. Eventually, he'd give MeLora to his army to do whatever they wanted with her. Knowing them, and he did, they'd each give her an *Oomba*. She'd go insane from the itching and burning the parasites produced under her skin.

He drew a deep breath. But today, he didn't want to dwell on MeLora and his future plans for her.

His thoughts returned to Ann. Was love and happiness a possibility with the vampiress? He'd spent hundreds of years alone. He wanted love again. A beautiful mate at his side, a queen to rule beside him, but from the moment he'd touched MeLora, he'd known the witch was not the right female for him.

Loneliness was a constant ache in his soul. He wanted someone he could build a life with, raise a family with, share his hopes and dreams of the future with...build his empire with, a female to give him more sons.

He had yet to find another perfect mate.

Zebus rubbed his balls. They felt tight and full. Achy. He hadn't sought MeLora for several days now, not since he'd killed King Darak, nor would he. He couldn't bear the thought of mating with her again. He'd accomplished with her what he needed, a son who'd be crowned King of Ru-Noc. He'd eliminated the competition for the crown of Ru-Noc. Zebus didn't count his brother's bold claim that Queen Helayne had birthed two children by him.

It didn't matter.

Prince Stry would never live long enough to claim the throne of Ru-Noc nor would Princess Kali. As soon as the missing prince and princess were located, he'd see to it they perished as quickly as King Darak.

And if Prince Talon tried to claim the throne, he'd return to Sanctuary and do the same thing to the prince that he'd done to his father. He'd rip out Talon's heart and burn it. Like the parasite he'd spilled inside MeLora, King Darak's death had been a bonus Zebus savored.

Yorbus, the babe MeLora carried by him would one day rule the magical kingdom. No one was getting in his son's way, especially Prince Stry.

Eventually, Zebus planned to turn Dymus over to Kyma to rule, and Zebus would take Ayrumus from Kalibus or—maybe not.

A plan niggled at his mind and began to take shape. A new plan. Something he should have thought of before, something to think about later and formulate to perfection. Yes. It might take some doing, but hell, time was on his side, and he had nothing to lose, he grinned—and everything to gain.

Zebus scratched his chin and gave it some thought. He'd need to breed two more females before the end of the mating season. He rubbed his straining cock. Three sons all total this breeding season. Indeed, he was going to be a busy demon come All Hallows' Eve, and a happy one.

Well, he'd found the right female with MeLora. She'd conceived his son instantly. He'd have to decide if Ann was whom he needed for son number two. He still had to question her, find out who her mate was, and how she could benefit *him*. He had to make certain any females he bred were the right females to plant his seed in.

The good thing was he'd already passed his *Oomba* to MeLora, so he didn't have to be on guard when he mated. All he had to concern himself with was breeding whatever female species he fucked to succeed with his plans.

Whatever he was going to do, he had to accomplish it before the end of Beltane, because another *Oomba* would begin a new cycle of life the last day of Beltane.

His heart pounded. Excitement *zinged* through his blood. He must talk to the oracle. It could tell him if he was going to father three sons this breeding season. Find out which females to capture and breed. Yes. Yes. He'd talk to the oracle this afternoon. Make certain the vampiress he wanted played a role in his future. The oracle was all knowing. Even better, it saw the future for all demon royalty.

Ah, yes, life was good.

Zebus smiled, pleased. On his right, his son Kyma joined him and took his throne. On Kyma's right, his son's new bride, Saylym Winslow, whom Kyma had given the name Rausha, sat beside him. Kyma held his mate's hand and every once in a while, he leaned close and whispered something in her ear or massaged her softly rounded belly.

The love his son felt for his new mate was obvious for the court to see.

Zebus swallowed hard. He prayed to the gods nothing ever happened to Rausha or that Prince Talon somehow managed to steal her back, Kyma would go insane. He'd go after Talon with the fierce wrath of a Rock Lion. His vengeance would be bloody and unforgiving and in the end, Kyma would return with Saylym. The young demon was completely enamored. He'd never free his beautiful new mate.

Zebus intended to take every precaution to prevent the *waken* prince from ever making contact with the witch again. Although she was only a few days pregnant, the girl child she'd conceived grew fast, as did all demon babies.

"How are you feeling today, my daughter?" Zebus asked, eyeing his new daughter-in-law with genuine affection and approval. She made his son happy, how could he not adore her? "You look well and lovely as always."

Rausha smiled. Her smile was as empty as her eyes were vacant. The drugs they continued to pump in her veins were beginning to take a toll. He made a mental note to tell the professor to cut back on the dosages. He didn't want her brain fried. She was too important.

"I feel wonderful, Your Majesty," she said sweetly. She patted her belly. "Very pregnant."

"Indeed. The little one is a precious gift to our realm. Please, call me Zebus or Father. There's no need for us to be so formal. We're family."

She gave a slight nod, a satisfied smile on her lips.

"How well is my granddaughter this day?" He eyed her stomach.

She laid her hand on top of Kyma's across her belly. "She is well—Father. Sleeping. Growing. She kicks a lot."

Zebus laughed. "Of course she does. She's the daughter of a demon. It's a good sign. She's content. This babe is very important to our species."

Rausha nodded. "Yes."

Zebus smiled, pleased his son's mate fit so well into their realm. It no longer mattered he'd stolen her from Prince Talon and brought her to the demon world for Kyma to breed. The drugs they'd given her had erased her memory of her former mate and the life she'd shared with Prince Talon in Sanctuary.

The important thing now was Saylym Winslow belonged to his son and Kyma had done a damn good job breeding her. The boy couldn't keep his cock out of her. That was good, too. The more Kyma mated with her and mingled his blood with hers, the quicker the former witch changed and the deeper in love she'd fall with Kyma.

Already, she bore signs of a demon. Sleek, tiny horns pushed their way through the top of her head. In a year, they'd be fully developed. In a year, she'd be pregnant again with Kyma's second child. Zebus' heart accelerated. Kyma's son. He couldn't wait to hold his first grandson.

Zebus eyed Rausha carefully. When she smiled, he saw that her fangs had started to push through her gums. They'd soon thrust her present teeth out of their way and grow longer. Kyma had shared with him the news her wings had started to develop. In a few months, all these changes would reach maturity. Once it happened, nothing could reverse them.

Once a demon, a demon was a demon for life. His lovely daughter-in-law would be a full-blood by All Hallows' Eve, with very few strains of her witch blood left as a reminder of what she'd once been.

The birth of her and Kyma's baby girl would coincide with the final changes. By then, Saylym would be a full blood demon. Wonderful. Five months, and it'd all be over, no going back for her. They had to keep her away from Prince Talon for those five months, get her processed through the final stages, then Talon would be repulsed by her looks, her smell, and by the fact that she'd birthed a demon child. He'd not want her back after all that.

The tattoo on the left side of her face marked her as the royal mate of one of the Angel demon clan. She might have once belonged to Talon, but if all continued to go as well as it had, it would never be true again.

In truth, even now it was impossible for Talon to change what had already begun inside Saylym's body. Too much of Kyma's blood and bodily fluids had mixed with hers. She was already totally indoctrinated into the demon realm. Her body changed daily. Her heart. Her soul. Her loyalties and love belonged to Kyma and the demon realm. For her, even if Talon rescued her today, she'd only feel confused and lost in the witch realm.

A tiny smile touched Zebus' lips. His plans were all falling into place. MeLora was the first who'd give birth to a royal demon All Hallows' Eve. Saylym was the second to fall under his control.

No one could stop him, not even his brother, King Kallibus of Ayrumus. Just because Kallibus had somehow survived the attack on him and Queen Helayne, didn't mean Zebus was giving up. He'd deal with Kallibus and Helayne when the time came.

Soon.

He looked around, displeased as one of the servants entered their private chambers and interrupted his family time. Family time was sacred to him and his tolerance for interruptions was zero. "This had better be important," he snapped.

The servant trembled and bowed before him. "Your Majesty, I apologize for the intrusion, but this guest is most insistent he see you now."

"Who is it?"

"He says his name is Black Drayke."

"You dare interrupt the time I set aside to share with my son and daughter for a lowly warlock?"

Zebus waved his hand in a violent motion at the servant. A bolt of jagged lightning flew from his fingertips and struck the servant in the chest. The demon dropped like a rock, dead before he fell. "You!" Zebus pointed at one of the guards standing close by. "You will fill his position. Drag his stupid carcass out of my sight and send in the warlock. Now!"

"Your Majesty." The soldier bowed, grabbed the lifeless legs and pulled the demon behind him.

"Kyma," Zebus said quietly, "take your lovely mate to your quarters and spend some quality time with her in bed. I'm quite certain you're horny. Show her how much you love her."

"I always spend quality time with Rausha—in bed. Be proud of her, Father. She didn't flinch when you struck down the servant. And you're right. I'm quite horny."

"I am very proud of your mate. Now go fuck her."

Kyma grinned. "Yes, Your Majesty. It is my aim to please my king."

Zebus snickered. "You have always pleased me. Now go please your mate. Make her scream with pleasure. Make her beg for your cock."

Kyma held out his hand to his young bride and helped her off the dais. "Come my beauty, your mate desires you."

She placed her hand in his and allowed him to guide her from the throne room.

Zebus watched them closely. They passed Black Drayke as the warlock stormed inside the chamber. Black Drayke pushed past them, annoyed they were in his way. He didn't bother to glance at Saylym or Kyma. Zebus smiled, pleased. Just as he thought, she was no longer recognizable to her kind.

Black Drayke swaggered before him, a cocky smile on his lips.

"You will kneel," Zebus snapped. "You stand before a king in his throne room. Kneel or I will strike you down where you stand!"

Black Drayke immediately dropped to his knees. "Your Majesty, I meant no offense."

"Your very presence offends. What do you want?"

The warlock started to rise.

"Stay as you are."

He swallowed hard. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"Tell me what it is you think I owe you."

"The crown of Ayrumus, as you promised. Saylym Winslow. Queen Helayne. I want them. I have needs."

"Your needs must not be very strong, at least not for Saylym. You just passed her and didn't bother to greet her."

"What? What trickery is this? I did not see Saylym."

"That's because Saylym Winslow no longer exists as the person you once knew. She is now Princess

Rausha Angel, cropped hair black as night, and lest you want to die you will never go near her. She is mated to my son and heir, Prince Kyma. She carries my first grandchild. You dare look upon her face with desire, you will die in agony. I swear it."

"But—"

"If you rise to your feet before I grant you permission, I will smite you down. Final warning." Zebus left his throne and pulled an athame from the jeweled belt around his middle. "Hold out your wrist."

Black Drayke knew better than to argue. He held out his arm and said not a word when the demon slashed his wrist and filled two goblets with his rich black blood.

Zebus swallowed one glass of the magical elixir and licked his lips. "Your other arm."

"But Your Majesty, I'm still bleeding from this cut and you still have a full goblet."

"And I will have other filled chalices as well. Now prove your allegiance to me. Bleed! Your other arm!"

The warlock turned demon thrust out his other arm. Zebus filled four goblets before he sealed both wounds.

Angry, Black Drayke watched the demon king drank down two more chalices of the potent magical blood.

"Your magic is black," Zebus said smacking his lips. "Black as your soul, but it tastes divine." He threw the empty goblets toward the great fireplace across the room. For a second, the sound of breaking glass filled the room. "It floods my body with magic and power. I'll save the other goblets for my son. He quite enjoyed the last two you so willingly gave him."

Black Drayke swallowed hard, but Zebus did not fail to see the hatred in the warlock's black eyes. "You cannot have Saylym. And don't even consider an attempt to steal her. Kyma is quite captivated. When it comes to his new mate, he's dangerously possessive. He will cut out your black heart and feed it to the Hounds of Hell if you so much as glance at her. If or when you're in her presence, I'd advise you to keep your gaze lowered. Kyma is alert to the least infraction toward his beautiful mate. He killed the last demon that dared to look at her face. Now, what else is it you think you...deserve?"

Black Drayke tried desperately to ignore the wave of dizziness swamping him from the loss of so much blood. The fucking bastard demon, one day the creature would drain him of every ounce of his blood. Each time, Zebus took a little more.

He knew very well the demon king was testing him, testing his endurance. Nervously, Black Drayke licked his dry lips and struggled to keep from passing out. If he went down, Zebus would show him no mercy. "Queen Helayne—and—uh—the throne—of—Ayrumus."

Zebus pursed his lips, his eyes dark and merciless. "I can't give you the throne of Ayrumus. You failed in your mission to kill Kallibus. You were supposed to stick an athame in his kidney and leave him dead on the ground."

"I did! I killed him. I watched him die."

"He's very much alive. He sits on the throne of Ayrumus, supercilious, and in command with that pregnant bitch he's made his queen. I'm forbidden to set foot on his land at the risk of execution. His queen rules beside him, the witch whose throat you were supposed to slit after I left."

"I swear to you, she was dead from the knife you plunged in her belly. Neither of them should be breathing." Black Drayke clenched his teeth. "It's that damned interfering witch with ungodly abilities to bring back the dead. It's all her fault!"

Zebus tilted his head, curious. "What witch is this? I know of no such witch with this kind of unnatural capability."

Black Drayke shuddered. Terror clawed at his insides. Sweat dampened his face. His palms were clammy. Sticky perspiration stuck to his balls like glue. Panic jammed his lungs to the point, he thought he'd explode with the need to breathe.

Zebus grinned. "You fear me, warlock? Fear my wrath at your lies?"

"I'd be a fool not to fear you, but I tell the truth. The witch exists. She's called the Healer by the other witches.

"Healer? Yes. I've heard of this healer, just not that she brings back the non-breathing. Find her. Bring her to me. I have uses for such a witch." Zebus rubbed his crotch. "Several uses. A witch with those kind exceptional powers, bred by a demon king, just the thought makes me hard. She shall be my third female."

"What? Third female?"

"Find her! Bring her to me."

"But—but—no one knows who she is or where she lives."

"Find her," Zebus roared. "Or I will drain you of every drop of your magical elixir. I don't care how you do it, but bring her here. You may rise to your feet and take your leave. Do not return without this special witch."

Chapter Nine

The fiend in his own shape is less hideous than when he rages in the breast of man.

~Nathaniel Hawthorne
(Young Goodman Brown)

Annu Mountain
Noddon Caverns
Immortal Realm
Beltane

Saylym clawed her fingers in the sheets, arched her hips, and met each deep drive of her mate's hard shaft. He filled her with his thick length over and over, to the point she felt stuffed. Arousal and heat burst through her like a star exploding across the sky. It flared, soared and burned white-hot, until her skin felt as if it'd ignite from the single stroke of a match drawn across it.

How she burned. Hungered. This constant need for her mate was a never ending ache between her thighs. Oh, how she loved this male who took her hard. Fast. And with an urgency that stole her breath right out of her lungs and left her gasping for more.

And he gave her more. He'd already lost control twice, but she knew, oh gods, she knew he was far from finished with her. She was nowhere near done with him. The hunger in her for him never ceased. Saylym moaned with an urgency she could no longer hold on back. She locked her legs around muscular hips and took him deeper inside her.

Desperate to reach the pinnacle of her desire, she clawed his shoulders until she felt the stickiness of his warm blood beneath her nails. His breath touched her face, hot and ragged. She shuddered wildly as his deep penetrations touched a particular hot spot.

Kyma trailed kisses over her brows, the tip of her nose, her chin, and her lips. He licked a path to her breasts, latched onto a nipple and suckled strongly. In seconds, she screamed her release. His cock grew harder, thicker, and he followed her over the wicked edge of the cliff, his seed rupturing hot and wet and as always...plentiful.

Slowly, she opened her eyes and met the fierce blue gaze staring down at her, an unbelievably handsome face, perfectly sculptured, lips sensual and swollen from her kisses. His masculine chest rubbed her

nipples until they tingled with renewed energy and need. His cock throbbed inside her, still not soft, nor did it appear to be headed in that direction anytime soon.

He smiled, kissed her slowly and nudged her deep inside. "You feel so good. Always. You rob me of my breath, my love. I can't get enough of you. I don't think I ever will."

For some odd reason, hot tears slid to the corners of her eyes and burned a trail to her hair. He moved, his shaft, hard as before, sank deeper. Gods, he filled her so completely.

But his eyes were—*blue*?

Saylym felt an edge of panic slice through her. No. This was wrong. Her mate's eyes were green as emeralds. This male who penetrated her body so forcefully, so deeply...his eyes were so pale a blue they looked ethereal. He was beautiful, sexy and he knew how to please her, but—she didn't know him and he'd just—she'd just—yeah, more than once.

She frowned. His long dark hair swept around her, his hair—the same, yet different. Her lips trembled. Who was this on top of her, inside her, his seed wetting her? Saylym dug her nails in his upper arms. "Who are you?" she whispered in an unsteady voice. "Please, tell me."

He leaned back, frowned. "Who do you think I am?"

Slowly, reluctantly, he pulled out of her, but he rolled and drew her against his side. His lips pressed her temple in a soothing kiss. "You know who I am, Rausha."

"I don't know who you are. Let me go!" She fought to get out of his arms.

He clamped her tightly against him. "Stop it, Rausha! You'll hurt the baby. Our baby. Gods, don't do this. I love you, sweetheart."

She stilled and slid a hand over her stomach. He was right. She carried. He loved her. She loved him. Oh gods, what was wrong with her? She didn't remember this male, yet she'd just been intimate with him.

Saylym turned so she could look down on him, study his face. He was so familiar, yet he wasn't right. Something was wrong. He wasn't the right male she should be lying here naked with.

Another face swam before her, dark, handsome, but no more handsome than the male who stared back at her with fear in his eyes. And love. This creature loved her? He did. She felt his deep emotions. He enclosed her within his wings, wings so very fragile and pale a blue, they appeared white.

Saylym turned her face from him.

"Rausha. Don't shut me out, sweetheart. Don't be afraid of me," he said soothingly. "I'd die before I hurt you." He slid one hand over her stomach to her side, the other he rested gently on top of her head, palms spread. His touch was so tender, so caring, his voice gentle. Warm. "I love you," he breathed. "With everything inside me that matters, that beats, that is precious, I love you."

Saylym blinked back tears. This was the male she loved? Yes. He must be. She was here with him, in his bed, in his arms. And his words stole her heart. She'd given herself to him—more times than she could remember. The incredible intimacy between them wrapped around her just like his wings and captured her, held her. She couldn't think. But she knew him, recognized his scent on her, in her. She remembered his touch, knew his body as intimately as he knew hers, yet he was so unfamiliar.

Still, her heart stirred. Warmth flooded her body. His eyes looked so worried. She loved him. Didn't she? She should tell him, relieve his mind. Yes. She must be having a moment out of time, something weird. His baby nested in her womb. Their child. She captured his hand, turned and kissed his mouth. "I love you," she whispered.

His breath escaped in a long, ragged hiss. "I love you, too, Rausha. You have no idea how much I love you. I'd do anything for you, sacrifice anything, anyone." His hands trembled as he brushed her hair from her face.

"Talon?" Her brows furrowed. Why was that name so familiar? So haunting? Why did it stir such an ache in her soul?

Kyma jerked. His hand stilled. Then she saw it inch toward the wall. He punched a button and a voice came over the intercom.

"Yes, Kyma? Do you need me?"

"Break-through memory. Get in here fast!"

Saylym trembled at the rage and frustration on her mate's face. He must have realized he was frightening her. He forced a smile on his lips. "No. I'm not angry with you, sweetheart. I'm angry because that idiot professor keeps getting your medicine wrong."

The door to their bed chamber slid open and a demon carrying a black leather bag walked in. Saylym flinched. She knew this male. She didn't like him. He was always sticking her with needles.

Discreetly, Kyma tucked the sheets around her. "Just relax, baby. The professor is here to help you. He'll make you feel all better."

She nodded and closed her eyes. One thing she remembered, the medicine the professor injected in her veins made her feel deliciously warm, superbly sexy and wiped away all traces of ugliness from her life. She liked that. She liked that very much.

"Now then," the professor said quietly. "You'll feel much better, my dear."

Saylym nodded. "I already do."

Kyma flung the covers away and leapt off the bed. He closed his fingers around Professor Shomus' throat and squeezed. "Never, ever be stingy with the drugs for her again. Give her plenty, because I'm warning you this one time, if she *ever* remembers Talon again while I'm fucking her, I'll rip your insides out and feed your guts to the demon army. Are we clear on this?"

"Yes, my Prince."

Kyma slowly released him. "Good. Now get out! Return tonight at midnight for her next dose."

"Yes, my Prince."

"Should I—I just walk in?"

Kyma sneered. "What do you think?" He walked back to the bed and settled beside Saylym. Gingerly, he pulled her into his arms, his palms closing possessively around a full breast.

Saylym opened her eyes and smiled. Her smile welcomed him back in her arms, her bed. Her eyes looked dreamy and slightly unfocused. "I missed you."

Kyma rubbed her nipples until they tightened beneath his expert touch. "I missed you, too." He looked up at the professor with fierce eyes. "You're still here? Get out! Get out, now!"

Saylym flung the sheet away and crawled on top of him. Her breath caught in her throat as she guided the broad head of his shaft inside her. "I really missed you." She laughed and took him deep inside her.

"Show me how much," Kyma whispered. He reached over the head of the bed and flipped a tiny switch. "Show me how much you want me, Rausha."

Her mouth descended on his. Kyma accepted her mouth on his. He needed this from her. In the background, the soft whirl of a camera recorded them in the most basic and elemental acts of all time. He tuned out the sound and moaned as she tightened the grip on his cock buried inside her.

Kyma sighed, his happiness complete as his mate rode him to fulfillment again and again. Let the camera capture them. His father insisted a mating record be kept. In his mind, he shrugged. He knew the real reason Zebus filmed their matings. His father planned to send them to prince Talon.

Kyma smiled. He hoped the prince died of humiliation as he watched the way this beautiful witch fucked him again and again. He didn't care how often Zebus filmed them mating. There was only one thing he cared about, and that was how warm and inviting Rausha's hot channel felt gloved around his cock.

Chapter Ten

Double, double toil and trouble; Fire burn and cauldron bubble.

~ William Shakespeare

*Ru-Noc
Sanctuary
Immortal Realm
Beltane*

Kirrah hesitated as she leaned over the prone man sprawled in her bed. Since the evening she'd returned from the bakery yesterday, he'd drifted in and out of consciousness.

Most of the time, he'd been restless, tossing and muttering about weird assassinations, *Waken* Guild, someone named Talon and Sage. She hadn't understood half of what he muttered about.

And who was *waken*?

Mulling it over, she decided maybe *waken* wasn't a *who* in this dimension, and it might behoove her to leave it alone and simply wonder. But ever the curious one, she picked at it in her mind.

Was *waken* what he'd been trying to say when he said he was Mr. Wa-Wa?

She didn't know.

The one thing she knew for certain, he was injured and showing absolutely no signs of improvement, except for his kisses. Maybe she should get someone to look at him.

But who?

New to Sanctuary, she'd lived in the magical realm barely two months. Aunt Penell had seen that Hannah and she were safe in their new homes, explained about Sanctuary and Ru-Noc, made certain the bakery was up and running, then she'd promptly left them behind—vacation, she'd said, one she'd been promising herself for centuries.

Kirrah bit her lip. She'd been terrified at the thought of her aunt leaving her alone in this strange new world. Yes, she had Hannah, but her friend lived in the room over the bakery. Aunt Penell lived with *her*.

"Don't worry, dear, your magic will grow. The other witches will look after you."

"Yeah, that's what I'm afraid of."

Her aunt hugged her and laughed softly. "Listen to me, Kirrah. I gave you my name, the Walker

name when you were very young, but you're a Winslow, a witch of royal blood. You have nothing to be ashamed of. Don't ever let anyone tell you different. When the time is right, your powers will be enormous. Just learn to harness them, and it's something you have to learn on your own." Aunt Penell kissed her cheek. "Never let a male weaken you. Elsbeth, your birth mother, was a rarity among witches. Her magic was strong. She controlled the four elements, earth, air, fire and water. Rarely does a witch maintain control over all four. Nyra, her first born, was gifted with the same powers of the four elements, plus more."

"More?"

Penell nodded. "Mmm. Yes. Nyra's powers haven't been tested to their fullest, but they are unlimited. She not only inherited your mother's magic, but she received Queen Shy-Ryn's ancient magic when the poor queen was murdered." Penell shook her head, sadness in her steady gaze. "Mixing the two witch's magical skills together in one witch did something strange to Nyra's magic. It unleashed powers in her, that even I, ancient as I am, have never seen before."

"When she reaches her full potential, only the gods know what will happen. There will be many who covet her, covet her magic. There will be those who seek to destroy her, and seek to breed her. And still others who will seek to steal her magic or use her. But there is only one who will steal her heart. He is a sinister force, mysterious and dark. Without hope. Without a heart. Their individual magical skills will collide. Our realm and his will be shaken to the core. The love they will have for each other will cross dimensions never crossed before."

Kirrah widened her eyes. "He is evil?"

"Only in what he is—that he can't help. His powers are ancient, obscure. His soul is dark, but he craves the light. He is more ancient than the universe, older than all the realms put together. But he is alone. Always alone. One day, he will come for Nyra."

Kirrah scowled. "Will I be able to stop him?"

Penell shuddered. "There is no one who can impede his possession of her, not even Nyra with all her formidable powers."

"She will die?"

"Only time will tell what the black forces have in store for her. Now then, Saylym was gifted with the element, water, you with fire. Together, the three of you will be daunting, add the other ten witches to your coven and no one will be able to breach your defenses. Remember that."

Kirrah blinked. "I don't understand. What coven?"

Penell hugged her. "In due time, child, you'll all come together. What a glorious day it will be. The jewels tell their own story. You will know when you see the witch who wears them who is destined for your coven."

"Jewels? *My* coven?" Kirrah licked her dry lips. "Aunt Penell?"

Penell shook her head. "The witch who is blessed with the diamonds—it is her coven. We don't know who it will be yet."

"We?"

Penell ignored her. Her aunt was good at that if she didn't want to answer questions. Kirrah frowned. "I don't understand. What jewels? I have no jewels."

Aunt Penell smiled. "It will all come to pass. Your mother was a very strong and capable witch, until she wed your father. He was her downfall, but Winslows possess old magic, impressive magic. As I said, your element is fire. Harness it. Learn to control it. Use it when the time comes. Troubled times lie ahead, child. They will worsen. It will all worsen. Sanctuary needs you and your sisters. It needs the new coven that is slowly forming. You must find your sisters."

"I have no idea what they look like."

"No one does, except for the witch who raised each child. And of course, since Saylym and Nyra are both ancient names, other witches besides your sisters have them, makes it a bit difficult to weed out the weeds. You'll have to be observant. Watch their magic. Look for the jewels that mark them and the entire

coven. It is the only way you'll have to recognize them.

"What if I make a mistake? What if I walk right by one of them and never know it?"

"I'm sorry, child, I can't help you anymore. I don't know what your sisters look like, either. Look to the jewels to guide you. The entire coven of thirteen will receive a set, just like you."

"I don't have any jewels."

"No, not yet. Someday. It was our sworn duty to protect you girls, to keep you away from Sanctuary until the time was right, until the jewels were ready, but they aren't making any appearances yet, so far as we know. You were raised without the influence of magic so those who wished you harm could not find you or prevent the jewels from coming to you."

"We're still in danger?"

"Yes. As I said, bad times lie ahead for all of us. Ominous times. You must be ready, but it is something you will have to prepare for on your own. I'm forbidden to teach you anymore than I already have. A witch's magic is personal and something she alone has to learn." Penell patted Kirrah's shoulder, sadness welling into her eyes. "Time went by so fast. You're all grown up, child. Seems like only yesterday you first discovered you're a child of magic, but it's time I let you go, let you learn the things you must learn." Her green eyes narrowed, her face turned serious. "Whatever you do, do not allow a *waken* to kiss you. They're charmers to be sure, handsome as the devil, but if one kisses you, chances are he'll suck your soul out of your body and leave a husk behind. You cannot trust the males of our species. They're like a female insect that devours her mate after copulating."

Then her aunt climbed onto her broom and *swoosh*, she was gone.

Kirrah sighed at the memory. God, she wished she could control her broom like that. She forced her mind off the subject of her lousy magic and concentrated on her aunt's last words, 'Don't allow a *waken* to kiss you'. There was that word again. *Waken*. What did it mean?

Oh, but she was on her own, alone for the first time in her life. She knew a few of the faces in Sanctuary now, but she certainly hadn't seen anyone wearing jewels embedded on their fingernails as her aunt instructed her to watch for. She talked to the witches who frequented her shop, but she wasn't closely acquainted with any of them. Not enough to ask questions or risk punishment for whacking a man with a broom.

For all she knew, this stranger in her bed could be somebody important and speeding brooms illegal, just like owning a car in Sanctuary. Kirrah laughed. She still had no idea where her car had disappeared to, but she had a hunch the meter witch had something to do with its strange disappearance.

Regardless, she didn't know the laws in this realm and she didn't think ignorance was going to be a good enough excuse for doing something wrong.

What kind of rules applied to managing one's hexes?

Was there punishment if a witch couldn't command her magic? If so, what was it?

Kirrah wrinkled her nose and eyed her house guest. Mr. Wa-Wa had thrown up several times over the course of the last couple of days, but at least now he appeared to be resting.

However, he needed a little one-on-one personal hygiene. She'd delayed it as long as she could, but he was beginning to smell ripe. Squaring her shoulders, she gathered supplies and sat down on the edge of the bed. Gingerly, Kirrah turned down the covers to his waist. Whorls of gold-tipped hair sprinkled his chest.

Her breath caught in her throat. "My stars, you're a hunk."

Kirrah briskly lathered the washcloth and drew the wet soapy cloth across his bare chest, muscular shoulders, and yummy six-pack abs. She caught herself humming a sexy little ditty and stopped. A girl could go blind admiring his physique.

Diligently, she dragged the soapy cloth across the flat brown nipples and watched them tighten. *Oooh*. Her fingertips tingled. Her blood churned and bubbled and pooled between her thighs. She licked her lips in a very un-Kirrah like manner.

Disgusted with her body's heated response to simply admiring the man's physique—well—and a little touching, Kirrah tossed the cloth in the bowl and chewed on her bottom lip.

What on earth was wrong with her? She felt like a swarm of bees had stung her all over. Why did she feel so damn jittery, like a freakin' live wire had short-circuited inside her? She jumped up, paced the length of the room. Back and forth. Up and down.

It didn't help. Nothing helped.

Her skin still prickled as if a thousand needles stabbed it. Electrical currents jabbed her spine shooting life to all her nerve endings. Anymore, and she'd be tingling from the top of her head to the tips of her toes.

Impatient, she snarled, "For heaven's sake, what's wrong with me?"

"Witch horny."

Kirrah gasped and spun to face the amused voice. There it was—the broom—right in step beside her, following her up and down path. "Gods, don't sneak up on me like that! You'll cause me to have a heart attack."

"Witch horny. Need to get laid in big way. Big deal this time of year."

"Okay. All right. I heard you. But I am not horny."

"Witch horny."

"No, I'm not. I never react to a male like this."

"Broom say, Witch horny. Nothing to be ashamed about, it natural thing at Beltane."

Kirrah watched as the broom swept its way across the room and halted beside the bed.

"Hmmm. Uh-huh...ooh yeah...*waken* fine sample. It very natural witch want to do the *rooba-rooba* with hot, hunky male specimen."

Kirrah blinked. Swear to God, it looked as if the broom was standing there thinking and rubbing an imaginary chin. "*Rooba-rooba*?"

"You know?" The broom moved up and down in a slow movement old as time, then shuddered and gasped. "That the way witch like it, nice and slow, long, hot strokes."

"Oh, my stars, you didn't just—yes, you did. You mocked—imitated—"

"Fucking," the broom agreed. "Or *fooking*, as the *waken's* pronounce it. No matter how it said, witch wanna *rooba-rooba* with hunky male. Witch in heat. Witch...hooor-neeey."

"No, witch insane. Why am I standing here talking to a broom about sex when you have no mouth? No brain. No name?"

"Broom might not have brain or mouth, but broom sure can talk and broom have name."

"Oh, sure you do. Are you a boy broom or a girl broom?"

"Broom is broom—sexless."

"Sexless? Then how come you know about—uh—sex?"

"Broom sexless, not stupid. Hang around in corners many times and watch *wakens* do the *rooba-rooba* with pretty young witches. And broom good friends with Dinka. Get excellent sex education."

"Ah-ha! I knew it! Who's Dinka?"

"Horny green frog. She smart about sex things. She gonna get laid verra soon."

"A smart frog? Hah!"

"It not funny. Dinka's green head filled with lots of smart know-it-all knowledge. And broom named Sticks. Hah, to you! Told you broom have name. Hah. Hah."

"*Sticks*! What kind of name is Sticks for Pete's sake?"

"Sticks wanna know who Pete?"

Kirrah threw up her arms. "Never mind. Just—just—go sweep the cobwebs out of the corners."

"Huh, broom good housekeeping. No cobwebs in corners. No spiders either."

"Then find something else to do."

The broom slumped. "Just trying to help witch understand her horny feelings for male."

"Go on—shoo. Go imitate a mop."

"Broom can't imitate mop," it said in a huffy voice. "Mop all wet and soggy. Dumb as stump, too. Know nothing about sexy things."

"Shush!" Kirrah held up her hand and motioned. "How can you sound so indignant?"

"Don't know what that word mean—in-dig-nant. What meaning?"

"Never mind. Be gone, broom, to your corner. Now!" She pointed at the corner where the broom always stood.

Slowly, it shuffled across the floor, dragging dust and whatever else was in its path behind it.

"And don't you dare tell this—*waken*, I'm horny."

The broom flipped around to face her—as if it had a face. Hah!

"*Waken* already know witch horny. *Waken* smell witch's mating scent."

"Oh-my-God! He does not!" Kirrah thought she'd faint with embarrassment. "He can't know I want him."

"He does so. Why witch very dramatic? Broom not gonna tell witch what else is going on with *waken*. Witch too damn excitable."

Kirrah wrung her hands. "What? What else?"

The broom lowered its voice to a crusty whisper. "Me thinks the *waken* is a half-breed."

"Half-breed?" Kirrah widened her eyes. "Half of what? What's that supposed to mean?"

"I bet witch not know what *Impure* is either."

"No. No, I've heard the word before. Impure? I've been called impure by a certain hateful meter witch. Sounds like something nasty, doesn't it?"

"Witch is *Impure*. Ha. Ha. Witch is something nasty." The broom danced a jig across the room and back. "Ha. Ha. Witch is something nasty."

"Stop it," Kirrah shouted. "You're becoming a royal pain in my tootie."

"And witch is *Impure*. Ha. Ha. Broom stuck with diluted witch. This make broom very unhappy. What I do to deserve you?"

"What? If you don't like me, you're free to go." Kirrah swore she heard the broom sniff.

"Broom like you. Broom love you. Broom never leave witch. Broom your familiar. Witch belong to familiar."

"My familiar? But—but—" Kirrah spluttered. "I thought familiars were animals—cats—or something...."

The broom sighed. "Witch not very smart 'bout magic-world. Familiars be most anything, not only animal. Animal familiars are *Futhars*. Broom familiars are *Srahtuf* species, opposite of *Futhar* race and can be broom, mop, lamp, book, bed, and table, anything inanimate."

"I see. So what is a half-breed?"

"Your education sadly lacking. Half-breed opposite of full-breed."

"Oh, for Pete's sake, I know that part—what I wanna know is what the other half is where the—*waken* is concerned? Is he dangerous?"

"Witch don't want to know."

"Yes, I do."

"No, witch don't."

"Tell me."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because Mr. Broom doesn't have answer."

"What? You put me through all this—this—"

"Dunghill?"

"Yes! And you don't even know for sure if he's a half-breed?"

"Broom know for sure, just not what other half of *waken* is, but have very bad feelings is not so good—broom think *waken* not really *waken* at all, not even half *waken*."

Kirrah muttered beneath her breath.

"Broom is not crazy, paranoid bag of switches stuck on stick. If broom was all these things, then broom would never let uneducated witch ride him again."

"Stop talking, broom, and go to sleep."

"Broom not sleepy. Want to fly. Take crazy, *paranoid* witch high in sky and dump her ass."

Kirrah gasped. "No. We are not flying. Go back to your corner and don't you dare leave it again tonight."

"Broom sorry. Broom kidding. Make joke. Witch can't take little joke? Witch spoil-sport."

"Uh-huh." Kirrah turned and eyed the stranger. He hadn't moved a hair. She sat down on the edge of the bed, frowning. What had the broom been trying to tell her? Warn her about? The man looked perfectly normal to her—except for the vanishing bruise on his forehead that was now a hideous greenish-purple fading to an even worse looking greenish-yellow.

Of course, she'd met men she was attracted to in the past. She'd even done her fair share of necking her teenage years, but she'd never felt this coiled heat before, not like this. It was as if she'd suddenly developed an over-active libido.

She felt on edge. Feverish. Her breasts ached. Her nipples stood out stiff and tight. Her skin itched like crazy. It was driving her insane, this urgent need to crawl in bed with this—this half *waken*!

The warmth spiraling in her belly made her squirm. Sweat collected at the base of her spine. She clenched her thighs, trying desperately to ignore the throbbing there.

What in blazes was going on? She didn't for a minute believe what the broom said about it being Beltane and the urge to mate.

But she'd never been so—never felt so—*hot* for a man. So needy.

Against her will, she returned her gaze to the man's wide chest. She'd never given much thought to the male anatomy before, but suddenly it was all she thought about. Kirrah stared at the perfect sculptured chest before her. Her stomach clenched. She had the oddest desire to touch her tongue to the tight little buds winking back at her.

Did they have to look so damn inviting? *Get a grip, girl. Finish his bath and get done. He's not your private toy.*

Oh, yeah? The chatty little demon riding her shoulders snarled the silent challenge. It whispered its evil words in her ears, mocking her. *If not yours, then whose toy is he?*

"Shut up!"

"Broom not say a word. Not one word."

Kirrah glanced over her shoulder. "I wasn't talking to you."

"Broom only other thing alive in room—beside your toy."

Kirrah blinked. "Toy? *OhmyGod!* You read my mind?"

"Broom guilty of mind probe, yes, is true. That why broom know witch wanna be fucked by *waken*."

"Stop using that kind of language right now."

"What kind of language? Fuck is good word, is it not?"

"*Not*. Don't say it again."

"Okay. Broom say *rooba-rooba*. Mean same thing. And broom know exactly what witch wanna do. Know hot *rooba-rooba* on witch's mind. Witch should just crawl on top of *waken*, take him cock in hand, insert toy, and be done with it. Make the hot whoopee!"

"Don't talk to me. And don't probe my mind."

"Can't help reading witch mind, broom joined with witch. Ha. Ha. Broom connected to witch. Ha. Ha. Witch belong to broom. Am...familiar."

Kirrah ignored the broom. It was becoming a royal pain in the ass. There was only so much she could

handle at a time and dealing with a talking, mindreading broom with a gutter-mind wasn't something she wanted to deal with at the moment.

Her gaze wondered south, past the tight six-pack abs to the flat little 'innie'. Her fingers curved into her palms. "No touching. No exploring the 'innie'."

Mr. Wa-Wa moaned and shifted closer to her as though subconsciously aware of her craving to touch him. The man slept like a restless tiger. His legs thrashed about. Quite often he kicked off the covers.

She was always very helpful and pulled the covers back over his hips. "It's not my fault he keeps flashing me," she muttered. "I've done the decent thing and tried to keep him covered. But I can't very well bathe him with my eyes closed. I might miss some places. Some real dirty places that need lots of special attention and soaping."

She couldn't help if between his moments of lucidity, he gave her delicious glimpses of the bulge in raw form.

And she had to bathe it.

Of course, she had to bathe it.

Bathing it meant touching it.

Was she *not* supposed to look?

To touch?

She snorted. Huh! Like she was crazy?

This was her first opportunity to get up close and personal with a—a—*whatchamacallit*—she wasn't about to look the other way. "Oh, wow!"

"What so knockout wowie?"

Kirrah jumped guiltily at the sound of the broom's voice behind her. She dragged the covers over the bulge and shrugged. "Nothing."

"Uh-huh. Broom know what witch doing. Witch filling eyes with log from heaven."

"What? I am not. Go to your corner and stop spying on me."

"Broom not spying. Broom trying to sleep, but keep hearing witch deep breath."

"Oh, for—never mind. Go away. Shoo! And I am not deep breathing."

"If witch say so, but broom have good hearing."

Kirrah swallowed past the breath trapped in her throat and lowered the covers once again. She had a female's appreciation for a male's anatomy, but dad-gum, she hadn't known 'it' came in super-duper go large.

Well, actually, she hadn't known anything about size at all. But she'd sure bet size *did* matter. "Quality over quantity, my ass, must have been a man who came up with that one, a man with a teeny—*drill*."

Kirrah leaned over her patient. She brushed silky strands of his thick hair back from an intelligent forehead. He needed a shave. Three days worth of gold-tinted whiskers peppered his lean jaws. No way was she shaving him.

She'd never even seen a man shave. Ever.

What if she sliced and diced him with the razor? And what with three little knots on his head and all those ugly bruises, she didn't think he'd appreciate his face looking as if it had been through a meat grinder, too.

Besides, the stubble kind of gave him the look of a pirate. Rugged. Sexy. Lean and mean and tough as an old leather boot.

Curious, she eyed the sparkling crystal that dangled from his left ear. She toyed with it. Such an odd symbol. It sort of resembled a tall, skinny misshapen 'P'.

What did it mean?

Was it important?

"Broom knows what symbol mean—if witch really want to know, broom tell you."

Kirrah gasped. The broom was leaning over her shoulder. Again. "I told you to stop creeping up be-

hind me. What does it mean?"

"It symbol for luck. Joy. It mean non-*waken* connected to water. Witch linked to fire. Non-*waken*, he put out your fire, ha, ha. Do the *rooba-rooba* with witch, cool horny witch down plenty nice."

"I think not. And I think broom needs to cool off and go to corner. Again."

The broom huffed and returned to its corner. "Witch not face facts."

The non-*waken* moaned. He breathed through his mouth, his firm lips slightly parted. His breath felt warm and moist against her palm. The tingling returned. It shot to her fingertips like heat lightning. Desire to stroke his mouth punched her in the gut. Maybe the broom was right. Maybe she needed cooling down.

And Kirrah wasn't one to deny herself pleasure. She traced first, his top lip, then the full sensual bottom lip.

"You've got this stroking thing down rather nicely, sweetheart."

She squeaked and jerked back her hand. Her gaze shot to his face. "Oh, my Lord! I thought the broom had sneaked up on me again. But you're awake."

For a moment, he watched her through narrowed eyelids. "The broom is asleep. It's snoring." He slid a hand to the back of her neck and drew her closer. "My turn," he breathed.

Mr. Wa-Wa took her mouth in what could only be called blatant possession.

What was it with this man and his uncontrollable urges to kiss her?

Grasping his shoulders, she could hardly deny she'd felt him up a time or two. If he'd been aware of the fact she'd copped a feel, she couldn't fault him for getting the wrong impression of her.

But jeez, every time he awakened, he pulled her on top of him for a long, hot sexy kiss. No wonder she was having dirty thoughts. Hot flashes. Tingles. Yeah, so she was a horny witch, just as the broom said.

And, oh my, the non-*waken* was naked, too. There was nothing between them but the comforter and her jeans, thong and tee-shirt.

Lordy, but the man knew how to kiss. He knew how to stroke. His tongue touched hers, moved over and around it in a sensual mating dance. Gingerly, he pulled on it with gentle suction.

"Mmmm." Reluctantly, he released her mouth. "You taste sweet—like sugar coated pineapples. I want to taste you all over." His lashes fluttered. He sighed and his eyes closed again. "Later..."

"Well!" Kirrah puffed a dangling curl out of her eyes and pushed herself off his chest. Crap, he was out like a freakin' light bulb—again. Just when things got interesting, he had to go and fade away on her.

He kicked at the covers, mumbling. "I have—to."

Kirrah lifted a brow. He had to what? "No-no-no. You need to lie still. You can't move around like this. You'll scramble your brain, Mr. Wa-Wa, even—more."

"Have—to—have—to kill—her."

Kirrah surged off the bed, stumbling back a couple of steps. Her heart pounded. Her mouth suddenly felt dry as an old eraser. She couldn't swallow, no matter how hard she tried.

Was this a joke? Kill *her*? Or another her? If so, who her?

He was pulling a fast one? Right?

She lifted his lid. Nope. He was a goner. Did it mean he was simply rambling without a clue as to what he rambled about? His face was pale as day-old death. He looked like hammered poop. His chest rose and fell with ragged breaths.

"Have—to—kill—"

The wash cloth slipped from her nerveless fingers and hit the floor with a *splat* at her bare feet. She swallowed hard. Crap! Oh, crap! Kirrah whirled to stare at the broom.

The broom was looking up at the ceiling, whistling softly, as if it didn't have a care in the world.

"I thought you were asleep?"

"Broom pretend to sleep, so maybe get to watch witch and *waken rooba-rooba*."

"Did you hear that? Did you hear what he said?"

The broom hummed and ignored her questions.

"Talk to me! Did you hear him?"

"Witch told broom not to talk."

"Now witch is giving you permission. Speak."

The broom danced all the way across the room and stopped at her side. It stood there looking down at the man.

Kirrah huffed. "Well? Did you hear what he said?"

"Broom heard very well. Broom have excellent hearing. Good eyesight, too. Broom see witch's hand slide down *waken's* belly toward long, fat, rope."

"I did not! He pulled me on top of him and—and—"

"Witch's hand traveled south to land of hot love handle."

"Oh, brother. You have a vivid imagination."

"Ha. Ha. Hot love handle. Broom make sexy joke."

"Shut up! What do you think?"

"'Bout what?" The broom sniffed as if offended. "Broom already told witch, injured non-*waken* dangerous."

"Yeah, but you didn't say he's a flippin' ax murderer."

"Broom not think non-*waken* flippin' ax murderer."

"He said kill her? Kill *who*?" she squeaked. "Me? I'm the only *her* here. He has to mean me. Besides, he was in the woods headed toward my house."

The broom snickered. "Aww, but non-*waken*, he have the hots for witch. He not kill you, at least not until he do the *rooba-rooba* with you, maybe not even then. Non-*waken* in woods, yes, but might not be headed for your home. Could be camping."

"Camping," Kirrah shrieked. "It's freezing out there. He wasn't camping. He was—he was—"

"Looking for beautiful witch to do the *rooba-rooba* with?"

"No! What if he came here to kill me?"

"Sent by whom? Why?"

"I don't know. Aunt Penell believed my sisters and I are in danger. I—I was kept hidden for over twenty years. They were too, for Pete's sake."

"Pete again? He very busy fellow."

"Not a real Pete."

"Then why mention him? Why anyone want lovely witch dead?"

"Maybe because I'm a witch with unlimited powers?"

The broom shrugged. "Not sensible. You might have unusual powers, but they not unlimited. Only one single witch in all of Sanctuary have unlimited powers."

Kirrah nibbled on the knuckle of her thumb. She looked up, frowned. "Who? Which witch has unlimited powers?"

"The healer. She most powerful of witches. Most beautiful, too. Witch like *Sleeping Beauty*. *Snow White*."

"Are you trying to say she's like a fairy tale?"

"Yep. That exactly what broom say."

"What's her name?"

"Healer."

"That's not her name."

"Is only name broom ever hear her called."

"Can you take me to her?"

"Maybe tomorrow night. Maybe, if you let broom talk whenever broom wish to speak."

"You're blackmailing me?"

"Broom not know what that mean. We have deal?"

"Yes. Okay."

Kirrah swore the broom gave her a wicked grin before it swept a path back to the corner. "You think you're so smart."

"Broom is smart. Ha. Ha. Broom blackmailed witch. He-he."

She ignored the broom's smart remarks and returned to nibbling her thumb. She was a witch. Did witches die? Yes. Yes. Of course they did. Her mother had been murdered by her father. And weren't witches hanged back in Salem way back when?

Goodness, she'd never hurt anyone—except, maybe for Clarice when she zapped her with snakes and spiders that long ago Halloween, and—and Mr. Wa-Wa—but those were accidents. Honestly, her heart just wasn't into causing anyone pain.

Kirrah cast her nervous gaze upon her broom-sticked patient. She felt sick and yes, a bit apprehensive. Ooh—now his dark shadow of whiskers took on a sinister appearance. He moaned and tossed his head restlessly.

She pursed her lips and moved a bit closer. "Who—who are you—going to—to kill?" she asked faintly. "Tell me." She patted his arm. "I'm your friend. You can—can tell me anything. Trust me."

"Ny—Nyra—Winters."

Kirrah's eyes bugged out. "Ny—ra?" Her voice cracked. "Oh, shit, you're really here to kill one of the witches?"

"Kill—Nyra."

"Yeah, Mr. Wa-Wa, I get the idea, you lousy, stinking murderer."

Nyra was the witch who owned the herbal shop, *Healing Hands* across the street corner from the Sugar-N-Spice bakery. She hadn't talked to her, only seen her from a distance. Oh! Realization hit her with the force of a magical blast. Was it possible the shop owner was one of her missing sisters?

And was Nyra the witch everyone called Healer?

Kirrah thought it must be so. She'd heard other witches call the shop owner Healer, but she'd never paid it much mind—until now. Oh, goodness, even *she* knew it was taboo to kill a healer. If there was one thing she'd learned since moving to Sanctuary—no one touched a healer! They were like gold, a rarity, and precious to the realm. A jewel...?

"Broom!"

"What?"

"Dang, stop creeping up behind me!"

"Broom, not creep. Broom sweep. Witch deep in thought, not listening. What witch want?"

"This healer, have you seen her?"

"Course. Broom does visit other familiars. Healer-witch has wonderful *Futhar* friend of mine. So what?"

"Have you ever noticed if she had jewels embedded on her fingernails?"

"Karma is rabbit, not have fingernails."

"Not the familiar, you dumb stick. The healer?"

"Not nice to call broom, 'dumb stick.' Broom verra smart stick. Witch tell broom she sorry for calling it name or not speak to witch again. Ever."

"Oh, for Pe- . . . all right! I apologize. It was rude of me to call you a name. Now tell me what you know."

"Healer very secretive, but no, no jewels on her nails. Why? This important detail?"

"Sort of. I guess she's not the right witch."

"Right for what?"

"If she had jewels, then she might be my sister, or part of the coven."

"Hmm, Mr. Broom only see one witch with sparkly nails."

"What? Who? When?"

"Can't remember when—maybe yesterday. Maybe last week. Is that lovely witch next to bakery. Magick Shop owner, she wear green, sparkling stones on her nails, but she not at shop anymore. She close doors, lockdown. Gone somewhere with *waken*. Witch hurt or something. *Waken* carrying her and telling witch she be okay."

"Why was he carrying her?"

"Don't know for sure certain, but think witch maybe fell in hole of some sort. She very dirty."

"You don't know where he took her?"

"Nope. Broom not care. Pay no attention."

"Crap! I think the non-*waken* plans to kill her?"

"Who? Witch with sparkly fingers?"

"No, the healer."

The broom laughed. "Not worry. Non-*waken* can't harm healer. She have awesome powers. He never get near her."

"He might."

"Might. But doubtful."

Kirrah eyed the non-*waken*. Was he mad? She winced. Of course he was or he would never consider butchering a healer. She needed to meet Nyra, talk to her, and find out what she knew about the coven, if anything.

Maybe they weren't sisters, still the healer might know of another Nyra. But so far, every time she'd dropped by the shop, the healer hadn't been there. The witch was illusive, always on the move, as if Satan was after her or something.

Or as if she avoided her.

Why would the witch avoid her?

Kirrah realized abruptly that's what had been happening. It had to be. No one could operate a business and always be gone. She eyed the stranger. Maybe he was Satan in disguise? He might be the reason Nyra was so elusive. Maybe the healer knew she was being hunted.

Why did he want to kill the witch?

Kirrah thought and thought about it, but she was no closer to the answers an hour later than she'd been when all the questions first niggled at her mind. She narrowed her eyes at the non-*waken*. Just for a little bit, she'd turn him into a fat frog, one that busted its balls every time it hopped—that is, if she had a clue what the proper hex was for changing someone into a frog.

She simply had to pay a visit to the Magick Shop and buy a book of spells. No matter if she knew her full potential of magic or not, she couldn't let him kill the healer.

She *wouldn't* let him to do it.

Jerking open the nightstand drawer, Kirrah fished out two lengths of rope she'd stored there days ago, when she first started hearing the voice...just in case.

"You have rope?" Once again the broom towered right beside her. "Curious. Witch into kinky sex?"

Kirrah slanted a gaze at the familiar. "No, witch is not into kinky sex," she said tightly. "This is the same rope I tied him up with yesterday. A lady never knows when she'll need pieces of stout rope to bind an enemy. These work nicely on Mr. Wa-Wa—the witch-murdering wak-wak."

The broom cackled. "Good one. Ha. Ha. Witch-murdering wak-wak. Broom like funny words."

"Yeah. Witch like funny words, too."

"Ha. Ha. Witch make joke with Mr. Broom. Mr. Broom give witch good ride next time. No loop-de-loops. No belly rolls."

Without further thought, Kirrah looped the ropes around Mr. Wa-Wa's wrists then tied them to the headboard. She made certain the knots were nice and secure.

"There. Mr. Wa-Wa isn't going anywhere, not for a very long time."

Chapter Eleven

*'Tis now the very witching time of night, When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to this world.*

~William Shakespeare

*Ru-Noc
Droth
Immortal Realm
Beltane*

Black Drayke, foulest of evil creatures, cursed Zebus with every step that led him safely out of his version of hell within the Noddon Caverns. He put as much distance between him and the demon as quickly as he could.

He didn't trust Zebus not to rip off his head or run an athame in his back. If the demon was brazen enough to attempt an assassination of his brother, then he sure wouldn't hesitate to kill *him*.

Black Drayke knew well Zebus had little tolerance for him.

How he despised the vengeful king.

There was no doubt in his mind Zebus had no intention of honoring his promises to him. Demons were notorious liars to out-dwellers. With no love lost between them, and King Kallibus now his sworn enemy, he no longer had any allies in the demon world. He had no one to partner with—except perhaps for....

Hmm. Yeah. The thought had merit. It was too risky now to return to Zebus. Black Drayke uttered a curse. He knew in the eyes of the demon, he was little better than a pissant crawling on the ground. If he appeared in Zebus' court again, the king would squash him like a bug.

Furious that all his plans to rule Ru-Noc and Ayrumus had gone awry, Black Drayke escaped the confining caves of the Noddon Caverns. He sucked in a refreshing lungful of the pure, clean night air and reveled in his escape. Much better. Beat the hell out of the sulfur air of the caverns.

Unfurling his wings, he bounded into the dark sky, his black limbs lending him speed in the night. Abruptly, he veered south and headed straight to Droth, to the one who'd always been there for him—MeLora.

He hated the witch almost as much as he despised Zebus. She'd betrayed him with the demon, but he

couldn't wait to let her know she wasn't going to get her reward either.

The information might sway her over to his side. Besides, he needed a good fuck, and MeLora, for all her evil, had always known what it took to get him off.



MeLora turned from the floor length mirror, cursing with each step she took. Pacing wildly back and forth across the bedroom floor, total revulsion for her pregnant appearance choked the breath out of her.

Gods, she hated her bloated belly. If she got any bigger, she thought she'd explode. Pacing, she clawed at her arms and stifled a scream of frustration. Damn Zebus and the irritating parasite he'd planted inside her body. The burning and itching were driving her insane. She knew damn well Zebus had somehow put it in her.

She didn't know how.

She didn't know when.

But she knew he'd done it to her.

It was a parasite and demons were known to share them for pure spite. The bug crept under her skin. MeLora watched it inch its way along. It left little tracks that rose on her skin in the form of tiny blisters. She followed the path the slimy bastard left behind. She'd tried to smash it with a book several times. But somehow the parasite sensed danger every time and burrowed too deep for her to kill it.

Grabbing a lovely vase off the nightstand, she flung it across the room. It slammed against the wall and shattered into a dozen pieces. The shards scattered across the black and white marble floor. Breaking it did little to soothe her temper and frustration.

Gods, she hated the parasite!

She despised the demon in her belly. Would it never stop growing?

I'm not quite to my full weight yet mother, a few more pounds to go.

Yorbus' silent communication startled her, but not nearly as much as the abrupt appearance of Black Drayke in her bed chambers.

She whirled, revulsion gripping her. "What do you want?" she asked fiercely. Gods, could her life get any worse? "Zebus will kill you for daring to enter our bed chambers."

"Your bed chambers? Do you honestly think for a minute Zebus is going to return to you?" He slid his dark gaze over her bulging belly. "He accomplished what he wanted." Black Drayke wrinkled his nose. "Your face is nearly as overstuffed as your belly. You're repugnant. He doesn't want to fuck you anymore. I don't even want to fuck you."

"Shut up!" She grabbed another vase and threw it at him. He easily dodged it and laughed as it shattered against the wall behind him.

"Tsk, ts, MeLora, will you destroy everything of worth in the palace simply because of your bloated ego?"

MeLora clawed her arm. "Yes! And I wouldn't let you touch me if your cock was made of gold and shot gold coins every time you climaxed. Zebus will come to me when he has time. I'm his mate."

Black Drayke sauntered closer. His black wings rippled the air in slow motion. "Think about this, MeLora. Demons mark their true mates with a symbol of their last name. Do you bear such a mark? Has Zebus tattooed you? No, he's only screwed you. Did he ever take care to give you pleasure in return when he mated with you? I'm betting no. He hasn't given you his heart. He won't."

"I'm his mate. He loves me."

"Loves you? You're disgusting. Partner up with me again, and I might give you a mercy fucking, if you're needy."

Tell him to go away, Mother.

"Shut up!"

"Ahh, you speak to the demon babe." Black Drayke gripped her upper arms and dragged her close. He laid his palm against her rounded belly. "His heart races. The babe trembles inside you. He is fearful."

MeLora shoved his hand away. "He has nothing to fear. I cannot harm him in any way."

"You can't." He lifted a brow, lowered his mouth and nibbled on her lips. He slid his tongue around hers and suckled like a starving infant. Black Drayke wrapped her fingers around his hard cock and groaned. Slowly, he released her mouth. "I'm a full-fledged demon." He covered her hand around his aching shaft and thrust. "I'm in dire need of relief."

"You think I'm not a full-fledged demon?" MeLora worked her fingers up and down the solid length. She hadn't felt a nice, firm cock since Zebus was last here with her. "Do you never wear clothes anymore?"

"Never. I can't bear them against my skin." Black Drayke grabbed her shoulders, shoved her back against the wall and pushed her gown up to her waist. "Ahh, I excite you. You're wet for me. I'm going to come, but it's going to be in you, not in your hands."

He lifted her, and in a single thrust, pushed his thick shaft deep inside her. MeLora screamed and wrapped her legs around his hips. "Yes! Fuck me. Hard. Harder. Yes. Like that. Do it faster."

Black Drayke threw back his head and laughed. "You always did like it rough."

They panted and rushed into instant orgasms that left them trembling. Black Drayke grinned and slowly pulled out of her. "That was fast, even for us."

MeLora dropped her skirt in a dainty move for someone as rounded in pregnancy as she was. The gown fell around her ankles. She lifted a brow. "Zebus will kill you for touching me."

"I don't recall you resisting. You think he gives a fuck I just pounded you with my cock? As long as his babe isn't hurt, he wouldn't care if you screwed his entire army." He slid his tongue down her neck and suckled on her tender flesh. "Now then, since we've both garnered a bit of relief, let's talk business. Yes, indeed you're a demon, but you're female and you carry the child. Zebus made certain you can do nothing to dislodge his son. Male demons do that with every babe they father." He smiled. "But he didn't count on me. I can rid you of the babe—if you like—and I think you'd like it very much."

MeLora's eyes glittered feverishly. "You're insane. Zebus would smite you from this realm if you harm his son. Besides, no matter how much I despise this babe, I will not do anything that will cause me to risk losing the emeralds on Saylym's fingers. I want them. I *need* them! I can do nothing to gain more magical power until I own those jewels. I have no doubts Zebus will secure them for me soon. He loves me."

Black Drayke snickered. "You're a fool, MeLora. I just fucked you. Do you not think the demon you carry will tell Zebus I nailed you?"

"But—you said he wouldn't care."

Black Drayke shrugged. "Zebus doesn't confide in me. How would I know if he cares if I screw you or not? Maybe he wouldn't. Maybe he would. But I doubt it. Your face is nearly as puffy as your belly. You're unattractive. Zebus cares nothing for you other than you incubate his seed. His son is all he wants. He wants the babe delivered safe into this realm. But know Zebus will *never* give you the emeralds."

"You're wrong. He promised to bring them to me the next time he visits me."

"He is never going to visit you again. On All Hallows' Eve when you birth his son, he'll be there to take him and he'll vanish with the babe."

"I don't care. I don't want the child anyway. Zebus can have him and good riddance."

"Saylym is mated to his son, Kyma."

"You're mistaken. Zebus has no children."

"He has an heir for Dymus. Kyma is his first born, his only child to date. I tell you true, Kyma is mated to Saylym. I saw them, although I didn't recognize her. Saylym's looks have been altered, her hair changed. She bears the mark of a royal demon and she is pregnant with Zebus' grandchild. Do you think he'll remove the emeralds, take from his own bloodline to give to you? I swear to you, he's devoted to his son and now to his new daughter-in-law."

"You're lying!" MeLora pounded his chest with her clenched fists. "You're lying! You love to make

me miserable. You always have. Zebus has no children. Yorbus will be his heir. His only heir. My son will inherit everything. Everything!"

"No. Yorbus will inherit the crown of Ru-Noc, but only if it suits Zebus' purpose. The demon is up to something. Whatever it is, it's big. It doesn't just involve ruling Ru-Noc or he'd be here with you."

MeLora shrugged. "I have no idea what you're talking about. Zebus never shares his plans with me."

"And he won't. He doesn't trust you. Neither will he give you the emeralds."

MeLora clenched her fists. "Then destroy this seed inside me, if you think you can and you're brave enough to defy Zebus' wishes. Destroy it, and I will not give him the son he yearns for."

"I *know* I can. Take off all your clothes."

MeLora rolled her eyes. "Why?"

"I must present an unclothed gift to the God of Destruction in order to gain his aid. He likes to gaze upon a naked female. Strip."

MeLora tore her gown over her head and flung it aside. "This better work."

"It will." Black Drayke closed his eyes. He placed one hand on her exposed stomach and raised the other hand in the air. He swayed from side to side. "God of Destruction, I call upon your mighty powers. Destroy the demon's seed within this witch's body. Smite it. Strike it down. And expel it from her womb. Make her beautiful again. I implore you, oh mighty one."

MeLora threw back her head and laughed. "You think you have the ear of the God of Destruction? What a fool you are. And I am already beautiful."

"You look like a sow overstuffed with piglets."

Mother, no!

MeLora gasped at the terror she heard in the demon babe's voice. She felt something warm trickle down her legs. Curious, she glanced down and drew a sharp breath. Dark liquid seeped down the insides of her legs and pooled on the marble floor. Sharp pain cut across her belly. MeLora dropped to her knees rocking back and forth. "Yes! Yes! Leave my body, son of Zebus!"

Mother! Stop it! Stop him. You must stop him.

Even as another acute pain sliced across her middle, MeLora laughed hysterically "Die, you fucker. I despise you. I hate you. I hate your father. Rot in hell."

Wave after wave of excruciating pain ripped through her. MeLora curled into a tight ball. "Gods, he's fighting to stay inside me. I can feel his claws ripping my womb."

Black Drayke lifted a brow. "You know the human saying—no pain, no gain. Isn't that what the mortals say? Now you know the meaning of those words. It's a useless fight, my darling. Give it a minute and it will be finished. You'll be rid of the creature."

MeLora smiled and nodded, waiting for his prediction to come true. He was right. In seconds, she screamed, both in pain and in exultation. She moaned, lifting her hands for Black Drayke to hold them, to support her as she tried desperately to expel the babe Zebus had put in her.

Black Drayke jumped back. "Don't touch me! I don't want your mess on me. Your hands are soiled."

"It hurts," MeLora screamed. "Help me," she begged.

"Help yourself," he said in an icy tone. "And hurry it up. Push the thing out so we can get rid of it. I'm getting bored listening to you whine."

"It's coming out," she said between clenched teeth. The demon clawed its way out of her, spilling its acid bile over and over. The moment it escaped her, it turned black and curled into a dark murky ball. Its high-pitched screams unnerved her. "Shut up! Make it shut up!" She covered her ears with the palms of her hands and stared at the jellied-like globule, a messy blob with teeth, claws and hair. She watched it shudder and breathe its last breath.

"Get it! Burn it! Now. I can't stand looking at it," MeLora ended faintly. "It makes me ill. Remove it from my sight."

Black Drayke probed the grotesque lump of tissue with the toe of his boot, then laughing, kicked it in

the general direction of the fireplace. "Burn, you creepy little fuck."

Flames shot up in the air, snapping and sizzling as they hungrily devoured all evidence of the demon creature.

"What of the other babe?" MeLora asked, rising slowly to her feet. She cleansed herself in the witch fashion, using magic to refresh her body, then put on a clean gown, black, her favorite color. "Could you not destroy him as well? I hate him almost as much as I despised the demon."

"No. The *waken* babe has a protective shell around him I could not penetrate. The God of Destruction refused to remove him." He laughed. "I offered to keep you naked all day for his viewing pleasure, but he said it was no pleasure to look upon your fat belly. He also said you'll carry this babe full term."

"Fuck!"

"Yep, it's exactly how the future king of Ru-Noc got there in the first place." He grinned. "Now that you look almost sexy again and aren't so big with that creepy brat, I want a reward." He rubbed his balls and cock. "You know what I need to gain satisfaction."

MeLora smiled. "Take care of your own needs, you cold-hearted freak."

Black Drayke locked his fingers in her hair and pushed her to her knees in front of him. "You'll see to my needs—until I can find someone better. And don't bite my cock or I'll break your neck."

MeLora cupped his balls and squeezed.

Black Drayke sucked in a sharp breath. "Don't even think about it. Now do what you do best, my darling. Tonight, you'll reward me for helping rid you of that creature."



As Zebus made his way to his private chambers, Kyma fell into step beside him. His son grinned. "I thought you'd be with your vampiress, rocking the bed, Father, or have you decided you no longer want her?"

"In good time, Kyma. Business has kept me away from her. When I go to her, I want no interruptions." Zebus smiled, pleased to have the opportunity to spend time with his son. "You've taken a moment to escape the loving chains of your new mate," he teased, knowing full well it was Kyma who wouldn't let Saylym out of his sight. He knew if his son was here, then Saylym was under heavy guard.

"Rausha is taking a bath. I thought she'd appreciate a bit of privacy." He paused, a dopey grin on his face. "I believe I have been remiss in thanking you for my beautiful gift. Gods, Father, she is perfect. No matter how many times I mate with her, I cannot keep from touching her again and again. Each time is like the first time. I come undone whenever I'm near her. Sometimes," he paused for a deep breath and slowly exhaled, then continued. "Sometimes, I think my heart will explode with happiness. I love her so much. I don't know the words to express how I feel about her. I don't know how to let her know how much she means to me. She isn't my captive. I'm hers. She has enchanted me with nothing but her smile."

"You're young and horny. It's the mating season which makes the urge to mate even more urgent. There's nothing strange or magical about it. You'll tire of her eventually and seek other females."

"No." Kyma shook his head. "I want no other female. She's the one for me. Rausha is my other half. When I touch her, it's like our souls blend. It feels right. She belongs with me."

"I think Prince Talon would heartily disagree with you."

"She no longer belongs to the prince. I will not contemplate him ever touching her again. She belongs in this realm now. Her body changes daily and with each mating, she becomes more demon, more mine. I have mingled my blood with hers dozens of times now. My seed has filled her womb many times, too numerous to count. For my Rausha, there is no Talon."

"True, but he will keep trying to get her back."

"And he will fail."

"Also true, but you must be on guard at all times." Zebus halted and grabbed his chest. "Gods." His breath left him in a rush. He leaned over panting. "No. Oh, no."

Kyma grabbed his father's arm and steadied him. "What is it, Father? What's wrong?"

The demon king drew a sharp breath and lifted his head, his eyes filled with sorrow. Slowly, he straightened and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his arm. Tears welled in his eyes. "The babe is no more. The bitch discovered a way to destroy my seed."

"Yorbus? My brother is dead?"

Tears spilled down Zebus' dark face and for a moment, deep lines creased the corners of his mouth. His heart filled with unspeakable grief. The utter devastation he felt was a like a raw and open sore throughout his body. "Yes. We have lost him," he said bleakly. Pain, sharp as a knife blade plunged into his heart settled in his soul. He clenched his fists. "She will pay for this. I swear it. No one destroys something I love, something that's a part of me, and gets by with it."

"But how did she manage it? It's impossible for a female to dislodge one of our babes."

Zebus ground his teeth, his jaw clenching. "She didn't accomplish it alone."

"Who would dare to cross swords with you, destroy your seed?"

"There are many who despise me. Kallibus is at the top of the chain, but he would not destroy a demon babe. And long have I detested the *wakens*. Because we are hostile with that species, our race became the natural enemies of the *weres*. Since I've teamed up with Brasov, Dracula's coven will now despise us. Anyone of these powers could have aided MeLora in destroying my son," he finished bitterly. "Most likely, it was Prince Talon who helped her with the destruction of my child. Right now he's furious with me over the loss of his mate and the others who perished in my attack on his home. I expected him to seek revenge. But I thought his attack would be on me, not my babe. I should have realized he'd hit where I'm most vulnerable. He always has. He will pay for this. If it's the last thing I do, I'll turn Rausha totally against him. I swear it."

Kyma gazed doubtfully at his father. "You truly believe it was Talon? I simply can't fathom the *waken* as a baby killer."

"Why not? He murdered your mother when she was pregnant. He *is* a baby killer."

"Yes, but he didn't know Mother was with child."

"It doesn't matter if he knew or not. He killed them. I must find another female to carry my seed. I dare not use MeLora again. Now that she has learned a way to destroy my seed, she is useless as an incubator."

"Would you have me kill her, Father?"

"Yes." Zebus nodded. "I will see her dead, but not now. For now, we'll allow her to believe she has gotten by with what she's done. When the time is right, I'll see she pays for the wanton murder of Yorbus. I'll make certain every soldier with an *oomba* fucks her. The bitch will die a miserable death and I'll watch her die and laugh." Zebus' eyes burned with his plans for revenge. "For now, we concentrate on making Prince Talon pay for his crimes against us."

"You're positive it was the prince?"

"Of course it was him. I took something of his, now he has destroyed something of mine."

Kyma nodded. "Then place the Magick Mirror in my bed chamber."

Zebus frowned. "Why?"

"Eventually Talon will find the path through the mirror in search of his lost mate. I will show him exactly the numerous ways I take what once was his. It will burn a hole in his gut every time he watches me mate with Rausha. Not only will he see her belly swollen with my child, worse, he will hear her begging for my cock. His heart and soul will bleed for every crime he's committed against us. I swear it."

Zebus agreed. "I'll have the servants install the Magick Mirror tomorrow."

"No." Kyma shook his head. "Have them do it now. The professor gave me an injection a few minutes ago. My cock is hard as stone. It's going to be a very active night between Rausha and me. It might take a few weeks, but eventually, the prince will discover us. I want Talon to see every inch I give her, hear her moans of pleasure as I satisfy her, hear her pleas for me to take her over and over again. He will have no

lingering doubts she loves me and only me."

Zebus nodded. "Make certain he sees her belly. I want him to know your child resides inside her."

Kyma grinned. "By the time I'm finished, Talon will never want Rausha again. I swear it on my mother's grave."

Chapter Twelve

Do not worry if you have built your castles in the air. They are where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.

~Henry David Thoreau

*Ru-Noc
Sanctuary
Immortal Realm
Beltane*

Prince Stry held his breath, cracked open his eyes to mere slits and eyed the room through his thick lashes. The room he now called home. It was a ridiculously feminine room, lots of lace scarves on the bedroom furniture. Pink silk wallpaper with tiny white roses decorated the walls.

A tall lamp stood in one corner. A wide pink ribbon, twined around its pole, ended in a huge pink bow with a big blue jewel sparkling in the center of the knot. All the dainty frilly-fraus a female liked to surround herself with.

Like the utterly pink comforter on the bed with multi-colored butterflies and the thin, solid pink lacey curtains at the window. A dresser. A chest. And a huge desk filled what extra space was left over in the far corner of the bed chamber.

He widened his eyes and stared with disbelief. Not only did the witch have a thing for pink, she was an avid collector of—*things*. The top of the chest was crammed with lighthouses of every shape, size and color imaginable. He frowned. Now where would she get items like those so obviously from the mortal realm?

By law, she wasn't allowed to cross the borders between the two worlds. Ever since the days following the Salem witch trials, only *wakens* could legally cross realms, unless the witch was accompanied by a *waken*.

The borders were heavily guarded by *Observers*, ghostly guards from their immortal realm that made sure witches didn't break the law.

Eyeing the room, he decided he needed to ask the witch a lot of questions. She had too many things from the mortal realm in her home. It meant she was making, or did at one time, numerous trips into a

world she had no business entering.

Her magic was too chaotic and dangerous for her to walk among mortals. Ever. The sweet little witch didn't know it yet, but her wings were about to be clipped. By the gods, he was issuing a royal command to her, one that forbid her to travel again or he— he frowned—or what?

Now that his memory had returned, he had to be careful what he said to the witch. If she knew he remembered everything, she'd make him leave. He wasn't going anywhere.

Neither could he tell the Guild about her. His brother Talon made that mistake about a young witch and was immediately ordered to steal her soul. Talon—his brother.

Where the hell was his brother now? And their cousin Sage?

Had Sage killed the human he'd been sent to assassinate? The witch?

Stry's brows furrowed as memories filtered through his mind. *Sheehta!* Sage was supposed to kill a witch named Kirrah.

"Fook!"

No. No way was he going to let his cousin near Kirrah or allow him to steal her soul. No matter how much fire-breathing the Ancients did, Kirrah was not going to die.

When he saw Sage again, he'd tell him straight out to leave the witch alone.

Stry grinned, pleased with his decision. He'd simply keep Kirrah, tame her, make her his for as long as it took to get his fill of her, then she was on her own again.

He frowned at that thought. No—maybe he'd just keep her. Claim her. Make her his mate.

The way his body responded to the witch every time she was near him, he knew he was never going to get his fill of her.

First, he had to convince her to stop making trips to the mortal realm. His brows drew together in a scowl. But what if she hadn't crossed into the mortal realm? Stry closed his eyes and gave this curious thought consideration.

What if instead of being raised in Sanctuary, she was raised in the human realm? There was a time in the 1600s when witches mated with mortal men. They'd had children by them, even lived in that stinking, disgusting realm. The products of those mixed marriages were a breed of witches known as *Impures*.

His eyes popped open and he knew in that instant as sure as he breathed, Kirrah was an *Impure*. She hadn't been raised in Sanctuary. No way. He'd have met her centuries earlier if she'd been born and raised in Sanctuary. "Damn—a *fooking* half-breed."

He was going to be king one day. He couldn't put an *Impure* on the throne. *Fook-fook-fook!*

No wonder her magical skills were so jumbled. It explained everything—her mishaps with spells, her odd speech, why she was so damned beautiful, because all *Impure* females were incredibly lovely, and their mating scents had a stronger allure, Mother Nature's way to ensure even the half-breeds were bred at Beltane.

It also explained why the witch hadn't known he was a *waken*, why she hadn't displayed fear of him when he kissed her.

A witch, as a rule, avoided *wakens* like the plague, except at Beltane.

Of course, it was Beltane now, and even though her mating scent was hot, she hadn't acted like a witch anxious to mate so she'd have the chance to conceive. Stry tucked the questions of where she came from and her history and where she got the mortal items in the back of his mind.

He had a feeling it wasn't going to be easy gaining answers from her.

Instead, he turned his attention back to the room and the contents. A person could learn a lot by what was in someone's home. The dresser—*what in the world were those things?* He narrowed his eyes. *Dolls?*

Stry worried his lower lip. He'd seen dolls like those before, gifts from his father for Queen Helayne. He blinked. His mother collected the very type of dolls his sweet witch had loaded down on her dresser.

He'd heard his mother call them piano babies. Piano babies? He had no idea why they were called that, but he'd looked them up once and was amazed at how many different shapes and sizes there were. He

knew his mother was determined to have at least one of each kind. Apparently so did his witch.

Stry skimmed over the dolls. They didn't interest him other than finding it fascinating that both his mother and his witch had them in common.

In every nook and cranny, the lovely *Impure* had stuffed old photographs—swear to the gods, some of the females in those photos looked like mortal women he knew were said to be pioneers. Long dresses, hair skinned back tight, plain and weathered faces. Hard times. Harder life.

But then some of the ladies in the photos were cute, particularly the two photos of different women on their wedding day. He recognized that time period too—and those style dresses and the strings of long pearls. Flapper gowns. Feathered hats. The Roaring Twenties.

One of the women held a big bouquet of white roses. He assumed the roses were white, but the picture was in black and white, so it was totally an assumption. The groom was seated in a chair. She had one hand resting on his shoulder and she stood on one foot. The other foot was kicked up behind her, poised gracefully in the air a few inches off the floor. Stry smiled. She looked a bit flirty, happy—a woman long in her grave. Had she lived a rich fulfilling life? He hoped so. He hoped she died a very old lady with lots of children and grandchildren around her bed when she went.

In awe of the countless number of pictures in the room, he wondered where in the world the witch got her hands on so many old photographs.

Were they members of her family? He intended to find out.

Stry released a pent-up breath, muttered a chant, and grinned when he felt the ropes fall away from his wrists. Why had she tied him up like that anyway? He was tired of lying in the bed. It was boring with Kirrah and her broom away. Sitting up on the edge of the bed, he determinedly worked the kinks out of his neck and shoulders.

By the gods, where the hell was she? She'd been away far too long.

He needed tender loving care.

He needed her kisses.

He needed to feel her breasts against his chest.

And he needed—her.

Did he matter to the witch at all?

He hated it when she blithely flew off on her broom and left him alone. Amazing how he'd grown used to the sweet sound of her voice, the tinkle of her laughter, her timid yet inquisitive care of his body.

Dammit! *Where* was she?

He didn't like her haring off on that crazy broom. She was going to break her neck. He wanted her back here with him, preferably in bed under him, where she damn well belonged.

Stry stretched and yawned. Except for a lingering dull headache, he felt fine, a bit hungry, maybe, because the little beauty kept cramming broth down his throat when he preferred a much heartier meal.

He snorted. Maybe he should leave, make his escape while the going was good.

Nah, he liked it here.

The witch had lips sweeter than wine. He enjoyed kissing her. He couldn't get the taste of her mouth out of his mind or the feel of her delicious body taut against his. Before he left, he intended to taste every inch of her delectable body. Hell, why not? It was mating season. Witches were as horny as *wakens* at Beltane.

Oh, yeah. The witch was ripe for the taking.

They were isolated. Plenty of privacy for a sweet seduction, just the way he liked it. No competitors for her affections. He grinned. The little sweetheart was all his or she soon would be. He figured he had a hundred percent chance of seducing her to his bed—er, to *her* bed.

His pulse pounded at the thought of mating with her. Claiming her. He was free. He'd never had a serious relationship. Never committed. Usually he mated with several witches during Beltane on the off-chance he might get lucky and breed one of them, but it had never happened.

Variety during mating season was the spice of Beltane. Not this year. Not since he'd been knocked silly by Kirrah. She was all he thought about, all he wanted. He'd never wanted one steady witch in his life before, but Kirrah had wormed her way inside his heart. There was simply something about her, her unbridled passion for life, the untruths she told so poorly, her awkward use of magic, her laughter and excitement, the way she talked to her besom, her wacky sense of humor—all these traits made up one fine, lovely, interesting, challenging witch.

It would take centuries to fully understand her. One thing was certain. There'd never be a dull moment with her in his life. Yep. He'd made a decision. Kirrah Walker belonged to him.

She'd captured his total attention. His heart.

The witch was charming, funny, a bit idiotic, but he loved that about her. He could keep right on pretending he had amnesia, something she seemed eternally thankful for, act as if he couldn't make it if she tried to boot him out. He'd seduce her in no time at all.

The witch might have a spastic, insane broom, but Kirrah had a gentle heart. If he acted as if he was in pain, she'd topple in his arms like a hooked fish. The only thing he regretted was the fact she was probably like all the witches, infected with the virus, *Infertilus*.

He wanted a child. An heir. All the *wakens* needed children. Sons and daughters. Their numbers were so thin they were on the verge of extinction. He desperately needed to plant his seed in a fertile witch. He prayed if Kirrah was raised in the mortal world, she just might not be infected. It was a slim chance, but a better chance than he'd had in centuries.

He'd love to watch her belly thicken with his child.

"Ahhhh! Down broom! I want down."

He cocked an ear, shook his head and laughed out loud. There came the little doll now, screaming at her broom to land without crashing—again. Without hesitation, he lay back on the pillows, chanted the bonds back around his wrists, and made certain they were knotted exactly as she'd left them.

He relaxed, closed his eyes and waited. His cock swelled as soon as she and her broom toppled head-first through the door.

"Ouch." He heard her say. Groaning, he couldn't ignore the sudden pain in his groin. Stry cracked one eye. She got up from the floor and rubbed her behind. Swirling around, she gave her broom what-for. "Gracious, broom, are you ever going to land me on my feet? I have bruises on my butt and my head."

Welcome to the crowd, Stry thought, his grin widening.

"Well? Answer me," she said with a bristly tone. "You always have plenty to say."

Stry watched the broom rise to its switches, and if a broom could glare, this one was definitely glaring at the little witch.

"Your magic is cockeyed, witch. Fly correctly, and I'll land without crashing us."

Kirrah blinked. "My magic is cockeyed? What's that supposed to mean? You have a crooked broomstick!"

"Humph! Broomstick straight as can be. You make excuses for your lousy, stinky magic!" The broom twirled and stalked to its corner in a fit of obvious disgust. It stationed itself there like a sentinel. Swear to the gods, it turned a non-existent nose in the air. "You have no skills to control a broom in flight."

"I think it's telling you your education in magic has been sadly neglected."

Kirrah jumped and turned to eye him. "*You*, witch-killer, don't talk to me."

Stry laughed. "Witch-killer? Baby, I think you came closer to killing me than I have to doing away with you. My head still hurts. I need tender loving care."

"I wasn't talking about me. I know you're not intent on killing me."

"Only with good *fucking*."

"When you're dead and stiff."

"One outta two is half the battle won already."

"It will never happen."

Stry grinned. "No? 'Never' is a very long time. I remembered something."

"What?" Her voice sounded strained. Her body strangely tense. Some of the color drained from her face.

Stry frowned. What was she worried he might remember?

"My name."

She blinked. "Your name," she said on a breathless note. "Is that all? Oh, not that—it—it—isn't important. It is—sort of. I—I—mean, yeah, I guess your name is...."

Stry huffed. What the hell was she jabbering about? "Why are you so nervous? What did you think I'd remembered?"

"Witch 'fraid you remember she whacked your head with me," the broom announced cheerfully.

Kirrah gasped. "Shut up, broom. You talk too much. I'm not afraid. Go to your corner and put a zipper on it."

The broom looked down as if searching for a zipper at a nonexistent crotch. "Mr. Broom doesn't have zipp—er. Witch maybe have Sticks mixed up with non-waken's zipper? The one witch toyed with so much?"

"Mr. Broom has a big mouth," Kirrah snapped.

"Humph!"

"Hey." Stry motioned her closer. She was so damned feisty, she was adorable. He didn't like being the cause of her distress, either. He smothered a groan as she sauntered to side of the bed, a slight flush on her cheeks.

"What?" she asked suspiciously.

"I don't remember anything else, just my name. I doubt I'll ever remember what happened to me in the woods. I think I fell and hit my head."

"No, witch hit you—"

"Shut up, broom!" they yelled simultaneously.

Stry grinned. "Yeah. I'm pretty sure I fell and hit my head."

"Really?" She beamed. "Ooh. That's terrible."

The broom snorted. They ignored its rumblings.

Stry smothered a moan as his cock stretched to full length. Damn. He had to get his responses to her under control or he'd blow the entire thing. Literally. He wanted her too much to have control over his body.

And he'd never wanted as much as he wanted this witch. He needed her beneath his thrusting hips. He hungered for the feel of her soft skin against his body, her legs wrapped around his hips dragging his hard shaft deeper and deeper inside her.

Damn, the ache in his gut burned like a *fucking* fire.

The witch leaned over him and tested the knots around his wrists. Stry swallowed hard. *Fook!* Her breasts were practically in his mouth. At least her cleavage was. Gods, she smelled delicious. Hot. Spicy. Horny.

Did she have to wear such a low-cut gown?

Why did she have to have such perfect, enticing breasts? *Sheeahtha!* It was all he could do not to lick the rounded slopes of her breasts. "You don't have to tie my wrists while I sleep, sweetheart. If I'd known you were into kinky foreplay, I'd have willingly surrendered to you."

She gasped and reared back. "This is not foreplay. I tied you up because you're a killer."

"Aww, sweetheart, I can't even bring myself to trample an ant underfoot." His lips twitched. She looked so cute—so—*fucking*—grave? His grin faded. Crap. She was one somber little soldier. The frown on her face said clearly she was dead serious. "Baby, I haven't killed anyone. I don't *want* to kill anyone. I'm not going to kill anyone, especially you."

"I know you aren't going to kill me. Mr. Broom will protect me."

"Me?" The broom ambled up beside her. It trembled so hard its switches scratched the floor. "Not

me. Witch can take care of self."

"I swear to you, Kirrah, I'm not here to harm you."

"I know it. You came here to kill Nyra."

"Nyra? Who's she?"

"The witch you plan to murder."

"I'd rather mate with you than make war. It sounds much more delicious. Would you mind removing the ropes? I'm not going anywhere. I'm not going to harm you and they're rubbing my wrists raw."

"Oh! I'm so sorry." Kirrah set about loosening the knots.

Stry grinned in spite of the fact he needed to continue to play half dead. "The pictures over there—are they family? I love the one of the female in her wedding gown holding the bouquet of roses. She's sassy looking."

Kirrah dipped her head, looking embarrassed. "I have no idea who any of those people are in the pictures."

"What?" Stry blinked, puzzled. "Why do you have pictures of people you don't know?"

Kirrah shrugged. "It doesn't matter; besides, it's a long story."

He searched her eyes. Stry saw a hint of vulnerability there he hadn't seen before. "I think it matters very much to you. Tied to this bed like I am, I have nothing but time, *La-Scheme*. Tell me," he coaxed.

Kirrah fiddled with a ragged nail and cleared her throat. "Promise you won't laugh?"

"I swear on my honor as a witch."

She giggled. Her eyes, such a lovely green sparkled like emeralds. "Your honor as a witch?"

"Now who's laughing?"

She sobered instantly. "I'm sorry. I wasn't making fun."

"I know. Tell me about the pictures. I find them fascinating. Their life shows in their faces, their smiles or even the lack of a smile."

"Yes." Kirrah nodded and sat down on the edge of the bed. "When I was a child, there was no one but my Aunt Penell and me. I always knew she wasn't my real aunt. She was kind to me. I know she loved me, and I loved her, but something was always missing. I wasn't happy. I constantly searched faces in a crowd for some hint of family." She looked up at him through her gold-tipped lashes. "I sound ungrateful, don't I?"

"No," Stry said huskily. "You sound like someone who missed having a large family. You were alone, therefore, lonely."

"Yes. It was just recently I learned what happened to my birth mother and father, and I know now I have two sisters—somewhere. Up until then, Hannah Miller was the closest thing I've had to a sister, but for many years, she lived in her own home with her parents. It was just me, up in my room—alone." Her brows knitted in a scowl. "Aunt Penell was very secretive. So there wasn't much conversation in our home."

Stry glided a finger tip up and down her arm. Her skin felt like silk. His heart ached for the little girl who'd been solitary and forlorn and aching for the family lost to her. "I'm sorry. Truly, I am."

Kirrah eyed the pictures in their frames across the room. She waved a hand in their direction. "I love old-fashioned things. One day I was browsing in an antique store and I came across all those photos—some in boxes, some just poked around things—half-hidden little treasures just waiting for someone to find them. As I browsed, I began to study their faces. The people in the snaps had a story to tell, but they'd been thrown away. They looked so abandoned. Forlorn. My heart ached for them. They were once someone's family and no one cared about them anymore. It made me sad they'd been discarded, as if they no longer had any value to anyone."

"So you bought them?"

"Yes—I collected every picture in that store I could find, every last one of them. I took them home with me, bought frames for the larger sized ones and displayed them on my walls. The smaller ones, I took a clue from the antique store and poked them around larger items so they'd still be on display."

"They became your family?"

"Yes. I now had aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, brothers, sisters, but more importantly, I became *their* family. I watch over them." She gave a helpless shrug. "I just thought they needed someone to love them again."

Stry swallowed hard. He blinked back the hint of tears that stung his eyes, but something inside him melted with those words.

I just thought they needed someone to love them again.

With that softly spoken sentence, Kirrah Walker owned his heart as surely as she owned those old photographs.

Chapter Thirteen

You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you.

~ Leon Trotsky

Na-Cyl
Wolfe Bayne Hollow
Immortal Realm
Beltane

While Creed LaVeau waited on his long front porch for his brothers to join him for their journey to Romania, an unexpected, unwelcome visitor appeared. Zebus Angel announced his presence only by his sudden arrival.

One minute Creed was alone on the porch, the next, Zebus materialized in the yard in front of him. The rank odor of sulfur filled the air and nearly gagged him. Even in the dark, his night vision was so sharp he could see several parasites crawling on the demon's skin.

Zebus held his arms up high. "I hope you'll make me welcome, *were*. I'm not here to harm you or anyone in your realm."

Immediately, Creed's hackles shot straight up. If he'd been in *were* form, his fur would have stood straight up, his body crouched in attack mode. His mind and body switched abruptly into a defensive stance. Claws shot out the ends of his fingers. Tufts of hair rose on his arms. His ears shot up to a fine point. His face elongated into a snout filled with long, sharp and lethal teeth.

Zebus shook his head. "Relax, wolf. I come unarmed and in peace."

Creed remained poised, on guard, until it was clear the demon was alone. He had little use for the demon king, in truth, he had none. "You are not unarmed. You have your parasites and they are deadly."

"Yes, these certainly are. But I could hardly appear without some sort of defense."

"Get rid of them."

"When you give me your word you will listen to what I have to say without ripping me in half."

Bad as he hated to agree, Creed nodded. He didn't want those damnable worms infesting his world. Zebus laughed and, in an instant, the worms vanished. "Feel safer?"

"You better have a good reason for invading my realm uninvited."

"If I waited for an invitation, I'd never get the chance to pay you a call." Zebus smiled, certain of his welcome now that Creed had retracted his claws and canines. He held his arms out to his sides. "I swear, I mean you or your people no harm."

"I doubt that. It is your way to destroy."

"It is not my way. It's what has been forced upon me to survive and to ensure the survival of my species. My seed."

"You're breaking my heart. What do you want, Zebus? Tell me and get off my realm. You aren't welcome. You'll never be welcome here."

Zebus clucked his tongue. "And here we are going to be related. You'd best get used to having me around and as part of the family."

"There is no way in hell you'll ever be part of my family. Make your point. I have no time for games."

"Ah, yes, your lovely sister is missing. I do believe she's been captured by the evil vampire, Brasov. Unfortunately, I helped him capture her—uh, stop right there," Zebus commanded, holding up a hand.

Creed halted in his tracks when he saw the parasites reappear on Zebus' bare arm again. "For the last time, get rid of those fucking worms or I'll rip you in half."

Zebus grinned. The worms vanished, but Creed knew the demon could summon them in a heartbeat.

"I helped the vampire before I knew you and I were going to be family."

"Somehow, I sense a lie."

Zebus shrugged. "Perhaps. But I'm helping you by telling you where you can locate your sister."

"I know where she is."

"No. In fact you do not. You know what realm she's in, but you don't know her exact location. I do."

"What the hell do you want, Zebus?"

"Your trust."

Creed snorted.

"Your loyalty."

He snorted again.

"Hear me out."

"I'm listening."

"Your sister's not only in grave danger. She's with child." Zebus laughed. "Ah, I see by your expression you didn't know she is carrying."

Creed jumped off the porch and landed in front of Zebus. His voice rang with a low, deep-throated growl—a warning that he'd reached the limits of his patience with the demon. "If anything happens to Shasta, and I find you're involved, there'll be no hiding place safe enough for you on Ayrumus. I'll find you and rip your guts inside out and feed them to our She-Wolves."

Zebus laughed. "So graphic. And spoken like a true king. However, I had nothing to do with making Shasta pregnant. I wish I had, but you can lay the blame for that at the vampire's feet."

"Which vampire?"

Zebus shrugged. "How would I know the answer to that mystery? Your sister mated with two different males. Either one could be the father of her babe."

"You lie!"

"I give you my demon's word. I speak the truth. I have done nothing to your sister—sexually. How could I? We're family now. I don't hurt family."

"You're wasting my time. Either get to the point of your visit or take your leave."

"Very well. Your future bride has been conceived."

Creed hid his surprise with disbelief. "You're filled with lies this night. The conception of my bride

isn't due for another hundred years."

"I wouldn't lie about something this important. Peyton has been conceived."

Surprised by the way his body instantly responded to the news his future mate was conceived, Creed lifted his head and studied Zebus. It was true. The demon spoke the truth else Zebus couldn't possibly know *his* future bride's name. "What does this news have to do with you?"

"Saylym Winslow is the babe's mother."

"I know who the mother of my future mate is. Again, I ask what it has to do with you?"

Zebus smiled. "Ah, but do you know who your bride's father is?"

Creed stiffened. "Of course. Prince Talon. Saylym is his mate."

Zebus snickered. "Saylym *was* Talon's mate. No longer. She is now mated to my son Kyma, and I assure you, he's quite lustful when it comes to mating with the beautiful witch. He just can't get enough of—"

"You lousy, rotten rock demon! How did you get your filthy hands on Saylym? What have you done?"

Zebus' lips curved into a lethal smile. "Watch what you say to me. I am a king, same as you. Whatever I did to accomplish the deed, you should be grateful. Your future queen, *my* first grandchild, will be born All Hallows' Eve—a hundred years ahead of time."

"I don't believe you. Saylym would never allow a demon to touch her."

Zebus snorted. "You need to get off Na-Cyl more, venture into other worlds, find out what's happening outside your realm."

"No thanks. The last time I ventured off Na-Cyl, I got a silver-tipped arrow in my back."

"Ah, the lovely MeLora and her evil witchery, she can be quite wicked."

"I'd rather discuss Saylym," Creed snapped.

"Obviously you don't know the lovely Saylym very well. She's a very sensual, sexual being. Talon could not begin to give her what she needs. I assure you, she lies under Kyma each night and pleads for him to fuck her. My son gives her exactly what she begs him for and more. Their mating is quite frequent, even in the daylight hours. Unbelievably hot. The witch is insatiable."

"You're disgusting."

"Maybe I am, but because I captured the beautiful witch and took her to my realm, gave her to my son to do with as he willed, your bride was conceived from their union. Peyton will be born half-demon and there is nothing you can do to change that bloodline. Your first born son will possess enough demon blood to mark him with horns, wings and fangs. My bloodline will sit on the throne of Na-Cyl." Zebus paused and grinned. "I couldn't wait to share this wonderful news with you," he taunted. "I knew you'd be delighted to hear it."

Creed swore beneath his breath. "You *planned* the event?"

"How could I plan such a thing? I had no idea Kyma would father your future queen. Believe me I was pleasantly surprised, but quite happy by the news. Yes, quite happy." He smiled and nodded. "When Peyton is born, I'll send word to you immediately. You'll then be welcome to visit my realm, but you must come alone. Meet your bride to be. We'll discuss the bride price now. Once we reach an agreement, I'll send the contracts round to sign."

Creed clenched his jaw. "I'd sooner bargain with the devil."

Zebus laughed. "Don't be nasty. I'm a saint compared to Satan. The contracts will be legend and fair. I'm a just and generous being. I'll skip the bride price due my son and daughter-in-law. Instead, I'll pay you emeralds, diamonds and rubies, a contract in reverse, if you will."

"In exchange for what?"

"I told you, your loyalty and trust."

"Nothing is ever that simple, not with a demon."

Zebus laughed and tsked. "You have to learn trust."

Creed clenched his fists. "What do you want from me in return for the jewels?"

"I want three of your She-Wolves for my army. It's Beltane. My demons are horny. We have few females and this particular strain of *were* is very special as you and I both know."

"Three? What good are three? They'll be fucked to death."

Zebus snickered. "True, but they'll enjoy every minute of it. Three are better than none. I'll take what I can get."

"No. I will not surrender She females from my pack for your army to abuse."

"Abuse? Demons don't abuse females. We mate with them, but they're too precious to abuse...unless of course they warrant it."

Creed stiffened. "As you say, it's Beltane. They're fertile. They're sure to conceive."

Zebus folded his arms across his chest and lifted a brow. A silent challenge Creed recognized. "You will give them to me, Creed. And because you're uncooperative, the number just jumped to five."

Creed growled low in his throat. "The She-Wolves aren't all you want."

"Of course not." Zebus' eyes glittered with triumph. "There's a war brewing. You know of it?"

"Between the *wakens* and you? I've heard rumors."

"It's more than rumors, I assure you."

"You assured the war when you stole Saylym. Talon's going to attack you, isn't he?"

"I assured the war, yes, when I took Saylym," Zebus agreed. "I want this war. It has to be, else the *wakens* will continue to survive. They might eventually manage to repopulate, increase their numbers. I can't allow it to happen."

"Talon *will* take back his mate."

A slow smile settled on Zebus' lips. "Yes, most likely he will or at least he'll try. Believe me when I say, by the time Talon can manage to recapture Saylym, he will no longer want her. Let's hope by then, he's found another to love or is dead."

Creed felt his breath catch hard in his chest. "He loves Saylym."

"I don't argue the fact at all. He loved the old Saylym. He will despise the new one."

"Never. No matter what you do to her, he will never stop loving her."

Zebus lifted a dark brow. "It is not his love I question. Saylym has already fallen in love with my son. Talon can never win her from him. It's a hopeless cause." He waved a hand as if bored with the conversation. "My concern is Talon. The prince will gather what forces he can and attack, but he will never have what he had with the witch again. He will never take her from my son. Kyma will drive an athame through Talon's heart before he'll surrender Saylym."

"You sound very certain Kyma can win a fight against Talon."

"He can. Kyma's prepared for this moment all his life. He's a fierce warrior and well trained for battle. When it comes to his new mate, he's ruthless. But Kyma won't have to lift a finger to keep Saylym. My son has won her love. Talon will see this. Losing the witch's affection will make him unsure in a fight."

"Saylym loves Talon."

"No. That love is lost. I promise you."

"She loves Talon," Creed snarled.

"She *fucks* my son," Zebus said, a hard glint in his eyes. "She sleeps in his bed every night, in his arms. She carries his babe. Her heart and body belongs to Kyma. This will never change. Even if Talon somehow manages to capture her, she'll never let him touch her. She is already changing into a demon. You know well it takes but a few matings—and there have already been many—a few exchanges of blood and the plentiful wash of a demon's seed and the process begins. She already has fangs, horns and her wings are developing. Soon, my friend, it will be done. She can't resist Kyma's sexual allure."

"What have you done to her?"

Zebus lifted a brow. "A few injections of our latest experimental drug, it works like magic, powerful stuff once it enters the bloodstream. She's quite addicted to it. It assures her sexual need and response. Not only is it a wonderful aphrodisiac, it also wipes away the memory. One injection—and it takes over the mind

immediately."

"I knew you were lower than wolf shit, but I had no idea just how low you truly are. You turned her into a junkie!"

"Oh, no. Nowhere near to being a junkie—yet. Saylym is very susceptible to the drug. Of course, she was given the maximum doses. Her resistance was strong...in the beginning. It's amazing really, that she could take so much of it before her mind broke. But her memory is a thing of the past, just as her former life is no more. She belongs to Kyma. She always will. Get used to it."

"I won't ask you again what it is you want from me."

Zebus picked at a ragged nail and Creed wondered if it was sign that underneath the demon's cool expression, he was actually nervous. "When the battles begin, I want to know you have my back."

"Fuck that! And fuck you! Talon's my friend. I'd sooner back a She-Wolf as side with you over him."

"Yet, you will. You'll swear allegiance to me. When the time comes and I summon you, you'll fight alongside me against Talon and the *wakens*."

"No, I won't."

"You will. If you don't, I'll see that Saylym is given a lethal dose of the *Rozbus* drug. It will kill both her and the babe she carries. I'll feed them both to Cerberus' pups."

"You would not kill your own grandchild. Even you are not so heartless."

"To win this war against Talon, I'd kill my own son. If you want your future bride, you'll not hesitate to sign the contracts and become my ally. When the time comes, I expect to see you and your *weres* on the battlefields protecting my flank. I'll send the papers to you next week. When you return the contracts to me—*signed* and stamped with your seal, you'll also send ten She-Wolves as a show of your loyalty and our newly formed partnership."

"You upped the number of females again."

"You'll pay this small bride price—happily."

Creed clenched his teeth. His hands curled into fists at his sides.

"We have a deal?" Zebus lifted a brow in silent question.

A muscle ticked near the corner of Creed's right eye. "Yes," he spat through clenched teeth. "We have a deal."

"I thought so. You will not reveal to anyone the terms of our contract. I want your support on the battlefield to be sudden and a surprise. Understood?"

"No, I don't understand."

"You will not send word to Talon of our deal or I will kill Saylym and the baby. Now do you understand?"

"Yes," Creed snapped. "I understand. You want him thrown off balance when he sees my *were* army covering your ass."

"You understand perfectly. Good. Your sister is being held prisoner at the Vlad Salt Mine near Village Pyre in Romania. Brasov is insane with power and bloodlust."

Creed tilted his head in a single nod. "He isn't the only one."

Zebus laughed. "True."

"If anything happens to Saylym or to my future bride, I'll hunt you down and show you no mercy."

"They'll both remain alive and well—as long as you're cooperative and keep your word. As soon as you sign the contracts and they're delivered, I'll send you the chests of jewels."

"I don't want them," Creed said sharply.

"Oh, but I insist. Contracts are binding in our realms. I always honor the ones I sign. Don't you? Now if you'll excuse me, I have a beautiful vampiress waiting for me to fuck and breed." Zebus vanished with a trace of laughter.

Chapter Fourteen

To get to a woman's heart, a man must first use his own.

~Mike Dobbertin

(Quoted in A 5th Portion of Chicken Soup for the Soul)

Ru-Noc

Sanctuary

Immortal Realm

Beltane

“Damn, witch, must you tie me up again? I was just getting used to my freedom.”

Kirrah glanced up from checking the sturdiness of the knots, surprised at the irritation in Stry's voice. She hadn't heard a sign of temper from the non-*waken* from the first moment she'd broom-sticked him up 'til now.

She hadn't expected to hear it in his voice when she told him she was tying him up again. Always flirtatious, Stry had flopped down on the bed and raised his arms over his head and told her to do her worst.

So now he was annoyed? Why?

His topaz-colored eyes hinted at sexual need and frustration. She thought maybe he held back because he was afraid of frightening her. If she was more experienced, she'd meet him halfway, but she didn't really know how to flirt.

The first boy she'd ever kissed, she'd chased him, tripped him, and demanded he pucker up and take his punishment and kiss her. He'd made a face and pursed his mouth as if he had to suck a lemon. His lips had been wet and made her think what it'd feel like to smooch a fish. She'd never bothered Andy Hills again.

Of course, he'd been eight to her six, but still, that had been the pattern of her life. She chased, her target ran.

Obviously, she wasn't good at romance.

Kirrah released a deep breath. What did it matter? It wasn't like she was in a relationship here. The non-*waken* was her prisoner. End of story. She wasn't about to leave him untied with the freedom to steal away and kill the healer—or possibly her. He denied it, but who knew if he told the truth? From the way she

caught him looking at her at times, she thought she might be his objective.

Kirrah purposely forced her mind to more urgent matters.

She didn't want to think about how hot and inviting his kisses were. How his hands felt squeezing her bottom or how good the firm length behind his zipper felt pressed tightly against her feminine mound.

"I'm not going anywhere," he said, tugging on the ropes.

"I know you aren't." Kirrah eyed the ropes to make certain they weren't frayed. It would be just like him to slip free of ragged ends. The knots fit perfectly around his wrist. "They're good and tight. No frayed ends. You won't escape."

He grinned. "What makes you think I'd even try to escape?"

She lifted a brow and rose to her feet. "I hardly think you enjoy being my prisoner."

"Oh, but I do."

"Hah!"

"Where are you going?" Stry shouted as she turned and walked away. "It's almost dark. It's freezing out there. Damn this crazy weather." He wrestled against the ropes. "It should be warm and balmy."

She looked over her shoulder. "Try to rest while I'm away."

"Don't go!"

Kirrah blinked. He sounded frightened for her. Why? She turned to face him.

He stared at her, drawing her gaze to his. "I don't want you to go out unprotected."

"I won't be at risk. Sticks will be with me. Mr. Broom is a deadly weapon."

"Right."

The broom leaned over her shoulder and Kirrah thought if it had a mouth, it'd be leering at Stry in triumph. "Witch has good crazy notion Mr. Broom her defender. Hah! She wrong, but Sticks willing to give her wild ride to Sanctuary."

"No! Kirrah can't go into the village. It's dangerous."

The broom leaned closer. "What danger? Is Beltane. Only risk she might meet a hot, sexy *waken* and he lay the *rooba-rooba* to her, bury hot root in her, show her smokin' good time. *Weeeee!*"

Stry watched the broom make its, by now very familiar, at least to her, up and down, obscene movements. He blinked and switched his gaze to Kirrah. "Did that broom just—"

"Yes! Mr. Broom is quite the exhibitionist. It should be a flasher. Not a shy bone in its body."

"What is this flasher?" The broom snickered. "Sticks not have body. Sticks just have long, hot love handle and sexy switches. Hmm, does sound kinky...maybe a little S&M? Or Sticks might be persuaded to find leather and whip?"

"No," Kirrah said, horrified.

"Whipped cream and cherries?"

"Oh, for Pete's sake—"

"Broom gotta meet this mysterious Pete; he always pop in at inopportune moments and get in way. Is he flasher?"

Kirrah turned to the broom. "No, Pete isn't a flasher. There is no Pete." She turned back to Stry and frowned.

"What did I do?" he asked innocently. "I'm neither a flasher nor Pete."

"You no Mr. Broom, either."

"Shut up, Sticks, and guard Kirrah with your life."

"Broom not have life. Broom is inanimate familiar. No breathe air."

"I don't need the broom's protection. I won't be gone long," Kirrah said. "I do, however, have a business to run. I'm closing it down for a few days, but I need to make certain everything's turned off and locked down. This is the first chance I've had to return to the village since yesterday. Besides, it's not as cold tonight as it was last night." She stood up and pulled on a black wool cloak.

"Stay in the shadows," Stry cautioned. "And don't talk to any males, and for Pete's sake, don't let any

waken kiss you."

"Hmm," the broom chirped. "This Pete, he mighty popular fellow, flashing must be big deal."

"Don't worry about me," Kirrah interjected. "I can take care of myself."

Stry struggled against the ropes. "See that you do."

Kirrah laughed. "Come on, broom, before he gives me a curfew."

"You have one hour," Stry snapped.



As soon as Kirrah and her wicked broom were gone, Stry hexed the ropes off his wrists and sat up. Briskly rubbing his chafed skin, he cursed the bonds. By the gods, he was getting very annoyed with being tied up.

Frustration slammed into him. He felt like punching something. What if the witch happened to run into Sage? He knew very well his cousin was searching for her, and the human, Hannah Miller. *Sheeaha*. He'd worry to death until the witch returned to him safe. He'd wanted to warn her, but if he had, she'd know he remembered everything about his past and make him leave her home. Dammit! He should have warned her anyway. She might meet his cousin and die.

Sage would suck Kirrah's soul right out of her body.

And dammit, Sage would have to kiss her to do it.

Then *he'd* have to kill his cousin. No male was kissing her but him.

Somehow, he had to convince Kirrah that he wasn't here to kill her. Yes, he'd originally approached Sanctuary to find Nyra and steal her soul, but hell, his heart wasn't into it. He didn't believe for a moment Kirrah thought he intended to harm *her* in any way. She couldn't possibly be afraid of him since she'd allowed him to kiss her several times. And she'd never tried to stop him from kissing her. Not once.

He glanced at the big clock that rested on the fireplace mantle. "One hour. If she isn't back in one hour, I go looking for her."

One hour.

In the world of magic, a lot could be accomplished in an hour. It was way past time he let the little witch know how he felt about her.

He intended to show her exactly that.

When it came to seducing a witch, he wasn't a prince for nothing. He was the best there'd ever been...

It was time the lovely Kirrah learned what Beltane was all about.

Chapter Fifteen

When the Angels arrive, the devils leave.

~Egyptian Proverb

*Ru-Noc
Noddon Caverns
Immortal Realm
Beltane*

"Did he fall for it?"

Zebus motioned Kyma inside his office and nodded in the direction of a chair for him to sit down. He grinned. "Like a baby. Hell, I thought was going to demand the contracts right then and there so he could sign them."

Kyma snickered. "I knew he would. Didn't I tell you he'd come over to our side of the war? He'll send you the ten She-Wolves, too. Wait and see. Next week, before you send him the final documents to be signed, change the number to twenty. It will give us a total of thirty She-Wolves to service the army. It'll be like having five females for each trooper."

Zebus leaned his head back against the plush leather of his chair and fiddled with some papers on top of his desk. "How do you know?"

Kyma grinned. "There was one making her living on her back at this she-house I visited when I was away at school."

Zebus lifted a brow. "Was she good?"

"She nearly sucked my cock right off its root. The She-Wolf took every inch of it and half my balls down her throat. By the time I left her, my balls were black and totally drained. My cock hung limp as a rope for a week. Hell, I thought she'd killed it."

Zebus threw back his head and laughed. "You never told me. How did you know Creed would cooperate?"

Kyma sobered, his smile slowly vanishing. "I would do anything to protect my mate. So will he."

"You didn't think I might fail in my mission to sway Creed over to our side of the war?"

"Never. You're far too clever to allow a *were* to get in your way."

Zebus pushed his stout body out of the chair and made his way to the bar where he kept his favorite bottles of demon potions. "Will you have a drink with me, to celebrate our success?"

"Of course."

"Where is your lovely new mate?"

"Rausha's resting. We just had a round of very strenuous mating. I taught her several new positions. I thought she should rest, especially since I kept her awake all of last night and plan to do the same tonight." Kyma accepted the tumbler of amber-colored liquid and took a deep swallow. He wiped his mouth off with the back of his hand and held the glass out for a refill.

Zebus refilled it and corked the bottle. "You have not grown tired of Rausha yet? Do you desire another female? I know using the drug rarely allows your cock to soften, so if Rausha isn't enough for you, just say the word, I'll capture you another beauty to fuck."

"No. Why are you always asking me if I want another female? Yes, my shaft stays hard, but it stays hard for Rausha. I only take the shots when I plan to be inside her all night."

Zebus laughed. "And when have you *not* planned to be inside her all night?"

Kyma halted the tumbler half-way to his mouth and lifted both brows. "Hmm, I guess I haven't yet."

Zebus shrugged. "Your happiness is of the utmost importance to me."

"I know that, Father. Put all your doubts aside. I fell in love with Rausha the moment I saw her. I will never seek another female. I'm mated for life. I promise you, she owns my heart."

Zebus took a sip from his glass and returned to his chair. It worried him that Kyma was so infatuated with the witch. Gods, if something ever happened to her, his son would go berserk. "How is my granddaughter? She grows well inside her mother?"

"She does. Peyton grows quickly, just as she should. Rausha talks to her, assures her of her love for her. I am breathless waiting for All Hallows' Eve. I can barely wait to hold my daughter in my arms."

"As soon as possible, plant your seed in Rausha after she delivers Peyton. If you need her stimulated to produce an egg out of season, we'll give her the fertility drug. Once we can no longer give her the injections to make her accept you, it's the children that will keep her bound to you."

"Father, don't. The drugs no longer have anything to do with Rausha's feelings for me. She loves me. I know it. You don't know what it's like between us when we mate. The witch was born for me. There's so much heat and passion. Her mouth is all over me. Her hands. It isn't just me going at her. Rausha wants me as much as I want her."

"Do not be fooled by the effect of the drug on her, my son. If not for it, Rausha would fight you to leave and go back to Talon and her sons. She wouldn't let you touch her. She certainly wouldn't *want* you to touch her."

"That might have been true—in the beginning, but no longer. Don't try to destroy what has grown between Rausha and me. She loves me. I see it in her eyes."

"You see what you want to see."

"I see it in her smile, in her eyes. I feel it in the way she touches me. Wants me. She is mine. Have no fear, Father. I will fill my house with children, but I won't impregnate Rausha right after she gives birth. Her body will need time to heal. She'll need time to bond with our daughter when she arrives. I want time to enjoy both of them before we have another baby. Besides, by All Hallows' Eve, my *oomba* will be begin its next life cycle. I won't risk spilling it in my mate."

"You have my permission to have the professor remove it."

"I want the sac permanently removed that it hatches in. I want that part of my body sterilized."

Zebus tilted his head. "That isn't a good idea."

"Yes, it is. I want it out of me. I will not take risks with Rausha."

"You're sure? It's a way to punish her if she displeases you. The sac doesn't just hatch your *oomba*. It's where all your parasites develop."

"I'm certain, Father. I want it removed today. Every time I fuck Rausha, it's a battle to keep from releasing it inside her. I get excited and nearly lose control of it. I would not seek to punish my mate no matter how much she displeased me. I love her. How could I harm her?"

Zebus smiled. "You think the drug we give her isn't harmful? It's highly addictive for a witch. Most likely, Rausha is already a junkie."

Kyma frowned. "She'll be fine once we're able to wean her off it."

"Kyma, we might not ever be able to wean her off the powerful stimulant."

"Then the professor needs to start decreasing the doses."

"You just ordered him to keep her memory suppressed. No. It's too soon to wean her off the drugs. She must be injected for at least a year. It helps speed up the process of her changing. When the time is right, I'll give the professor his orders to decrease the dosage."

"I don't like it, Father. I don't want to turn her into a junkie."

"We'll do whatever is necessary to assure she remains yours. Just remember, my son, if the time ever comes, both Rausha and the babe are the only means we have of winning this war."

"They aren't expendable."

"No, certainly they aren't, but they are how we'll defeat Talon, how we'll keep Creed quiet and in line, and his *weres* in our control. Now then, I have something I must do this night."

"Father?"

"Yes?" Zebus turned back.

"Be careful."

"I will. Go wake up your new mate and show her how much you love her."

"You're always sending me to Rausha to mate with her."

"No. To show her how much you love her. Sometimes we don't get a second chance to do that."

"Rausha knows I love her. I tell her hundreds of times a day and night."

Zebus grinned. "Yes. But *show* her you do. Prove it. Now go. Wake her up with silken kisses and a sweet unexpected gift. And do this for the rest of your lives together." He tossed Kyma a bag.

Kyma caught the weighty sack with one hand. "What?" He loosened the drawstring and looked inside. Inside the velvet bag were hundreds of sparkling diamonds. Kyma poured a handful of the precious jewels into the palm of his hand. "Diamonds, Father?" Even in their dark realm of sulfur fumes, few females, and little laughter, diamonds were extremely valuable and coveted.

"Pour them over your bride. *Show* her how much you love her. With those diamonds, you make her independently wealthy. Observe her. See how she uses them. Her use of them will prove to you if she loves you and our people, then you might be able to start weaning her off the drugs." Zebus patted his son on the back. "Now, go fuck your mate. I've waited long enough to claim my vampiress."

Chapter Sixteen

All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream.

~ Edgar Allan Poe

*Ru-Noc
Sanctuary
Immortal Realm
Beltane*

Stry knew the moment Kirrah arrived. Like always, she and the broom made one hell of an entrance. For once, he didn't rush to the bed and hex the ropes into binding his wrists again.

He was through playing games—at least that game. If either of them was tied up, it was going to be for the pure sexual, sensual pleasure of it. It was time to turn up the heat. Show the sweet witch exactly what he wanted, where their relationship was headed, and prove to her his powers exceeded hers, so no more tying him to the bed—except for pleasure.

His pulse beat frantically. His chest heaved. Gods, if he didn't relieve the ache in his groin soon, his balls were going to explode. Damn, his palms were sweaty. He rubbed his hands along the outer seams of his leather pants.

Stry couldn't recall ever being nervous about seducing a witch. He drew a deep breath, held it, and waited for her to find him in the dining room. Showtime! His plans to lead the beautiful witch astray were in motion. Curtains up! Let act one begin.



Kirrah picked herself up off the floor, mumbling about insane brooms and their inability to follow simple landing instructions.

"You say hurry home, broom used super speed. Not broom's fault you not give clear commands and really mean granny gear."

"Granny gear, my Aunt Fanny, admit it, you're addicted to speed." Kirrah dusted off her bottom and headed straight to the bedroom to check on her captive. The broom fell into step beside her.

"Okay. Broom admits to having a teeny problem with speed. Should I attend meetings? Stand up-right in front of the crowd and make loud, verbal confession? 'Hello, my name is Sticks and I'm a speeda-holic.' There! That make witch happy? I confessed. Ha. Ha."

"Uh-huh." She froze in the doorway. "Oh my gods, broom, he's gone!" She whirled, giving the room a quick search. "How did he—" She hurried over to the bed, staring at it like she thought standing beside it would somehow conjure him back where he belonged. "He's gone," she whispered.

The sudden ache in her chest rose like a tidal wave, swelling higher and higher until the pain nearly drowned her. The ropes she'd tied him with lay there on the bed, discarded. Tears filled her eyes and slid down her cheeks. She sniffed. "He's gone, broom," she said helplessly. "He left me. He *left* me. I'm alone again."

The broom sidled up beside her and added his sniffs to hers. "Don't cry, pretty witch, Mr. Broom here with you. Sticks always be here for you. You not cry now 'cause you break broom's old heart."

Kirrah laughed through her tears. "You don't have an old heart."

"Okay, maybe not have heart, so maybe not break heart, maybe break broom's feelings, no matter, broom loves witch and you be hurt, broom be hurt, too."

"How could he just go?"

"Broom not have answer. Maybe witch need check house, make sure non-*waken* not hiding somewhere waiting to jump out and kill witch."

"Oh! Oh! I didn't think 'bout that."

"That why broom here, keep witch on her toes."

Kirrah left the bedroom and turned left. The hall led back to the living room and she already knew he wasn't there, but she had to pass through it to gain entrance to the dining room. As soon as she entered the room, she stilled.

There he was! He stood at the end of the table. Simply stood there. Waiting. Kirrah burst into tears and ran to him.

Stry grunted at the impact her small body had on his much larger one. "Whoa, sweetheart." Automatically, he closed his arms around her and held her tight, simply held her, his heart racing. Stry titled her chin and searched her face. "Why are you crying?" he whispered softly. "Did something happen? Did someone hurt you?" He felt fiercely protective of this female and if someone had abused her, he thought he just might have to break a leg or two.

"You. You hurt me."

"How? What did I do?"

"You left me."

"I didn't leave you, *La-Scheme*. I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere."

Kirrah nodded. She drew a sharp breath and wiggled out of his arms.

"Where are you going? I want you here in my arms. Hell, I want you inside my skin."

"I have to see what you did, take it all in. I didn't pay much attention to the room when I first saw you." Kirrah turned, and at a glance, eyed the dining table. It was no longer her small round table but a square-shaped one, big enough for four, but with only two place settings.

A lovely mixed floral arrangement perched in the center, low, so as not to block the view between them. Even from across the room the strong, sweet scent of the purple hyacinth teased her nostrils. Two candelabras at either end provided the only lighting in the room. At one end, a silver bucket with ice and a bottle of champagne waited alongside two tall slender glasses.

She moved over to the table and lifted the serving lid off a platter. Sliced duck smothered in a rich glaze smelled utterly delicious. Small potatoes, baby carrots and hot rolls lathered with rich, creamy butter waited in separate dishes.

Two small dessert bowls brimmed with what looked like chocolate mousse stood apart, decadent and creamy.

Kirrah looked at Stry and saw the tenseness on his face. The room was set for pure seduction. Hers. She didn't care. She wanted to be seduced by this male. She wanted to feel his body locked with hers in a rhythm that set fire to her soul. "It's beautiful," she said breathlessly.

His chest rose and fell with the ragged breath he freed. "I hoped you'd like it."

She sniffed. "I love it. Thank you."

"Hungry?"

If only he knew. "Yes."

Stry pulled out a chair for her.

"How did you get free of my ropes?"

He grinned, lifted the champagne bottle from the bucket of ice and popped the cork. Kirrah grabbed the two long-stemmed glasses and held them for him to fill.

"I was never your prisoner, sweetheart, except for my heart. You held it captive the moment I saw you streaking across the night sky. You looked so damned cute jetting around on that besom inches above the trees. My heart fairly lodged in my throat you scared me so badly. I wanted to snatch you out of the sky and take you home with me."

"Instead, I crashed into you and knocked you silly."

"It's the best thing that ever happened to me," he said huskily. He slid a serving of the sliced duck on her plate and dipped the vegetables beside it. Stry smothered it all with the sweet glaze he'd concocted. "Taste it."

Kirrah nodded and picked up her fork and knife. She sliced a tiny bite of the dark meat and lifted it to her mouth. Chewing, she moaned as her taste buds burst with pleasure. "Oh, my gods, it's delicious. What is that glaze?"

"My own secret recipe." He took a bite and, like Kirrah, groaned his pleasure.

Kirrah sipped some of the bubbly and eyed him. "So, how long have you been able to slip off the ropes?"

"From the first. I am a *waken*."

"Not *waken*," the broom said, entering the dining room. "Seducer is non-*waken*. You are other."

"Then what am I?"

"Mr. Broom does not have answer, but it is not good thing you are."

"Broom! That isn't a nice thing to say."

"Still true. You let non-*waken* put him love stick in you, witch be very sorry."

"That's enough, broom! Go to your corner and go to sleep. Now!"

"Humph!"

"I'm so sorry," Kirrah apologized.

"It's okay. It's simply trying to protect you."

"Well not by being rude to you. No. It has to learn it can't say anything it wants to say."

"Familiars live pretty much by their own rules. Which reminds me, did you see a bawk with me when you first crashed into me?"

Kirrah took another bite of duck and sipped from her glass. She licked her lips. "Thank you for this fabulous meal and the champagne is out of this world."

"You're welcome, and yes, the champagne *is* out of this world. I grabbed it out of thin air."

Kirrah giggled. "And the duck? Did you shoot it out of thin air?"

A smile played on his sensuous mouth. "I'm not giving away any more of my secrets." Stry waved his hand and one of the dessert glasses floated through the air to Kirrah.

She grabbed it and placed it in front of her. "You did that so smoothly. I wish my magic was that neat."

"It will be, with time and practice."

She spooned a healthy-sized portion of the mousse in her mouth and swallowed. "Oh, my stars, that

is unbelievably light. I didn't even feel it on my tongue. It vanished in a soft fizz, but felt like creamy butter on my tongue."

Stry waved his hand again and half the candles went out. The room filled with gentle, flickering shadows. Soothing music flowed around them, seductive. "Dance with me?"

Kirrah nodded and rose to her feet. "I'd love to." She went into his arms. Her head rested lightly against his chest.

Stry swallowed and pressed his hands to the small of her back. They danced in slow circles to the soft bluesy tune. Kirrah flung back her head, her gaze searching his. "What's a bawk?"

"Never mind. I don't care." He lowered his head, rubbed his mouth against hers. Teasingly, he licked her lips. "You missed a dab of *chocco*."

"And you found it..."

"Yes." He took her mouth, deepened the kiss, until Kirrah thought her lungs would explode from lack of oxygen. At last, he reluctantly released her lips. "I want you, Kirrah, so much I feel like I'm on fire all the time. I've never felt this way before."

She smoothed her hands across his wide chest. "I want you, too."

Stry squeezed her against his body. He slid his hands around her hips, cupped her buttocks and fit her against his erection. The unmistakable ridge was like a branding iron against her, hot, hard and proof of his urgent need for her.

"I don't just want you, Kirrah, though the gods know the wanting is killing me. I want you to understand that I don't just want to use for the relief mating with you will give me. You know how you took those pictures into your heart and made those people in them your family? How you love them?"

She nodded, wondering where he was going with this.

"I want to be loved like that. I want you to love me like that, take me into your heart and give me a home there. I want you to need me in your life the way you needed those pictures. I need you to love me as if I have no one who cares about me. Will you love me like that?"

Kirrah lifted her gaze to meet the surprising tenderness in Stry's gold-colored eyes. "Love you like that?"

"Unconditionally—because you see something in me worthy of loving? I need a home, Kirrah. A family. Will you give me those things? Will you surrender your heart into my care, your body, your—soul? Trust that I love you back in the same manner?"

He looked at her as if he could eat her up, but there was something else in the somnolent smokiness of his steady gaze. Something genuine. There wasn't a hint of laughter. He wasn't poking fun at her or how she felt about her pictures and the people in them.

Kirrah licked her dry lips and nodded. "Yes, I already love you unconditionally. I love you."

"Woo hoo!" Stry scooped her up in his arms. "Gods, baby, you have no idea how hard it was for me to say the right words to you. I was so scared you didn't love me back."

He headed toward her bedroom, a big dopey grin on his face. She didn't know how they reached it so quickly. Super speed, maybe, but in an instant, he was sprawled on the bed. Kirrah tumbled on top of him, laughing.

How could she feel so happy? So content?

She didn't know this male, yet her heart was filled with love for him.

Stry looped his arms around her waist and pulled her closer. "This is better," he whispered. "This is where you belong. I miss you, witch—when you go away and leave me here alone, damn, I miss you like crazy." Slowly, he cupped the back of her head and brought her mouth to his for a slow delicious claiming.

Kirrah moaned. Lying on top of him like she was, she couldn't miss the steady rise of his powerful shaft inside his leather pants. It pushed urgently against her mound, hot and needy. Oh stars, when he took her, she'd no doubts she'd know she'd been well and truly taken.

Stry freed her mouth and walked a trail of damp kisses along her throat until he reached the pulse

that beat frantically there. He nibbled on the tender flesh below her ear. Kirrah gasped at the erotic touch of his mouth gliding on her skin. His tongue. He paused and the delicate pressure of suction on her throat sent a wave of roaring fire blasting through her body.

When at last he freed her, she swore life pounded there on her flesh. Life. Heat. Friction. It all blasted her with the force of an exploding planet. Megatons of sizzling static electricity flashed through her body, molten heat, white-hot and slow moving as lava slugged through her veins and nerves. Her eyes burned. Her body lit up like a flare in the night, brilliant and red-hot.

Stry reared back and eyed his handy work. "My gods, you look as if you're—on fire. You're—glowing."

"I am. I feel like I—I'm—like my nerves are fried."

The glimmering red afterglow slowly faded from her body and Kirrah let out a deep breath. "Incredible."

"Yes. You belong to me," Stry whispered. "I didn't know claiming you would do that to you, but I think it proves we're right for each other. I've never seen that happen before."

"What?" Kirrah blinked, trying to escape the sexual haze still throbbing through her body.

"It was like you were a living, breathing flame."

She pushed herself off his chest and rushed to the bathroom. Staring at her throat in the mirror, she eyed the dark pink mark. "You marked me?"

"Yes, I did," he said with a hint of cockiness to his voice she hadn't heard before and from right in the doorway of the bathroom.

She jumped. "Don't do that!"

Stry folded his arms across his wide bare chest and lifted a brow. "Too late. You're claimed. I can't help what you do to me. I couldn't stop myself from marking you."

Her gaze dropped to the infamous zipper. "Oh, shit. You're hard as a brick."

His eyes followed the trail hers had taken and he grinned. "Do you want to talk about it or should we make use of it?"

Kirrah jerked her gaze away from his groin. "I was—" she licked her lips. "I was—yeah—definitely—use it."

He laughed. "Come here. I'm cold without you in my arms. Don't rub the mark. The brand—it's a *waken's* claiming mark. No, don't touch it."

Kirrah gasped as he grabbed her hand, but it was too late, she'd already rubbed the spot. It changed instantly from rosy pink to deep purple and spread across the side of her neck like a wine stain. "Is it alive? It moved."

"In a way, it's alive. It's magic. A *waken's* claiming mark has a tendency to be shy. It doesn't like anyone to touch it. *La-Scheme*, it's nothing compared to what I wanna do to you."

"Oh," she said, feeling her knees weaken.

Stry captured her hand and guided her out of the bathroom and back to the bed. He took a moment to flip back the comforter and sheet. Gingerly, he lowered his head and claimed her mouth with all the pent-up passion he'd held in check for days.

Kirrah stood on tiptoe and circled her arms around his neck. She met his mouth with lustful enthusiasm, parted her lips willingly beneath the onslaught of his hot kiss.

Moaning, she accepted the silken heat of his tongue, relished the way he mated that part of him to her. When he lifted her in his arms and lowered her to the bed, she knew there'd be no leaving it again, not until they'd mated.

She couldn't find her voice to object. In truth, she didn't object. The only thing whirling through her head was, *Hurry, please*. There were no lingering doubts in her mind this non-*waken* was right for her. Her body burned for his. Oh, how she wanted him.

Stry stood a short distance from the side of the bed and slowly undressed. He peeled off every inch

of his clothing, layer by layer, as if he were stripping to music. First he unbuttoned his shirt, taking his time with each button.

Kirrah licked her lips and eyed every new inch of new skin he revealed for her viewing pleasure. Stry left the sides dangling and slid off the buttery soft leather vest. He twirled it around on his fingertip before launching it across the room. The shirt dropped on the floor at his feet.

To her, his chest was a piece of art, sculpted to perfection. The pecs were sleekly muscled. Just enough gold tipped hair covered his chest to sift her fingers through. Not too much. Not too thin. Tight, flat abs. An arrow of light brown hair sifted straight to the waistband of his pants and disappeared.

All she thought about was dragging her tongue over those sleek abs, follow that intriguing trail of hair and taste what lay below it. She squeezed her thighs together not the least surprised at the dampness there. She was on fire and she needed him to cool her down.

He kicked off his boots, then his socks. Kirrah waited breathlessly as he toyed with the button below his navel. When he finally worked it out of its slot her breath escaped in a rush. His hips moved slow and lazy as he worked the snug leather over his fine ass and kicked the pants to one side. "You have no idea what you do to me, *La-Scheme*," he whispered.

Kirrah eyed his straining cock and licked her dry lips. The engorged tip kept bobbing urgently toward her. "I have some idea," she croaked, staring at the velvety hardness just inches out of reach.

He chuckled. "I'm talking about in here." He jabbed a finger against his heart. "I've never felt anything this special, Kirrah, never wanted so badly that everything inside me hurt."

Kirrah swallowed past the lump in her throat. His words, gods, they were just so right, like his body—so—flawless. Yet, he wasn't perfect. He had his failings. She wasn't sure what they were yet, but no one was ideal, but he'd do until perfection came along.

Her fingers curled. She dug them into the sheets to keep from launching herself at him. Oh, my. This was it. The real deal. She'd waited a lifetime for this male. His staff stood proud and majestic. The hunger on his face was electric. Hot.

Stry eased down on the side of the bed. He glided a fingertip along the edge of her cleavage that spilled over the top of the witch-black gown she wore. "You have on way too many clothes," he said huskily. "Either that, or I'm a tad underdressed."

"Then let's get me out of this gown so you're not underdressed." Kirrah gave him the freedom to lift the silky material over her head. Her pulse pounded fiercely. She felt like something wild, as if she danced to the rhythm of a pagan drum beat from a long-ago campfire.

The back of his knuckles grazed her nipples through the delicate netting of her bra. The aching buds tingled in response. Her breath caught and she wasn't sure she'd ever manage to breathe again.

What was she doing?

The thought occurred to her she'd never allowed a man to undress her before—never allowed one to intimately caress her. Touch her. Not the way Stry planned to touch her. Maybe she was jumping into this too fast.

What did she really know about him, other than he had a soft head? She moaned. By the gods, that was the only thing soft about him. When he held her, his body was like rock against hers. Doubts started to assail her. Maybe she should slow down, put an end to this. Oh but—she didn't want to.

He tossed her dress aside. "Having second thoughts?" he asked huskily.

"Yes. No. Maybe."

He grinned. "Which is it?"

"I don't know."

"We don't have to do anything you don't want to do. It might kill me, but we'll wait until when you're ready."

"I'm ready—I—I'm just not ready."

Stry skimmed the backs of his knuckles up her ribcage. "I'll take my time." A slow hiss escaped his

lips. "I'll try to take my time." His gaze slid from her mouth to her toes and the deltas in between, before returning to settle on her swollen lips. In a glance, he took in the see-through, black lace push-up bra and the matching, skimpy thong. "Gods," he whispered, "you're killing me here. You're so beautiful. When I look at you, I think I might die with wanting you."

He lowered his mouth to her breast, nuzzled the full slopes until he rooted a path to a nipple and suckled it through the lace.

Kirrah arched her body in silent supplication. She didn't think she'd ever felt anything as erotic as his mouth taking her nipple through the soft lace and making it his. She couldn't hold back the tiny whimper when he pulled stronger on the tight bud. He dragged her thong down her legs, unbearably slow, heightening their senses. Slowly, he tossed the flimsy lace aside.

She twisted her body, arching against his. "Shhh—I'll take care of you, baby—I'll take care of your needs, little one. I swear. I know how you burn, how you hunger."

His mouth wandered from the tight nipple to the little dip in the center of her belly. There, Stry explored the sunken treasure with smooth dips of his tongue, slow sips and even longer, slower licks up and down her belly. He paused to nibble her bellybutton before gently biting his way to the auburn thatch between her thighs.

Lifting her hips, he buried his face in the sweet delta and slowly explored every crevice, every silken mystery there was to find. Stry traced his tongue along the line of her clit, slid it up, down, up, down, slow, delicious strokes of his wicked tongue that drove her insane with need.

Kirrah screamed with wild frustration. She squirmed and begged him to stop. Then she pleaded for him not to stop when he started to obey her. She clawed his shoulders, urging him on. His soft laughter poured over her like hot steam inside a sauna. The explosive climax she felt beneath the ginger stabbing of his tongue left her nerves raw and tingling and on edge. "More," she screamed and dug her fingers in his mane of hair.

He grunted and started over, tantalizing licks along the tender, sensitive tissue. He teased her clit with gentle nips, then soothed the slight stings from his love bites. The non-*waken* didn't give her time to catch her breath between orgasms before he loved the same area with his tongue, teeth and lips again.

Kirrah whimpered and rocketed into multiple climaxes. "Oh. My. Gods!" she moaned and bucked beneath the expert flicks of his tongue and sweet bites of his teeth.

Stry shuddered. Her kittenish whimpers and urgent thrusts of her body drove him to distraction. Her hot response to his long licks set his blood on fire. The witch was burning him alive, but he savored the feel of her fire roasting his body.

He settled on top of her and nudged her thighs farther apart. Stry buried a moan. Gods, he was right there. Not only at the very edge of climax, but *there*, at her womanly portal. The broad tip of his cock touched the sleek inviting channel. Her wetness bore witness she was ready for him.

The need to chant the words to bind her to him slammed into his mind with the powerful force of a spell. It burned, persistent and vital, but for some reason, the vows he thought he knew, the vows every *waken* was born with ingrained in their mind refused to take shape.

Instead, foreign words filled his head, a foreign language; a chant he'd never heard darkened his mind. Black Magick? The vows felt thick and heavy, like sludge blackening his brain.

He didn't understand what was happening.

Stry drew a sharp breath and decided to ignore them. He'd bind her to him next time with the proper vows from a *waken*. He guided the blunt tip with the intention of thrusting deep, taking her virginity, because he had little doubt she was pure—but it happened again—the words.

Those damn dark words, the foreign language and pain, wild and sharp and excruciating slammed into his gut like the tip of a sharp knife. Everything cut through him and sliced a path straight to his groin and burst out the head of his cock.

"Fook," he yelled and jerked back.

Stry tumbled off the bed, dropped to his knees, and cupped his balls.

Kirrah sat up and stared at him. "What's wrong?"

He rocked back and forth, moaning. His balls burned like the fires of hell. His cock hurt even worse. The oddest sensation, as if his cock was undergoing a major change, tore up the long length and back to the root of it and settled once again in his manly nuggets. "Ahh! Ahh, gods."

What was happening to his cock?

Of a sudden, it felt like a million bees were stinging it. What the hell? What had she done to him?

As though she'd read his mind, Kirrah scooted to the edge of the bed and asked, "What did I do? I swear I didn't mean to hurt it." Her eyes were wide and curious. "What happened? Is something wrong?"

"Wrong? Is something *wrong*? You put a spell on my cock," he shouted rocking back and forth. "I may never be able to use it again. You hexed it," he accused.

"I did not," she cried. "I didn't utter a single word." She narrowed her eyes. "If I'd cursed it, it'd be on the floor flopping around like a fish out of water."

"You don't have to utter a single word, witch. You cursed my cock!"

"I didn't. Let me see." She started to get up, but he stumbled back and landed on his butt. He clamped both hands over his root and turned on his side. "Stay away from me, witch."

Moaning, he slowly pushed up on all fours, got to his feet and made his way the bathroom. She stormed after him. Kirrah blinked as he slammed the door in her face. She huffed and shoved the door open. "Let me see."

"No. You're not touching it." He turned his back to her and moaned.

"I don't wanna touch it," she shouted. "I just wanna look at it."

"Why?" he flung back over his shoulder. "So you can do something else to it? Give it the Evil Eye?"

"Oh, for the love of—" Kirrah stepped around him and shoved his hands away from his shaft and gasped. "Oh, good gods, it's red as an apple, and it—it's—deformed," she cried. "It's grown a neck. You didn't tell me your—uh—your—uh—"

"Cock?" he snapped. "And it doesn't have a neck. If you didn't want me to *fook* you, all you had to do was say no. What kind of hex did you put on it?"

"I didn't. I swear. How could I possibly make it curve at the tip like that?" She clutched her heart.

"Heavens, it looks like a flippin' meat hook and you were about to put that warped thing in me?"

"Well it didn't look like that until *you* touched it."

"I didn't touch it," she yelled.

"Honey," he said with a sneer, "you had your hands all over it. You couldn't wait to get my slab of meat inside you. You're a hot, horny witch who casts spells on *waken's* mating rods. Stay away from me and my cock."

"Gladly. And while I'm gone, pack your pants, vest and boots, and get out of my house," she shouted. Kirrah sniffed and swiped a tear from her cheek. "You're just hateful and paranoid, as if I'd actually handle your deformed equipment. If I cursed you, you'd be covered in red-eyed spiders and long-fanged snakes." She stormed out of the bathroom. "Broom, take me away from this idiot sex fiend and his one-eyed warped stick."

The broom flipped end over end toward her. It hooted and whistled and skidded to a stop between her thighs. "Broom told you he was a non-*waken*. Broom warned witch." It took off through the house, dodging furniture. Kirrah waved her hands and the back door magically opened. The broom rushed out of the house and into the night.

Kirrah locked her fingers around the handle and held tight.

Stry raced to the back door and watched. Blinking like the idiot she'd called him, he swore harshly.

"Fook! She called me an idiot and she leaves out of here naked except for her—good grief." He looked at his cock. Swear to the gods it was much bigger than it had ever been in his entire life.

What the hell had the witch done to it? What kind of curse? His jaw gaped. "Gods, I'll never be able to *fook* again. She's ruined it. Ruined it!"

Abruptly, four things dawned on him at once.

He wasn't cursed! No. Oh, no. His heart pounded out the truth. His pulse hammered with an irregular rhythm that carried the message to his brain. No! It couldn't be. He knew of only one species where the male's mating tool curved like a hook. Demons!

But it wasn't possible.

He wasn't a demon.

He was *waken*. Pure *waken*.

If he was demon, it would mean his mother mated with a demon. Duh! No. No way. She'd never do that. He glared at the offending tool. Obviously she'd done a bit more than mate with said demon—she'd conceived *him*. He *was* part demon—*fook*; the cock part was all demon.

What about the rest of his body?

Were any other parts of him demonic?

He slammed the back door and raced back to the bathroom and glanced in the mirror. "*Sheeahhta!*"

Just above his heart, a strange symbol marred his flesh—a tattoo. Where the hell had it come from? Had it been camouflaged and now suddenly decided to make its presence known? He leaned closer to the mirror trying to get a better look at it. What the hell was it? What did it mean?

Half of a very pale angel's wing joined half of a devil-red wing that had tiny claws on the tips—two halves to make a whole?

Was he part angel? Part devil?

No. It had to have a symbolic meaning. But he didn't know enough about demons to know what it meant. Why, after all these years, did it appear now?

The other two things that punched him in the gut like a tight fist were just as odd. Kirrah, the crazy witch, had flown out of here on her broom practically naked. All she'd been wearing was the thin netted bra he hadn't removed from her.

Quite obviously, the witch lacked a brain. She was a total and complete nut case and he was nuttier for being in love with her.

But the oddest thing of all was the fact she'd been crying real tears. She'd cried earlier tonight, but at the time, he simply hadn't put it together. He'd been too busy worrying she wouldn't like the seduction scene he'd created and her tears had slipped right past his notice.

Witches—full blooded witches didn't cry real tears. Their hearts bled tears, but they didn't shed tears unless—"Oh gods."

The *why* of it boggled his mind.

"She's an *Impure*."

Half mortal. Half witch.

His race despised *Impures*, but not nearly as much as they hated demons.

At least the pain in his balls was finally easing. His cock no longer felt like it'd been beaten with a hammer. It no longer felt quite so strange and misshapen, even though it was.

Samhain, why did it seem normal to him?

How could it?

If Kirrah was an *Impure* and he had no doubts she was, and he was part demon—gods, what a hell of a combination! A demon and an *Impure*. What the hell would their children be? What genes would be dominant? Human. Witch? Or Demon?

He snorted. Well, he doubted he needed to worry about it. No way in hell was Kirrah going to let him stick his deformed cock in her. They'd never have children, at least not with each other.

Stry dropped to his knees and cupped his face between his palms. "Happy *fooking* thirty-fifth birthday to me!"

Chapter Seventeen

The needs of society determine its ethics.
~Maya Angelou

*Ru-Noc
Noddon Caverns
Ayrumus
Immortal Realm
Beltane*

King Kallibus lifted Helayne's hips, buried his shaft one final time, and growled deep in his throat. His release came hard, but then it always had when he mated with her. He shuddered violently. His seed pumped hot and plentiful, as was the way of the demon, too.

Too bad she was already bred.

He'd love the pleasure of feeling her conceive his babe again. Not that it mattered. Breeding seasons came and went with regularity. There would be other times. Other babies. He wanted more children with Helayne, and by the gods, this time next year, she'd be bred again. He wanted at least six more children. Hopefully, all girls. His race needed females.

He was proud Helayne already carried a son, her belly sleekly rounded and growing heavy with his babe.

But he already had a son. An heir. And one son was all a king needed to leave his crown to. It wasn't that he didn't want the babe Helayne carried, the gods knew he did. He adored the boy child he'd put in her belly, it was just that he knew demon males desperately needed mates. They needed hope for the future.

Perhaps he should order his scientists to create a formula that increased the odds that only female babies were conceived in the future. Yes. He'd do that first thing tomorrow. Once they had the formula perfected, then he'd pass a law requiring all females to take the drug.

Kali, his sweet daughter, bless her, had already taken a *waken* mate, so she wasn't going to end up here, bred by a demon. It was a blow, but the chance of mating her to a demon was lost.

Reluctantly, he withdrew, pressed a kiss to Helayne's stomach and settled his queen's head on his chest. He closed his arms possessively around her thick middle and touched his lips to her temple.

She snuggled closer.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?" he asked.

"No. I'm fine. The baby's fine."

"I'm sorry Talon refused to accept me as your mate. I've never meant the prince any harm. He's your son. I couldn't possibly harm him without causing you pain."

Helayne sighed and walked her fingers across his thick chest. "He'll come around. He has no choice. With Zebus bent on murdering all of us, he'll need you—eventually he'll recognize the fact you're on his side."

Kallibus lifted her hand and kissed her fingertips. "I'm not on his side, Helayne. I'm just not on Zebus' side. You know as well as I what will happen. Let's hope his pride and hatred for my species doesn't get in his way of good judgment. The war that is coming is one he has no chance of winning."

Helayne shivered in his arms. "Maybe I should warn him."

"How? I will not allow you to return to the surface. He will not come here."

"Then I must try to get word to him."

"No. Talon will have to fight his own battles. He's to blame for my brother's hatred. I will not betray Zebus."

"Your brother tried to kill you!"

"I know that, just as I know he tried to kill you and our babe, but I cannot hate him for it. Your son murdered his wife and unborn child."

Helayne nodded. "He didn't know. You don't know Talon. He didn't know the witch was with child."

"It doesn't change the fact that both she and the child are dead. Zebus will not forgive him. He seeks justice. He won't stop until he has revenged those two deaths." Kallibus sighed. "Do you know this is the first time I've mated with you that I don't have to sneak away and leave you because of Darak?" He shuddered. "I worried he'd discover we were lovers. That I'd put two of my babies in you."

"Talon would have been your son, too, if you'd been able to come to me in time."

"I know. Gods, I was always terrified Darak would realize you carried demon babies."

"You forget I'm a witch, my love. I put a spell on Darak so he wouldn't notice how big the babes I carried were or—"

"Oh, yes, your stomach always rounded out nicely from my seed. Even now, it's big."

She smacked him on the chest. "That isn't a very nice thing to say to the female you proclaim to love. No woman wants to hear she's huge as a mountain."

"I meant no offense." He pulled her on top of him and settled her over his aching shaft. "I love mating with you. Knowing my son sleeps under your breasts is the sweetest thing. I care not how big you get. It wouldn't be normal if the babe wasn't large. You know I love you, my Queen. I've always been desperately in love with you. I couldn't bear it when you were mated to King Darak. I knew he lay beside you every night, when it should have been me. I knew he touched you—possessed what was rightfully mine and I ached knowing it."

"You chose to give me up to Darak. It wasn't my decision."

"You wouldn't have accepted me then. Not as your mate." Kallibus sighed and rubbed his mouth against hers. "Will you ever forgive me all the wrong I've done to you? If you will allow me to, I swear from now on, I'll be there for you. I'll make you happy. I'll give you babies—if you want them. If not, this one will be our last."

Helayne palmed one side of his face. "Don't make promises you can't keep."

Kallibus grabbed her hand and pressed a kiss to the center of it. "I mean what I say. I'll make you happy."

"That isn't what I'm talking about. You make me happy just being here beside me. At last—beside me, and I do forgive you the pain you inflicted upon me through Black Drayke. I save my anger for him. He was

unnecessarily cruel and he liked it. I've always wanted to lie in your arms, feel your love surround me."

"Then what promise do you think I'll fail in?"

"Stopping with this one babe? Do you think I don't know demons love large families? I know you want daughters. You'll not stop with this one babe. I have many fertile years ahead yet."

His sexy laughter slid over Helayne, heating her blood. "You're right. I can no more resist putting my baby inside you than I can ever give you up again."

Helayne wiggled closer and toyed with one of his nipples. She heard his soft gasp and knew he was pleased with her touch. Kallibus had always responded to the merest touch from her.

"I won't give you up again, Helayne, and I will not let this problem with Talon and Zebus come between us."

"I understand. You won't have to. I realize you hated the fact that Darak touched me, but you should know he was always kind to me. In his way, he loved me. He just didn't have time for me or the two children you and I made would never have happened."

"I know he was kind to you. If he hadn't been, I would have killed him centuries ago." Kallibus caught her wandering hand as it explored south. "If you go there, be prepared for me to take you again."

Helayne smiled, slid her hand from his and gently cupped his sac. "Do you know what today is?"

"You think I'd forget the day our first child was born? Conceived and born out of season, but with love."

"And the beginning of your plans to destroy the *wakens*."

Kallibus gasped as she took his cock in her hands and set a smooth rhythm, pumping slowly. "You knew?"

"Yes. I knew. I just didn't know the reason why. I could find no fault in your plan or betray you, not when *wakens* were draining each witch of her soul they mated with. At the time, I wished you success and aided you in your endeavor by conceiving your children."

"And now?"

"I have a *waken* son. I couldn't harm a hair on his head nor allow you to. I'm still not fond of the *wakens* or their cruel laws, but in the last fifty years they've begun to realize they're decimating their own species by killing off their females."

The demon rolled her beneath him and nudged her thighs apart. "It's too little, too late. There's no way they can bounce back and produce enough pure blood *wakens* to hang on to their realm. They are doomed to extinction. It's coming...soon."

"That is sad."

"Don't feel sorrow for them. It is mostly their doing. Your males do not appreciate their females. My race was and is desperate for females—desperate for children. Putting the *wakens* in the same desperate situation did little good. They didn't change. They still continue to assassinate their females. Granted, not as frequently, but taking a single witch's soul is one too many. Demons appreciate each and every female we manage to bring to our realm and breed and we don't murder them."

"You will never allow me to go to the surface again. Will you?"

Kallibus entered her swiftly and set a steady rhythm. "That is what I said. Honestly, do you want to go to the surface? Leave me?"

Helayne gasped as he touched a particularly sensitive spot. "Not—leave you—ooh—that is—" She sucked in a sharp breath and shuddered.

"Yes, my love?"

"Good—that is—good."

"You have no idea how difficult it was for me to walk away and leave you each time I came to you, return to my realm without you, without my children. I was terrified one day King Darak would decide he no longer wanted you and steal your soul. He would have died a very slow death if he'd dared to take your life, but—" he thrust slowly inside her, drew back and buried his cock again and again.

Helayne clawed his butt and met each hard thrust of his body. "Gods, you know how to make me burn."

"You burn me, too, sweetheart, you always have."

Helayne shuddered and cried out, her climax aching and sweet. Kallibus clenched his teeth and still, he roared with the force of his release. His chest heaved as he lay atop her. Gently, he pressed soft kisses below her left ear. "I love you, my Queen. Never doubt that. I love you with everything that's a part of me."

Kallibus slipped out of her and rolled away. He settled her in his arms and pressed kisses along her jaw line. "You may go to the surface if it is your desire, but only when I'm free of duties here to accompany you. I will not take any chances with your life."

"Our son and daughter are alone and unprotected, without knowledge of their true heritage. They need us."

"You said you sent Kali away with the *waken* captain."

"Yes. I made the suggestion to Darak. I knew this Beltane season was going to see some changes on Ru-Noc. There was little doubt in my mind all hell was going to break loose. I felt the disruption in the air, the disquiet in my soul." She propped herself on one elbow and smoothed his brows. Her breasts rubbed against his chest, his nipples. "Not all *wakens* are bad, Kallibus. Not all of them steal witches' souls."

"Nor are all demons bad. We love, hurt, and cry when those we love perish. We aren't immune to pain. Though most refuse to see it, there's decency in us. We've had our losses, too."

"I know that."

"If the *waken* captain harms my daughter, he'll die."

"Captain Koran loves Kali. I would not have put her at risk if I hadn't been certain of his feelings for her. He'd never think to steal her soul."

"Then it is a good thing, the two of them together?"

"Yes. Forgive me, but you have not mentioned what will happen to Stry this day."

"It is a time when his body will awaken to what he truly is. He will begin to take on demon characteristics. If he tries to mate on his birthday, it will escalate the changes so he'll want to say the proper binding vows, but he doesn't know them, so he'll be confused. I should be there for him, to help him with the transition. I *will* be there for him."

"He vanished days ago. No one knows where he is. I don't know if he's dead or alive."

"He's alive. I know exactly where he is."

Helayne frowned. "How do you know he's alive? How do you know *where* he is?"

"A demon knows immediately when he loses a child. I knew when Kali died."

"What?" Helayne shouted. "What are you talking about?"

"Shhh. Don't fret, darling. Our daughter is fine. She did however die and return as a vampire."

"Oh, *shymeta*. A vampire?"

"Not so bad, my love. She is now stronger. She will not age or sicken. And she will live an eternity."

"And Stry?"

"Stry is going through his changes, becoming a demon. I feel his pain and uncertainty." Kallibus rolled out of bed and pulled on black leather pants. "I'm going to him. He needs me to explain what he must do to breed the witch he desires, to bind her to him."

Helayne slid off the bed. "I'm coming with you."

"No. You are not."

Helayne stiffened. "I do not like being given orders."

Kallibus slid on a black vest and narrowed his eyes. "Get used to it, my Queen. Down here, my word is law. I am your king, your mate and as such, you will obey my commands. Remain here until I return."

Helayne nodded and bowed. "As you wish, Your Majesty."

"Don't." Kallibus lifted her chin and rubbed his mouth against hers. "Don't be angry. I think of you and the babe. It isn't safe above ground. Here, you're protected by my guards. This talk I need to have with

Stry is a demon-to-demon, father and son private discussion. Give us this time together."

"Your Majesty, I'd grant you anything you desire. I always have."

Kallibus grinned. "Then next Beltane, give me a daughter, one who looks like her beautiful mother and who is as graciously obedient."

Helayne's lips curved into a slow smile. "You won't always have your way. I will not always obey you, but in this instance, consider it done, my King. I will give you a daughter next breeding season."

"And you will remain here, as I command?"

"This time."

He grinned. "We'll discuss your small rebellion when I return."

"How shall we discuss them, my King?"

"Why in bed, my beauty, with me between your lovely thighs, just as we shall always discuss your rebellions."

Part Two

The Middle

In every man's heart there is a devil, but we do not know the man as bad until the devil is roused.

~James Oliver Curwood
(The Case of Beauvais)
(Back to God's Country and Other Stories)

Chapter Eighteen

What men desire is a virgin who is a whore.

~Edward Dahlbert

*Ru-Noc
Sanctuary
Immortal Realm
Beltane*

For Stry, there was no longer a way to deny what he was, what he'd become in a matter of days. What he'd become since his humiliating, botched attempt to *fook* Kirrah.

Demon!

The one word screeched over and over in his head until he thought he'd go insane with the echo.

Demon-demon-demon!

He ignored the fact he was naked and paced like a caged animal. Finally, he flopped down on the side of the bed and chewed on his bottom lip.

Where was she?

The hour grew late.

He didn't like her being out past the witching hour alone. Not at Beltane, and with all the horny males that were bound to be searching for a mate in Sanctuary.

He glanced at his misshapen mating tool. Hell, he could hardly blame her for staying away from him—from *it*. She was right; his cock looked like a meat hook. He should cover it. Maybe he could disguise it with something. What? Nothing came to mind, except...for another hook. Samhain! If he disguised it like another meat hook, he'd never get Kirrah naked again.

Gods, he must be insane—after all, what male would even consider disguising his cock? It was what it was. Stry buried his face in his hands and moaned.

How humiliating! The first female he actually gave two *sheeah*tas about and wanted to impress with his prowess and what happens? His whopper goes and grows a neck. He was abnormal. He felt abnormal. Deformed. Ashamed.

But hell, since ending up at the witch's house, he'd been naked more often than clothed anyway.

There was no use covering up the part of him she'd eventually have to accept inside her body—that is... if she still desired him. *Fook!* What if she'd changed her mind? Well, yeah, he guessed her taking off on her broom like a bat zipping across the night sky was a pretty good indication she'd changed her mind, alright.

Stry leapt off the bed and rushed to the bathroom where he stared at his reflection in the rectangle-shaped mirror over the sink. His face looked the same, yet there were subtle changes. Differences only he'd notice. Or Kirrah. She'd notice okay. His lips were fuller. "Yeah, because I've grown *fooking* fangs!" She'd never miss that scary little fact. Hell, she'd already accused him of being a vampire, now she'd believe it. What the hell was he supposed to do with them? Suck out her blood? *Ugh!*

He eyed the two, newly formed spiky teeth in the front of his mouth. At least they weren't long. Maybe Kirrah wouldn't notice. Right. And maybe the little honey would learn to fly like a proper witch. "Not gonna happen."

He touched one of the canines with his forefinger and flinched. "Ouch!" Stry jerked his hand back and stared at the drop of blood on his finger tip. "Definitely sharp." He sucked on the end of his finger, tasting the sweet coppery flavor of his blood. He frowned. It tasted different, too. Richer. Thicker.

But those weren't the only changes. He'd already spotted the tiny spurs of shiny, topaz-colored horns poking up near his temples and the cinnamon and tan colored wings under the skin between his shoulder blades. The other changes were subtler.

Like the way his new noodle stayed hard and ached, much worse than when he'd been a *waken* at mating time. His body felt strange. Stronger. Muscular. Heavier. He walked different. Slower. More sensual. His speech was deeper. More sexual. More beguiling.

The urge to mate was a constant thing now. He thought of nothing else but *fooking* Kirrah and putting his seed in her, binding her to him with the words that would make her his. The problem was he didn't know the words.

And why this awful, powerful hunger for a child?

Was it something deeply ingrained in the demon psyche? Make babies or die? Why did he crave a union with only this particular female? *Wakens* were known to *fook* a witch and quickly move on to the next one. It was their way—but he was no longer a *waken*.

And he didn't know the mating rules for demons. *Fook* 'em and leave? *Fook* 'em and stay? Hell if he knew. The only thing he knew deep in his heart was he wanted Kirrah, and he never wanted to set her free. Possessiveness? Was it the demon way? He had a strong feeling it was.

Or maybe it was simply his way.

Gods, he didn't even know if his new-fangled cock would fit in the witch. Disgusted, he left the bathroom only to freeze at the sudden materialization of an extremely large demon in Kirrah's bedroom. *Sheeaha!* Now he knew for certain he was a demon. Gods in their bathing suits—Stry had little doubt he was somehow related to this particular demon. And he'd come to get him.

The huge male sported a set of shiny, ebony wings, a pair of slender black horns and sharp fangs. His hair was the color of faded cinnamon, silver in places. Stry swallowed hard. *His* hair was the color of cinnamon, not faded, no silver yet, but then he was centuries younger than this male.

Fook! Now what was he supposed to do? Meet and greet his likely father? Grandfather? Uncle?

"In answer to your silent question: you listen to what I have to tell you and stop worrying if your cock will fit the witch. Trust me. It will. Yes, it will be a tight fit and gods know you'll think you're going to explode with pleasure and frustration before you somehow manage to penetrate her. Witches are smaller built than demon females." He clasped his hands in front of him and rocked back on his heels. "They were never meant to be our mates, but—sometimes there is little choice left for a species if it wants to survive. Yes, you're going to have to enter her slowly. You'll think you're going to die from the need to thrust inside her quicker. It will always be difficult and painful for her until you seat yourself, but the pleasure you both achieve is incredible. The treasure you create when you spill your seed in her is worth it."

"Who the hell are you?" But Stry feared he knew the answer even before he voiced the question.

"You know I'm your father. You feel the connection to me now. It's always been there, just deeply buried until the right time. As to my title, I'm King Kallibus from Ayrumus and you are my son and heir."

Not that he'd needed it, but Stry's worst fears were confirmed. "I'm not a *waken*?"

"You know you aren't. You're demon royalty, hence the tattoo on your chest." Kallibus motioned to the ink stain marring Stry's chest. "I put it on you right after your birth and kept it invisible until now—your coming of age in demon years."

"Mother?"

"Helayne is with me. She will remain with me. We expect our third child All Hallows' Eve."

"Third?"

"Kali is mine."

"Talon?"

"No."

Stry thrust fingers through his long hair. "I don't understand."

"You don't have to understand. The only thing you need know is I love your mother. Our relationship has been complicated, but I love her and my children. I'll love Talon, if he'll allow me to."

"He knows?"

"Unfortunately. My brother, Zebus, your uncle, launched an all out attack on Talon's home a few days ago."

"Is he okay? Was he injured?"

"It was a violent attack. In the process, Zebus stole Talon's mate. At the moment, your brother isn't very fond of my species."

"Talon has always disliked demons." Stry raked fingers through his hair. "My brother will despise me."

"I hope it won't come to that. Talon has some things he has to learn to live with, but right now—yes, he loathes all things demon, even more so now that Zebus gave Talon's mate to Kyma to breed."

"Kyma?"

"He's your cousin and Zebus' only heir. Zebus...well, there's not much good I can say about him, but Kyma...one day, when he's king, he'll make a fine ruler. The thing you must learn to accept, Stry, once a female is taken to our realm and mated with a demon, she belongs to him from that day forward, no matter if she's released to return to the surface. No other male will ever touch her again, unless the demon allows it."

"This is all insane."

"It's simple. We hold what we claim. A *waken*'s claim to a female matters not to us. It's our laws, our binding vows that count and makes her ours. It's the most powerful of all oaths. More binding. If that doesn't work, we use magical drugs. By the time we stop the drugs, the female is fully indoctrinated to our ways and our blood. In all cases, she changes and becomes a demon."

"Why? I don't want to force a female to mate with me, force her to bond to me."

"We've had no choice. Our race has reached a critical level. We have fewer than a dozen females left of our species. Soon there will be none. They are hideously deformed and unbreedable. We took their blood and created a virus to make the witches infertile to the *waken*'s seed. For centuries, we have experimented with it, so that now, only the demons are capable of breeding the witches. Another hundred years and the pure blood strain of *waken* will be totally eliminated. When that happens, we will move above ground and rule Ru-Noc. So the oracle has foreseen, it shall be and nothing can prevent it."

"My loyalties lie with the demons?"

"They should. But I'm not here to sway you, Stry. You will come to me when you realize you owe nothing to the *wakens*. I know that for now your heart is divided. You were raised *waken*. I had no choice but to allow you to be raised by your mother in their realm. Make no mistake, you are bred from my seed. You are demon and you will continue to evolve in such a form. You will not be accepted up here. You'll have to bring your mate and live at Ayrumus or Talon will kill both you and her."

"I won't fight Talon."

"I don't expect you to. I expect you to come home, where you belong for the time being."

"Why are you here?"

Kallibus' brows rose. "You have a young witch you wish to mate with—"

"That's none of your business."

Kallibus' lips twitched. "Already you are possessive and protective of her. I wasn't asking to probe. You need to know the demon binding vows; that is, if you plan to keep her."

"I'm keeping her. She's mine."

"Ah, I thought so. You have all the signs of a young male demon in *Cruce*."

"Cruce?"

"Your cock stays hard. Your body aches. You're ready to find your eternal mate. In your case, you've found her; you just haven't claimed her."

"I claimed her as a *waken*."

"That mark will not stop another demon from mating with her. You must put your demonic symbol on her and breed her."

"What symbol?"

"An angel or an angel's wing, something to represent your last name, so all demons may see she is bound to a royal demon and dare not touch her."

"*Wakens* don't have last names."

"But demons do and yours is Angel. Tattoo her, her face, her arm, her hand, somewhere it can't be missed."

"That's it? Tattoo her and she's mine?"

"That's the easy part. I'll tell you the rest."

Chapter Nineteen

Love takes off masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within.

~James Arthur Baldwin

*Ru-Noc
Sanctuary
Immortal Realm
Beltane*

For the first time, Kirrah landed with her broom in a long smooth glide that left her standing on her feet instead of landing on her butt. But the thrill of a perfect landing was ruined by the fact her temper hadn't cooled down much. Mr. Wa-Wa was still at the top of the hot list and burning like the fires of Hades.

She'd let him upset her.

Upset her?

What a joke!

Yeah, he'd upset her all right, to the point she'd left her house with no underwear or jeans covering her—her—*rosebud*! Her ass felt like a block of ice. If she was good at casting spells, she'd have covered all her flowers a lot sooner. Instead, it had taken her forever to figure out a chant to replace her missing clothes. By the time she did, her flesh was already blue and numb and her teeth rattled like dried peas in a tin cup—but the rest of her body burned for his stem—at least her little tulip did.

How the heck could she still want him knowing he had a deformed dick?

What trickery?

What Black Magick?

If there was one thing Aunt Penell had stressed, it was stay away from Black Magick.

And what had *she* done?

She'd gone out and found the first male witch with a broken, bewitched cock.

There was something wrong with her head. Uh—no—there was something wrong with *his* head, and she didn't mean the one on his shoulders! Although she was beginning to think there might be something wrong with that one too, besides the three knots she'd put on it.

Yeah—she'd hadn't missed the two, shiny new growths poking up from his skull—like freakin' horns!

Was he Satan? Son of Satan? Grandson?

It just wasn't right. She wasn't right. He wasn't right.

The first male she wanted to surrender her virginity to and his tool was warped—and he possessed horns. It could only happen to her. Screaming with frustration was not going to do her one whit of good. Heck, his rod wasn't just bent out of shape. The tip was double in width to what it had been. Wide, thick and long—it simply wasn't normal.

His mating shaft was hexed all right, but she wasn't the one who put the evil spell on it.

So who had hexed him?

Kirrah parked her rebellious broom in a corner and shook her finger at it. "Don't follow me. I'm going to take a hot shower and thaw. I don't need your help," she said curtly.

The broom slumped in the corner. "Thought broom might wash witch's back and eye boobs."

"Mr. Broom, you don't have eyes!"

"Broom can fake it."

"Give it a chore," Stry suggested, lying there on her bed with his hands behind his head.

She turned a sour look in his direction. In spite of her anger, her gaze dropped to his cock. "Look, bent dick, I thought I told you to pack it up and leave."

"No need to get nasty. I've discovered the reason why my—er—dick is curved."

"Whoopee! Give the *waken* a cigar and call him Smokey."

"You're angry?"

"Only a little, after all, I enjoy being accused of witchcraft, of bending your stick shift into a pretzel. I want you to go. Leave my house."

"Where would I go?"

"Not my problem, Mr. Wa-Wa."

"Stry. My name is Stry."

"I don't care if your name is, 'Oh Joy.' Leave!"

"I know you're not mean and cold-hearted. I have no home, Kirrah. No family I'm aware of. You know my memories are still a little *iffy*. Surely you're not so cruel as to turn a poor soul out with nothing to eat, no shelter, and injured? Injuries you caused?"

"I did not cause the injury to your bean pole!"

"I wasn't referring to that injury."

"Oh." Kirrah hesitated. "Well, I knew it'd come down to this. If I don't take care of you, you'll sue me."

"I will indeed. That little bakery you love, I'll own it. You'll work for me for slave wages. No more buying family pictures to set on your dresser or hang on your walls."

"And you say I'm nasty? Okay. You can stay. Just—don't try to stick that weird thing in me again."

"It isn't weird. It's perfectly normal for a—"

"What? What are you?"

He scowled. "Never mind. Just know it's a normal mating tool."

"Hah!"

"Okay." He held up his hands. "Maybe not so normal, but I think it will get the job done—if you let me."

"No way." Kirrah slammed the bathroom door behind her and locked it.

Stry grinned. "We'll see, witch. We'll see. You're mine, button. You've been mine since the moment you cocked me upside the head with your wicked broom."

"Demon plan to do the *rooba-rooba* with beautiful witch?"

Stry nodded. "You bet your switches I do."

"Don't hurt her. You try to suck witch's soul from her body while mating with my Kirrah, I shove broom stick up your demonic ass."

"You would too, wouldn't you?" Stry laughed.

"You bet your balls I would."

"Relax, Sticks. Now that I'm a demon, I don't have the ability to steal a witch's soul any longer. I only want to *fook* Kirrah, breed her, which is what Beltane's all about—right—making baby demons?"

"Guess so." The broom sounded doubtful.

"Look, set your mind at ease. I have no intention of hurting her or harming her in any way."

"Good thing. Just know broom keeping wary eye on you."

"You don't have an eye."

"And *waken* don't have a normal dick! I think we even."

"Gods. Shut up and leave me alone. I'm not a *waken*."

Kirrah came out of the bathroom wrapped in a big brown fluffy towel. Her wealth of auburn hair looked darker, wet and falling around her shoulders in dripping rattails. Her skin glowed like a dew-kissed rose. She looked soft and sweetly feminine. Inviting. Lovable.

Stry smothered a groan. *Fook!* Was she trying to kill him? Didn't she realize he was already—hell; *already* had nothing to do with it. His dick was never going to be soft again. He wanted her. He wanted to bury his cock so damn deep inside her, she'd have no doubts she belonged to him.

The *waken's* claiming mark he'd placed on her throat had faded, just as his father had predicted. The magic he'd possessed as a *waken* no longer existed. The need to mark her, tattoo her as Kallibus had instructed now felt absolutely necessary and urgent.

Somehow, he had to convince Kirrah to mate with him.

"Kirrah, *La-Scheme*, come sit down beside me." He patted the bed and wondered if it was proper for him to speak the native language of a *waken*.

Her face tightened. She tucked the towel tighter around her breasts and stared at him warily.

"You need to listen to what I have to tell you. If after I'm finished, you no longer want to mate with me, then I'll leave."

She tilted her chin. Her lips quivered. "You don't have to leave. You can stay for as long as you like."

"No, I can't. I have to leave, but I want to take you with me when I go, as my beloved mate. Please, come here and listen to me."

Kirrah nodded and took a step toward him. The broom lined up beside her. Stry grinned. United they stood against him—what—against his crooked cock?

"You need to give your broom some tasks. It has too much idle time."

"What?" Kirrah clutched the towel to her bosom. "How do I give it chores?"

"You chant a spell."

"I don't know how to chant."

"You're a witch. All witches know how to cast spells."

"I don't."

"Why don't you?"

"I don't know. I just don't."

"Where the hell did you grow up at, the mortal realm?"

"By that remark, if you mean among humans, then yes, I grew up in the mortal realm, near the border between Arizona and California."

"*Fook*. I knew it! I knew you were raised human."

"Why does it matter or make me different?"

"It matters. If you'd been raised in Sanctuary, you'd know how to chant."

"Oh brother, like I give two beans if I can hex a person or not? I'll learn everything I need to know—eventually." She marched over to the closet, yanked down a pair of jeans, a brown tee-shirt and headed toward the bathroom.

"Where are you going?"

"To dress."

"You can dress in here."

"Hah! Wouldn't you love a peep show?"

"Sounds good, but I was thinking more in the lines of what if the house catches on fire while you're in the bathroom dressing?"

Kirrah rolled her eyes. "*Pu-lease*. Why would it catch on fire?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe because you can't control your magic. You don't know how to chant properly, so if you should happen to hex something while you're in there mumbling—"

"I do not mumble!"

"Yes, you do. You mumble all the time. It's why candles are always leaping to life or the fireplace explodes with fire or why—"

"Good grief! You're such a baby." Kirrah jumped as the broom sidled up beside her. She glared at it. Clearly, her patience was at an end. "Broom, sweep the room!"

Kirrah's eyes bugged out as the broom immediately started sweeping the room. Stry laughed.

"It isn't funny!" She marched over to the bed, hands plastered on her hips.

"Sure it is." Stry took the clothes from her fisted palms and tossed them aside. "You won't need them for a while," he said huskily. He tugged on the end of the towel until it came loose and dropped on the floor at her feet. His gaze slid over her, taking in the fullness of her breasts, the peach-colored nipples. Slowly, he grazed the tight buds with his thumbs. "Let me love you, Kirrah." He groaned and buried his face against her stomach. "I need you." She made no objection as he dragged her onto his lap. "There now," he whispered soothingly, brushing a stray curl from her forehead. "You're where you belong."

Kirrah burrowed against his chest. Stry groaned. Her wiggling played havoc with his will to keep his damn hungry cock under control. It rose like a giant monolith, just like it did every time she was near him. He shifted a bit, moving her off the log in his pants.

Kirrah leaned back and searched his eyes. "Did you see it? Did you see how quickly it obeyed me?"

"No, but I felt it."

"What?"

"Oh, you mean the broom? Yeah, honey, I saw it. All you did was cast a sweet little spell. It'll last long enough for the broom to tidy up in here." He nuzzled her neck just below her ear where the flesh was delicate and tender. "Mmm, you smell delicious, like cinnamon and myrrh, the fragrances of a goddess."

Kirrah sighed and rubbed her mouth along his powerful jaw line. "I don't cast sweet little spells. I've never cast a spell in my life. Well, except for once—the spiders and snakes, you know? But it was an accident. So was knocking you down with my broom."

Stry laughed and tightened his arms around her. "Honey, you can run me over with a broom anytime you want. I promise not to duck."

She lifted her face, searched his eyes. "I didn't mean to injure you. Truly, it was an accident."

"I know that," he said tenderly. He fastened his gaze on her mouth. "Gods, baby, you are the sweetest thing that's ever happened in my life. I don't want to lose you."

Kirrah licked her dry lips and ached for the kiss she saw in his eyes. "You—uh—look—as—if—"

"What?" Stry lowered his head. "What, witch? I look as if...what?"

"You're going to—to—kiss me...."

"Uh-huh—I might have lumps on my head and a cock-eyed dick, but I'm not stupid. Your mouth is pure sin and right this moment, I'm so into temptation."

She sucked on her bottom lip. Stry groaned. The little witch drove him insane with that slick lower lip. He wanted to suck on it. Hell, he wanted to taste her all over again, from head to toe and back to her mouth. *Fook!*

Yeah, that's exactly what he needed to do. *Fook* her.

And by the gods, if he didn't, another *waken* would.

Waken?

No, he wasn't a *waken*. The only witch blood flowing through his veins was from his mother—witch blood was slightly different from *waken* blood. They were two magical beings from the same realm, same race, but still two different species. But he possessed no *waken* blood, not if his father was a demon. Glancing toward his lap, he knew Kallibus had told him true. He no longer had any doubts his father was the demon king.

Ah, but demons mated with witches every Beltane. Not that the *wakens* approved such unions, but it still happened and was going to continue to happen until the *wakens* were extinct.

Why hadn't any of the male witches seen it? Realized what was happening to their realm? He remembered Talon's arguments with the *Waken* Guild when he was ordered to assassinate Saylym Winslow. His brother had seen what was happening long before even *he* saw it. The Guild simply refused to face the truth of the situation.

Because then they'd have to face up to the responsibility of their part in the destruction of their ability to reproduce.

The Guild hadn't wanted to admit that the witches conceived every Beltane, they just didn't conceive with a *waken*. The females had mated successfully with the demons, just like they'd mated successfully with mortal man.

Gods, how could the *Waken* Guild have been so stupid? Why had they ignored the terrible tragedy unfolding before their very eyes? Had they thought it would all go away? *Poof!* And it was over? No more worries?

Then it hit him. Why did he care? He owed no allegiance to the *wakens*. He was demon. But hell, his brother was *waken*. He cared about Talon. And dammit, he did care what happened to the *wakens*.

Stry eyed Kirrah, his lust for her quickening. There was every possibility when he mated with her, she'd conceive his child. His son would be a demon.

He was demon. Demon!

Between his shoulder blades, his skin itched. The wings growing there irritated his flesh. *Demon!* He was demon royalty. There was no reason why he shouldn't or couldn't mate with Kirrah. Indeed, he thought the urgency to *fook* her was even stronger, now that he knew he was half demon.

Because he'd breed her when he spilled his seed in her womb?

Yes! It was something ingrained in his mind, the need to reproduce his kind and quickly. It was like some kind of internal clock had alarmed in his head. The urgency kept building inside him. If they mated—no, he shook his head. Not *if*, when they mated, she'd catch his seed. He knew it with everything in him.

Should he tell her?

What if she didn't want his child?

What did other demons do?

Did they simply plant their seed, give the witch no choice? Somehow, he thought it was exactly what had been going on for centuries. The witches were bred, and believing they were infertile, were too happy they were going to have a child to mind that the father was a demon.

He knew a demon didn't desert the witch he claimed and bred.

Did the demon love the witch who conceived his babe? Love his children? *What?* Gods, this was driving him insane.

Stry turned his gaze on Kirrah who trembled in his arms. Absently, he toyed with her tight nipples. She wanted him. He knew she did, else her body wouldn't respond so readily to his playful touches. His breath caught in his throat. What if he hurt her? The first time—with his misshapen whacker and all—he couldn't bear the thought of causing her pain.

There was no way around it.

Dammit! What if he did it wrong?

He knew nothing about mating—not as a demon, except for the bit of instruction his father gave him,

which had more to do with binding than actually mating.

Stry released a pent-up breath and pressed a kiss to her temple. Deep in his gut, he worried. What if he did it wrong? What if she hated him when it was all over?

Gods, the thought of her hating him shook him. He loved her. When had she burrowed beneath his skin and captured his heart? This was insane. The witch was insanity walking on two legs—gorgeous legs, granted, but—she was a flying *fucking* hazard. She wielded her broom like it was a weapon instead of a means to get from point A to point B.

It was obvious to him she was unskilled. Untrained. *Fook-fook-fook*.

And she was scheduled for termination by the *Waken* Guild.

No way in hell was he going to let her die.

Where the *fook* was his cousin Sage?

Hell, was Sage even his cousin?

No, of course he wasn't.

Sage was King Darak's nephew. If Darak wasn't *his* father, then Sage sure wasn't his cousin. But Sage was like a brother to him. *Was* like a brother to him. Dammit, one didn't have to be related by blood or race to care about another. He'd watched Sage grow up. Yeah, the *waken* was family.

But Sage should have already assassinated Kirrah. If he had, then *he* wouldn't be in this mess. *Shee-ahtha*. What was wrong with him? It wasn't like he wanted Kirrah's soul sucked from her body. He didn't.

But if he'd never met her, he wouldn't be so damn miserable. All these changes wouldn't be taking place inside and outside his body. His insides wouldn't be all twisted into a knot and his bent cock wouldn't be leading him around like a blind, one-legged pony.

He needed a witch doctor.

No, no, not a witch doctor.

A witch doctor could no longer help him.

What he needed was help from a demon doctor. Advice. Kallibus hadn't exactly gone into detail about mating with the witch. He'd simply said *it'd* fit, put *it* in her and make a demon baby.

How to *fook* a witch when his cock was curved? Huh. No clue. He needed a 'How-To' book. He didn't know of any demon book stores with self-help sex instructions. Hell, he didn't know any demons, not personally. For the gods' sake he'd only just met his father. Fat lot of good Kallibus had done him.

Stry scowled. Yeah, he was on his own. He'd get his cock inside Kirrah somehow, and he'd deliver his seed as his body dictated. Here and now, it was survival of the fittest species.

Kallibus had told him it was his duty to produce an heir for the throne of Ayrumus. Produce an heir he would, by hook or by crooked staff. Still, he needed answers only his father could give him. He intended to visit Ayrumus first chance he got—see exactly what he'd one day inherit.

Living underground didn't much appeal to him, but getting killed by the *wakens* appealed even less. He supposed for the time being he had no choice. A demon he was and the realm he'd dwell.

Chapter Twenty

All great achievements require time.
~Maya Angelou

Na-Cyl
Wolf Bayne Hollow
Immortal Realm
Beltane

Creed stood on the long front porch of his home and stared at the blood-red moon hanging like a big fire ball in the night sky. Warm air brushed his face and lifted the strands of his shoulder length hair away from his nape.

The scent of wild wolf bane teased his nostrils, acted as a stimulant, and heightened his already over-active libido another notch.

But the rage flooding his body at the way Zebus had manipulated him into agreeing to sign the bride contracts and support the demon's attacks on Talon chewed at his soul like a hungry wolf. He wanted no part in the destruction of Prince Talon or the *wakens*.

The helpless, impotent anger roared like an out-of-control fire in his blood.

What could he do? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Talon would fall, and there was nothing he could do to help his friend. The fury only intensified his need to mate.

All this trouble—a war that would annihilate Talon and the *wakens*, his betrayal of his best friend whom he had no choice but to deceive —left a bad taste in his mouth, all because of one little baby girl who would one day be *his* mate, his queen, the mother of his heir.

Resentment flooded his soul—for Zebus—for Saylym, who'd betrayed Talon and mated with a demon. But most especially, he hated the female child destined to be his queen. Peyton Angel—a demon on the *were* throne. The son he fathered with her one day would be more demon than *were*.

If it was the last thing he ever did, he'd see to it this female paid for ever being conceived and born, for ruining his life, the lives of his people, and Talon's life as well. If it were at all possible, he'd refuse her as his bride, but it wasn't. The oracle had spoken. Creed knew he had to make her his queen, mate with her, but he refused to give his heart into the care of a demon bitch.

He would not love her, he vowed. He'd never love her, and he'd see to it she lived her life with him in utter misery.

Creed gasped at the shaft of pain that blasted his heart. All his hopes for the best prospects for his people had been placed on the birth of his future queen—all for nothing.

He couldn't breathe. Air stilled inside his lungs, trapped. It flowed neither upward nor outward, but remained lodged like a spear in his chest. Zebus' untimely visit with the news *his* future bride had been conceived left Creed's wolf spirit in turmoil.

Grimness settled over him like a black fog. His bride would cost him the friendship of a good *waken* or worse, she'd cost Talon his life.

And his pack—*his* pack would never accept her because of what she was—yet his destiny lay with Peyton Angel.

Creed paced and swore softly. Damn the oracle. He'd like to blast it to oblivion, but all realms had an oracle, and his had told centuries ago of the coming birth of his mate. One did not dismiss the future an oracle proclaimed.

Gods, what was he supposed to do—besides wait for Peyton's birth—then for her to mature? No doubt she'd be prepped from the moment of her birth for her future role as his queen. The question ripping him apart now—did he want her for his mate? The answer to that was simple enough—he'd never want to mate with a demon or have her seated upon the throne of Na-Cyl. He'd never be able to trust her. Her loyalties would lie with the demons, not the *weres*.

Did he have a choice but to accept her? Same simple answer.

Zebus would prep her from birth. Once Creed took her for his mate, Zebus would pay her and Na-Cyl untimely visits, no doubt to whisper commands in her ears.

Creed flinched. Through his bride, he'd lose control of Na-Cyl to the demon king.

Because of her, he'd have to be on constant guard that she didn't run an athame through his heart while he slept. Creed curled his fingers into tight fists. Once his packs learned his future bride was a demon, they'd go berserk. They'd never accept her.

And they'd make her life unbearable.

Not only would he not be able to protect her, but it would give Forge the excuse he needed to challenge him for the crown. The problem was, hell, he didn't want to protect his future bride. He *wasn't* going to protect her. No way. Once she was here, once she was his mate, once he'd fucked her and bred her, she could fend for herself.

He needed an heir from her. Once the babe was born, he'd send her back to Ayrumus. Hell, he'd love to leave her in Ayrumus—period!

And yet, the oracle had spoken.

Peyton was the female in his future. He'd seen it clearly in Saylym's eyes. He'd heard his future bride's name whispered on the wind. *Peyton...Peyton.*

Her name stirred his blood. It set his pulses pounding. His cock rose and ached with the necessity to spill his seed. Tonight, urgency speared through his body, hot and primeval.

His body burned.

His blood bubbled.

Every inch of his skin tingled.

He wanted to strip off his clothes and howl. Creed's heart hammered. His pulse beat a rapid, irregular ditty—all signs he approached his third *Lu-Nark*—signs that indeed, his future mate had recently been conceived.

No wonder his body was going crazy. Even though her birth was months away, her arrival was imminent. This year. And his body responded violently to the fact. The time for another change raced toward him, overwhelming in its savage intensity. It slammed into him with the force and pain as if he'd leapt off a cliff and hit the bottom many feet below.

The change *zoomed* toward him. So sudden. So soon after his second *Lu-Nark* which had happened but a short spell ago.

Creed didn't flinch when the invisible claw branded him with the third stripe across his chest, marking him. In a way, he welcomed the pain. It was part of the ritual of *Lu-Nark* and he could do nothing about it but bear the sharp ache. In time, he'd have to reveal it to his pack, inform them he was now a fully matured *were*.

And he'd have to announce his mate had been conceived.

A silent chant repeated itself over and over in his mind. *Too soon. Too soon.* He should have had at least a hundred years before the third mark appeared. A hundred years before his bride was born—a hundred more after that before he could claim her.

Two hundred years, but everything was out of sequence—his life on fast forward. Rushing. Racing. His body had quickened into full maturity—prepared itself—for what? Shit! Yeah. That's what it was doing. Preparing. His cock stretched, lengthened and pounded against his zipper.

Creed sucked in a fierce breath. Everything in him hastened. His body sped ahead, preparing itself for the taking of a mate.

Too soon. Too soon.

Too many years to wait—he needed a female—now!

"Dammit," he snarled and dug his claws in the porch rails. The wood split and splinters sailed through the air. Slowly he retracted them, leaving deep gouges behind in his wake. If he hadn't been so preoccupied with running his realm and concerned about Shasta's disappearance, he'd have known the instant his mate was conceived.

Then Zebus' visit wouldn't have caught him off-guard. He would have already known Peyton was a demon. No, he wouldn't have liked the idea any better than he did now, but at least he'd have anticipated Zebus' appearance in his realm.

Creed couldn't get Peyton off his mind. Until now, he'd looked forward to his bride's birth. Damn, he'd made so many plans. A new home—children—sons and daughters—now he wanted nothing from her except the heir he'd one day need.

He'd kill the wild craving he felt for her. It was only a natural response to learning she'd been conceived.

Deep inside, his heart rebelled, his rage seethed. Even if he stopped wanting her, she was still going to bring nothing but trouble to his people—to him. He silently thanked the gods he wouldn't have to present her to his pack for another hundred years, but who even now, rested snug in her mother's womb.

Talon. He worried about his friend. Creed reached deep in his mind for Prince Talon, to discover what had happened, to learn why Saylym was no longer in the prince's life.

Saylym must have been delivered of her twins early, then gone right back into heat. It was a rare thing, but occasionally it happened, two breeding seasons in one for a witch.

Creed frowned when all he received from Talon's mind was black grief and despair.

Shit. What had happened?

This should be the happiest moment of *his* life. He should be howling and leaping in the air with joy. He did neither. His friend was in misery. Creed scowled. He wasn't exactly happy either.

Maybe he should change the future.

What would happen if he defied the oracle, made certain Peyton was never born?

You dare defy me and your entire race will cease to exist. No matter her species, Peyton is your future mate. You will do nothing to change the future!

The sound of the oracle's angry voice in his head made Creed sick to his stomach. Nausea rolled through his gut like a stormy sea. His vision blurred. Shit! How had the oracle known what he was considering doing?

She will destroy my people, Oracle.

No, you will destroy them if you prevent her birth. If you attack Saylym, kill both her and Peyton, Zebus will declare war on Na-Cyl. He is powerful. You do not stand a chance against an invasion by his army. You will take Peyton for your queen as I have foretold or suffer the consequences. The loss of Talon's friendship, even the probability of his death, is regrettable, but the loss of Peyton would be disastrous.

Creed rubbed his face. Trapped. No way out. He'd sign the fucking contracts Zebus presented to him. He couldn't put his packs at risk because he was discontented over who'd fathered his future mate.

Besides, there was Talon to consider. He might be devastated by Saylym's loss, but he'd never recover from her death. The *were* king released a long, pent up breath. A damnable situation no matter which way he turned. And no matter which way he turned, he was trapped. Someone was going to get betrayed, hurt, and possibly killed.

Any joy he might have once felt at Peyton's conception was overridden by the guilt he felt for the *waken's* loss. How could he possibly celebrate the conception of *his* bride at the expense of Talon?

Sometime in the last week, history had been altered. It must have. It was just like Zebus to tamper with the future and change things to the way he wanted them to be.

When the demon king captured Saylym and gave her to Kyma, had he known the future queen of Na-Cyl would be conceived? Most likely. Zebus did nothing without a reason. If the demonic oracle predicted Peyton's conception, then yes, the demon knew long before he captured Saylym that the witch was the mother of Na-Cyl's future queen. He would have made certain one of his demons fathered Peyton.

Who better than the demon's own son, Kyma?

Zebus.

How he'd love to rip him apart. He would too, if not for the fact—Peyton. Even if she never spoke a word, Peyton would always stand in his way; position herself between him and her grandfather. Damn the demon and damn *his* future bride!

Because of her, Talon and Saylym had been ripped apart. Their love, their lives, their family destroyed—and in the process, *his* future created...assured. Oh, gods. What a damnable mess.

He wished it was finished.

But he couldn't touch Peyton for at least another century. She wouldn't reach mating age before that. Dammit, he couldn't wait a hundred years to relieve this burning need that clawed at his dick.

With this third *Lu-Nark*, his need pressed with urgency. It meant he'd have to cast aside his aversion and mate with a female from his pack, but not one of the *commoners*. He couldn't do that, nor would one of them be capable of servicing him. He'd put it off for as long as he could. But like everything else in his life lately, he had no choice.

Now that his bride would be born All Hallows' Eve, he felt as if he was being unfaithful by going to another female. He snorted. He owed her nothing. Not his loyalty. His fidelity. Nothing. She was a means to an end and he intended to see that it ended quickly, preferably with her death.

The *Lu-Nark* pulsing through his blood left him no choice but to seek a mating partner for tonight. If he didn't mate, his fourth and final *Lu-Nark* might also escalate, arrive years early and accelerate his need to the point he'd become violent with any female he mated with.

A male *were* could rip a female to pieces while mating with her. With this need at such a dangerous stage, it was best if he sought a She-Wolf.

Creed refused to injure one of the lesser *feminnas* in his pack. He'd never harmed a female in his life, by the gods, he wasn't about to start now. No, he'd save that for Peyton, a bitch demon who'd deserve everything he gave her and more.

Fourth *Lu-Nark* was an extraordinary time in a *were's* life. It was supposed to happen only when he mated with his true mate for the first time. The mating bond that went on between eternal *were* mates was a guarded secret shared only by the *were* males and passed down from father to son. It happened but once in their life and it happened at fourth *Lu-Nark*. It was of the utmost importance that he slow the cycle down.

The only way now to stave off that special time was to take care of the fire torturing his groin. Excitement pulsed through his blood. It thumped a pagan rhythm, a drumbeat that smashed its way through his soul and trounced him.

The instinctual hunter fused in the very marrow of his bones, knitting tendons and ligaments into one. It turned him into a dangerous predator ready to pounce on unsuspecting prey.

His claws erupted from the tips of his fingers and receded, erupted—receded. Twin canines ripped through his gums and slipped back deep in place where they belonged when he wasn't in hunting mode. Fur spiked along the ridge of his knuckles and vanished.

Creed shut down his mind, silently commanded his body not to shape-shift, but his body wasn't heeding his orders—not like it should. The wildness of the beast howled deep in his soul. He wanted to run through the woods like the wild wolf he was, find his mate, and perform the ritual that would make them one, mate with her until they were both exhausted—and that was the problem. His body wanted one thing, but his mind and heart was in total rebellion.

How could he feel such extreme differences for his future mate?

On one hand, his blood heated. He grew excited. Needy. He couldn't wait to claim her.

On the other hand—*on the other hand*, he needed—but the need wasn't desire. He wanted to rip her to shreds—destroy her—and he *would* destroy her, in his own way. He would never allow her into his heart. More importantly, their souls would become as one. He wanted to leave her in the hell from whence she'd spawned and would be raised—and as soon as she gave him an heir, he'd send her back to Dymus, back to her sulfur laden realm, and he never wanted to see her again.

His mate, yeah, his mate had turned out to be a nightmare. After she birthed his heir, he'd make certain she remained in her black world of lies and deceit.

She'd be born All Hallows' Eve, a hundred years ahead of schedule. The passing of another hundred years would come before she arrived at Na-Cyl to ruin his life. In his realm, a hundred years went by fast. Even so, it would be a long, miserable century with his body in almost constant need, and his mind in turmoil and denial.

Creed sighed. Hell, he'd waited centuries for her already, he could wait one more. Surely—he could wait one more without his final *Lu-Nark* morphing. His life might be changing a hundred years from now, but Prince Talon's had been destroyed now.

Demon!

Friggin' demons!

He didn't want their kind in his realm. Had never allowed them to trespass and now—his bride—a union conceived and made in hell—his son—his heir—a quarter demon, but the demon bloodline was strong. The genes would pass on for several generations, possibly longer if his son mated with the new breed of demon the witches were birthing, instead of a *were*—which was exactly what Zebus counted on happening.

Zebus would do his level best to draw *his* son into the demon world and indoctrinate him.

Yes, his and his unborn son's future looked dismal. His and Peyton's coming together wasn't going to be easy. They weren't going to agree on anything, especially where Zebus was involved. And Creed refused to let the demon take control of Na-Cyl. Never would he let the demon king rule the *were* realm.

Sonofabitch! This was going to get nasty and it was going to get complicated. Creed clenched his fists. Yes. He should slip past the guards inside Dymus, steal inside Kyma's domain and murder Saylym. Kill Peyton in the womb—it was the right thing to do—the wrong thing to do.

He owed Saylym. Dammit, he liked the witch. It wasn't her fault she'd conceived a demon's seed. Was it?

She'd shown him nothing but kindness when he'd been wounded by the silver-tipped arrow. How could he repay her by taking her life and that of her daughter?

But how could she mate with a demon?

How could she betray Talon?

Maybe—maybe she'd fallen out of love with the prince. She must care for Kyma. She was mating with him, carrying the demon's child. He didn't know Kyma. He'd never heard anything bad about him, but he'd never heard anything good either.

And he had Talon's mate. Not only had her, but he'd bred her.

Yeah, he didn't think he liked Kyma any better than Zebus.

Was Zebus' son and heir as dangerous as the demon king?

What was he thinking? A demon was a demon. They were treacherous. Deadly. Extremely unpredictable. Vengeful. Possessive of their mates, and they carried grudges for centuries.

And one day, he was taking one for a life mate. Fuck!

Creed stared at the moon and felt his heart bleed. Full moon. Blood red. A good night for *weres*. A joyful night. Already his pack gathered in the village. Tonight was a night to celebrate. Or it should be.

When the moon was full and deep crimson, they didn't change into *were* form. They didn't hunt in packs and bring down deer, bear or any other large animal they found to feast on. Once a *were* male reached puberty, a full crimson moon was the only time in his life the change didn't occur.

A scarlet red moon. A good sign. It announced the news of the conception of the king's mate. His pack would never miss such a sign. They'd know that soon he'd take a queen.

His queen. A demon.

Saylym Winslow. He'd seen in her eyes days ago that she'd give birth to his queen. What he hadn't known was that Talon *wouldn't* be the father. He'd assumed—he couldn't decide whether to laugh or cry. His future would be his pack's sorrow and unrest.

How could this be?

How did it happen?

"We're ready," Ransom said, loping up with Bane at his side.

Creed shook his head. "It took you long enough."

Ransom grinned. "Bane was kind of busy. I had to wait for him to finish—"

"You two go ahead. I'll catch up with you. I have to seek a She-Wolf."

"What?" Ransom blinked. "*Now?*"

Bane laughed. "And I thought *I* was horny. Damn, you must be in bad shape if you're going to a She-Wolf and delaying Shasta's rescue."

Creed glared at his younger brother. "A *necessary* need—third *Lu-Nark*—a few minutes ago." He glanced at the blood-red moon. "Have either of you looked up at the sky?"

Ransom glanced up and whistled softly. "Holy shit. No, I hadn't looked. I was uh—a little preoccupied—too."

"A She-Wolf is the only female that can relieve my need—except for my bride. I have no bride—yet."

"Gods." Ransom sighed. "It's way too soon. You just went through the second phase of *Lu-Nark* a few days ago."

"I know that," Creed snapped. "It's years too close together. It's why I must seek a She-Wolf and slow down the changes."

"We'll wait for you," Bane volunteered.

"No. Go. I have no idea how long I'll be. This might take awhile. Check in at *Dracula's Inn* and wait for me. Do not call attention to yourself. I'll be there as soon as possible."

Ransom nodded. "Be careful. You know how a She-Wolf is. She'll claw you to death if you give her too much pleasure."

"I'm not going there to pleasure her, but to relieve my needs."

Ransom laughed. "She'll be pleased just because you're the king. She'll attack you before you even get your pants down."

Creed nodded. "It's the very reason I've always given that species a wide path."

Chapter Twenty-One

Many demons are in woods, in waters, in wildernesses, and in dark pooly places ready to hurt...people.

~ Martin Luther

*Ru-Noc
Annu Mountain
Noddon Caverns
Immortal Realm
Beltane*

Ann Drakulya slowly opened her eyes and blinked. God, her head hurt. Not only did it feel fuzzy, but it felt incredibly heavy. Different atmosphere, maybe? Decreased oxygen? Hell, she was the undead. She didn't need air anyway—well, except for the rare intake.

Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, thick and dry. She swallowed trying to move a bit of moisture around and down her throat. Ann licked her lips and winced. They were tender and slightly swollen, as if she'd been thoroughly kissed...several times.

Kissed...yes, she remembered kisses, hot, sensual, curl your toes kisses with lots of tongue and little bites from razor sharp teeth, soothing licks to take away the sting. Why couldn't she put a face to those lips, tongue and teeth? A body?

She moaned and moved by slow, hesitant degrees. Shadows crept slowly through her mind, like ripples in a dark pool, memories of a dark face over hers, a smile, lips soft and tender, yet forceful...deep kisses. Dominant male. Submissive female. Her.

A certain tenderness tingled between her thighs, one she recognized. Oh, God. Someone had violated her? She blinked, forcing her brain to function, but she couldn't remember anything except hazy images, a male settling his muscular body over hers, handsome, regal, a bit wild and untamed, kisses hot enough to steal her breath, his shaft long and thick and oddly shaped, hard, so hard when he thrust inside her.

Big hands cupped her breasts, his mouth and tongue—everywhere. The first deep penetration, strong, powerful, filling her until she thought she'd die with both the pain and the pleasure of it—his deep groans of satisfaction as he settled inside her and set an urgent rhythm, his muscular hips pumping madly, a voice, deep, masculine, commanding, encouraging her to wrap her legs around his waist, his body trembling with

the power of his release jetting inside her, a dark head resting on her lower abdomen and tears that scalded her skin. A baby?

Quickly, Ann spread her hands across her belly. Yes. A babe. A boy. It had clawed its way to safety, hooked those tiny sharp nails into her womb and now, it nestled deep inside her, safe, secure and growing at an incredible rate.

Together, she and the male who'd spent hours mating with her had made a child.

Hello, Mother.

In her mind, she saw the babe blink. He had her eyes, dark as chocolate, wise and intelligent.

My son. Tears filled her eyes. *You are well?*

Boyish laughter. *You asked me that but two hours ago. I am very well. I grow strong.*

Your name?

Zyon. It has not changed. Again childish laughter. *Do not worry so about losing me. Rest assured, Mother, I'm not going anywhere—until it is time. Where's Father?*

She bit her lip. *I'm not sure. I'm not sure who your father is.*

Again, the sound of laughter. *Zebus fathered me. Do not fret, he will come soon. Father was overcome with joy by my conception. How do you feel about me?*

Ann gasped, shocked that her baby could doubt her love for him.

Never mind, Mother, you do not have to answer. I feel your surprise that I asked you the question. You love me. Of course I love you.

I'm very lucky to have you for my mother. Father chose well. A smile curved the tiny baby lips. *I'm going back to sleep now.*

Yes. Of course. Sleep.

Ann frowned. Who the hell was Zebus? She couldn't get a clear image of her baby's father in her mind, or even of her baby, but he was there, growing inside her, and that's all she needed to know.

She concentrated on her surroundings. Nope. Nothing familiar. She couldn't recall anything—Oh, shit. Demons had attacked Radu Castle! Someone or something had stabbed her with two athames, then broke the blades off between her ribs.

Quickly, she felt along her side—tenderness, but no bleeding. The athames were gone, the wounds sealed and healing.

Someone had removed the blades. Who?

No wonder she had a headache, among other unexplained aches. Lately, her body had been sorely abused. No, that wasn't entirely true. She'd been pleased. Sated. A tender ache throbbed deep inside her. She wanted. Needed. Ann twisted restlessly. Her blood sizzled, as if her body summoned her...mate.

Who? What? What did she want? Need?

Slowly, she tried to scoot to the edge of the bed only to discover she was too dizzy to sit up. The room spun wildly and she flopped back on the bed, her head resting on the big comfortable pillow.

She blinked away the dizziness and looked around. Where was she?

How had she arrived here—more importantly, *why* was she here?

She was in some kind of cave. *Another cave?*

Yes. It was a lot different from Brasov's salt mine. This chamber was enormous, fit for a king—richly decorated with beautifully woven silk rugs suspended from the ceiling, one along a narrow wall, another behind a red velvet sofa and love-seat. The divan and matching love-seat, mammoth in size, filled a far corner wall, along with casual tables and a burgundy-colored leather recliner big enough to get lost in.

Black silk drapes fell over false-fronted windows, two of them, shrouding the area with a homey atmosphere and intimacy. A quarter-moon-shaped chrome and glass bar, at least seven foot—even she could see was well-stocked—stood in the opposite corner from the sitting area. Tall, thickly padded royal-blue stools rowed up in front of the bar like thirsty drovers after a long hard drive. Fancy and colorful, the entire chamber was alive with rich, warm jewel tones.

She frowned. Obviously, it was all setting. Props for seduction? Yes, she thought so. Was it all real or an assimilated persona of a life hungered for, but never quite lived?

Huge, gilt-edged mirrors, diamond-shaped, hung behind the bar and reflected the backs of numerous bottles. It appeared her host was quite the partier. Quite the seducer—and she'd fallen for his charm—another notch on his bedpost.

The interior walls of the chamber were made from some kind of grayish-white rock that sparkled like diamonds in the semi-darkness. If not for the two lamps at either end of the sofa, she thought the room would be shrouded in frightening shadows.

The odor. Her eyes watered. The awful stench washed over her, sulfuric and bad enough to gag a mule. She wrinkled her nose. A memory teased her mind. Zebus? Zebus! She remembered the raunchy smell surrounding her when the demon wrapped his black wings around her. The scent strangled her as she was taken from Brasov's lair.

Terror skipped up her spine. Chills washed over her body.

What did the demon want with her? What had the demon done to her?

She eyed the bar and licked her dry lips. *A demon? A boozing demon?* Ann blinked. *Get hold of yourself, Texas. You're losing it. Think!*

Until last night, she hadn't known demons truly existed. Hell, until two nights ago, she hadn't known vampires were real either. Now she was a human changed into a vampiress held prisoner by a demon.

Where was the sense in that?

And she was no closer to discovering what had happened to her sister Amee than when she first arrived in Romania. As if everything wasn't bizarre enough, there *was* such a person as Dracula. Ironically, she was mated to his elder son, mated and pregnant by Ciprian Costica Drakulya. She frowned. But no, she wasn't pregnant by Ciprian. She'd conceived Zebus' son. So...what had happened to the child she and Ciprian made together? Terror nipped her insides.

What was happening to her? Happened to her?

She'd gone on a simple rescue mission to save her sister and ended up a vampiress. There was no logic to her life. She shivered. *What* life? She was dead as a fish on a creek bank. It annoyed her to no end when she'd complained to Ciprian about being dead and he replied, "You aren't dead. You're the *undead*."

"What's the difference?" she'd asked sullenly.

"The dead remain dead. You're able to walk around without limbs dropping off."

"Huh! For how long?"

He grinned and shrugged.

"I see very little difference between dead or undead. I have no pulse. My heart beats about once every thirty minutes and only then if I run up and down a flight of stairs. I'll never have to worry about nail polish again. My nails are so purple, they look like grapes. Manicures? Hah, forget it. My nails sprout two inches every day while I sleep. They look like lobster claws and they're tough as an old crab." Tears filled her eyes. "I hate blubbing. I shed bloody tears! I look like some kind of—of walking, talking, bleeding ulcer!"

Ciprian tugged her in his arms, laughing softly. "You are beautiful to me."

"No, I'm not. I'm dead, cold as lobster salad and dead as a sardine. And—and forget breathing. I breathe—when I need to—which isn't often, maybe once every thirty minutes or so. I swear my heart rate is synchronized with my breathing."

"Ah, but you do breathe."

Angry as she was at Ciprian for changing her life, she preferred him to the demon who'd taken her captive. Didn't she?

Lost in thought, it took her a moment to realize the demon had stripped her and left her naked as a bird without feathers. The chills speeding down her spine settled in her stomach and turned to chunks of ice.

Oh, God. She was naked?

Had anything happened?

Yes! Don't be stupid, Texas. You know you were touched. You can still feel his possession of your body. For heaven's sake, you're pregnant by him! You were touched quite successfully.

Had he touched her while she slept the deep sleep of the Vampyre?

"Stay calm, cowgirl. Think. There must be a way to escape."

Yes. She'd escape. It had to be night or she wouldn't be awake. But how much good would it do her? She had no idea where she was, how to escape from the room she was in, since she saw no door.

How far away was she from Radu Castle?

What if she couldn't find the castle? She dare not risk getting trapped in the sun.

Hours passed. She was no closer to working things out in her mind than she'd been when she first awoke.

Where the hell was everyone?

Where was the freakin' demon?

At last she heard the soft glide of a panel, looked around in time to see part of the stone wall slide to one side and—it was him—her captor.

"Oh, shit." On second thought, she thought she preferred it if he never turned up again.

Laughter. *"Ah, my love, I hope you had a nice, restful day. Night is upon us."*

Zebus, the demon that'd captured her stalked into the chamber. His dark eyes raked her naked breasts. Fire lit the deep depths.

Ann lifted her head and groaned. He was naked and—and hairless—and the erection he fondled was a monster. She blinked. Never had she seen anything that came close to the size and shape of this creature's penis. And she'd had it inside her? Fuck!

No wonder she was tender.

She studied the hard length he slowly stroked. It was like all penises, except the head was thicker and more bulbous. It curved at the tip, reminding her of a meat hook. *Not a great comparison, Ann.*

He stepped closer.

Oh, God. No. Please, don't let him touch me.

Zebus laughed. "Relax. When I'm in the privacy of my bed chamber, I prefer not to wear clothes. He leaned over her and holding out a hand, helped her to sit up on the side of the bed. "Get up and get dressed."

"Why?"

He laughed. "Most females are quite anxious to escape. I offer you your freedom and you ask why. Are you certain you want the answer to that question?"

"Yes. Why are you releasing me?"

Zebus tossed her the clothes she knew she'd been wearing. "Because I've accomplished what I set out to do."

"And that was?" Ann grabbed the shirt and jerked it on. She didn't take her eyes off the demon.

He watched her fumble with the snaps on her shirt, his gaze hot and avid. "You are very beautiful, Ann. Very desirable." He stroked his cock. "But I neither want nor need anything more from you. You have served your purpose."

She swallowed hard. Tears welled in her eyes. "You raped me?"

"There was no need."

"I don't believe you."

He shrugged. "I assure you—you climbed on me and anchored my cock inside you just like you anchored my seed to your womb. I did not force you, but I enjoyed your ride. You're quite expert at riding, but I sensed your newness at taking a male's cock. You fit around mine like a warm, wet—"

"How long have I been here?" She cut him off, preferring not to hear how she'd taken him.

"Long enough."

"You—uh—you—touched me?"

"If by that timid description are you asking if I fucked you? The answer is yes."

"How— many—times?" she asked faintly.

"Times? Too many to count." He lifted a dark brow. "My touch is all over you."

Ann licked her lips. "How many times?" Her voice rose on a hysterical note.

"That would be telling, and what is the purpose? Suffice it to say, it was easy to stay inside you for multiple matings, but I think you already knew the answer to that question. I told you, you took my cock inside you and I let you have your way until you were sated...then I took you, until I was sated."

"Damn you," she snapped. "I can't remember what you did to me."

A smile twisted his lips. "Nothing that you didn't beg me to do, I assure you. Finish dressing. It's nearly time to go."

"How did you know where to find us?"

"Us?" he asked curiously. "There was only one person I really wanted from the castle."

"Who?"

"Think about it. I'm sure you'll come up with the answer."

"In the castle, you knew exactly where to find us."

"In the castle, I knew exactly where to find you. But what makes you think I knew where to find any of you?"

"You knew."

Zebus grinned. "Smart and beautiful. What do you think the answer is, my love?"

"I don't know."

"It's simple, really. You have a traitor amongst you."

"In the castle? One of Valerian's friends?"

He merely shrugged. "The important thing is the fact you will be freed very shortly. Cover your breasts before I think you're inviting me to sample—again—and I take you up on your invitation."

Ann jerked the sides of the shirt together. Damn, her fingers trembled so badly she couldn't push the snaps together.

"Allow me."

"I can do it," she snapped.

Gently, Zebus pushed her hands aside and started at the bottom working his way up. When he reached her breasts, he shoved the sides apart and stared. "You have the most beautiful breasts I've ever seen. I need to let you go, yet I find myself needing to be inside you again, needing the touch of your skin against mine, your lips pressed to mine, our bodies joined in perfect rhythm and harmony."

She didn't resist when he feathered a fingertip across her right nipple. Her breath caught sharply. God, she wanted this.

How could she want this when she knew what he'd done to her?

How could she crave his touch?

Ann closed her eyes and tried desperately to ignore the fact her nipple tingled and tightened in instant response to his caress. "Oh, God. What have you done to me?"

"Only what you desired," he whispered, brushing his mouth against hers. "Only what you asked me to do."

"Then do it again," she demanded. "I need to feel you inside me...again." She locked her fingers on his shoulders as he leaned in and drew the aching nipple inside his mouth and sucked hard. Strong. He groaned with pleasure, his tongue teasing the tight bud. Reluctantly, he released it and leaned back. "Does it hurt?"

Ann opened her eyes and blinked. "Does what hurt?" she asked. Her voice cracked on a breathless note. Heat flashed a wicked path straight to her feminine sheath and settled into a dull ache.

"This." He stroked her left breast.

She looked down and gaped at the tiny tattoo of an angel. Angel? For God's sake, why would a demon mark her with an angel? "I don't understand. How did it get there? Why?"

Zebus ignored her question and instead, lowered her to the bed. "Dawn is yet a few hours away." He came down on top of her and nudged her thighs apart. "I find that after all, I cannot let you go without making you mine as you demand."

Ann moaned as he guided his cock to her aching channel and pushed deep inside her. She clenched her hands into tight fists. Hammered his shoulders, but she wasn't sure if she fought his intrusion inside her body or welcomed it.

Then his mouth settled on hers and she knew the answer. It was like being kissed by liquid fire. His tongue tangled with hers, alive and hot and seductive and she loved it. Loved him. Yes. She loved him.

He drove inside her body, merciless and rough. He demanded she lock her legs over his shoulders. Ann clenched her teeth and discovered she craved his rough possession. She met his deep strokes, accepting him deeper inside her. "Harder," she breathed against his throat. "Oh, gods, take me harder."

"Ahh, my beautiful, Ann," he groaned. "You are a delight to fuck. I can't get enough of you. You're simply addictive, my lady. I never bargained for this."

Time stood still as he plunged into her over and over. Her hips rose and fell in a mating ritual old as time. Zebus stiffened, his cock buried to the hilt, his exhilaration high. His heart beat with triumph as he spilled inside her for the third time, his seed pumping just as hot and plentiful as the first time he came inside her. Ann clawed his shoulders, her orgasms stealing her breath.

Reluctantly, he pulled out of her and rolled off the bed. His balls swung soft and loose. His cock hung long and flaccid, at last appeased—for the moment. He stared down at the beauty he'd just spent the last hour fucking, then glanced over his shoulder. "Professor Shomus? Do you have one of your special injections ready?"

A snicker. "Indeed, I do."

Ann dragged the black sheet over her body and flinched as another demon stepped out of the shadows and walked toward her with a needle and syringe filled with a pale yellow substance. "What? *Who* are you? What do you want? Zebus!"

"Relax my dear," the older demon said with a smile. "This will take but a second and you'll feel so much better for it."

"Don't touch me!" At the sharp stab of a needle in her arm, she screamed, "I'm warning you, I'm FTB. Drugs don't work so easily on me."

"FTB?" Zebus said in a quizzical voice. "Tell me, what do these strange initials represent?"

"Fighting Texas Bitch who'll kick your ass!"

Zebus threw back his head and laughed. "My, my, the vampires must adore the little challenge you are. You're not timid in the least. I like that. Quite amusing, my love. Draw a double dose, Professor, and give her another injection. When you're finished, I'll return her to Ciprian."

"Ciprian? Who's Ciprian?"

Zebus leaned over her, his face grim. "Listen to me, Ann."

Ann blinked because the power of his voice was a magnet and he knew it. She squirmed as the professor injected her a second time. "Your name is now Queen Symbra. You are my mate. We spoke our vows last night. When I summon you, you will always hear my voice and obey my commands. You will come to me. Understand?"

"My name is..." she frowned.

"Symbra," Zebus repeated softly. "Queen Symbra. You belong to me. You will always belong to me. When I summon you to mate, you will no one stand in your way."

The drug rushed through her veins. It spread and spread like a wild fire out of control, burning and curling through her body, a serpent twisting its way through every cranny until it spiraled to her brain and took control. "Symbra," she whispered with a smile. "I am Queen Symbra."

"Yes," Zebus cooed. "You belong to me, my love."

Ann thought she'd self-ignite. Hot. God, she felt so hot. Then she felt the sharp bite of another injection. The drug channeled through her body, cooling it. It fogged her brain, a black muddy sludge that stole her memory. "I belong to you, my King..."

Voices blended together, but nothing made sense. Were they talking about her?

"Will she remember anything?" Zebus asked, helping her off the bed. She stood before him, unashamed of her nakedness. He took the time to look his fill.

"She will remember only what you want her to recall."

Zebus knelt before her. He pressed his mouth against her stomach, then wrapped his arms around her slender hips and held her tightly. "I did not expect to care. I was not prepared to take a mate."

"You need her, Your Majesty. Your people need her."

"Yes. She has become unexpectedly precious to us."

Ann tangled her fingers in his long dark hair. It felt like silk beneath her touch. Two dark horns protruded from his scalp. Not very big. Not even ugly. Somehow, they fit him and added to his allure and mystery. His face was dark, hardened with bitter memories as he looked up at her. Yet, she knew he'd kissed her tenderly. He'd made certain of her pleasure before he took his. She frowned. Hadn't he?

He was attractive in an odd way. He nuzzled her lower abdomen, his face near her pubic bone. "I smell my scent on you. In you. My son lies within you. Take good care of him."

"Yes. I will. I love him."

Zebus smiled. "You please me, Symbra. Although it wounds me, I give you back to Ciprian. You are mine and it does not please me to share you with the vampire."

Fire shot through her veins. Oh, God, what was wrong with her? She hungered for this male. Again.

He scattered tiny kisses across her womb. Slowly, he parted her nether lips and probed with his tongue, licked her clit, lingered and stabbed deep within her. His tongue worked wicked magic, licking and probing, until she squirmed against him, wild and needy. Moaning, she flung back her head and panted. One more deep stab of his tongue and she climaxed instantly. Once. Twice. He sucked her clit, sending her rocketing into a third orgasm. Her knees nearly buckled. "Stop. I—I can't bear anymore. What are you doing?"

Zebus freed her and raised his steady gaze to hers. "I'm bidding you good-bye, my lovely Symbra. You might not remember anything else that happened between us, but you *will* remember these last minutes I tasted you, pleased you. You will think it a dream, but in your heart, you will know I possessed you in the most intimate of ways. I can't bear you not to take at least one pleasurable memory of me with you."

Sorrow and pain lined his face. He grieved. A demon felt pain? Yes. She felt his anguish all the way to her soul. She was important to this creature. Why? And he mattered to her. She couldn't think why she cared about him. "You are saddened by our parting?"

"Yes. I am devastated." He drew a shaky breath. "I don't want to let you go."

Her body clenched with spasms of need. He looked so lost—so lonely. Her heart ached. What was he? Not Vampyre. No, not Vampyre, but a species unto itself. One that lived in a dark, forbidden realm, hope lost because—why?

He'd told her why when he held her in his arms, but she couldn't think—because—oh, God—their females had all sickened and died centuries ago. Hope was lost because their males had no mates to reproduce their kind. They'd had no choice but to seek another race of females and breed them. "Did—did something more happen between us?"

He smiled and brushed his lips against belly again. "Do not ask questions you do not want the answers to."

Ann scowled, her brows furrowing. How many times had they mated? She feared the number was high, else why did she keep seeing his face above hers, keep feeling his body thrusting inside hers? Feel his seed drench her womb...so many times?

Were they real memories or dreams? Surely if he'd touched her numerous times, she'd remember. But why would she? She didn't even know where she was or how long she'd been here.

"Where am I?"

She felt his smile against her flesh. "In my world, where you belong, where I want to keep you, but must set you free."

"How long have I been here?"

"Not nearly long enough, but long enough—"

"How long?"

"This is your third night here with me, our third night of mating."

"Three—"

Zebus rose to his feet, catching her in his arms as she swayed. "Will she remember me, Professor Shomus? Remember what happened these past nights?"

"No. Nothing, Your Majesty, just as you said, except what you want her to remember, unless you wish her to remember—?"

"No. She must not recall these three nights. Not yet." Zebus eyed the tiny angel he'd tattooed on her breast. "I didn't think I'd care this much. She was nothing to me—the first time, but—"

"You fell in love with the vampiress."

Placing her on the bed, Zebus leaned over her and licked the mark. It shimmered beneath the slow swipe of his tongue, then vanished from sight. "Yes. I fell in love. I can't believe I care about her, but she now owns my heart and I can't allow her to affect the decisions I must still make. You're certain you gave her enough of the drug to wipe out everything that happened here, except these last minutes when I tasted her?"

"Of course."

"It is done? The drugs are doing their job?"

"Yes. Why did you render the tattoo invisible? It is your mark of ownership."

"It is for my eyes. And Symbra's."

"I see."

"No, you do not see. You do not understand anything." He rested his palm on Ann's belly, a possessive gesture that anyone who knew him would have recognized. "It kills me to set her free. Dammit, she is mine!"

"Then, don't. Keep her. She carries your son. She belongs here with you. It is past time you have a queen at your side, a family, especially now that Kyma has taken a mate and has a baby on the way. You need someone you love beside you. Make her yours."

"This female is already mine, but I must send her back to Ciprian."

"He will know you touched her?"

"He could not fail to recognize my scent on her. If he loves her, he will not care another has fucked her."

"She conceived...."

Zebus lifted a brow. "You know she did."

"Zebus—"

"Don't. She *was already* with child. That must stand."

"You doubt the babe inside her is yours?"

"No. It is my babe. As important as it is, do you think I would fail to make certain of the deed? She carries my seed. Zyon, part demon, part human, part Vampyre, and pure royal blood. A prince with powerful bloodlines no one can deny. Because Ciprian's blood mingles with Ann's, so does Dracula's. But Symbra carries an even more royal bloodline than Dracula's. Zyon's lineage is ancient. Important. My son will dwell among the Vampyre. He will inherit his birthright not only as Dracula's grandson and Ciprian's heir, but as the heir to the throne of Pi-Ram, the realm of Vampyre. He is the grandson of Alexandru Vadim, the most

ancient of Vampyre. Zygon will be raised Drakulya, a Vampyre prince of the finest lineage. I do not want to let them go, the choice is not mine. My son must be raised as Ciprian's heir and as the heir to Pi-Ram."

"But he will know the child is not his."

"No. He will suspect, but Ann had already conceived his son. He might doubt, but he will never be certain, and with his blood in the child's vein, he will never be able to deny the babe is his."

"What of the child she carried? Ciprian's son? You destroyed it?"

"It doesn't matter what happened. It is done. In its place, mine lives, that is all that matters now."

"She will grieve for the lost child?"

"Every child who is lost deserves to be mourned, but no, Symbra will not remember the loss. But I will. I don't wish her this grief. She will never know the difference, but Zygon will know, as will I."

"What of the future?"

"I have no future."

"You have to have a future, Zebus. We need you. You're the strength of our race. The gods know Kal-libus is useless. He's too besotted with Helayne to see his people need strong leadership."

"I've trained Kyma well."

"Kyma loves Rausha. He would not free her for the greater good and fuck another. You will."

"I will." Zebus nodded graciously. "For now, I am the one who sacrifices. I am the king. I will do whatever it takes to assure our species remains at the top and rules within every realm."

"What about when Zygon reaches manhood?"

"You mean when he turns thirty-five in human years and his cock changes into that of a demon's mating rod?"

"Yes. You know it will happen. It happens to all males who carry even but a drop of demon blood in their veins."

"When it happens, Zygon will seek his true heritage. He will come to me. I will explain it to him, but it will not change the fact he carries Drakulya blood."

"What about you and Symbra?"

"You ask too many questions, Shomus. There is no Symbra and me. I have MeLora if my needs become too urgent. She's a good fuck."

"You do not love that black-hearted witch who plots some evil constantly and you know well, you will not touch her again, not after these past three nights when your heart has been given and not after she murdered your son."

"It is true, MeLora is unlovable. You're right. I cannot bear the thought of ever touching her again. Soon—I will rid myself of her."

"You fell in love with Symbra."

Zebus sighed. "You know I did. What is your point?"

"Now that you've had a taste of love again, you think you will be able to let this female go? Never touch her again?"

"I didn't say I would never touch her again, only that I am releasing her to Ciprian—for now. In the future, she will bear only my children. I have spoken to the oracle. Zygon will not be our only child. Symbra and I will have three children. Two sons. One girl child—a daughter...Lavandyr." Zebus smiled, a tenderness settling in his heart he'd never quite felt before, except at the birth of Kyma. "Her name will be Lavandyr and her mate is a very special male, unborn as yet...but he will be conceived in love by a very powerful male and a beautiful witch. I have seen this all through the eyes of the oracle. It will be a change, having a daughter. The children I make with Symbra will be created over the span of the next three hundred years. After that," he shrugged. "I will have to hear what more the oracle has to say."

"Ah, every hundred years—to match the vampire's fertile times. That is why Ciprian will believe the babes are his. But in between these three hundred years, while Symbra sleeps with Ciprian?"

A soft growl. "She will take Ciprian into her body as he wills, but through the vampire, it is I who

will mate with her every night. It is my cock she will feel, my seed that will flood her womb, my kisses on her mouth and breasts. She will *never* bear Ciprian's offspring or feel his touch."

"And the birth of Zyon? Surely you will want to be there when your son is born."

"I *will* be there. I will watch his birth through Ciprian's eyes. I will hold my son in my arms through the vampire. Zyon will know it is I who holds him. Enough questions! You need have no doubts. I take care of what is mine—Symbra and Zyon are mine."

Shomus nodded. "It is nearly dawn and you know I must report all details of your future plans to the Lord Council."

Zebus frowned. "Yes. I know. And dawn comes too soon. I must hurry and return her safely to her vampire mate before the sun fully rises."

"He knows you are the one releasing her?"

"No. He knows only that I took her from Brasov. Symbra will tell him tales of her miraculous escape, of hiding during the daylight hours and making her way back to Village Pyre."

"And Ciprian will believe her?"

"Doubtful, but she will have no other memories to share with him. He will find her at *Dracula's Inn*, disoriented and confused, and no recall of the past few days and nights. It is done, Shomus. One of the goals I had to fulfill has been achieved. Symbra carries my child. It is everything, the *only* thing that matters."

"You will bring her back to our realm? She is your queen. She belongs here. Our people need her. They need to witness her big with your seed. They must have hope."

"When her belly ripens heavily with my son, I will present her at court. They will see her; see that my son grows healthy and strong. It will not be all that long. You know demon babies grow fast and grow large."

"You will keep her, then—at your side?"

"You know I can't, but perhaps I can manage a night or two. I would love to have her to myself when she gives birth. Maybe....it is a great time for sharing between mates."

"It must be done, Zebus. You need the bonding time with her."

"You don't have to tell me what needs to be done, Professor. Do you not think I need her? Do you not realize I already yearn for her back in my bed and she isn't even gone yet? I love her. I never thought I'd ever love again, and here she is...my miracle." Zebus swallowed hard. "But no matter where she is or how long we are parted, I will be in Symbra's heart, just as she is in mine. She will not want another—ever. Now leave us, while we say our good-byes."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Sure God created man before woman. But then you always make a rough draft before the final masterpiece.

~Unknown

*Ru-Noc
Sanctuary
Immortal Realm
Beltane*

Stry gazed around Kirrah's bedroom, took in the mish-mash of her collections, and wondered just exactly when his life had gone nuts. Certainly a long time before Kirrah came crashing into it. He thought maybe at the moment of his conception when he'd clawed his way up inside his mother's womb and hung on until his birth.

After the conversation with his father—and the confirmation that he was indeed a demon, Stry no longer felt sure of the path his life was headed, other than underground to live like a flippin' mole.

No more sunshine.

No more icy winter days or nights.

No fresh air.

He sniffed and curled his nose. *No fresh air*. Stry not only felt the changes taking place in his body, he caught the new, overpowering stench of sulfur that consumed him. Before long, he'd be totally demon. Hell, he'd need to bathe often to counteract the sulfur scent all demons carried. He'd need to soak up the heat that Ayrumus generated.

From what he understood, the temperature never varied there. It was always hot and steamy, day or night, the year round. It had to be the bit of reptile in the demon genes that required so much warmth.

No wonder demons stayed horny all the time. They never cooled off.

All these changes taking place in his body overwhelmed him. The one constant thing in his life was Kirrah and the love he felt for her. Whatever twisted paths his life was headed down, he wanted her with him, beside him. His mate.

He needed her. Deep in his gut, he felt terror of the unknown. His world, his life had crashed around him so suddenly, he couldn't quite keep up. His family was scattered and not even his family any more.

He'd lost touch with his brother, his cousin and the gods only knew where Kali was with Koran.

Yes. He needed Kirrah. Not just her body, but her, standing beside him, with him, in whatever the future held.

He'd meant what he said when he told her that he wanted to be loved the way she loved the people in her pictures. Not that he'd ever doubted his mother's love or even Darak's, but this love, the kind between a male and female, was different. He'd never possessed the heart and soul of a female before, never wanted to, nor had he wanted her love, but...

Stry sighed. Maybe he was being unfair to Kirrah, dragging her into what was essentially the wreck of his life. But gods, he didn't just want Kirrah to love him the way she loved those damn pictures. He wanted to love her the same way. He did love her the same way. Building their lives together on that kind of foundation was essential to him. With that kind of love between them, centuries from now, they'd still be in love with each other. And he wanted that.

Hell, he was nuts about her anyway. He sure didn't see that changing. Ever.

Now he just had to perform the ritual and speak the binding vows. He brushed a strand of her damp hair from her face. "I love you, Kirrah. Trust me to do what's right for us."

"I do." She licked her lips, torturing him with the slick glaze she left behind.

Stry moaned and gently took her mouth in a long, slow kiss, a wet kiss, with tender sweeps of his tongue and soft whispers in her ears. He wrapped her fingers around his aching cock and thought he'd explode from her light sensual touch.

Shy and hesitate, she moved her hands away from his engorged rod.

"No," he whispered between tastes of her mouth. "You've never hesitated to touch me. Don't now. It's no different from before, except for the curve. Touch me, *La-Scheme*. I need to feel your hands on me, your lips."

When she hesitated, he guided her fingers to his aching shaft, gently, but insistent. "I love you, witch. I swear I'll do nothing you don't want me to do. I won't hurt you—if I can keep from it."

Tears glistened in her lovely eyes. "I know," she whispered and she curled her fingers around the long length of his aching shaft. "I love you, demon, but I think you should know, it is different from before and not just because of the curve. It's bigger, thicker and it's going to hurt like hell."

"I know." He searched her gaze, found wariness, but also acceptance. "I'll be gentle. I swear I will."

She nodded.

Stry hesitated, then slowly raised his hands in the air and drew magical red symbols in the air. A fire leapt to life in the fireplace across the room. On the floor, in front of the toasty flames, thick pads of white pelts appeared and looked inviting. He lifted her in his arms and carried her across the room.

Kirrah shuddered as he placed her on the bountiful layers of furs and plundered her mouth in another long kiss. Stry eased back and again, he waved his hands in the air. A silver bucket filled with chips of crystal clear ice and a magnum of champagne stood beside the fur away from the low burning fire. Two delicate, long stemmed glasses, painted the faintest blush of pink appeared beside the bucket. Near the glasses, a little gold teapot of melted chocolate popped into view. A dozen long-stemmed waffle cookies were neatly lined on a small serving dish at precise angles for easy reach.

"What are you going to do with those?" she asked, breathless.

Stry grinned, took one of the cookies, dipped the stem over and over in the melted chocolate and lifted a brow. "Lie back. Relax."

Kirrah did as he instructed.

At first, he painted her lips with the warm chocolate and followed the sweet treat with smooth glides of his tongue. He licked it off with neat, tiny strokes that made her squirm. She heard the tone of his breathing change as he eyed her breasts. Grinning, he drew mini-circles around her puckered nipples, larger ones around the blushing areolas. Stry painted a straight line down the middle of her belly to the very edge of her public bone. Arching a brow, he paused, nudged her legs apart, and decorated her inner thighs with the

sweet chocolate.

By the time he'd finished his art, he'd used half of the cookies. Between feeding her tiny drops of chocolate and bites of the cookies, they'd nearly munched their way through the sweet straws.

Kirrah thought she'd die as Stry edged his tongue over her body and slowly nibbled the damp chocolate off her body. He took his time sucking the sweet ambrosia off her nipples. He nuzzled and investigated her navel with long, damp strokes of his tongue, swirling and dipping inside to scoop all the liquid chocolate from the tiny indentation.

Gingerly, he nudged her thighs apart and slipped his wicked tongue inside her. She squirmed with the need he'd built inside her. Kirrah shuddered and climaxed with the first wicked touch of his tongue along her clit.

Stry gave her no mercy. He sucked, nibbled and stabbed the delicate inner folds until she screamed with multiple orgasms. "Oh, God," she moaned, "no more. I'm drained. I can't move."

He ignored her and took her over the edge again and again until she felt as liquid as the pot of warm chocolate.

From out of the air, Stry produced an athame and glided it slowly across his wrist.

Kirrah gasped, trying desperately to catch her breath. "What are you doing?" she cried.

"It's but a shallow cut, *La-Scheme*. To make us one, our blood must mingle."

"We are one," she whispered. "In my heart, we are joined." Kirrah held out her wrist. "Do what must be done." Trust glittered in the depths of her green eyes.

Stry searched her face. "Thank you."

"For?"

He kissed the tip of her nose. "For loving me, in spite of everything, for trusting me and giving me your heart, your body."

"You aren't hard to love, Stry, or to trust."

"I think I might be. My changed appearance? Oh, gods, Kirrah, when you took off out of here I thought I'd lost you."

Kirrah laid a trembling finger across his lips. "No. You are what you are. Horns, wings, fangs, a bit of a bent dick," she giggled then sobered instantly. "None of these make you bad. It's what's inside you, in your heart, your soul, that makes you what you are, not your species. What you are in here." She touched his heart. "It's what makes you...mine. I love the *you* that matters." She rested her palm on his heart. "Just because you're a demon, doesn't mean you're evil, just like I'm not wicked because I'm a witch. So many species are feared by mortals because they don't understand we're simply different."

Tenderly, Stry held her close and buried his face in her hair. He felt unmanned by her words. He blinked away the sting of tears and shuddered. "You make me feel so humble. You know what love is. I was blessed the day you broom-sticked me."

She laughed. "Broom-sticked—it's always going to be one hell of a word."

Stry leaned back and grinned, flashing perfectly formed, straight white teeth, along with the two new fangs she found utterly charming.

He caught her staring at the new canines. "Do they frighten you? I'll have them pulled if—"

"You will not," she cried. "I love them. They're sexy and I imagine you doing all sorts of wicked things to me with them."

"Yes. I totally agree with doing wicked things to you. I have big plans that include lots of wicked love bites. Lie back," he said gently.

Kirrah rested back against a mound of furs.

"Don't look if the sight of blood makes you ill."

"I'm not weak-stomached."

"I knew that. Gods, you took care of me when I was bleeding all over you." Stry held his wrist over her belly and dribbled his blood over her womb.

Kirrah sucked in a sharp breath. "It's so hot. I'm amazed at the heat. What is the purpose of doing this?"

Stry hesitated. "It makes you desire me—even more than you already do."

Shit. He'd spoken an untruth, and he hated it. He didn't want their relationship starting out with a lie, but Kallibus warned him if he told Kirrah the truth, she might not mate with him. If she knew she'd conceive first thing, she might refuse his seed. Stry decided to put the theory to the test. "You want children—my babies?"

Kirrah met his gaze, her eyes steady. "Will they have wings? Fangs?" She glanced at his cock. "Other unusual things?"

"Yes."

"I don't know. Maybe. Someday. Maybe—never. I don't know if I want to bring children into a world where other races despise them."

Stry narrowed his eyes. That wasn't a good enough answer. And he couldn't take the risk that she'd never produce his heir. Damn. Damn. This was not going to be good. This was counter-productive to their happiness. No choice. He had no choice. "Open your mouth."

"What?" Kirrah blinked.

"Drinking my blood is part of the mating ritual. It won't hurt you. You only have to take a few drops."

Trusting him, Kirrah parted her lips and willingly swallowed the dark crimson liquid.

Stry nodded. "Good. See? You don't feel a thing. Do you?"

"No. It's sweet and warm. Not bad, burns all the way to my stomach, though."

"It's called the *Path of Change*."

"What?" Kirrah blinked.

"Nothing, sweetheart." Stry prayed he'd done the right thing. It no longer mattered. The process of her changing began the moment the first drop of his blood touched her tongue. There was no going back for either of them.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The creative urge is the demon that will not accept anything second rate.

~ Agnes De Mille

*Ru-Noc
Noddon Caverns
Immortal Realm
Beltane*

Zebus nodded at Maxus, his eyes frozen with displeasure. Three days ago, he'd sent the demon to infiltrate Ayrumus and spy on Kallibus and Queen Helayne. He slammed the door to his office behind Maxus and circled the desk that took up most of the space in the cramped room.

He dropped into his chair and motioned for the spy to sit down across from him. "You better have a good explanation for deserting your post. I told you not to leave Ayrumus for any reason, but to send word to me if you had news to report."

Maxus licked his thick lips and trembled. "Your Majesty, I would never have done so unless I felt it was—"

"You felt? You *felt*? You have no feelings unless I grant them to you. Do not waste my time with trivial words. Report."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"What has my brother been up to? Is he keeping the lovely Helayne busy?"

Maxus laughed. "Yes, Your Majesty. He fucks her day and night. Her belly is huge with his son. She has grown quite grotesque."

"Is this your report?" Zebus toyed with the athame on top of his desk. "Every female we breed grows grotesque with our babes. This isn't big news."

"No, Your Majesty. I came to inform you, Kallibus has an heir already. Prince Stry—"

"This I already know!" Zebus picked up the athame and tested the edge of the blade. "What else?"

Maxus swallowed hard. "I—I—uh—"

"Speak!"

"Yes—"

"If you *Your Majesty* me one more time, I'll slit your throat."

"Yes—of course. Prince Stry has acquired a mate. Kallibus paid a visit to his heir and told him what he needs to do to ensure the witch conceives."

"Witch? All the witches are sterile, unless—"

"Not this witch. She's new to Sanctuary and has never been injected with the virus. It's rumored the witch is Saylym's sister."

Kyma slammed the blade of the knife through the demon's hand and pinned it to the top of his desk.

"Whose sister?"

"Ahhhh! Forgive me. I meant—Princess Rausha, Your Maj—"

Zebus twisted the blade. "It isn't that far from your hand to your throat. What is this witch's name?"

"Kirrah."

"And she is where?"

"With Prince Stry."

"I didn't ask you who she's with. I asked *where* she is."

"A—a house, in the magical forest—near—near—Sanctuary. Kallibus paid a visit to his son today and taught him the binding vows. It's my understanding the prince will mate with the witch tonight and breed her, if he hasn't already."

Zebus pulled out the athame, stood up, and circled Maxus. He stopped behind him, fingering the sharp blade. "Did Kallibus also say his son would bind the witch to him?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Then instead of coming here to report this shit to me, why did you not go to Sanctuary and capture the witch, bring her to me, and prevent Kallibus' son from breeding her?"

"I—I—"

Zebus locked his arm around the demon's shoulders and slid the blade neatly and quickly across the soldier's throat. Maxus dropped to the floor, gurgling. The demon clutched his throat and stared at the dark blood pooling onto the floor.

His eyes merciless, Zebus watched him die. "Stupid, useless, fuck!" He marched across the room and jerked open the door. "Guards!"

Two demons hurried down the corridor and halted in front of him. "Your Majesty?"

"Get this piece of useless crap out of my sight. Send someone in here to mop up the mess. Tell Kyma I want him here in two minutes. Dispatch three demons to Sanctuary. At once! Tell them to scout the area until they discover where a witch named Kirrah lives. Her house is in the magic forest."

"You want her captured and brought to you?" one of guards dared to ask.

"No. I want to know the moment she's alone—then I want time stopped."

"Your Majesty?" the brave guard inquired. "But that's—"

"You heard me. When she's alone, I want to know immediately. Stop all time, except for here."

"Then you want us to bring her to you?" The other guard found his courage at last to speak.

"No." Zebus smiled, his eyes glittering dangerously. "I will go to her. Tell Professor Shomus I need him to make up a batch of his special drugs."



Kyma knocked and entered his father's private office. "You sent for me?" He ignored the large stain on the floor. It wasn't the first time he'd seen a dark pool on the floor in his father's office. He doubted it would be the last.

"Yes. Shut the door and lock it."

Kyma's brows rose. "This must be serious." His father didn't want to risk someone walking in on their conversation. "What's wrong, besides the obvious fact you slit someone's throat?"

"And delighted in doing it, I assure you." Zebus smiled. "Nothing's wrong."

"You killed off one of your agents because there's nothing wrong?"

"I killed him because I did not want him to spread the report he gave me, and Maxus was a notorious gossip."

"He was, indeed. You have good news then?"

"I do. Your mate has a sister."

Kyma grinned. "Is she as beautiful as my Rausha?"

"I don't know. That's what I intend to find out as soon as possible."

"Then what?"

"Then I'm going to breed her."

"Ahh. You intend to use her so she can replace the loss of Yorbus."

"I've already done that. My lovely new mate, Symbra, conceived a son."

"Congratulations, Father. You know I welcome a brother and a stepmother. I want only your happiness."

"She and I will have two more children. Another son. A girl child."

Kyma smiled. "The oracle?"

"Yes. It assured me I will have other children with my Symbra."

"That is great news. You care for this vampiress?"

"I do. I love her, but I cannot let it interfere with this opportunity to breed another female."

"So you will definitely mate with this witch?"

"Yes."

"She is unmated?"

"Probably not by the time I can get to her. Prince Stry, Kallibus' son and heir, is likely laying claim to her even as you and I speak."

"You intend to ignore his claim?"

"Of course. His mark is not sacred to me."

"How will you bring the witch here? Kallibus will attack if you take his son's mate."

"I'm not going to bring her back. I know Prince Stry will put his babe in her belly. He would be very unwise not to secure her to his side with a child. The Angels are not unwise."

Kyma laughed. "No, we aren't."

"I will see to it the witch drops a second egg and I will cover it with my seed. She will carry two demons, my son and Prince Stry's. I will make certain she gives birth to my son first."

Kyma laughed. "You're going to stimulate her into dropping a second egg?"

"Yes."

"Your heir will sit on Kallibus' throne one day and rule Ayrumus."

"I've raised a wise child, indeed. While I'm away, you are in charge."

Kyma nodded. "Be very careful, Father."

"I intend to. You will order time stopped when I send you word. I do not want any interruptions while I'm—breeding the witch. I will send you word when to restart it."

Kyma grinned, pleased. "When I receive this word, I can assume you were successful and I have a second brother to look forward to meeting All Hallows' Eve?"

"Yes. You may assume this."

"My brother will one day be king of Ayrumus. That is fantastic news."

"Yes. But because Stry is also Queen Helayne's heir and she is rightful queen of Ru-Noc, my son will also inherit the crown and rule in Droth as well. I'll be gaining two kingdoms in one fell swoop by breeding Prince Stry's mate."

"First you have to remove MeLora off the throne in Droth."

"That won't be a problem. Her days are numbered already." Zebus rose. "I must take my leave."

“Enjoy.”

“What, fucking Kallibus’ future daughter-in-law?” Zebus lifted an arrogant brow. “I intend to. It’s why I’m stopping time.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

I'm just going to do what I want now, and let the chips fall where they may.

~Edward Cullen
(Twilight)

Romania
Vlad Salt Mines
Mortal Realm

Nandru Illie knew he was in trouble. There wasn't one damn thing he could do to save himself. He'd done the very thing Valerian warned him not to do—he'd drifted too deep in Brasov's domain.

Damn, he should have paid heed to Val's sound advice and never returned to the salt mine to spy on Brasov. But he'd wanted to help Val, help their people. Nandru knew from the moment he accepted his first assignment, it was risky. The minute he'd said, "yes," he felt slivers of ice coat his spine.

The bad feeling hadn't left him.

Worse, the iciness chilling his blood told him time was running out.

Carefully, so as not to draw attention to himself, he ran his gaze over Brasov.

The vampire kept changing and not once for the better. Brasov used to be as dark and handsome as Valerian. Both vampire males had been striking with their long dark hair and ice blue eyes. Now, only Val retained the essence of goodness, whereas, Brasov was pure evil.

The gluttony Brasov indulged in had left its mark. The vampire no longer bothered with grooming. The clothes he wore looked as ragged and decayed as Brasov himself. Blood stains splattered the front of his dingy shirt. One not only sensed the evil rising off Brasov's rotting flesh, but the very air around him smelled foul. His hair hung in lifeless, matted unclean strings. His teeth were dark and stained.

Tonight, Brasov was in a hurry. In such a hurry, Nandru had no time to send word to Valerian, to warn him what was going to take place or even let him know Shasta and Dragos were still alive.

He'd managed to drop into the shaft when he first arrived and offer to feed Shasta, but Dragos had already fed her. Seeing the two of them locked in a mating *Shaz* had not only embarrassed him but he'd felt like an intruder. Shasta was astraddle of Dragos' lap and although Nandru looked away, he'd known what

was taking place. He'd averted his gaze.

"You don't have to worry, Nandru, Shasta's in a deep sleep. I commanded her to sleep. She'll never know you saw her naked or with me like this."

"What are you doing, Dragos? Are you insane?"

"Maybe, but she accepted me. I won't give her back to Val. She belongs to me now."

"No." Nandru shook his head. "This will only cause trouble where we already have enough as it is."

"I don't need your arguments. There's nothing I can change or would. She carries my son."

"Val's son."

"My child. Val would not love him or accept him."

"He would."

"No. I love her, Nandru. She loves me."

"You're insane. You dishonor our future king, humiliate him and steal his queen. He will show you no mercy. Neither of you. He'll kill you, Dragos."

"I need your help."

"No. I cannot turn on Val. I won't. You're on your own in this."

Dragos nodded. "I understand. It's a risk I'm willing to take. Will you at least remove the athames from between Shasta's ribs while she sleeps?"

"Yes. I will do that. Not for you, but for Val—and I wish you good luck. You will need it."

"Don't worry about me. Val will accept Shasta's decision."

Nandru frowned. "No, he won't. He's our leader. His decisions are the only one that matters. He chose Shasta for his First Bride. He will not release her."

He sensed something more had changed between Shasta and Dragos besides the embrace of the *Shaz*, a more intimate change. The scent of sex permeated his nostrils. Ah, hell! They'd mated before he came to check on them, a mating that wasn't sanctioned by Dracula or Val.

Gods, it wasn't supposed to happen like this. Dragos wasn't supposed to fall in love with Val's mate. If Dragos sexed Shasta without Valerian's permission—shit—it meant not only was Dragos going to claim Val's First Bride, but there was going to be serious trouble in the vampire kingdoms.

"Don't look at me like that, Nandru. I told you I love her. My claim to Shasta is just as valid as Val's, more so since it's *my* babe she carries. I won't give her back to him. Ever."

"He is to be our king. What you've done...it will destroy what's left of our covens. Wrenched apart, we'll be vulnerable to attacks from any race."

"Then so be it. She's what's important. Her...my baby. *My* baby! What Dracula demanded of me was wrong. To expect me to give up my child—I can't do it. I won't."

Nandru couldn't deny he'd feel the same. It didn't help matters that Shasta was pregnant by Dragos. What the hell had Dracula been thinking when he sent Dragos upstairs with Val's mate? Didn't he realize he couldn't play with their lives?

Nandru tried to put it all out of his mind as he waited in front of Brasov. He'd had to bite his tongue to keep from asking questions about Ann. He had no idea if Ciprian's mate was still alive. No way to find out where Zebus took her when he left with her.

There was no possibility of informing Ciprian that Ann had been taken captive by the demon king. Not right now. The sun had set only minutes ago, and as soon as they'd all awakened, Brasov summoned him. He'd barely managed to sneak the quick visit with Dragos.

Now that Apostol had deserted Brasov, the vampire seemed to think *he* was his new best friend. Brasov hadn't let him leave the mine for the past two nights. The evil vampire had plans for tonight. Big plans.

Nandru looked around the inside of the mine. He didn't like it. He couldn't escape out front, there were *changelings* everywhere. He couldn't rescue Shasta or Dragos. They were both too weak to shape shift and besides, Dragos wouldn't release Shasta from the *Shaz* until he knew for a fact Valerian had witnessed them locked in the intimate embrace.

So frustrated was he by the events unfolding around him, Nandru felt like pulling out his hair. He couldn't warn Val about anything. He knew he dare not try to materialize to Radu. Brasov would destroy him while he was in the weakened state of transference.

Besides, even though he couldn't go along with Dragos' decision to keep Shasta, neither could he bring himself to abandon her and Dragos to Brasov's brutality. For the moment, they were safe, but he'd remain with them, no matter what.

Nandru chewed on his thumb, careful not to pace or betray his nervousness. Where the hell was that damnable demon? Why didn't he bring Ann back? Did he even intend to return her? Demons were known to keep the females they captured, but sometimes, for some odd reason, they released them.

Brasov stepped up. "Where the fuck is Zebus?" he snapped.

"I was just wondering the same thing. He has chosen not to reappear at this time."

"I need his support if my plans are to succeed."

Nandru said nothing. Fear kept him silent. If he said too much, he was sure to reveal the fear choking him.

Brasov paused and eyed him. "You're quiet tonight. Are you concerned I might lose my battle for the crown?"

"No."

"You believe I can win this war against Val?"

"Yes, of course. I know you can."



Brasov frowned. He heard a thread of impatience from the younger vampire. He didn't trust him. Nandru's answers were always pat. Anyone who befriended his brother was no friend of his, and he knew well Nandru had been one of Val's closest friends.

Brasov mulled this over.

Was it possible the young vampire was a spy planted by Val? Shit. Stupid! Stupid! He should have realized sooner. This was exactly the kind of thing that would cost him.

Inside, chills slithered down his spine. Yes, of course Nandru was a spy. Lucky for him he'd decided to keep a close eye on the vampire or Val would know his plans for this night. Dammit, how could he have been such a trusting fool?

Brasov clenched his fists and reined in his temper to keep from attacking Nandru. For the moment, he could get by without Zebus' assistance and the demon knew it. Zebus would return and help if and when he summoned him, but for now, Brasov had an army raised, literally from the dead and readied for battle. They waited his command outside the salt mine.

He walked over to the edge of the shaft where he'd pushed Dragos and Shasta just that morning. "How you two doing down there?"

"Let us go!" Dragos held Shasta closer, protectively. "We need to feed. We're starving down here, you bastard."

Brasov laughed. "Feed off each other, you fuck. Share your parasite with the *were* bitch." He laughed when he realized what he was seeing. "Maybe I should make that dumb fuck. I don't have to kill you. Val will do it for me. You must be insane to hold his bride in a *Shaz* clutch. In the meantime—starve."

He headed to the front of the cave. When Brasov reached the entrance, a multitude of his *changelings* waited just outside the opening. Some were dressed nicely, some in rags, some old, some young. Some male. Some female. His creations. His children, except for the traitor Apostol and that Amee bitch. If he ever located them, he'd rip out both their hearts.

Amee was pregnant with *his* heir. How dare she run away with Apostol? He wanted her back! He wanted his son. And he wanted Apostol deadlier than he already was. Brasov wanted his revenge, and he'd

have it, too. He'd see to it the traitor melted in the morning sun.

Nandru joined him. The young vampire stood at his side, arms folded across his wide chest. *Another traitor!* Brasov held up his hands, embracing the silent crowd. "Tonight, *changelings*, we take Radu Castle. It stands there in the moonlight at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains, vulnerable. Defenseless. Ours. Tonight we will see the victory we've been waiting for. One more step to the successful taking of the crown. Tonight, Radu Castle falls to us. Tomorrow, the crown."

No applause. No cheering.

Hell, there wasn't even any breathing.

Twitching, the utter silence fucked with Brasov's brain. He swore viciously and forced his jerky muscles to relax. Dammit, he wanted cheers. He deserved praise for his well thought out plans. *Changelings*. Totally useless, except for a show of manpower.

"All right. I can't bear all this enthusiasm. Tonight, before we get started, I have a special treat for you. Maybe it'll liven you all up a bit." He snickered. *Liven?* Right. Like who could light life under this bunch of corpses standing in front of him?

Brasov laughed. His attack on Nandru was sudden and happened before the other vampire had time to defend himself. He drew a lethal claw across Nandru's vulnerable throat and severed his jugular.

A geyser of blood spurted and speckled Brasov's already stained shirt. Ribbons of dark scarlet ran down Nandru's flawless white shirt, dark and inviting—obscene.

"Fucking spy!" Brasov shook his fist. "You thought you could outsmart me?"

Nandru's lips moved, but it was too late for words, too late to flee and much too late for a defense. Brasov sank his lethal fangs in the vampire's throat and slurped greedily. When he had his fill, he tossed the younger vampire's wasted, washed-out body to the *changelings*. "Finish him. He's a betrayer."

He watched the *changelings* attack Nandru. They fed off his life's blood until, at last, the vampire stopped struggling. When they finished, they looked back at Brasov for their next orders. Emotionless. Quiet. The *changelings* had left nothing behind but a pale gray corpse upon the ground.

"Let's go," Brasov shouted. "And see that we move quietly and in neat formation once we're near the castle grounds. If anyone makes a sound, I'll stake you in the morning sun."

Brasov sneered. Valerian didn't know it yet, but his home was about to be invaded and wrenched away from his control, for the second time in as many nights.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Achievement brings its own anticlimax.

~Maya Angelou

*Ru-Noc
Sanctuary
Immortal Realm
Beltane*

Stry drew a sharp breath and settled heavily on Kirrah. The bed of white furs beneath their naked bodies was nice and thick. The fire toasty. His body fit over hers, long and hard against her soft smooth skin. She smelled like chocolate and heat and sex. Inside, he burned with need. "Gods," he whispered. "I can't wait any longer, sweetheart."

Every muscle he possessed throbbed. His balls clenched so damn tight, it was all he could do to keep from yelling in agony. His cock hurt.

"I love you, Stry," she whispered and nuzzled his ear. "Don't wait any more. I want you just as badly. I ache for you."

Stry nibbled at her mouth, parted her lips with his, nudged her thighs apart and using one hand, took his heavy cock and pressed it against her sleek channel. "Open for me, baby."

He felt her tense beneath him. All the while he whispered sweet words to her. Stry rubbed her opening with the meaty tip, working his way slowly inside her damp channel with a shallow penetration.

"You will accept my seed inside your womb and bear my children. You will never allow another male to touch you. You will always see to my needs and happiness. In return, I will touch no other female. I will protect you always. I will give you sons. These are my sacred vows to you."

In one single thrust, Stry pushed inside her, tore through the thin membrane of her virginity and settled deep. Kirrah screamed and clawed his shoulders. Tears wet the corners of her eyes and dampened her hair.

"I'm sorry," he moaned against her mouth. "I thought—"

"Shhh," Kirrah whispered. "Don't move. Not yet. I feel like I'm bursting at the seams. Gods, you're so packed in me."

He started to pull out of her, to give her the relief he knew she must need. Kirrah pressed trembling fingers against his mouth and shook her head. "Don't. It's okay."

"No, it isn't okay. I hurt you and that wasn't my intent."

"I know that. Love me, Stry. Please? I need you."

Stry wiggled his hips and settled deeper inside her.

Kirrah moaned.

"Are you in pain? Did I hurt you again?"

"No. Just, it's very big. Thick. But you feel good inside me." Kirrah lifted her hips. "You feel good. It's...I'm so full...of you."

"Do that again—"

"What?"

"Ride my cock. Yes. There. Ahh, Samhain, but you steal my breath—"

Stry pulled back and plowed deep. He set a powerful rhythm of long, slow withdrawals and deep-seated penetrations that drove both of them wild, that built and built their hunger until they both struggled to breathe.

He cupped Kirrah's slender hips and lifted her to take him deeper. Her soft cries of pleasure spiked his desire. His urgency. He felt wild, raw, and elemental as the earth. Sharp stabs of pressing need stung the tip of his cock. "Kirrah, baby, I—"

"I know—" Her voice shook. "I feel it, too. Gods, I didn't think I could feel more stuffed than I already do."

Tiny explosions rippled through Stry. "I want to fill you."

They clung desperately, riding the feral storm that raged inside them. Helpless, they went at each other using teeth, tongue and body, until breathless, they soared into simultaneous orgasms.

Stry shuddered. His seed burst forth, hot and hard, and jetted inside her.

He knew the moment his son was conceived, sensed the powerful surge of life, saw in his mind's eye the tiny new life claw its way inside Kirrah's womb and anchor firmly to the strong muscular lining.

Tears rushed to his eyes. He blinked wildly in a desperate attempt to keep from unmaning himself in front of his female. His breath quickened and swiftly left his lungs. Samhain, he'd done what he needed to do, done what his mind, his heart guided him to do and he knew, even if he'd wanted to, he wouldn't have been able to stop it from happening.

"Kirrah," he whispered shakily.

No response.

"Sweetheart?" Stry frowned. Reluctantly, he pulled out of her and rolled to one side. Supporting his body with one elbow, he stared at her. She was so still. Lifeless. Pale. His gaze fell to her breasts. She wasn't breathing.

Terror slammed into his gut. His heart jumped crazily. His lungs shut down. He touched her icy skin with trembling fingers. "Kirrah! Gods, no! Don't take her from me like this. Please."

Stry pressed tiny kisses over her pale face, on her cold mouth. He tried breathing life back into her, but her head lolled to one side and she lay as broken as a fragile doll in his arms. And he knew the demon inside him had destroyed the one thing he loved most in his world.

Kirrah Walker was dead...

Chapter Twenty-Six

Someone has to spread the good news that we survived.

*~Edward Cullen
(Twilight)*

*Transylvania
Radu Castle
Mortal Realm*

The sun had barely set when Valerian, Dragomir and Ciprian shoved the lids on the old-fashioned wooden caskets to one side and climbed out of their resting place. Valerian sighed with pure, unadulterated pleasure. The long hours of day had taken an eternity to pass, but at last, he was freed from his prison.

The rejuvenation of power and healing from their native soil—well, there was no feeling like it, except maybe for when he'd sexed Shasta. Dammit, he wanted his mate home, back in his arms, his bed, where she belonged.

She'd spent way too many hours away from him and way too many hours alone with another male, a male who was in love with her. A male who'd mated with her and left his seed growing in her womb. He had a bad feeling...

Valerian stared at the healing earth he'd slept on and tried not to think about the ache in his heart, or the wound Shasta must have felt at his sending her up those stairs with Dragos. Anything she did to pay him back, he knew damned well he deserved. But gods, he couldn't bear to think what might have happened between his mate and Dragos since their capture.

No. He shook off the disruptive feelings, the pain, and instead, closed the lid on his temporary bed. He hadn't realized he needed the native soil so badly. It had helped to soothe the loss of his powers Dracula had stolen from him and the painful return as they flooded his soul once again. Not only had it eased his body, but his mind as well.

Val heard a slight scrape and turned.

Dracula had risen an hour before sunset and aggravated their final moments of rest with taunts about their laziness. The ancient knew well it would be at least another century before the younger ones could rise that early.

Their king waited impatiently on them in the cellar. "You three look almost like vampires again. Word of warning, just because you have regular beds you sleep in doesn't mean you don't have to occasionally take your fun in a coffin in the dirt."

"Gods," Dragomir uttered. "Who wants to have sex in the dirt?"

Dracula grinned. "Try it, you might like it."

Dragomir made a gagging motion and shuddered.

Dracula's lips twitched. "Throw in a little water; wallow in the mud—very soothing for what ails you."

Dragomir snorted. "The only thing ailing me is the need to fuck."

"My point, exactly," Dracula grinned.

"Good grief," Ciprian snapped at his father. "Do you ever give that thing a rest?"

"My cock? Not if I can help it. If I'd let it rest back when, you wouldn't be here, my son."

Ciprian's snort sounded a lot like Dragomir's. "I would have been here. You'd have just found another female to sex, instead of Mother. How are Dracul and Laura?"

"They're awake, but they'll remain in their resting place for this night. I know you're all aware Laura lost the baby during the daylight hours."

The vampires nodded. A pall of sadness at the loss hung around them. Val turned away, uncomfortable discussing Dracul and Laura's personal loss. Connected as they all were, they'd shared her pain, shared both her and Dracul's deep grief and his rage at not being able to go to Laura and comfort her.

"Our rest was disturbed by the flashes in our minds of Laura suffering the loss of the child," Valerian said.

Dracula looked truly saddened, his face bleak. "I know. Although she's very weak from the tremendous amount of blood loss, her body shut down as soon as she lost the baby. She'll mend. Her body's slowly repairing itself. She keeps asking for Dracul, but we have to keep them in separate chambers. Their natural instinct will be to feed each other and Laura cannot feed from Dracul. She's too weak to risk one of the parasites entering her bloodstream. But she must feed."

"She's needs looking after," Ciprian said. "But she won't feed from one of us. I barely got her to feed from me when she was thrown down the stairs. She won't do it again."

"Yes. I know. I've summoned a couple of females from Austria to care for her. They will be here shortly. All of you—stop feeling so guilty," Dracula snapped. "There was nothing any of us could do to keep her from losing the child. If you want to lay blame, then lay it at the feet of the demons that attacked us without provocation."

Valerian rubbed a hand down his face. "The demons wouldn't have launched an attack without Brasov's encouragement and well you know this."

"It doesn't matter what I know. It's what I can prove to the Ancient Council that counts. I can't prove Brasov is working with Zebus and neither can you."

Valerian sighed. He wondered if he looked as haggard as he felt. Although his native soil had let him sleep deeply, his rest had been disturbed by images of Shasta locked in a mating *Shaz* with Dragos. He didn't understand why he kept seeing it in his mind, unless— "Fuck!"

"What? What is it?" Ciprian asked. "What's wrong?"

Val inhaled sharply and trembled with rage. He glared at Dracula. "Shasta and Dragos are locked in a clutch."

"What!" Dracula exploded.

Dragomir looked wary. "How do you know this?"

Valerian turned on Dragos' brother. Dragomir lifted his chin.

"You already knew they'd gone into *Shaz*. Didn't you?"

"Yes. I knew when it happened."

"And you didn't tell me?"

"What good would it have done? By the time I realized it, they were already in *Shaz*. None of us can do anything about the vows they've spoken. Shasta no longer belongs to you, Val. She is Dragos' mate and will remain so."

"I will kill him for this," Val said quietly.

"And hurt Shasta to the point she might never recover? You won't do that to her. She's given her body and heart to Dragos. If you want to fault someone, then fault yourself. You did nothing to prevent Dragos from mating with her the first time. You gave her to him without a struggle. It was the easy way out. Now you will leave them both alone. Let them find happiness together if that is their desire."

"It is," Dracula said. He eyed his grandson, ignored the pain he saw on Valerian's face. "And you will do as Dragomir says. You will leave them be. Dragos will have to go before the Ancients to seal his claim for her. There is where you will do battle to win Shasta back." Dracula cocked his head. "The females have arrived to care for Laura. Shall we go get Dragos, Shasta and Ann?"

Valerian nodded and materialized into a bat. He'd go get Shasta, all right. By the gods, she was his mate and he'd not stand idly by while Dragos stole her from him.

The others followed behind him. Together, they headed straight to the Vlad Salt Mine.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

A woman wears her tears like jewelry.

~Author Unknown

*Ru-Noc
Sanctuary
Immortal Realm
Beltane*

Stry tightened his arms around Kirrah and rocked back and forth in front of the fireplace. Tears rained down his face. Sobbing, he buried his face in her wealth of auburn hair. "I'm sorry, button. I'm so sorry. I never meant to harm you. I swear it."

"My Kirrah...is dead?"

Stry looked up. The broom was a watery blur in his line of vision. Unmanned, he could do nothing about the tears soaking his face—he didn't try. "I'm sorry, broom. Yes, your Kirrah is—"

"Broom *knew* if you stick your big ugly cock in her, you'd kill my witch. Broom should poke you in eye with switch—show demon how it feels to be stuffed with big thing."

"Don't—say anything else—please, broom? I need—"Stry's words broke off instantly. He drew a sharp breath. "What's happening, broom? She—she's glowing."

"Mr. Broom not know sure thing, but think demon best lay witch down and move back. Witch not dead. Witch in other...world," it whispered in awe. "Witch soul taking journey, perhaps return in awhile—perhaps not."

Stry placed Kirrah gently on the furs and stood up. He wiped the tears from his eyes. "I—"

"Cover your warped pole, demon, it look very scary to broom. It *uggg-lly*."

"Then don't look at it."

"How can broom not see it, when it sticking out like flag pole?"

Stry squatted beside Kirrah and gently pulled the soft furs around her shoulders. "She's so pale, broom." He stared at the faint light delineating her body. Then the diffused light, brightened. Stry fell back on his rear. "Oh, gods."

Her body slowly rose in the air. The furs he'd draped over her slipped, but remained in place. She

hovered there, several feet off the floor. Lifeless. Weightless. There. But not there.

"Gods, what is happening? I've lost her, broom. I think she's dead and her soul is searching for her body."



No! No! I'm not dead!

Kirrah tried to shout the denial, reassure Stry, but she couldn't push the words past her numb lips. She thought maybe her body was frozen. Her heart lay like a lump of ice. Inside her, nothing stirred, not her heart, her lungs, not her blood. Nothing.

She couldn't move, speak or even draw a breath, but she knew she wasn't dead, though she heard Stry's deep sobs and his words stating the opposite. He hadn't killed her. No! No! She didn't want him to be burdened with such guilt. Her soul still lived inside her. She knew it!

Kirrah, you will journey to me now.

She blinked. Hey, her eyelids moved—so, everything wasn't dead. Woo-hoo!

Stop playing around! Come to me, Kirrah. Now!

What? Where? Who are you?

Relax. Take a slow deep breath.

Relax? I'm so relaxed I can't breathe!

Feminine laughter. I know. So don't relax quite so much.

Kirrah sighed and inhaled slowly, then quietly released the breath. Ooh. I can breathe.

That's the way. Now leave your body and journey to me.

I—I think I've already departed my body.

No. Your inner radiance glows around your body. Leave it. Do so now.

I can't.

You can.

But—Stry will think—believe—

He already believes you are dead. Your journey is short. You'll return in a few minutes, but for now, you must come to me.

Kirrah wasn't sure how it happened, but she felt her soul leave her body. It soared, flying. Flying. It rushed through the rooms of her house, past the walls and into the dark night, up to the clouds and then—she was there...in a large opulent chamber, rich with sparkling jewels, gold coins, fabulous furniture and satin-lined drapes. Thick furry rugs covered the stone floor. She felt warmth under her bare feet. Kirrah looked down and squished her toes in the plush red fibers.

Where am I?

You're here—with me, where you belong for the moment. Samhain, witch, you took forever to find the right mate, then when you did, you took forever to fook him—and it's freakin' Beltane! What do you think Beltane is for? It's the time to make babies—and you've been dallying around for days. Well let me tell you, I've waited centuries for your coming of age—and finally...finally, you get the job done. Now then—

Wait! Who are you?

Who I am doesn't matter.

It does to me.

Laughter. Oh, very well then, if you insist.

I do.

I'm Queen La-Néea Winslow. You're my descendent. Don't ask my age. I tell no one that—just understand if I move, I'll crumble to dust.

Kirrah blinked and stared at the statue. You're made of marble. How can you crumble?

She pulled her gaze away from the wondrous witch-queen seated upon a granite throne and looked

around. They were in an incredible room, filled with numerous chests of gold doubloons, emeralds, rubies, diamonds and sapphires, strands of pearls, crowns and sparkling tiaras.

So much wealth. Amazing.

And cold. It doesn't take the place of a mate who loves you or children. I had a lover once—a handsome Spanish pirate. He had no idea he was going to shower me with all his riches.

What happened to him?

He died—I lived on to take other lovers, but Santos was the only male who ever owned my love. The waken betrayed me eventually, like all wakens do. He tried to steal my soul. I ran a hexed dagger through his heart.

I'm sorry.

Don't be. I conceived his child at that moment. I took more than his treasures as payment for services rendered. It was the least I could do. Leetah was born that following All Hallows' Eve. She was so beautiful and kind. Only the gods know how my Leetah became the angel she did. Her skin was smooth as ivory, long black hair like her father's, the sweetest smile. She inherited my violet eyes and her powers—well, there have been none her equal in looks or powers... until now.

I don't have that kind of power. Heck, I don't have those kinds of looks either.

I'm not talking about you, either. But this meeting isn't about my child, any other witch, or me. Hold out your hands.

Why?

Laughter. Are you always so suspicious?

Yes.

Again, laughter. Spoken like a true Winslow. Hold out your hands, palms down. I have a gift for you. Obey me, child, for my time is short. These jewels are even more ancient than my pirate's treasure.

Kirrah held out her hands. An electrical charge slammed into her stomach so hard and fast, it knocked her on her butt.

What —oh, shit!

She fell back, too weak to remain sitting upright. Kirrah gasped, struggled to breathe, desperate to take in air, when she remembered she hadn't been breathing in the first place—not much, anyway.

But this was different. This was like being packed into a tight bottle and the lid screwed shut. It felt like all the space inside her body had been squeezed out and she was left empty, a tight vacuum of nothingness, dark as the deepest space in the heavens.

Her body shook. The back of her head hit the carpet, but she felt the stone, cold floor through it. She lay there naked. Shivering. Then nothing. Her body stilled. Afraid to move, afraid to blink, she stared at the incredible lights that twirled wildly around her. They danced up and down the length of her body like she was a piano keyboard.

Kirrah held up her hands, astonished when sparks flew from her fingertips and zapped the ceiling overhead. Oh sure, she'd had sparks fly from her fingertips before, but it was nothing compared to the shocking power she felt zip from her fingers now.

Flabbergasted, she moaned when white-hot pain seared her fingernails. Tears seeped down the corners of her eyes.

Stop it!

It's almost done, child. Almost.

Then it was over. The lights faded and vanished in a spiraling poof!

You may sit up now.

Sit up? I don't think I can.

Kirrah held up her hands and eyed the semi-precious stones embedded on her fingernails. *What? I've never seen jewels like these.*

No. They are the eyes of the tiger, topaz and onyx, uniquely Winslow, as are all the Winslow jewels. Their magic is special. They have waited for you for many centuries.

Waited? I don't understand.

The stones could not be transferred to you until you mated for the first time and with the right male. Prince Stry, even though he's a demon, is the right male for you. You conceived, you know.

No, I didn't know.

Your mate took the choice from you, but he had no option. You will not be angry about this. Instead, love the blessing he has bestowed upon you. Love his son. Your child.

Yes. Of course I shall love our baby.

Good. Now...prepare—for another seeks to mate with you.

No other male is touching me. I've chosen my mate.

A sad sigh. Do not speak so certain of things beyond your control. It matters not to this male that you are mated. He seeks a vessel to carry his seed. He's chosen you.

No. I'm already with child. You know it. Stry—I carry his son.

Yes. But mysterious things can happen in the womb, especially when magic is involved. Zebus is determined to mate with you, child, and he is a very strong and virile male. Not many times in his quests has he ever failed.

No! Wait—who the heck is Zebus?

It doesn't matter. Just know he will come to you if you are left unguarded. He comes for a single mating, but the seed he leaves growing inside you will root out Stry's babe and will become a king of two realms one day.

Tears filled Kirrah's eyes. No. I can't betray Stry with another male.

You won't betray him, child. You will have no choice in the matter. The oracle has spoken of this ruler...he will be named Zayne.

That isn't my son's name.

It will be. Now go. Prepare your mind to accept Zebus. It is of the utmost urgency that Zayne be conceived and born. All our futures depend on the birth of this king. Prepare your spirit for war. The time will come when the tiger's eyes are your only weapons. Guard the jewels closely, child. Ten tigers will fight at your side. Remember that. Allow no one to take them from you—and there are those who will try.

But—

Go! My time is done. The treasure here, it now belongs to you and your sisters, Saylym and Nyra. Divide it equally.

I don't understand—how am I supposed to take the treasure? There are so many chests, trunks. I don't even know where I'm at or where my home is.

The treasure will be waiting for you. Have no worries, Kirrah, time will cease soon. Accept what you cannot change. You will remember nothing of this conversation, except that you must share the treasure with your sisters. Go now, child. Go.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

It is better to conquer yourself than to win a thousand battles. Then the victory is yours. It cannot be taken from you, not by angels or by demons, heaven or hell.

~Buddha

Romania
Village Pyre
Dracula's Inn
Mortal Realm

Creed joined Ransom and Bane at *Dracula's Inn*. The intimate setting inside the small tavern was quiet, homey, Old World, more welcoming than he'd expected. It was just what he needed to soothe his ragged nerves.

Rubbing a hand down his face, he sighed. Shit. He felt like hell, but at least the constant urge to copulate had finally been satisfied. He had a feeling, the reprieve was temporary.

It had taken over four hours of nearly constant mating with two She-Wolves to relieve the ache in his groin. His chest, shoulders, back, and ass had paid the price. He'd thought they were going to rip him to shreds before he finally obtained the relief he needed.

Creed winced and eased onto a chair beside Ransom. His brother was busy devouring a raw steak. Creed sniffed. "That smells delicious."

"I ordered you one. The waiter is getting it now." Ransom grinned. "You move like an old man. So, are the tales true?"

"About the Shes?"

Ransom nodded and cut off a piece of juicy red meat. "Yeah."

"Forget everything you ever heard."

Ransom took a bite, chewed and swallowed. "Ah hell, I hoped it was an erotic experience."

"Oh, it's erotic. They fuck a man like—" Creed grinned. "I don't even know how to describe it. It's wicked. Wild. But you have to survive it."

Bane held his knife in mid-air over his steak. "Survive it?"

Creed stood up and tore off his shirt. His brothers gasped.

"Good grief! You're ripped to shreds," Bane whispered in awe.

"Yes. And this is five hours after the mating session ended. The marks have healed to some degree."

Ransom choked. "Samhain. Did you walk or crawl away?"

"I crawled. My dick was dragging the ground and there wasn't one damn thing I could do about it. I barely managed to pull myself out of their tent."

"Did it help?" Bane asked.

"Help?" Creed arched a brow. "By that question, if you mean has the heat cooled in my balls, then yes, it helped. I pray to our gods I don't have to ever return to the She-Wolves."

"Did you—uh—breed them?" Ransom asked, taking another bite of his steak.

Creed's brows knitted into a scowl. "Mishka took my seed, yes. Oma is sterile."

"Samhain, Creed, you weren't supposed to breed either of them."

"I know that, Ransom. It's easier said than not done when a She-Wolf takes your cock and *Lu-Nark* is burning wild inside you and she grips your staff with every ounce of strength she has. Believe me, the She-Wolf is very strong, very powerful. I came in her before I realized—"

"And it's exactly what she wanted. Now she'll brag she carries the son of the king."

"Daughter. She carries a girl child."

"Girl? Samhain. I bet that pissed her off. What will become of the babe? You know Shes abandon girl pups at birth."

Creed nodded his thanks to the waiter who delivered the platter holding a thick juicy raw steak.

"Mishka agreed to bring me the babe when she's born. I'll raise her."

"You'll raise her?" Bane questioned around a bite of meat. "You're daughter's going to be the same age as your future bride. How do you think Peyton's going to feel knowing you mated with a She-Wolf when you knew she'd been conceived? It's like breaking your vows to her."

Creed cut the steak on the platter in half, forked up half and bit off the end. "I did break my vows of fidelity." He shrugged. "I owe her nothing."

Ransom set his fork aside and frowned. "You did it purposely? You mated and bred the She-Wolf deliberately, just to prove to your future bride you care nothing for her? What has happened? You know this will hurt your bride one day. You were so anxious for her, now you act like you despise her."

"I said I owe her nothing. I feel no honor or respect for my future bride. I no longer want her, but I'm stuck with her. I'm not concerned how she'll feel when she learns I fucked another female and bred her. Now let's finish our meal. We have to journey to Radu Castle tonight."

Part Three

The End

Sure, they were all going to die, but they'd go out with their middle fingers upraised in the oldest salute known to the world.

~The Queen Of Swords

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Beginnings are scary. Endings are usually sad, but it's the middle that counts the most.

~Sandra Bullock

*Ru-Noc
Sanctuary
Immortal Realm
Beltane*

Stry paced back and forth in front of the fireplace. Every few minutes, he stopped to check on Kirrah. Nothing had changed in the last fifteen minutes. Her skin felt icy. Her lips were blue and there were no signs of life, but he knew in his heart, she wasn't dead.

Dammit, what had happened to her?

And what was with all the chests and trunks of jewels that had suddenly appeared? An unimaginable treasure waited in the far corner. It flowed over into the living room and part of the hall.

Stry eyed Kirrah's fingernails. What the hell were jewels doing embedded in her nails? That had to have hurt like hell. Who put them there?

At least Kirrah looked peaceful.

His nerves were as wrecked as a train on the tracks in the mortal realm.

For a while, he'd thought his mate was never going to breathe again. Although she was breathing now, he wasn't certain what had happened to her. He'd watched helplessly as her body floated nearly to the ceiling and hovered there for what seemed an eternity.

He'd never seen so many lights sparkle around someone like they did around Kirrah. Even the broom had been speechless for a change.

Whatever had happened must have been awesome.

She'd died. He *knew* she'd died in his arms. Yet, she was somehow alive, breathing, not breathing-hell, every time he mated with her, was she going to die? He couldn't handle that. His father hadn't said a

word about the possibility of Kirrah's spirit leaving her body if she mated....

Stry paused long enough to grab his clothes and jerk them on.

The broom perked up. "Demon going somewhere?"

"Yes. I'm going to talk to my father."

"Demon father?"

"Yes. Kallibus has some explaining to do."

"But—you can't leave new mate here alone."

Stry paused. "She's resting. Her breathing's normal—well, almost normal. I don't want to disturb her."

"Can't leave witch unprotected. Broom getting bad vibrations. Black Magick in the air."

"For Samhain's sake," Stry yelled. "She's lived here for months without my protection. An hour alone isn't going to bring the house down on top of her. I won't be gone any longer than that. I promise."

"Might," the broom stated stubbornly. "House might topple. Demon might be gone longer than hour. Manly demon mate should be ashamed to leave sweet little witch alone."

"I'm not leaving her alone. You're here. Protect her with your life, broom. I have to have answers. What if I kill her every time I mate with her? Next time she might not return. I cannot handle Kirrah dying again or losing her for eternity."

"Witch not breathing okay now. Demon best stay here and look after mate, not leave simple, cowardly broom to protect her."

"Yes she is breathing fine now—but for how long? I need answers. I have to go. Protect her, broom. I'll not be gone long. I swear it." Stry hunkered down beside Kirrah. Gently, he swept the tangled mass of curls from her face and pressed a kiss to her cold lips. "She still feels ice cold, broom. Don't let the fire go out."

"You can depend on Mr. Broom."

"Her heart beats so slowly."

"Broom will stay by her side. Swear it's so."

Stry nodded. "I'll return as quickly as I can."

"Broom think not so. Broom think you best not go anywhere...."



Negus, one of Zebus' demon agents, approached him carefully. The demon king grinned, his smile malevolent as a spider's. He knew well Negus hadn't forgotten what happened to Maxus. Negus didn't want to end up with an athame in his heart or his throat cut.

Zebus motioned him closer and laughed when Negus shuddered. "Relax. I left my athames at Dymus. I'm not in the mood to cut throats."

The demon king had taken two of his best guards with him to Sanctuary. They'd checked into the *Witch's Nest*, a small inn in Sanctuary. A noisy blend of races filled the dining hall, *weres*, vampires, demons and even *wakens*, because Beltane pulled every male of every species into its powerful grip. It was the witches' mating season, but the females didn't always simply mate with their own kind.

Over the centuries, as fewer and fewer children were born, the witches had mated with every species from all the realms in an attempt to reproduce.

Zebus smiled, relaxed. It was only the demons that had successfully impregnated the witches who'd been made purposely infertile after the Salem slayings. It would continue to be so. Only the demon race knew the antidote to make the witches fertile.

They weren't into sharing.

"Do you have good news?" Zebus asked Negus.

"Your Majesty. Yes. Prince Stry has left the witch alone, except for a magical broom to guard her."

He's gone to speak with his father, King Kallibus."

"You know this for a fact?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. I saw Prince Stry leave."

Zebus rose to his feet. Excitement spread through his heart. "Go. Return to our realm. Tell Kyma to freeze time. The rest of this night belongs to me and the lovely Kirrah Walker. I'll return to our realm at dawn."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Negus?"

"Your Majesty?"

"You are now my second in command. You will take the place of Maxus at Ayrumus. Go tonight, learn what Prince Stry has to say to Kallibus, report to me at dawn in my private chambers. I'll be expecting you."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. I won't let you down."

"I know you won't. Those who fail me, pay the ultimate price."

"Yes, My King. Goodnight, Your Majesty and—have fun."

Zebus snickered. "I always do."



"Wake up, my lovely."

Zebus crept inside Kirrah's home, taking a moment to eye the living room filled with unbelievable wealth. He could care less. He had that much wealth of his own and likely more. He was here for but one treasure and one treasure only.

He crossed the room and leaned over the slender shape curled up beside the glowing coals of the fireplace. She was all but wrapped from head to toes in white furs.

"Wake up, sweet witch. Tonight, I have a big surprise for you. It's big and round and hard as a pole, just for you, my sweet. Wake up."

He folded back the furs.

"Well, *hell-ooo*. Tonight I have a big surprise for you. And it's long and round and hard as a broom stick."

Zebus dropped the hold he had on the furs and jumped back in shock. The weird, deep voice and the sudden movement under the furs caused his heart to spasm. A long-handled besom with wickedly thick switches flew from under the furs, bursting with blinding speed.

It lifted high above his head and circled the room, its maniacal laughter shrill and nerve racking. Zip-ping and zagging, it dashed around like a deflated balloon, up, around, down, up, around and around. "Ha! Ha! Mr. Broom fooled ugly demon ass! Lovely witch not here! *Weeee!*"

"Where is she?!" Zebus clutched his fists with frustration.

"Witch not here. Ha. Ha. You not gonna get to *rooba-rooba* her with your fat pole. Ha. Ha."

Furious at being thwarted, as soon as the broom was close enough, Zebus snatched it out of the air. "Where is she?"

"Mr. Broom *die* before reveal where lovely witch is."

Zebus winced as the ugly broom ripped from his hands, sailed across the room, then whipped around and flew straight at him. Fierce as a mother lion defending its cub, the broom attacked him. It beat him over the shoulders, laughing like an insane banshee the entire time.

"Get out of house!" The broom whacked him upside the head. "Leave here! Never come back! Never try to *rooba-rooba* sweet witch again!"

"Ouch!" Zebus snarled and grabbed the broom by its handle. He flung it across the room. "Filthy familiar. Stay away from me and mind your own business!" Zebus' eyes widened. The thing charged right

back at him, its switches puffed out in all directions like quills on a porcupine. It flipped end over end with the switchy end headed straight at his face. Zebus growled a warning.

The broom ignored him.

When the magical familiar reached him, Zebus wrapped his fingers tightly around the broom handle and snapping it across his knee, breaking the familiar in half.

A piercing howl filled the room. The broom screamed—a loud, shrill, pain-filled screech that sent shivers down Zebus' spine. He flung the halves across the floor, startled when the two pieces flopped around like a fish out of water. Then one of the halves gave a long slow wail, as if running out of air, and they both stopped moving.

The sudden silence was eerie.

"Shit." Zebus stared at the broken familiar.

"You killed it?" The professor inquired. "You broke its back."

Zebus sighed. "It doesn't have a back. It's a besom."

The professor poked the two parts with the tip of his shoe. "I think you broke its back."

Zebus shrugged. "Maybe so. Fuck! Prince Stry must have taken the witch with him."

"Yes. She isn't here. I searched all the rooms."

"She was here," Zebus said angrily. "I smell her."

"They mated in this room, over there, by the fireplace."

"I don't need you to tell me that, Professor. Let's go," he snapped. "There's nothing here for us."

"What about the broken familiar?"

Zebus swore softly. "What about it? It should have minded its own business."

"I could mend it?"

"Leave it to die in peace. Let's get out of here. I have a demon to kill for failing me."

Chapter Thirty

Do not follow where the path may lead. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.

~Ralph Waldo Emerson

*Annu Mountain
Noddon Caverns
Immortal Realm*

King Kallibus welcomed his son and new daughter-in-law with open arms. "Thank the gods you are both here, safe. My spies informed me that Zebus is above ground, hiding in Sanctuary, waiting for a chance to breed Kirrah. It is lucky you were wise enough to bring her with you, my son."

Stry smiled at his new mate. "Her familiar wouldn't let me leave in peace until I agreed to bring her. I tried to materialize here. Made it all the way to Sanctuary, but the damn broom put a hex on me and I arrived back at Kirrah's. I couldn't make the journey. Not without her."

"Oh yes, besom familiars can be so unpredictable and fun, but if it thinks it is right about something, it will take charge." Queen Helayne crossed the chamber, a wide smile on her lips. "Stry." She hugged him, then kissed Kirrah's cheek. "Welcome to our family." She eyed the slight mound of Kirrah's belly. "Ah, I see my son has been busy. You carry my grandson."

"Yes," Kirrah replied. "Stry wanted a baby right away. He rather overwhelmed me. I was pregnant before I knew it."

"Yes. That is the demon way. Did you want a child so soon?"

Kirrah smiled. "I had my doubts a very old and wise witch advised me otherwise. I find I don't mind being pregnant, although I can't believe the rate the babe grows."

Helayne smiled and rubbed her own rounded belly. "Yes, demon babies grow at a tremendous rate. They are quite large when born."

"I love babies. Stry wants a large family."

Helayne grinned. "Demons love large families. Has the babe told you his name yet?"

"Lash," Stry said quietly. "His name is Lash."

"Stry." Helayne hugged her son again. "You vanished without a trace. You've been missing for days. I was worried sick. What happened to you?"

Stry patted his mother's shoulders. "Didn't Kallibus tell you?"

"Only that you'd found a mate."

"Kirrah attacked me with her broom and they took me prisoner."

"I did not!" Kirrah gasped in denial.

Helayne laughed. "Come, let's have a late meal. This sounds like a delicious tale. I want details." She paused and clasped Kirrah's hands. "Samhain, you're one of the thirteen."

"What?" Kirrah blinked.

"The jewels. They've started transferring. Oh my, you have one of the most powerful sets. The tigers. This war is coming sooner than I thought if the stones are switching to new owners so rapidly. The tigers are set four."

"Set four?" Kirrah stared at her fingernails. I only have this one set."

Helayne nodded. "Yes, but there are thirteen sets for the coven. Yours is set four. That means three other witches have already received the gifts of their stones. Do you know who they are?"

"No." Kirrah shook her head. "I have no clue."

Helayne nodded. "I do. Saylym Winslow has the emeralds and a young witch named Hannah has the rubies. I don't know who has the third set or what they are."

Kirrah gasped. "Hannah? My best friend is Hannah Miller, but she isn't a witch."

"That's her. Hannah Miller. She mated with Sage."

"Sage is mated?" Stry blinked in shock.

"Who's Sage?" Kirrah asked.

Stry grinned. "He was the biggest flirt in Droth. He's taken a mate? Unbelievable."

"Oh, not just a mate, they expect their first child this All Hallows' Eve."

"But—but," Kirrah spluttered. "Hannah is human."

"No, my dear," Helayne said gently. "Hannah is a Winslow. She's your cousin, thorough MeLora."

"MeLora?"

"Another cousin."

"I can't believe it, my best friend is really my cousin?"

"It's a long story. I'll tell you over dinner. Come, I know the two of you must be starved."

"Saylym..." Kirrah's voice trailed off and she battled tears. "I think she might be my sister. I want to see her. Talk to her."

Kallibus shook his head. "That's impossible. Zebus kidnapped her several days ago and she's now mated to his son Kyma. From what I hear, she's very happy with the prince, but he won't allow her to the surface until it's time for her to deliver the babe she carries. Perhaps then you'll get a chance to speak to her."

"Come," Helayne said. "Let's eat. You can tell us all about this attack on my son with your besom. It sounds utterly fascinating."

Kallibus fell into step beside his family. At long last, he had what he wanted. His queen. His son. His new daughter. A grandchild snug in its mother's womb. The joyous anticipation of a new baby with Helayne, one they'd raise together this time.

Happiness swelled in his heart. Life couldn't be better—except maybe if he'd seen the look on Zebus' face when he realized Kirrah wasn't there for him to breed.

Chapter Thirty-One

Character is what you are in the dark.

~Dwight L. Moody

*Transylvania
Outer Wall of Radu Castle
Mortal Realm*

Creed held a fist in the air and halted the progress of his brothers as they grew closer to Radu Castle. A shiver trickled up his spine and tickled the hairs at his nape. A bad feeling crawled across the pit of his stomach, worse than the hairy legs of a spider inching its way along his flesh.

Even though the castle was lit inside and torches burned outside the gates and lit a path, he didn't like the unsettled and malevolent atmosphere. Something was wrong.

"What is it?" Ransom sidled up beside him.

Creed shook his head. "Not sure. Valerian isn't here or he would have come out to greet us. The wolves are silent and they always announce the presence of intruders. Too much quiet here."

"Is there anyone inside?" Bane asked.

"Yes," Creed responded. "Three females. One male. The male and one of the females is gravely injured. Fuck! This is the work of Zebus. I can smell the sulfur in the air."

"Zebus?" Ransom frowned. "What does he have to do with anything?"

"Too damn much," Creed snapped.

"Do we go inside or not?" Bane inquired.

"Not. We aren't alone. There are guards."

"I don't see any guards," Ransom said.

"Look up, perched on the parapets and towers, gargoyle hounds frozen in stone. If we go any closer, they'll come to life and shred us to pieces."

Ransom kicked at a stone poking up from the ground. "What do we do now?"

"Back to the woods and wait. Something's here—and it isn't Valerian."

Chapter Thirty-Two

Listen to the night, it's deafening.

~Mae
(Near Dark)

*Romania
Vlad Salt Mines
Mortal Realm*

Valerian was the first to materialize inside Brasov's nest. He wasn't sure exactly what he'd expected, but the sinful luxury combined with the strong odor of frequent sex and warm blood wasn't it. His fangs burst through his gums in reaction to the sensual scents set to stimulate any male vampire.

Drawing a deep breath, he retracted his fangs and slowly released the pent up air trapped inside his lung. "Shasta! Dragos! Where are you?"

"Here!" Dragos beat on the side of the stone wall with his fist. "We're in the shaft."

Val drew a second deep breath. In his heart, he knew what he was going to see, but to *know* it was one thing, yes—he preferred to see it for fact, then he'd not be haunted by doubts.

It wasn't difficult to locate the shaft since Brasov had left the chamber well lit. The area immediately surrounding the shaft was circled with torches. His brother, bless his evil heart, wanted him to see Shasta locked in the bonding clutch.

Valerian hesitated but a moment, then steadying his heart, he peered over the edge. For the second time, his fangs ruptured through his gums at an incredible speed. His eyes burned and he knew without doubt they glowed. "Release her, Dragos. Now! You have no right to do this thing you've done."

"She climbed on my cock willingly, Val."

"But she did not let you bind her to you willingly. Not like this."

"I didn't force her. I didn't even ask her. She took my cock inside her. She wanted it. Shasta loves me. And—I love her."

"Free her from the *Shaz*. Awaken her. I will hear it from her lips. Not yours."

Dragos took Shasta's mouth in a deep kiss, then slowly released it. "Awaken, my love," he whispered. "Awaken and remember our love. Remember our love and our child is all that matters."

"Don't!" Val raked his hands through his hair, agitated. Intense fury raged through his mind. "Do not use *Razure* on her."

"I've used nothing on her but my cock—and she liked it." Shasta stirred in his arms. "Awaken, baby. Val is here to take you from me."



"What?" Slowly, Shasta stirred. She lifted her head and blinked at Val standing above them. His face looked stern, his eyes brutal. She didn't think she'd ever seen him look more dangerous than he did at that moment. He hated her. She saw it in his fierce gaze, the way his handsome face twisted with the need for retribution.

Why did he want vengeance?

He'd thrown her away. Given her to another male to mate and breed her.

It slowly dawned on her she was naked, astraddle of Dragos and his hard shaft was buried inside her. The wetness inside her told her he'd recently climaxed.

"Dragos," she whispered and hid her face in the tangle of his long dark hair. "Don't release me. I am wet and he'll know—"

"He already knows. I must free you now."

"No!" Panic filled her voice. "I want to stay with you."

"Shasta," Val warned. "You are my bride. Come to me. Now!"

"You betrayed me."

"Betrayed you? It is you who sits there with another male's—" He broke off, unable to say it. "Get up! You're coming with me."

"No, she isn't," Dracula said behind him.

Val whirled. "You've caused enough damage in my relationship with my bride."

"And I will cause more if you try to force her to leave with you. Until the Ancients make a decision, she remains with Dragos."

"How can you do this to me?" Val knew he sounded hurt and angry. Hell, he was stunned. His grandfather refused to stand by him on this matter.

"She wants Dragos or she wouldn't be in a clutch with him. We cannot stand here debating the issue. We must get them and leave here immediately. Something is wrong at the castle. My gargoyles tell me there are intruders."

"Where's Ann?" Ciprian joined them at the edge of the shaft. "Is she down there, too?"

"Don't look down," Val ordered. "Shasta is dressing."

Ciprian stepped back. "Is Ann there?"

Val shook his head. "No. It's just Dragos and Shasta."

"We need help out of here," Dragos called. "We aren't strong enough to materialize."

Val snorted. "Strong enough to mate, but not to leave? I find that difficult to believe."

Dracula held up a warning hand. "Don't. It's a different kind of energy and well you know this. Do not belittle your queen or your friend in front of others."

"Dragos is no longer my friend."

"Stop it!" Ciprian snapped. "We have other things to concern us besides your injured pride, Val. One, my mate isn't here. I've searched the entire mine."

Dragomir jumped into the shaft to help his brother.

"Take Shasta, first," Dragos said faintly.

Dragomir searched his brother's face and shook his head. "I hope you know what you're doing."

Dragos rose unsteadily. He slid his arm around Shasta's thickening waist and palmed her belly. "This is *my* son. Shasta loves me. I love her and this child. I will not send her back to Valerian."

Dragomir nodded. "So be it. I stand by your decision, but understand, we lose a good friend."

"I know, but I must follow my heart."

Dragomir nodded. "Hold on, little sister. I will take you out of here." He lifted Shasta in his arms and rose to the top. Gently, Dragomir stood her on the floor of the mine. "Are you all right? Can you stand?"

She nodded, tears sliding down her face. "Yes. Nandru removed the athames. It's just that we haven't been able to take enough nourishment to replace the blood we've lost."

"Where is Nandru?" Ciprian asked.

Shasta shivered. "Brasov killed him."

Val started toward her.

"Don't touch me," she snapped, backing away. "I will never forgive you for what you did."

Dragomir stepped between Val and Shasta. "Leave her be, Val. As Dracula said, this dispute will be settled by the Ancients. For now, she goes with Dragos and me."

Valerian swallowed hard and relented. "Get your brother."

"You will stay away from her? I have your word?"

"Yes. I will stay away from her. I also forfeit the crown." He turned to face Dracula. "Give it to Brasov."

"No. It is yours."

"I don't want it. You think so highly of Dragos, give it to him. But I will not be king."

"You can't be serious?"

Valerian lifted his head, his eyes filled with pain. "I was never more serious. I'm done."

Dragomir returned shortly with his brother. Dragos leaned heavily against his elder brother, his breathing ragged.

Val stared at his pale face, noted his uneven breathing. The vampire was in bad shape. Blood seeped from his ears, nose and mouth.

"Ciprian, Zebus took Ann," Dragos said raggedly.

Ciprian's jaw tightened. "How was she?"

"She was bleeding heavily," Shasta said. "She's weak. He took her away this morning at dawn."

Ciprian nodded. His shoulders slumped.

"I'm sorry, Ciprian," Val offered. "You know what the demons are like when it comes to females."

"I'll find her. I'll get her back. I swear it."

"For now, we must return to Radu." Val turned his gaze on Dragomir. "I'll meet you and Dragos back at the castle where I will surrender my rights to be king to Dragos."

"What?" Dragomir sounded stunned. "No." He shook his head. "You are rightful king. We leave for Moldova. We'll return when the Ancients are ready to hold court and make a decision."

"No. You can't take Shasta with you. She belongs at Radu."

Dragomir stiffened. "She goes with us, Val, and keep the crown. It is yours."

"And so is Shasta."

"You know no harm will befall her with us. We will see to her protection."

"That isn't what I'm concerned about. You know well the longer they're together, their bond will strengthen."

Dragomir nodded. "The bond is already there. It was there from the moment she conceived my brother's child. She leaves with us."

Chapter Thirty-Three

Let the world know you as you are, not as you think you should be.

~Fannie Brice

Transylvania
Radu Castle
Mortal Realm

Brasov hid in the shadows near Radu and listened to the *changelings* howl with pain and the rage at their own deaths. "Fucking gargoyles!"

They'd ripped his small band of warriors to pieces. Those they didn't shred, they ate. Dracula. Always interfering. His grandfather owed him. He'd see the ancient one dead for this. How dare Dracula protect Valerian and the castle?

He had every right to live here, to possess and wear the crown.

Clearly, Dracula had chosen sides in this war.

And where was Zebus?

Brasov snarled. His temper was frayed by his failure to steal Radu Castle. He detested failing. Ah, but he still had plans—great plans. He had a safe place prepared for his chosen bride. No, he wouldn't be returning to the salt mine. He knew well that nest was compromised. He laughed. Let them set their traps.

How could they think him stupid enough to return there?

But they'd set their wards and gargoyles. They'd look like the fools they were. He, Brasov, soon to be reigning Prince of Vampyre, was just getting started.

Clearly, he couldn't depend on Zebus' help, either.

It was obvious the demon had his own path to blaze and was not one to keep his word. Zebus had sworn he'd help him take Radu and the bastard hadn't bothered to appear at the very first battle. "Probably fucking Ciprian's mate."

He should have sampled her instead of allowing the demon to take her. But no, there was another he wanted more, wanted with a desperation that overwhelmed him. He'd have her, too. Soon.

Princess Kali belonged to him. He'd been the first to taste her, the first to touch her intimately, to savor the delicious flavor of her blood. He intended to make his claim on her clear to all. "Soon, my love. Soon."

I'll send for you. You will sleep beside me for eternity."

Chapter Thirty-Four

You have to have a darkness...for the dawn to come.

~Fannie Brice

Transylvania

Radu Castle

Mortal Realm

Dawn was only moments away by the time Val lead his small group back to Radu. He looked toward the faint streaks of dawn, the sky still murky with night shadows, but he knew the sun would make its appearance much too soon.

He glanced at Ciprian and wondered if he felt as defeated as *he* did.

Small group – hell, it was Ciprian and him. If he wasn't so damned angry, he'd be depressed. But the fury he felt toward Dragos, Dragomir and even Dracula, was more helpless than a determination to seek revenge. He just wanted to bring Shasta home where she belonged and begin healing the breach between them.

Val wasn't worried about her safety. Dragos and Dragomir would both die before they let any harm befall her. And he could hardly blame Dragos for falling in love with her. Hell, *he'd* fallen for her from the moment he saw her.

No, the fault was his and his alone. He'd lost Shasta through his own neglect, lack of planning, and being too cowardly to stand up to his grandfather. He knew how Dracula was. He should have left him sleeping and handled his problems himself.

Valerian swallowed back the ache ripping through his heart. He'd lost the female he loved and chances were slim that he'd ever win her back. The ache buried deep in his mind. His heart was like the dark before the dawn, black without an end in sight.

He looked up at the brightening sky. In another thirty minutes, the sun would rise. Maybe he'd just remain here, let the sun do its job.

"No," Ciprian said. "You will not take the easy way out. You are going to be king. You must live, Val. We need you."

"I don't want to be king. Not anymore." Val sighed. Already, he felt the change in temperature. He

clenched his fists. His fangs ached. Hunger clawed at his empty belly. He needed to feed, but he could not find the will to even try. Shasta. Gods, he wanted, needed only the taste of her blood.

"Where's my sister, vampire? If you've harmed her, I'll kill you."

Val looked around, startled to see the *were* king step out of the deep shadows and tower over him. That just proved how absorbed he was in his problems. He should have known the werewolf was there. "Creed. What are you doing here?"

For the first time, Val noted the carnage lying about the grounds outside the castle. "You did this?" His skin prickled. All he needed was a war with the *weres*. He felt as if he'd just been rudely awakened. No...the body parts scattered about were not those of vampires, at least not from his nest.

Creed snorted. "If we'd done this, there wouldn't be any body parts left behind. We eat our kills."

"We?" Val saw instantly, Ransom and Bane. They joined their brother, arms folded across their wide chests, dark looks on their faces. These three could tear him to shreds in nothing flat. Val blinked. For the life of him, he couldn't wrap his mind around a coherent thought. "Is my brother among those parts?"

"No." Creed rocked back on his heels. "He cowered in the woods and watched his army slaughtered. He has since left."

"Oh. What do you want?"

Creed growled a soft warning. "Don't play stupid, and don't take me for a fool. Shasta. Where is she?"

"Moldova."

"What?" Ransom grunted. "Why the hell is at Moldova? We know you took her for your mate. Your queen."

"Because she chose to go there. It's where her new mate is."

Creed swore softly. "And you let her have her way?"

"Yes. How was I supposed to stop her? I hurt her. I couldn't hurt her more."

"What joke is this? What do you mean you hurt her?" Creed's claws shot out the end of his fingers. "You have one second to explain and it better be good, vampire."

Val forced his fangs to remain in place. He didn't want or need a fight with Shasta's brothers. "I didn't hurt her physically. And what goes on in our private life is none of your business."

"Wrong," Ransom said, stepping up beside Creed. "What did you do to her?"

Val looked from Creed to Ransom to Bane and back to Creed. "Shit. I let another vampire sex her."

"Let?" Creed snarled. "Or forced her to let another male mate with her? Think before you speak."

"She wasn't forced or injured in any way. She wouldn't let me breed her and I need an heir."

Ransom grinned. "You couldn't make her do anything, vampire. Shasta is a law unto herself. If she let another male touch her, it's because she wanted him."

"She loves me," Val said quietly.

"Maybe. I'll hear that from my sister," Creed snapped.

"She's my mate and I will not tolerate your interference."

"Yes, we know you're her mate. We tracked her scent here to you."

"I made her my queen."

"You changed her into a vampire!" Creed accused.

"Yes, that is our way, as it is the way of the wolf."

"And she allowed you to do this?" Ransom asked.

"Yes."

"Willingly?" Bane lifted a brow strongly resembling his older brother.

Val hesitated. "Well, I think good sexing played a big role in her letting me bite her."

"Good sexing?" Creed roared. "If it was so damn good, why isn't she here with you now?"

"I guess Dragos fucked her better than I did. She left me for him. What more can I say? Now leave me the hell alone."

"No. No way. She didn't just leave you for another male. What did you do to her? What was involved in this letting another vampire mate with her?" Creed demanded answers.

"I gave her to Dragos for four hours."

"Is that all?" Ransom snorted.

"She conceived his child."

"So?" Bane asked.

"She fell out of love with me and in love with him in those four hours."

"But she mated with you first?" Creed inquired.

"Yes," Val replied. "She mated with me first."

"Shasta isn't in love with Dragos. She's pissed at you," Ransom said, grinning.

"I know."

"Well man, don't just stand there with your fangs hanging out and your balls dragging the ground. She wants you to fight for her," Creed snapped.

"I did fight for her. I'm going to fight for her. But for now, she belongs to him and there's nothing I can do about it. I have to retire. The sun is close."

"Go. We'll discuss how you're going to go get her when you awaken tonight," Creed said.

"I can't go get her. Dracula has forbidden it."

"Where is he?" Creed narrowed his eyes and searched the grounds.

"He returned to Austria a few minutes ago."

"Then fuck him," he snapped.

"I'd rather not if it's all the same to you," Val said dryly.

Creed grinned. "It is. My brothers and I will stand guard today. Rest. And fear not another attack from your brother."

"It isn't an attack from Brasov that worries me."

"Let me guess—Zebus." Creed rocked back on his heels, swearing.

Val nodded. "How did you know?"

"His stench lingers in the air. I knew he was to blame for this."

"Not to blame, but he's involved," Val confirmed. "He teamed up with Brasov."

Creed clenched his teeth so tight a muscle near his left eye twitched. "If Zebus shows up to continue this battle, I can't defend you or the castle."

"What?" Ransom and Bane spoke simultaneously. "We have to help Val. He's our brother-in-law. Family helps family."

Val felt as if he'd been sucker-punched. "I might not be your brother-in-law much longer, but I could use the *were* support."

"The *weres* will not go to war against Zebus," Creed announced. "We can't."

"But—"

"Enough!" Creed cut off Ransom's words. "As your king, it's my decision what battles we fight, what species we engage in war. We are not at war with the demons or Zebus nor will we ever be."

Val nodded, his eyes burning. "I'm sure you have your reasons for siding with Zebus. If it's all the same to you, I'd just assume you don't protect Radu. You might open the gates and let him and his demons inside while we sleep. I have two seriously injured vampires in there because of Zebus. You're on his side, I don't want you here."

Creed nodded. "Very well. We'll be at the Inn if you need us."

"I won't. And neither will Shasta. She's my queen. My mate. She and I will work out our problems."

"Then fight for her. Go get her. Bring her home to your castle where she belongs," Creed said. "Fight for her honor. Fight Dragos."

"I can't fight Dragos."

"Why? All's fair in love and war. Isn't that the mortal saying? Or perhaps you can't beat him?" Ran-

som concluded with a question in his voice.

"I can beat him, but it isn't fair to fight a dying vampire. I refuse to do that to Dragos."

Creed's dark brows furrowed. "What's wrong with him?"

"His heart is infested with worms."

"Courtesy of Zebus?"

"You should know. The demon's your friend."

"You can't save Dragos?" Ransom asked.

"No. Dracula thought he could, but the parasite is a new breed. They're resistant to his persuasion. He couldn't remove them."

"Dragos?" Bane inquired, frowning.

"A few days at the most." Val swallowed hard. "Dracul, Ciprian's younger brother is dying as well. His heart is more infested than Dragos.' He hasn't long. One more dawn...perhaps two."

"I'm sorry," Creed replied.

Val stiffened. "We do not need your pity. Go. Take your leave, join Zebus. I don't need your kind here. We are damaged enough."

Chapter Thirty-Five

And where the offense is, let the great axe fall.
~William Shakespeare

*Ru-Noc
Noddon Caverns
Approaching Samhain
Immortal Realm*

"Rausha! Sweetheart, what are you doing?" Kyma stepped behind Saylym where she stood alone in front of the Magick Mirror. The dark blurry shape in the hexed glass called to her.

Kyma knew immediately Talon had found a path to her. Good. He smiled, pleased. He'd waited for this moment. He wanted the *waken* to see him mate with the beautiful witch. Before he was finished, Prince Talon would have no lingering doubts Saylym no longer belonged to him, but was now the mate of a demon prince.

Kyma's muscular body overlaid the one in the mirror. He frowned. In the background was another shadow, one he could not distinguish, nor did he recognize, one that stood behind Talon and observed silently, thoughtfully.

In his mind, Kyma shrugged. Perhaps Talon had a friend with him.

Kyma slid his arms around Saylym's big belly and cupped their child. "Baby, what are you doing standing here in front of the mirror in the middle of the night? Your skin is cold as ice."

Possessively, he palmed her heavy breasts and gently squeezed them. He teased the tight nipples until they turned to hard spikes. Tilting her face to his, he claimed her mouth in a brutally savage kiss.

She moaned and searched for his tongue. He savored the sexual battle of their tongues thrusting in a raw mating act. Saylym threaded her fingers in his long hair and the kiss turned even hotter, raw and carnal.

Kyma grunted, cupped her butt, and dragged her against his erection. He closed her fingers around his rock hard cock. "Touch me, darling," he encouraged. "I need to feel your sweet touch."

Saylym closed her fingers around his mating shaft and stroked and pumped the long length. When he freed her mouth, her ragged breaths matched his. "Noo. Don't stop kissing me," she cried. "I want you."

Please, Kyma. I want you inside me. I need to feel you filling me."

Kyma flashed a wicked triumphant glance toward the mirror. Then slowly he turned her and bent her over the long padded bench in front of the mirror. "You want me to fuck you?"

"Yes! I need you."

He nudged her butt with the blunt tip of his shaft. "Can you take me like this?"

"Yes. Yes," she said desperately, grinding her ass against his straining cock. "Please, Kyma. Fuck me now. I'm going insane with needing you. Hurry."

He edged closer, forced her head down, lifted her ass higher, then guided his rigid cock to the mouth of her sultry, hot channel. Slowly, he entered her. Inch by inch he filled her, until he was seated to the hilt. "Gods, woman, you're damned tight. I love fucking you. Your pussy's so hot it feels like it's going to melt my shaft. Come on, baby, work it."

Saylym wiggled her hips. "I love the feel of you inside me. Don't torture me so. Dammit! Fuck me!"

Kyma laughed. "I aim to please my mate." He set a slow, steady, torturous rhythm. By the time he came, Saylym moaned with weakness. Her breasts heaved with ragged breaths. She panted, trying to calm her body from the number of multiple orgasms he'd given her.

He pulled out of her, glanced toward the mirror and smiled. "Now, my lovely mate, will you service me? Take my love rod with that lovely mouth of yours?"

Saylym turned and lowered onto her knees in front of him. He locked his fingers in her hair. "Now," he whispered. "Take me. Take it nice and slow, just like always, just as if you're very hungry for it."

She looked up at him and smiled. "I am hungry for it, just like always." Slowly, Saylym closed her mouth around his jutting cock. She licked and suckled and licked some more. She glided her tongue around and around the blunt tip, teasing and nibbling until he could bear no more.

Kyma guided her, instructed her, thrust his hips. "Merciful gods, you know how to please me." He thrust twice more and exploded. Saylym pulled on his cock, her mouth wet and hot and accepting all he had to offer.

Gingerly, Kyma helped her to her feet, sat down on the bench and pulled her astraddle of him. "Your turn, my beautiful Rausha, ride me, love. Take what you want for as long as you want."

Clenching his teeth, he helped her ride his cock until they both groaned with urgent need. He buried his cock in her sleek channel one last time, and breathing hard, poured his hot love juice inside her. Kyma remained inside her while his harsh breathing slowed to rough exhales. "Are you all right, my lovely mate?"

She nodded, her breasts heaving with her ragged breaths. "I can't get enough of you. I find each time I love you, I want to love you again and again."

"I'll never get enough of you either, Rausha."

Saylym heard the victory in his voice, saw him turn his head toward the mirror and smile again. Puzzled, she frowned. Why did he keep smiling into the mirror?

He fondled her breasts, licked the side of her neck. He stroked her nipples until she thought she'd die. "Again?" he whispered.

"Yes."

She didn't know how much time passed, but she knew Kyma spilled inside her twice more before he sat her aside and stood up. He pressed a kiss to her eyelids, slid his mouth to the rapidly beating pulse in her throat and suckled. "You taste delicious. Feel like taking a hot shower with me?"

"Mmm, I feel great. You know how to keep me satisfied." She leaned closer. "I love you, Kyma. I've never loved anyone the way I love you. Never let anyone take me from you."

"You have no need to worry about such things. You are safe here, safe in my arms."

She pressed her mouth to his, nibbled on his lower lip. "I didn't know I could love like this. You are a wonderful lover. You please me, always.

"I love you too, baby." He rubbed her belly. "Tell me, who did you see in the mirror?"

"I—I don't know. I—there was a man. Talon. He frightened me. He said he's my mate. That we have

sons. Twins."

Kyma turned her to face the mirror. He slid his arms around her thick waist from behind and splayed his wide hands across her swollen belly. "Our daughter sleeps well this night." He lifted her hands, kissed the emeralds on her fingernails. "Our daughter will inherit these lovely jewels from her beautiful mother."

"Mmm. Yes. When she reaches mating age, I'll give them to her." Contented, Saylym rested her head in the crook of his shoulder and savored his light caresses.

Kyma cupped a hand over her mound and parted her nether lips. Slowly, he rubbed a long finger up and down her sensitive clit. "That is good my love. My father is proud you are willing to give Peyton the jewels."

"She's our daughter. Of course they'll go to her."

"Next breeding season, you will give me a son. Swear it."

"Yes, if it is your desire."

"It is my desire to make many children with you. *I'm* your mate, sweetheart. Didn't I just prove it?"

She gasped as he delved inside her, swirled his finger around and teased her clit. "I never doubted for a minute you're my mate. It's just that he sounded so sure—"

"No! I've always been your mate. Your only mate. He's an intruder. He tries to steal what you and I have together. He wants to destroy our love." Kyma thrust his finger inside her. "Ride it," he commanded softly.

And she did. Wild and out of control with the fire he'd stoked deep inside her, she moaned, parted her thighs and gave him deeper access to her burning channel. "Oh, gods, how do you make me so hot?"

"I'm your mate, Rausha. I always will be. I love you, baby." He brought her to an explosive climax. Saylym leaned weakly against him. "You love me so well. Don't ever stop."

"I have no intention of stopping. You're mine, darling. We are going to have a very, very large family. Someone's trying to hex you. You don't know anyone named Talon, sweetheart. You never have. This child you carry is your first. Our first."

"I know all this, Kyma." She turned, cupped the side of his face. "Never doubt I love you with all my heart. I want to give you the sons you desire and need."

"And you will—"

Suddenly, the mirror exploded. Crystal pieces of long jagged glass flew through the air, peppering both of them. Saylym screamed and buried her face against Kyma's chest. He locked an arm around her and held her protectively against his body.

Dizziness rolled over her like swells of tidal waves. Agonizing pain slashed across the right side of her belly. "Kyma!" Clumsily, she curled her fingers against his chest and leaned heavily against him.

His heart rising in his throat, Kyma swept her into his arms and carried her to their bed. "What's wrong?" He swiped a hand across his bare stomach. "What is this? Blood? Sweetheart, you're bleeding!"

Saylym gasped and looked at her belly. A long sharp piece of jagged glass stuck out of the lower right quadrant of her stomach. White-hot pain ripped across her insides. "Oh, gods, the baby. She's cut! Her heart. It beats faintly. The glass is lodged deep in her chest."

Kyma slapped the button on the wall near their bed. In the distance she heard an alarm. He jerked on clothes and wrapped a blanket around her.

"What was that?" she asked faintly. "Some kind of alarm?"

"Yes. We need help. Someone just tried to kill us and tried to murder our daughter." He helped her stand. Immediately, her knees buckled. Kyma caught her in his arms as she toppled toward him. He spun around and headed out of their chamber and down the hall. "You'll be okay, sweetheart. I swear by all that's holy, I will not let him get to you. Ever. I'll keep you safe."

Professor Shomus and Zebus met him in the corridor. "What are you doing? What happened? Where are you taking her?" Zebus asked.

"To Sanctuary. We need a surgical team on standby. Rausha's been injured. So has our baby. Our

daughter will be born tonight."

"But it's not time. The baby isn't due for another three weeks."

"Don't you think I know that? There's glass, enchanted glass from the Magick Mirror buried deep in Rausha's belly. It's lodged in the baby's chest. We must hurry, Father, or we'll lose both of them."

"What happened to cause such a thing?" Zebus asked. "The Magick Mirror would never attack one of us or our children."

Kyma shot a look at the professor. "The *waken* made contact with her. He hexed the mirror. She knew him. Give her an injection, Professor. Something for pain, then give her a shot of the new drug, and this time, make damn certain you give her enough so she never remembers the son of a bitch." He shuddered and held Saylym tighter. "If that murdering bastard ever makes contact with my mate again, if she ever says his name or remembers she has twin sons, I'll rip out your heart." Kyma glared at his father. "Talon can never be allowed near her. She isn't safe with him. He just tried to kill her. He tried to murder my daughter. I'll see him in hell for this. I swear it."

"I'll triple the dose," the professor said.

"No," Kyma said, clenching his jaw. "Give her an entire year's worth."

"Kyma, with all I've already given her, a year's dosage will totally wipe out every memory cell she has left. She will never recall anything about her past."

"And that's exactly the way I want it. She has no past, only a future with me and our children. Do it, Professor. Now! I will not risk her remembering Talon or their sons. Ever. I will not lose her to him."

The professor hurried toward the lab.

Zebus eyed his son. "What else happened?"

Kyma wondered if his eyes looked as icy as they felt. "Talon heard Rausha beg me to fuck her."

"Did you give her what she wanted?"

"I made damn certain he saw us. I didn't want him to have a single doubt Rausha and I have a very active, extremely satisfying intimate relationship, and she loves me, as much as I love her. I'm sure he became quite livid, but there was nothing he could do but watch helplessly while I took his mate over and over and over again. The fucker tried to steal her from me through the mirror! It exploded."

"Calm down, Kyma. You knew it was the Magic Mirror. We knew he'd try to contact her. We meant for him to see you mating with her."

"Yes. I expected him to try and slay me, but I never thought he'd try to butcher Rausha and my baby. Our goal was to obtain revenge for what he did to Mother, but I will not put Rausha or my child at such risk again. And I swear I'll cut out Shomus' heart if she recalls any of this."

"It isn't Professor Shomus' fault Talon tried to make contact. These things are to be expected. He wants her back. We'll just have to be on better guard."

Kyma narrowed his eyes. "I think after he saw his female suck me off and her obvious pleasure while doing me, he no longer wants her. I saw the fury on his face. Even if he does want her, he can't have her. I will never give her up to him."

"He will seek the birthing chamber. Talon knows now that she's heavily pregnant with your babe and that he has caused a severe enough injury for her to need medical help from the witches. Talon will hunt both you and her down in Sanctuary."

"If he comes near her or my daughter, I'll kill him, just like he killed my mother and my baby brother."

Zebus nodded. "I've trained you for that moment of revenge. We've waited centuries to avenge your mother's assassination, your brother's death, but this witch you're infatuated with is merely icing on the cake."

Kyma stiffened. "She had nothing to do with Mother's death. *This* witch is my mate. She will remain mine. I'm not infatuated with her, Father. I love her with every breath I draw. I will never have another female, so you better get used to having Rausha around. I plan on making lots of babies with her."

Zebus grinned. "I expect you will succeed, too. As soon as this girl child is born, get them both back here where it's safe. Perhaps we can get Rausha in and out of Sanctuary before Talon discovers she's there."

"I will not rush her back here, Father. She will need time to mend and bond with our daughter. They will have the time they need before I bring them back here. The *waken* will not get near what is mine. I will stand guard over her myself. I told you; she's mine. I love her. I love this babe we made together. She is proof of our passion, my possession. We will raise our daughter side by side, and any other children we create together."

"Talon will get in the clinic. We must make plans." Zebus eyed Saylym's pale face. "I have an idea." Kyma waited.

"I'll mull it over and get back with you. In the meantime, I'll post guards outside her chamber and outside the Sanctuary Clinic. It's early in the season for births, but who knows? Maybe some of the other witches will go into early labor. Maybe the staff will be so busy delivering babies no one will pay your mate any heed. Cover her face when you take her inside the clinic. Let no one look upon her other than the surgeon. After she delivers your daughter and you know she and Rausha are well, kill her."

"I already planned to do that."

Saylym moaned in his arms. "Just a few more minutes, sweetheart, and we'll be on our way to Sanctuary."

Professor Shomus hurried toward them. He paused long enough to flip back the blanket, then jabbed first one needle, then the second in Saylym's arm.

"She's unconscious," Kyma said, worry in his voice. "She's losing blood. Did you give her the amount of drug I told you to?"

Professor Shomus nodded. "Yes. It will wipe all traces of any previous memories left in her brain. She has no past now. It's gone for good. You're the only mate she'll recognize or ever love. I added a hallucinogen with the suggestion that if a male named Talon ever approaches her, he wants to kill her and her children. She will fight him if he comes near her. She will scream down the roof of the clinic if he enters her birthing chamber."

"Father," Kyma said, "I'll see you in Sanctuary."

Zebus watched his son until Kyma rounded the corner. "I hope Talon tries to find Saylym. I hope he enters her birthing chamber."

"Why do you wish that?"

"Because then, Kyma will kill him. My mate's brutal assassination will be avenged. We'll have one less fucking *waken* to worry about."



"Our daughter will inherit these lovely jewels from her beautiful mother." MeLora clenched her fists and repeated the damning words. Her temper rose, hot and fierce. She glared at the offending mirror, at the images of Kyma and Saylym mating and making plans for more children.

Did the freakin' demon's cock never wear out? No, of course not. He was his father's son, and just like Zebus, he went at the female every chance he got. She bet he fucked Saylym day and night and there the witch was, her belly bloated much bigger than hers. The witch's face was just as puffy as *her* fat stomach had been before she rid her body of Zebus' ugly seed, and still the young demon desired Saylym.

MeLora tapped a fingernail against her teeth. Well she had something to say about his stinking brat of a daughter inheriting those emeralds. It would happen only over *her* dead body. She'd kill the bitch in Saylym's belly before she ever let the little twit inherit those stones.

And she'd cut off Saylym's fingers if she had to, but the emeralds belonged to *her*. She was the only one who knew how to use the magic they possessed.

"What are you doing?" Black Drayke asked from her bed. She scowled. The damn warlock, turned

demon, had moved in on her. Swear to the gods, she'd had the sorriest mating season of her life. First Black Drayke, then King Darak, then Zebus and now, once again she was stuck with Black Drayke, only he was so damned ugly, she could barely stand to look at him, let alone mate with him.

What was it about her that drew the wrong lovers?

She'd done her best to steal Talon from that bitch, Saylym, but he'd refused her offer. Creed had looked like a likely candidate and MeLora had wanted to mate with him so badly, but then he'd had to go and ruin everything by revealing the wolf in his nature. MeLora shuddered to think what might have happened if she'd mated with the *were*.

"I said what are you looking at?"

"I'm watching Kyma fuck Saylym."

"Really?" Black Drayke jumped off the bed and joined her in front of the mirror. "Gods, he's got a cock on him, makes me damned envious."

MeLora grinned. "Me, too." She licked her lips. "Envious of Saylym's good luck."

Black Drayke frowned. "What the hell? She looks like a fat blob." He shuddered. "I don't know how he can want her, probably faking it."

"He isn't faking it. He loves her. Not once has he failed to be ready for her. He doesn't care how big and bloated she is."

MeLora slid her hands over her much smaller belly. "Yes, she's grossly huge. Much bigger than I am, and still he desires her."

"Have you seen enough? Come back to bed. I want you to suck my dick again."

"Not before I kill the brat in Saylym's womb. Zebus intends for the babe to have the emeralds."

"Told you. Didn't I tell you Zebus would not take the emeralds from Saylym and give them to you?"

"He doesn't want to give me the emeralds—I'll see to it his granddaughter doesn't live to be born."

MeLora held her arms high above her head and chanted:

*"Mirror, mirror, weave your spell,
Break apart, break apart, and break apart well,
In separate sharp pieces, shatter apart
Cut deep, stab deep—into the babe's heart,
Make it your home, forever to dwell.*

MeLora waved her hands, gathered a giant fireball out of the air and dashed it toward the mirror. Glass shattered and flew through the air. The broken pieces fell on MeLora, nicking her arms and face, but the larger, more dangerous pieces shot forward and straight toward Saylym.

Black Drayke cursed and leapt back. "What the hell are you doing?"

MeLora laughed when she heard Saylym scream. She searched out the longest, most jagged piece of glass and sent it flying straight at Saylym's back and buried it deep in her side and belly.

She watched and laughed when Saylym collapsed against Kyma. His terrified yell sent a thrill through her. MeLora grinned when she saw the blood soaking Saylym's body. "Ha! Now who's the smartest witch?"

"Get away from the mirror, MeLora. Kyma can see you."

"No. I'm a blur." MeLora dusted her hands off on her gown and smiled. "Kyma will believe Talon is the culprit."

"Really? Good for you. Now come service me. My cock is hard."

MeLora grinned. "I hope both Saylym and her stinking demon baby die long, miserable deaths." She looped her arm through Black Drayke's smiling, pleased with her night's work. "I'll give you that blowjob now."

Chapter Thirty-Six

The darkness that surrounds us cannot hurt us. It is the darkness in your own heart you should fear.

~Silvetris

*Ru-Noc
Sanctuary Witches' Clinic
Approaching Samhain
Immortal Realm*

Kyma paced the long corridor of the witches' clinic outside the operating room. He paused and stared at the surgery room doors, then returned to pacing. Dammit, this not knowing what was happening was driving him nuts.

Behind those doors, his baby daughter struggled to live. Two days before that, his mate had been in there, fighting the same fight. He'd believed then if something happened to Rausha, he'd go crazy, but the thought of losing their baby ripped his heart apart. "Gods, please, I beg you, spare my daughter's life."

Kyma swiped at the tears filling his eyes and clenched his fists. He'd never felt so helpless. His daughter's life was in the hands of a person he didn't know, and he didn't like it one damn bit. Waiting for news from the surgeon shredded his nerves. With each step he took, his rage against Talon grew and grew. He swore if it was the last thing he ever did, he'd see the *waken* dead and off to hell.

Zebus approached him and pressed a cup of something warm in his hands. "Drink this. It will help calm you."

"Calm me?" Kyma roared. "I don't want to be calm. I want to kill that fucking bastard. No. I'm *going* to kill that fucking bastard. How could he do such a thing to a helpless baby? She's an innocent. And if he cares so much about Rausha, how could he harm her so? She almost died, Father."

"I know, but right now, you need to stay calm for Rausha. She needs your strength."

"Did you see her? Talk to her?"

Zebus nodded. "She's worried. She has no idea how serious the baby's condition is. She's awake and asking for you."

Kyma took the hot drink his father insisted he have and took a sip. "Will you stay here, talk to the doctor if she comes out with news?"

"I will."

Kyma whirled. "I won't be gone long."

"Kyma!"

He turned to face his father, question in his fierce blue eyes.

"Take this with you."

Kyma stared at the lethal enchanted dagger Zebus held out to him. It was one from his father's antique collection, a primeval athame, hexed with the obsolete magic of druids. A secret, powerful magic no one had the power to reverse. It was the dagger Zebus used for sacrifices during holidays. The fancy black and silver Celtic knots and skulls embedded on the gold handle contained the *Powers of Hell*. Once used, the damage it inflicted was irreversible.

"I don't need it, Father. I have the one you gave me when I came of age."

Zebus pressed the athame in his hands. "It isn't for you. It's a gift for Rausha. Leave it with her. Leave her unguarded, she'll do the rest. I've already instructed her on what to do. She'll seek justice for her little one."

Tears welled in Kyma's eyes. "Thank you, Father."

Zebus nodded. "Go. Nothing will happen to Peyton. I will not contemplate her dying."

"I'll be back shortly."

"Take your time. Professor Shomus checked her. Rausha's fertile, Kyma. Very fertile. Two eggs, just as the oracle said."

"Father, no. She needs time to heal."

"She is healed sufficiently. Witches recover quickly from childbirth. You know that. She is ripe. You know your duty. You know what is expected of you. Go. Do what is necessary. Keep the guards outside her door until it's done, then dismiss them and return here."

"I won't do it, Father. Rausha needs rest, not me fucking her and making her pregnant again so soon."

Zebus stiffened. "I did not ask you, Kyma. It is an order from your king, not a request from your father. Refuse and I will fuck her myself and fertilize her eggs. Now go, and do as you are commanded."

Kyma bowed. "As you command, Your majesty, so shall it be."

"Good. Now go and bring me back the news I have grandsons on the way."

As soon as Kyma entered Saylym's room, he locked the door behind him. Furious, it was all he could do to keep from cursing his father. He'd die before he ever let Zebus mate with Rausha.

She looked up as he entered her room and smiled. "You're here."

Kyma eyed her. She was so pale. His heart twisted inside. He'd come so close to losing her. Drawing a deep breath, he slowly exhaled and crossed the small room. He leaned close and kissed her mouth.

"Where else would I be, sweetheart?"

Two nights earlier, he'd thought he was going to lose her and his daughter. They'd both come so close to dying. They could still lose the baby. His heart ached. Knowing Peyton was critical was almost more than he could bear. Two slivers of glass remained in her tiny heart. The surgeon was trying to remove the hexed pieces, but it wasn't looking good.

Rausha clasped his hand. "Our baby?"

"Still in surgery, last report, the surgeon was having difficulty locating the glass. It moves. Hides. Binds itself to the chambers of heart."

Tears spilled down her pale face. "She can't die."

Kyma squeezed her hands. "She won't, sweetheart. She's a fighter, like her mother. How do you feel? Are you in pain?"

"I feel fine. The incision is almost healed."

"Let me see." Kyma folded back the covers and eyed the faint pink line barely visible. He leaned closer and pressed a kiss to the fading scar. Nuzzling her belly, he licked a line toward her bellybutton.

She gasped and arched against his face.

Kyma felt his heart catch. He wasn't sure how he'd gotten so lucky to win the love of this female, but he'd be eternally grateful he had. "I've missed holding you in my arms these past two nights," he said huskily. "I want to be inside you so badly, I ache. You're already fertile again. We could make those little boys the oracle predicted for us, but they'd be born out of season. I'm leaving the decision up to you."

She smiled, her lips curving sweetly. "I want you inside me, too."

"You're not just fertile, Rausha, not just one egg. We'd have twins."

"Yes. Your father had his doctor examine me. Two eggs."

Kyma tucked a silken curl behind her ear. "I love you," he said gently. "Don't ever doubt that."

"I don't."

He turned to leave. "I have to go. I need to be there when the doctor comes out of surgery."

"But...aren't you going to breed me? I'm willing to give you a son...two sons. Your father said—"

"I don't give a damn what my father said. You just gave birth. Your body hasn't mended. I love you, Rausha. If I didn't—" He shrugged. "If I didn't, I'd be in the bed there with you, inside you. I want a son, two at once if that is what the gods will, but we will wait until next breeding season. I promise you, we'll have more babies, but for now, Peyton is enough."

Tears welled in her eyes. "I want to give you the sons you need."

"And you will. There will be other breeding seasons. Rest. I'll be back as soon as I know something about Peyton."

"Yes, of course. I want you to be there when the doctor comes out to report."

He took her mouth in a sweet kiss, rubbed his nose against hers. "Have I told you I love you?"

"Only about a dozen times today, but I never tire of hearing it."

"I love you, Rausha Angel, with all my heart, my soul. Thank you for the gift of our daughter."

She burst into tears. Kyma swallowed hard. "What did I say wrong?"

"Nothing. It was perfect."

"Dammit! I have to go. I'll be back as soon as I know something."

She nodded.

"Do you need anything? Are you in pain?"

"I'm fine. One of the witches helped me up earlier. It hurts when I walk, but I can bear it. Go. Our baby needs you."

Kyma nodded and moved the call light closer to her. "If you need anything, just press the button."

"I will."

"Don't be brave. If you hurt, ask for pain medicine."

"Yes, I will, but your magic has kept me pain-free."

"Good. I know you're worried, but try to rest." Kyma turned to leave, paused and turned back. "I almost forgot. Father sends you a gift."

Saylym laughed. "He's already given me three bags of diamonds, one of mixed jewels, and three of gold coins."

Kyma laughed. "I know, but this is his first grandchild, just think what he'll give you when we have our sons. Anyway, this is a special gift." Kyma placed the dagger in her hands. "Be very careful and don't cut yourself. The dagger is hexed with extremely old magick. It carries a poison on its tip that is lethal. If anyone comes near you..."

She nodded. "I know what to do."



Talon couldn't believe his luck. The demon prince had dismissed the two guards standing outside Saylym's door. Finally. He'd waited and watched, praying for a chance to slip into her room. And here the arrogant

bastard was leaving her alone for the first time in two days and nights.

They must have decided he wasn't a threat, Kyma and Zebus. The two were so certain they owned Saylym, but he knew better. She loved him, loved their sons, and by the gods, he was taking her home if had to carry her over his shoulder to do it.

As soon as Kyma disappeared down the hall, Talon made his way to her room. Quietly, he pushed open the door and slipped inside. The room was dimly lit. He edged closer to where Saylym lay with her eyes closed.

When he reached the side of the bed he stopped and stared at her. Gods, what had they done to her? This wasn't his beautiful mate. This wasn't the female he knew and loved.

In Saylym's place was a frail witch turned demon, skin so pale he could see the fine network of black veins beneath her skin, short raven-colored hair in place of her long silver curls. Her lips were fuller, more sensual, made to give a male extreme pleasure of the most intimate kind.

The bastard had been in here kissing her.

He clenched his fists. Swear to the gods, he was killing the demon first opportunity.

Tiny horns stood up near her temples, shiny and black. A tattoo, half an angel's wing covered the left side of her face. He swallowed hard. In an odd way, he still found her attractive. Amazingly, she was still so beautiful he ached with the need to touch her.

His need for her was calmer. Less urgent. His heart didn't jump the way it once did when he saw her, but...he frowned. She'd been sleeping with a demon for months. Even now, he smelled Kyma's scent on her.

Talon snarled. Fucking bastard! He couldn't get the sound of Saylym's voice out of his head begging the demon to fuck her again and again. She hadn't fought him. She hadn't looked frightened or abused. She'd reveled in the demon's touch, his possession.

Talon struggled against the rage he felt at her betrayal. His mate would have fought to the death before she let a stinking demon breed her. The image of her belly, bloated with the demon's seed filled his mind, his heart. Kyma's hands all over her, in her, his cock rubbing against her ass—the pictured burned in his brain and made him sick.

He looked at Saylym and wondered if he still loved this female, *if* he could love her. Her beauty now was understated, softer, but her appeal was just as powerful as ever. His hand shook when he touched her raven locks. No. He didn't think he loved this female or ever could again. He had no desire to touch her intimately, but he couldn't leave her to the demons. "Saylym? Sweetheart, wake up. It's me, baby. I've come for you, time to go home."

She opened her eyes, blinked. "Kyma?" she said drowsily.

"No, baby, it's me, Talon."

"Who?"

Her eyes widened, such a deep blue, nothing like the color they once were. She pressed back against the pillow, frightened. "Who are you? What do you want? Get out!"

Talon drew a sharp breath. "It's me, sweetheart. Your mate. I've come to get you and your baby." He lowered the rail on the side of the bed and leaned closer. "Saylym, I love you. I wouldn't harm you. You know that." He lifted her into his arms and swung toward the door. "I'm getting you the hell outta here."

"Ahhhhh!" Her piercing scream rent the air. "Let me go! Now."

"Saylym, for the god's sake, be quiet."

She struck him with her tiny fist, hitting him in the mouth.

"*Sheehta*. Stop it!" He stood her on her feet and held out his hand to her. "Come with me."

"Ahhhhh! Somebody help me! Help!" She backed into a corner, huddled, shaking. Her eyes, wild and glassy, reflected her terror.

"*Fook!* I'll kill—I'm going to get your baby."

"What?"

Talon turned to the door. "I'm going after your baby. Maybe that will—"

"No! Leave my baby alone!" She hurried over to the nightstand and grabbed the dagger off the bedside table. Saylym lunged at the intruder in her room. "You can't have her!"

Talon turned to face her. The blade she plunged into his chest felt ice cold. The iciness spread, hot, cold, hot. His heart faltered, sped up, slowed to a crawl, and skipped beats. "Saylym? Why?"

She pulled the athame free and plunged it again and again, praying, crying, screaming, "You'll not hurt my baby. Leave me alone! Leave us alone."

Talon collapsed on the cold floor at her feet. Gods, it hurt. How could anything so hot feel so cold? His vision blurred and tears spilled free. Then he felt nothing, nothing but the ice heating his body, freezing his blood and slowing it to a thick crawl in his veins. His eyes flickered closed and he welcomed the frozen blackness that closed around him.

Saylym leaned weakly against the wall. Her body trembled. She shook so badly she could barely breathe. Blood covered her gown, her hands. She stared blankly at the dagger in her hand, then at the strange male lying on the floor.

She jerked when the door to her room slammed against the wall and Kyma and Zebus burst in. "Kyma," she said faintly. "I killed him."

Zebus leaned over the body, felt for a pulse and smiled. "You certainly did, my daughter."

Kyma closed his arms around her and gently removed the athame from her grasp.

"I killed him," she said. "He was going to take our baby. I had to stop him. I had to. I couldn't let him harm her."

Kyma flung the knife on the bed. "You did the right thing, baby. You couldn't let him take our child. You did the right thing. You were just protecting our sweet baby. He meant her harm. He meant to kill her." He pressed kisses over her face, lifted her into his arms and carried her out of the room. "Don't look at him," he whispered when they passed Talon's body.

She buried her face against Kyma's chest and wept. "I killed him."

"I know, baby. I know. You did what you had to. Shh. Don't cry, sweetheart. Please. Guards!" The two guards ran up just as Kyma reached the door. "Get that piece of shit out of here. Take him to the back alley and dump him in a trash bin. Make certain no one sees you. Then clean up in here."

"Yes, my Prince," one of them replied.

Kyma exited the room, turned left and headed straight to the nurse's station. "We'll get you another room."

Zebus watched until his son and daughter-in-law were out of sight and turned to the guards. "He isn't dead." He picked up the athame off Saylym's bed and handed it to Negus. "Take him out back and finish the job Rausha started."

"Yes, Your Majesty. Then what?"

"Bring the athame back to me. It belongs to my sweet daughter. When you return, lock Kyma in the room with his mate."

"Your Majesty?"

"Do it, and tell him his king said he will not be allowed out until he breeds his mate, and the deed had best be done before morning, or I will see to it myself."

The guard bowed. "Yes, Your majesty. I will give him the message."

Epilogue

There are nine gates between life and death...I will send you beyond the Ninth Gate!!

~Lycorne

*Romania
Carpathian Mountains
Approaching Samhain
Immortal Realm*

Princess Kali struggled to get free of the demon that'd snatched her right out of her brother's home, right under her mate's nose. They'd watched helplessly, she knew, terrified the demon would kill her with the athames.

She pressed her side where the demon had broken off one of the athames between her ribs. Fresh blood dripped between her fingers. Dizziness swamped her. She was hungry. Her back hurt. The babe she carried was due in a few days. And she was the prisoner of a freakin' demon.

Kali looked around now, uncertain where she was because she'd been blindfolded once they left Talon's home. Where ever they were, it wasn't inside the demon's realm. This place was icy. The walls of the chamber were solid, layered with centuries of ice, so thick and clear—it looked like glass.

Fat icicles dripped from the ceiling, long, thick and dagger-tipped. Although she couldn't feel the cold, she knew the temperature was well below freezing.

"Hello, my darling, so sorry to keep you waiting, but I had some business to take care of before I could joined you."

Kali whirled at the sound of an old familiar voice. An old enemy. Her heart leapt into her throat. "Brasov," she said faintly. Oh, gods, she was in deep *shymeta* here. "What do you want?" She watched him pat his zipper in place and knew exactly what business he'd been taking care of before he joined her here.

His smile was the cruelest she'd ever witnessed and she knew whoever he'd just sexed hadn't survived the ordeal.

He edged closer. "How do you like our new home? Granted, it isn't nearly as warm and cozy as my last place, but no matter, I feel perfectly content. How about you?"

"I'm fine."

"Good, because you won't be long." He moved quickly, crossing the room in a blur of speed.

Kali gasped and backed away, but his attack was fierce. He rode her to the ice covered floor before she could catch her breath. She pushed against his chin with the flat of her hand, but as strong as she was, he was ten times stronger. He was the older vampire, his strength way beyond hers.

She didn't feel the top of dress being torn to shreds—what she felt was the sharp tips of his fangs sink into her bared breasts again and again. He fed like he was famished, slurping and swallowing greedily.

Unable to fight him off, her arms dropped weakly to her sides. "Please, my baby," she said faintly.

Brasov lifted his head, his eyes merciless. His fangs lengthened. Kali widened her eyes and stared. She'd never seen fangs quite that long or lethal. He'd changed over the past months. He'd been dangerous before. Now he was deadly, a powerful, ancient being without a conscience. "You belong to me, Kali. I was the first to taste you—I'll be the last. You will not have this baby. I swear it."

Brasov methodically ripped off what was left of her gown and tossed it aside.

Tears poured down Kali's face. "I beg you, don't kill my baby."

"I'm not going to kill your baby, Princess...I'm going to kill you." Brasov twisted her head to one side and sank the lethal fangs into her jugular.

Her breasts heaved. Her lungs fought for air. With each swallow of her life he drained, she felt her heart jitter...slow. Slow. Gods, she couldn't breathe. He retracted the lethal fangs and sank them on the other side of her throat and started again. He repeated this until she thought there were no new places for him to bite.

Then he spread her legs wide apart and bit her inner right thigh. When he lifted his head again, her blood spilled from his mouth. "You're mine, Kali. My initials will mark you for eternity."

He lifted her in his arms and carried her some distance inside the ice cave, around twists and turns that spiraled deeper and deeper, until she had no clue just how deep inside the cave he'd taken her.

Kali's eyes fluttered, but she couldn't work up the strength to care where he took her. She felt so light, as if her soul floated away. Intense pain slashed her heart. *Koran, my darling, I'm sorry. Forgive me for failing you and our son.*

Kali, what's happening? I'm here. I'm in Romania. Where are you?

*Don't—know—*Her heart crawled...slower...slower, until the beats were so far apart, she felt dizzy. What blood was left in her body sludged along as slow as lava and turned dense as mud. Her heart stuttered. Slow...slow...slower...stopped.

Brasov smiled as he lowered her into the dip on the small mound of solid ice. His lips twisted with triumph. He'd known the moment her heart stopped beating. She lay there in the ice coffin, naked, pale and cold as a slab of marble.

Tenderly, he stroked her full breasts, taking pleasure in the many bites he'd left on them. Curious, he rubbed his palm over the huge mound of her belly. The babe inside her lay quiet and still—no heartbeat. "You refused to give me a son, Kali. You will not give birth to Captain Koran's. Ever."

Slowly, he fit the solid clear slab over her resting place, sealing her inside the sarcophagus of ice. He looked upon her lovely face through the frozen lid. Beautiful. So still. So cold. Perfection. She belonged to him now. His for all eternity. Her beauty preserved behind the ice. "None will ever find you here, and I will never reveal your final resting place." He leaned down and pressed his lips against the ice. "Rest, my darling..."

GLOSSARY FROM THE WINSLOW WITCHES OF SALEM

ANZUS GEVO- DIVINE GIFT

ARK TREES- A TYPE OF OAK TREE

AZREL-STIMULANT FOR MALE DEMONS

BAVAR ROOT – A BLACK SHRUB/BUSH

BAVAR ROOT SOUP-BLACK SOUP MADE FROM THE BAVAR ROOT SHRUB/BUSH

BAWK- A RARE BIRD, HALF-HAWK, HALF-BAT

BELTANE-WITCHES MATING SEASON

BLACK SLUMBER-SLEEP OF THE DEAD

BESOM-WITCH'S BROOM

CHANGELING-A NEWLY TURNED VAMPIRED, USUALLY A HUMAN THAT'S BEEN CHANGED.

CHAR-FLUM-ROPE- A FLAMING WHIP USED TO PUNISH THE WITCHES/WAKENS

CHOCO-CHOCOLATE

CONTAINER UNITS- CELLS FOR HOLDING SOULS AND/OR BODIES

COPSTER- POLICE

CORMEL- CARMEL

CROWNING – THE PRIME STATE OF BEING FOR A MALE VAMPIRE WHEN HE'S READY TO FIND A MATE.

DISIAC- A PREPARATION FLUID TO PREPARE A FEMALE FOR SEX WITH AN UNDERWORLD GOD.

EL-LOY EGG- AN EAGLE'S EGG

ENFORCER AGENT-SECRET AGENT

FEMMA-LENE-FEMALE

FIREBON LIONS- MAGICAL, STUDLY LIONS THAT DWELL IN THE UNDERWORLD

FIRST BRIDE-THE MOST IMPORTANT CHOSEN BRIDE OF A VAMPIRE TO BE THE MOTHER OF HIS OFFSPRING.

FUTHAR- THE PROPER NAME FOR THE FAMILIAR RACE

FUTZ-FUZZY- FUCK FUZZY

FYDE-FARZ- SHIT

GRUBO WRESTLER - AN OVERWEIGHT WARLOCK WRESTLER

GRUBIT- A RABBIT

HANDEFAST- MARRIAGE

JABBER ENGINE JETSKEY-A MAGICAL HIGH-POWERED ENGINE ATTACHED TO A BESOM

JUKEY- A FORM OF CATNIP DRUG, HIGHLY ADDICTIVE LIKE OPIUM

JUNUS VINE- A STRONG VINE WITH THE ABILITY TO COME TO LIFE AND WRAP AROUND YOU.

KYDOR-THE GREAT SALT PLAINS ON RU-NOC

ILLUMROF-MORTAL/HUMAN

IMPURE- HALF-HUMAN, HALF-WITCH

IMAGE-A LOOK-ALIKE

INFERITLUS-A VIRUS THAT LEAVES A WITCH STERILE

ISH-CROM-ICE CREAM

KIERAN-SWEETHEART

KNOCKROOT-A CERTAIN TYPE OF TREE ROOT FROM THE KNOCKROOT FAMILY

LA-SCHEME-DARLING

LEETH-THE HEAVY URGE TO SLEEP

LOBSTROID-LOBSTER

LOLLI-ROOS-LOLLIPOPS

LU-NARK-WHEN A WEREWOLF REACHES FULL MATURITY AND THE URGE TO FIND A MATE INTENSIFIES

LUTTO-LETTUCE

MABON-AUTUMN

MACKHA GUN- LIKE A MACHINE GUN, EXCEPT IT SHOOTS LASER BEAMS INSTEAD OF BULLETS

MANDREYAN HONEY- TYPE OF BEE'S HONEY FOUND ONLY IN RU-NOC.

MANNARA-WOMAN-MATE

MANNAZ-MAN-MATE

MARSH WASPS- A MEAN, SHORT-TEMPERED YELLOW WASP THAT LIVES IN THE MARSHES NEAR SANCTUARY.

MARSEM PUFFS-MARSHMALLOW PUFFS

MAU-LEY- MY LOVE

MITHRA-A HALLUCINAGENIC LSD TYPE OF NARCOTIC

MON-KAR-MONKEY

NAGARRA-DAY

NAGAZ-NIGHT

OBSERVER-GHOSTLY GUARDS WHO PATROL THE BORDERS BETWEEN THE MORTAL AND IMMORTAL WORLDS.

OOMBA-A PARASITIC WORM RELEASED BY A DEMON DURING COPULATION.

OXBORE — A HUGE, BULL LIKE CREATURE FROM THE SWAMPS OF RU-NOC.

PERTHRONE-STONE

PREAKNESS-INTENSE STAGE A WAKEN REACHES AT MATING TIME.

RAZURE-VAMPIRE'S ENTHRALLMENT.

REDE WORM- RED WORM FOUND ONLY ON THE KYDOR SALT PLAINS

ROM-A VERY FAST BIRD RESEMBLING A ROADRUNNER

RU-NOC-LAND OF WITCHES, WAKENS AND WARLOCKS

RUSHING-WHEN A MALE VAMPIRE REACHES THE AGE TO SEEK A MATE.

SHEEAHTA-MASCULINE FORM FOR SHIT

SHRUM WORM- A MAGGOT

SHYMETA- FEMININE FORM FOR SHIT

SOWILLA-SUN

SRAHTUF-INANIMATE FAMILIAR

SWIGEE-WET GLOVE

TERREZA DE NOCHEZ- TERROR OF THE NIGHT

THRASH HOG-WILD BOAR

TOAD'S BANYAN-A PLUM-LIKE FRUIT

TOKEN-CLAIMING MARK

TOMORS-TOMATOES

TY-GUR- TIGER

U-NULLBRED-A CHILD BORN FROM INCEST

WAKEN-A MALE WITCH

WEEBLE BUGS-LIGHTNING BUGS

WHOOSHY-WHOOSHY- ABILITY TO FERTILIZE EGGS

WHUMPIE-WHUMPIE-VAMPIRE SEX

WISKA-WHISKEY

ZUM BIRD- A VERY TINY BIRD THAT RESEMBLES A HUMMING BIRD

About the Author

Tabitha Shay is a native Oklahoman and a member of the Oklahoma Writer's Federation, Inc., in which she has served as both a category chair and a judge for the past three years. Before becoming an author, she was a nurse, dedicated to helping others. Her novels have topped the number one top ten best seller's list at Fictionwise for her publisher, Eternal Press.

Her first novel, *Witch's Brew*, won Second Honorable Mention in 2006 at the OWFI Convention. *Witch's Heart* took First Place in 2007, and *Witch's Touch* won First Honorable Mention in 2009. Her books have been nominated for several awards, including the prestigious P.E.A.R.L. Award for *Witch's Moon* that was nominated for Best All Around Paranormal in 2008.

Ms. Shay also writes contemporary western romances under the pen name, Jaydyn Chelcee. Available now in her Montana Men series: *In the Arms of Danger* and *Too Close to the Fire*.

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