



Firebrand

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Prologue

Gisparry, Ireland
Everwood Ring, home of the Gisparry Fae

Alara cradled the small bundle securely in her arms as she made her way quickly through the dense thicket. The bundle moved, a soft mewling cry escaping from it.

“Hush, there now my dear one,” she whispered as a large shadow passed over them casting an evil blackness in its wake. She could feel the instinctive unfurling of her gossamer wings but she willed them to still and settle close to her back. Overhead the shadow passed once more, increasing the beating of her heart a hundred fold. “The Dullahan hunts!”

She crouched down, wrapping her body around the swaddled child protectively. She could hear pounding hoof beats strike the ground, the terrible sound escalating each time its maker passed back and forth in a hunting pattern, getting closer with each looping track. The monster that hunted them had landed and was searching aground.

“We do not have much time,” she whispered against the baby’s cheek as she tried to bury herself inside a dark thicket. “If the Dullahan finds us, he will take you to Gorash.” She clasped the baby tightly to her body trying to make two appear as one.

The specter tracked close by them. Through the brambles she could see it. Clad in dark flowing robes, the Dullahan rode a magnificent black stallion with flaming red eyes. Its

disembodied head hung from the saddle pommel. From time to time he would grasp the head and hold it high, allowing him to see great distances even in the blackest night.

As moonlight passed over the Dullahan's raised arm, Alara could clearly see the face of her hunter. The skin, although smooth was the color and texture of stale dough and stank like moldy cheese. A hideous grin split the face from ear to ear and small black eyes darted about like malignant flies. The entire head glowed with the phosphorescence of decaying matter making it look more like a lantern to be used to guide the creature in the darkness.

The horse stopped next to the brush in which she hid, a mighty hoof pounded the ground spraying dirt onto her like rain. She could feel the warmth of air wash across her each time it snorted in response to the tug on its reins and she prayed her precious baby would remain silent.

After what seemed like an eternity to her, she let out the breath she did not realize she had been holding as the Dullahan thundered away. Cautiously she emerged from hiding, carefully holding the child close.

Not knowing if the specter was still near enough to hear the furious pounding of her heart, she ran. At her feet, low growing vines seemed to try to wrap themselves around her while in front of her the thick bushes of the forest loomed menacing in her path. Yet, she struggled onward, sidestepping the twisting vines and protecting the child in her arms from the fingered branches of grasping trees.

The mewling sounded again, turning into a small but high-pitched wail that persisted. "Be still my most precious of precious things. You'll be safe soon," she said stopping her frantic sprint.

Looking over her shoulder, she hoped she was far enough away from the evil that sought her and closed her eyes. Lifting her chin, she let her wings unfurl from her back. They opened in a magnificent display of iridescent color. A moment later and she was flying, willing all her energy and emotion to her wings. She called upon both the love for her baby to help speed her onward, and the fear of the evil thing hunting her to fuel her resolve and make her path to what she hoped was safety straight and true. To falter, just for an instant, would mean certain death for her and a fate even worse for her child.

The rocking motion of flight quieted the crying of the baby to a soft tremulous purr punctuated by an occasional wail. After a while, the child stirred more frequently and Alara knew she could wait no longer. Settling her feet on a mossy knoll with feather-light ease, she fumbled with the bundle and moved the pale, very nearly transparent, cloth away. She smiled at the sight of her newly born infant, allowing herself to forget what had to be done.

“My dear one,” Alara said, sliding the strap of her dress from her shoulder and moving the baby to her breast. Her chest heaved with longing as the babe began to suckle. “Drink your fill of fae milk, my daughter. Taste it and remember me.”

#

In another part of the woods near the sacred Dolmans of Mourne, a watcher troll built a small fire on which he planned to roast two small fish he had caught in the lough. He'd just speared the first one when a sudden reverberation of a sound like thunder rose from behind him and made him drop his supper into the fire. He turned to the deafening sound, now more like a violent shattering of wood as though lightning had splintered a great tree. But the sky was cloudless and he could smell no rain in the air, only the strong odor of sulfur.

Grabbing a heavy stick, he padded toward the noise just as another roar seemed to answer the first. Around him the normal sounds of nature grew silent. Birds did not sing, the wind did not blow, insects stilled but he went on. The landscape ahead took on a surreal appearance with every rock and bush taking the form of creatures waiting to pounce. Then, as though written by script, clouds appeared, swelling and darkening as they rolled across the sky, adding an ominous feel to the silence in the land. The troll examined the ground as he plodded along, sniffing the air and grunting as he tried to find the source of the unnatural pull toward something he had no idea what.

Soon his search led to the mouth of a cave with the bones of dead animals littering the entrance. Thrusting his long nose forward, he caught the scent of stagnant air. Moving in closer to the hollow, he could see light undulating on the cave wall a few feet inside. Following his curiosity, he entered and walked until the ground ended and he found himself on the edge of a precipice.

His eyes widened. Directly in front of him, suspended in the air, golden circles glistened like stars. Just one of them would make him rich. Inching as close to the edge as he dared, he reached out, his fingertip grazing one of the spheres. He jabbed at it a few times but it seemed to move farther away.

Angry now, he fell to his knees and stretched his gnarled arm as far as it would go. He could feel the golden globe hit the palm of his hand and he grabbed at it. As he did, he pitched forward and the natural world seemed to ripple and fall away. With a guttural cry, he closed his eyes and slipped over the edge, preparing himself to die.

But instead he landed with a thud only a few feet below the rock shelf. Warily he stood and found himself in a large crater with a floor that was a circle of gold that he estimated was fifty feet round. Above him, numbers and jewel-encrusted letters joined the golden circles. They moved and swirled in a random pattern as though caught in a vortex. Jumping with all his might, he tried to catch one of the prizes but could not reach any.

It was then that the sound came again, now a great clang like a giant piece of a large metal puzzle being dropped into place. It made him step forward and watch in fascination as the floor on which he stood moved ever so lightly, casting a barely perceptible beam of light onto writing carved into the walls.

He moved forward slowly and ran a large hand over the lettering. His yellowed eyes widened as he read the inscription beneath his fingers:

From one comes three

From three comes one

Forgetting the treasures that moved above him, he scrambled out of the hollow and ran out of the cave.

He had to tell the Master. It had begun.

Chapter One

Present Day, New York City

When Amber Drake touched the doorknob on her townhouse it rippled like heat waves rising from the desert floor. Electric-like shocks began at her shoulder blades and shot down her spine ending at the dimples in the small of her back. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply and slowly until the sensations passed. She knew they would. This was not the first time. She stepped back and pulled her cell phone from her purse. The one-touch dialing connected her quickly.

“David,” she said, fighting to keep composed. “It happened again.” She listened to the voice on the other end, closing her eyes as his soothing tone spread calm through her. “I’ll wait for you. Please hurry.” She flipped her cell phone closed and held it to her chest as though it still connected her to him.

David Mack had come into her life a year ago. He was her rock, her haven at a time when everything she knew seemed to be falling apart. Since she’d met him, she felt safe, almost as though he had been sent to her for just that reason. It didn’t surprise her in the least when she fell in love with him. Even when she told him about the hallucinations, he listened and didn’t judge her.

The phenomenon began when she was about thirteen. Her mother had died about a year earlier and left a terrible hole in her life. Her father, Marcus, tried his best to fill it and had for a while. But Amber’s body was changing, she was becoming a woman. Her father tried to help her understand but she needed a woman’s touch.

She'd taken a walk to the large oak tree near the lake behind her family home in Pennsylvania, where she often went to think about her mother. The now familiar pulling sensation inside her seemed particularly intense, so she kept walking to relieve the ache.

She soon found herself at the edge of a meadow at the foot of the only hill around for miles. It appeared to have been thrust out of the earth and raised as a gift to some ancient god.

The sides of the hill shot straight up but Amber felt compelled to climb them. When she reached the top, the sun was directly overhead and when she looked down from the peak, she saw a perfectly circular pond set below. Looking down into the clear water, she felt an overwhelming urge to step off the mountain and float down onto the still water below.

Not knowing why, she inched closer to the edge of the cliff, a feeling of invincibility inside her growing steadily. She felt she could do this. She felt she could fly. But that was crazy, people couldn't fly not without airplanes at least. But even though she knew better she spread her arms and closed her eyes, a pain shot up her back and settled between her shoulder blades. A feeling like building energy began on each side of her spine and rose in a crescendo until she feared the skin on her back would rip apart. When it finally stopped, her entire back felt as though she had been hit with a thousand tiny electric shocks.

Shaken, she climbed down the hill and dropped to the ground near the pond. She looked across the perfectly still water and the sunlight sparkling on the surface drew her to the edge. She leaned forward and for a brief moment, reflected in the water, she could see two curtains of luminous light behind her. She watched in fascination as they vanished a second later like two small eddies of energy running out of power. She turned quickly but saw nothing.

When she looked back into the pool she saw a vision of her friend, Serina, talking to what at first glance appeared to be a small animal. But on closer look, it did not look like anything she'd ever seen before.

It was a small creature, only about two feet high with a pair of undersized eyes and a lipless mouth set beneath a round nose. Its ears were long, ending in points much like the antennae of a butterfly. Its feet were webbed like a frog's, its skin a light blue. Clearly not remotely human, it was not an animal either. Amber could hear Serina talking in a language unfamiliar to the thing while the wind blew the petals of flowers around the creature's head.

Suddenly, as though drawn by a tap on the shoulder, Serina looked straight back at her. Their eyes locked and Serina shook her head slowly, almost sadly. Then a cloud moved across the sun and the vision vanished.

Amber never said anything about that day, not to her father, not to Serina. But soon the episodes began to coincide with her menstrual cycle and she was able to sense their onset much in the same way a child senses she is home and awakens just before the parents pull the car into the driveway after a long trip. Then there were the incidents. She could see things, sense things, a car about to hit a child, the intense smell of a storm. Sometimes when she was with David, it was as though she could look inside his steel blue eyes and see the blood flowing in his veins.

But what scared her the most was that now each new episode brought with it what seemed to be a psychic warning, a soft whisper telling her to prepare.

Shaking off the feeling of presage that wound itself around her, she touched the doorknob again. This time nothing happened. She had told David she would wait for him but she felt a power urging her inside. By small degrees she turned the knob, her senses prickling. Then, after opening the door completely, she reached for the light switch on the wall.

“Bring not the light,” a croaky voice said.

Amber lowered her hand, her heart pounding hard in her chest.

An indistinct figure stepped out from the deep shadows inside the room and into the lighter ones near the doorway. “I did not come here to hurt you, that is, unless I am forced to.”

“A friend of mine will be here any minute. You’d better leave while you can,” Amber warned.

The intruder continued to move around the room. “If I am forced to hurt whoever comes, I will.

He passed in front of the window and for a moment, Amber could see him in the moonlight that filtered in through the opaque curtains. About three feet tall, he was stocky with markedly large hands and feet. His knotted hair touched his shoulders, shrouding his features in shaded darkness.

“Who are you? What do you want?” Amber said as he moved back into obscurity.

“For now, only talk.”

More curious than afraid, she walked into the living room relying on memory for navigation. She found the sofa and perched on the edge. As she slowly reached for the lamp on the end table, she felt something fall on her arm before a sharp pain ran up her hand

“No light! I have warned you once,” the intruder shouted.

A bright blue spark preceded another burst of pain in her arm. She cradled her wrist and squinted through the darkness. “Okay, I get the message,” She said rubbing her sore arm.

“I want the object,” the man-creature said in a low, gravelly voice.

“What object?”

“I’ve been searching for it for about twenty-five years and there is a connection to you.”

Amber could hear him shuffling around the room picking up and replacing things on the tables and bookcases. She became annoyed. This was her home. She heard papers being moved around. “Stop touching my stuff,” she yelled.

A sharp pain shot up her side followed by another more intense before she realized he was poking her with something. Timing the jabs, she stood and caught the end of what felt like a rough wooden staff with both hands. With a quick jerk, she ripped it from him. In response, a solid shove from behind propelled her forward across the coffee table and onto the floor.

“You will tell me where it is,” the intruder shouted, pinching her leg and tugging on her hair before she could even react.

Dragging herself upright, Amber squinted into the darkness trying to find him. “My friend will be here any minute and if you’re still you’ll be real sorry.”

He responded by poking a finger in her side so hard that it brought tears to her eyes. She slapped at the air. “Quit it. That hurts.”

“Hurt all night you will, unless I find the object.”

Angry now, she punched out her right fist and somehow caught him on the chin. She heard him stumble. “And so will you,” she countered. Air rushed past her as she sidestepped when he lunged at her again.

“The object. I must have it,” his voice hissed.

“Tell me what it is,” she challenged, turning in a circle, waiting.

“The key. I need the key,” he insisted.

The sound of glass hitting the floor made Amber’s stomach knot. She was sure he had a weapon. “What kind of key?”

“A wondrous key. A remarkable key. But not a key at all. And I must have it,” he shouted as something heavy hit the wall behind her.

“Look, whoever you are if you keep talking in riddles, we’ll never figure this out.”

The air filled with the sound of his heavy breathing. “Then you’ll give this to me?”

“Maybe,” she baited. She heard him knock over the table to her right and turned toward the sound. When she did, she felt a shard of glass cut her arm and a small trickle of warmth run across her skin. “You cut me,” she gasped with astonishment.

“More I will if you do not tell me where it is!”

She clasped her hand over the cut and held her arm to her chest. When she did a pain began like a knife trying to split her breastbone assailed her. She dropped her arm and pressed her hand against her chest. Beneath her palm, she could feel the pendant she always wore begin to pulsate. She looked down and saw a dim glow between her fingers.

Instinctively she grabbed the amulet through the thin material of her blouse and wrapped her hand around it. In what seemed to be only a fraction of a second, heat grew on her skin until she felt as though she held molten lava in her palm. The urge to rip the pendant from her neck was dwarfed by a premonition that she must protect it at all costs. She tightened her grip around it.

“Show yourself,” she demanded, as the sound of objects hitting the floor intensified. Almost as soon as she uttered the words, a flickering Day-Glo green outline began to form in front of her, growing more solid as she stared. “I can see you,” she said, her voice an unsteady whisper.

The room filled with yellow light as she heard the lamp near the door click on. “What the hell?”

“David, look out!” Amber shouted right before she saw David pitch backward into the window, breaking the glass. “Stop him before he gets away!” she called out, almost knocking David over again when she scrambled after the disappearing figure. When she got to the street, she saw the small, dark shape hurriedly turning the corner. “Damn!” She walked back to the house and into David’s arms.

His blue-eyed gaze narrowed as he looked around her living room. “What happened?” His voice dropped to a gentle soothing pitch. “Are you all right?”

“I’m not sure,” Amber, replied, her voice suddenly shaky. She met his eyes and tried a wavering smile. “About either question.”

He kicked the door closed and led her to the sofa. "Sit down, honey." He sat next to her and pulled her to him in a protective hug. She settled softly against him. "Tell me what happened."

"I walked in on someone going through my things." She didn't dare tell David that she wasn't sure the thing she'd glimpsed was a person at all.

He smoothed a lock of auburn-gold hair behind her ear and away from her face. "A robbery? We'd better call the police."

Amber upright. "No. I'm a little short on details, and besides I'm not sure he was trying to rob me exactly." She pulled back from his arms and angled to face him. "He said I had something he'd been looking for" She slid her forefinger under the gold chain around her neck and lifted the pendant from inside her blouse. "I can't be sure but I think this is what he wanted."

David slipped his hand under the tri-colored disk. "Are you sure? Anyone can get something like this from a street vendor on Canal Street."

"No. Look. It's glowing." She looked from the pendant to David and, for a split second, thought she saw an uneasiness in his eyes that alarmed her.

"It's just a reflection," he said quickly bringing the discomfort on his face under control.

"No, it's not. I don't know how exactly but I think it helped me see him in the dark." She let the chain fall back onto her chest.

"Amber, you're upset." He took her hand in his. "When you called me, you said that you had another episode. Are you sure he wasn't just a street punk and the rest is just your imagination?"

She pulled away. "I didn't imagine anything." Suddenly drained and tired of the effort to be strong, she rested her head on the back of the sofa. "He said he'd been searching for twenty-five years and I'll be twenty-five in a few weeks. I don't think it's a coincidence." David rose and began to pace. She could see both warmth and concern on his face. Despite her best intentions, the sparkle of building tears lay bare in her eyes. "I'm not like everyone else and I think he knows why."

He was back at her side in an instant, pulling her up from the sofa and back into his arms. "Honey, you're in shock, that's all."

She pulled free. "No! Something's happening. I can feel it."

His arms went tight around her again and he murmured soothing little sounds. He scooped her up into his arms. She rested her head on his chest as he sat on the sofa and settled her on his lap.

“It’s okay,” he said softly, kissing her hair and then her cheek, “just try to tell me what happened.”

She glanced at the curve of his lips and then back into his eyes. While she waited for the words to come, her fingers cupped his cheeks cradling his face, a new growth of dark beard scraping against her skin. She ran her thumb over his lips, comparing their softness to the rough feel of his cheek.

“I have to kiss you first,” she whispered as she moved her mouth closer to his. “So I can feel safe,” she said against his lips.

Their caresses soon began to burn with building passion. The arousal was swift, urgent and undeniable. With each kiss it grew until their breaths came in quick, shallow gasps. She began to unbutton his shirt when he gently lightened his kisses and slid her from his lap. They stood, foreheads touching until their breathing slowed.

His fingertip gently traced her kiss-swollen mouth. “What are we doing, Amber?” he whispered hoarsely.

Amber drew back, her gaze lingering on his lips. “Isn’t it about time?” Her heart seemed to stop when a sad smile passed over his features.

“Not yet.”

Her lip quivered. “You don’t want me?”

He pulled her tightly to him and rested his chin on her forehead, a controlled breath escaping his lips. “More than you know.”

“Then what is it?”

“You’re too emotional right now and I won’t take advantage of that.” He gently raised her chin and looked straight into her eyes. “And I think you’re scared.”

“Not anymore now that you’re here.” She wound her fingers in his. When she withdrew them, some jet black curls tumbled across his forehead drawing attention to his clear blue eyes. She brushed the hair away from his face, the tip of her forefinger grazing his skin. With the soft contact, he inhaled sharply and closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, his gaze trailed across her face.

Amber moistened her lips and saw his eyes follow the tip of her tongue across her mouth. He shifted and she could feel his building arousal.

“Amber, maybe we should get out of here until we’re sure it’s safe,” he said hoarsely.

“I feel safe when I’m with you.” She rose up and kissed him. “Kiss me back, David,” she whispered against his mouth.

“Amber, under normal circumstances...”

She put a finger to his lips. “These are not normal circumstances.” She looked into his eyes and saw a barely controlled fire there that made her want to feel his body crushed to hers and surrender completely to whatever would happen. “Kiss me, David.”

With a sound that belied his hesitation, he stroked her face gently before lowering his lips to hers and kissing her softly.

It wasn’t enough for her. The fever for him raged. It mixed with the strains of the other unusual feelings she’d been having producing a hunger she never dreamed possible.

“More, David,” she said, clinging to him, “Let go. Give in.” She pressed her lips against his and urged his mouth open to accept her tongue. She felt the fire build with every stroke she made until she felt him surrender. She molded her body against his, every single curve fitting perfectly into the accepting ridges of his form.

Tendrils of her auburn hair danced across his hands as he massaged her back and she felt him deepen his kiss and press his body harder against hers. His fingers roamed downward to the curve of her hips and the unmistakable sound of desire rumbled from his throat when he slid his hands over her buttocks and pulled her hips forward to show her that he was ready for her.

Her kiss curved into a willful smile when she felt how much he wanted her. In response she moved to the rhythm of his hips. Each time the juncture of her thighs acknowledged the crest of his manhood, she took a small sharp breath imagining how he would feel inside her. As she danced in a lovers’ aching whirlwind her body burned like molten iron in the heat of a blacksmith’s inferno.

She didn’t remember pulling his shirttails out from the waist of his pants but soon her hands were roaming the span of his back, his skin fire to her touch. She traced the molded muscles under his ribs as she moved her hands forward across his flat stomach and up the carved lines of his torso. When her fingertips caressed his chest, she heard the sharp intake of breath that he released in a growl of desire. She trailed the tips of her fingernails down his skin and slipped her hands out from beneath his shirt, hearing him groan as she did.

Her fingers moved to the buttons of his shirt. As she opened one and then another, she kissed each inch of bare skin revealed. As the last button was freed, she ran her hands up to his shoulders and slid the shirt from his shoulders when suddenly David ceased his ardent movements.

“I guess I should have knocked first?”

Serina Ward stood in the doorway.

David twisted away from Amber, Serina’s eyes staying on him as she came closer. “We were...just talking,” he said in a voice still thick with desire. He shrugged his shirt back onto his shoulders and quickly buttoned it. Turning his back to Serina, he tucked the shirttails back into his pants.

“Uh-huh,” the tall, honey skinned woman said, “last time I saw talking like that, I was watching the lunch scene in When Harry met Sally at one in the morning on the Movie channel.” She walked toward them then stopped abruptly when she noticed the condition of the room. “What happened here?”

Composure regained, Amber answered. “Someone broke in but I think I surprised him before he took anything.”

“Are you sure you aren’t hurt?” Serina asked, inspecting Amber like a fragile package that had just been delivered.

Amber pressed her lips together. “He did cut my arm with a piece of glass.”

“Where?” Serina ran her hands over Amber’s arms.

“Right here.” Amber looked at her right forearm. There was nothing. She checked the left. The skin was clear. “I’m sure I felt blood, she said with confusion.

“Maybe the skin wasn’t broken,” Serina offered.

“No, I felt the glass dig into my arm. But then the pendent started to heat up and I grabbed onto it. After that I shouted at the intruder and it was almost like I ordered him to appear. I saw him like a pencil sketch on paper outlined in a sickly green color.” She looked first at Serina and then David, seeing the twin looks of concern on their faces. “If either of you know something about this, tell me.”

Serina and David looked at each other but said nothing.

“The intruder did say he was looking for something specific. Something he was sure I had,” Amber added. She saw Serina’s face momentarily blanch and then recover quickly.

“What else did he say?” Serina asked.

“Nothing. He just kept repeating I had something he needed.”

“Curious. What do you think it was that he wanted?” Serina asked in a voice that sounded as though it she were testing.

“I have no good idea,” Amber replied. Her brows furrowed in response to the uneasy look that rose on Serina’s face. “But I think you know, don’t you?” Heat began to rise on her chest. She looked down and saw that the pendent was glowing again, scattering small beams of white in all directions. She hooked her thumb around the chain and raised it so the charm was completely exposed. “This is what he wanted, isn’t it?” She watched in fascination as the light grew and ebbed before her eyes. “It seems alive.”

“Not alive,” Serina said, taking hold of the chain and letting it fall back on Amber’s neck, “It’s activating.”

Amber narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean activating?”

“It’s been in synergy since the creation and is now coming to impact. Once fully galvanized, it can be a powerful ally or a threatening opponent depending on the motives of the owner.” Serina cocked her head. “I’m surprised it didn’t warn you of the intruder.”

“I think it tried. But I thought it was my imagination, like the visions.” Amber pressed her lips together. “They’re connected, aren’t they? The visions, this pendent.”

Serina didn’t answer but simply placed her hand over the charm now resting near Amber’s heart. “We must guard the amulet well until the time comes when its authority is needed.” Serina closed her eyes and breathed deeply and evenly. As she did, the pendent seemed to quiet and then darken. “You must learn to keep the charm at peace.”

Amber looked down at the amulet. It felt alive against her skin. “What is this?” she asked. Uneasiness washed over her. “What am I?”

“You’re special, Amber,” Serina said softly.

“How? And how do you know it?”

Serina cupped Amber’s cheek. “Close your eyes and open your mind.”

The pull to comply was undeniable and Amber could not refuse it. As her eyelids closed light and color exploded behind them. She saw a man and a woman alone in a beautiful garden, a kiss, then more. Suddenly the garden burst into flame and a beautiful woman in white pointed beyond a golden gate. From there the images moved like a movie in fast forward—people, creatures, screaming, fire, wind, swords another kiss and then blackness.

Amber’s eyes flew open. “Who are those people, what does it mean?”

“You’ll know.”

Amber’s brows drew together. “Know what? When?”

“When you’re ready to accept what must be.”

“And what do I do until then?” Amber asked in a rush of breath.

Serina traced the triangular lines of the pendant through the fabric of Amber’s blouse. “There’s nothing any of us can do but wait.”

Amber’s eyes fell closed even as the words were spoken. She not only heard the sadness in Serina’s voice but also felt the hopelessness in her heart. She knuckled away her building tears. “Riddles.” Amber’s shoulders slumped. “I feel like something terrible is going to happen and I can’t stop it.”

“No one can,” Serina admitted quietly.

“You’re scaring me, Serina,” Amber said feeling her heartbeat rise. “What is happening? You’re my best friend what have you got to do with any of this?”

Serina put her arm around Amber. “Soon,” she said, placing a reassuring arm around Amber and leading her to the sofa. “We’ll know all soon. But for now, stay here and David and I will get something to temporarily fix that window.”

Amber clasped her shaking hands in front of her. “What if he comes back?”

Serina glanced to the door, a barely observable sparkle of light emanating from her eyes. “He won’t.”

“I’m staying the night,” David announced firmly. Serina’s eyes darkened to the color of thunderclouds. “No need. I’ll be here.”

David never wavered. “So will I.” The tone of his voice left no doubt as to the finality of his decision. Silence hung in the air for a few moments before he spoke again. “I’ll check the basement for something to put over that broken window.” He didn’t wait for an answer before he turned and disappeared into the townhouse kitchen.

On his way down to the basement, the heels of his shoes hit the wooden steps more solidly than he felt inside. He walked to the far wall and began to shove aside boxes and paint cans. He straightened and slowly turned, sensing Serina’s presence more than hearing her come in.

“Is this what you’re looking for?” she asked.

He watched the hammer leave her hand and float across to his. He grabbed it out of the air. "You know I hate when you do that floaty thing. Besides, I thought you were dead set against using your magic around Amber."

"I'm simply reminding you of why you were sent to us. You are here to bring the Keeper to the Triad. No more. No less."

"You mean to her death." He strode to the corner and grabbed three long planks of boarding before heading for the stairs.

Serina fell into stride beside him. "If that be the will of the First One."

"She's so innocent. She has no idea what she has to do."

"But the time is coming and there will be no stopping the events from playing out to fulfill the prophecy. The pendant has activated. Soon it will transfer its full power to Amber. Once the transfer is complete, she will learn who and what she is and will be the most sought after person in the universe. We will no longer be able to ensure her safety and hide her from Gorash. He will come after her again and it will be up to you to prevent it." She put her hand on David's arm. "That is your heritage, your destiny. You can't change it."

David looked from her hand to her eyes. "But I can try." He shrugged his arm free, pushed past her and headed back upstairs to Amber.

#

Below the city, deep inside an abandoned subway tunnel, Gorash, King of the Trolls, paced his provisional throne room. "Jolinax, I should have you flogged! Or better yet, sent to the ice caves to help search for the third key." Wild with fury at the interference of his underling, he shot to Jolinax and lifted him by his throat.

"I meant to surprise you by bringing it to you" Jolinax croaked as Gorash's fingers tightened.

"Do you, a mere drudge, presume to know even if this girl you found is even the Keeper?" Gorash couldn't stand any of underling subjects knowing more or even as much as he did.

"I was only thinking of you, of our people, of what we stand to lose if she was and if is allowed to fulfill the prophecy."

Gorash felt the cartilage in Jolinax's throat begin to collapse against his hand as he squeezed harder. "The prophecy!" he cried, reveling at his own power as Jolinax's eyes bulged and a choking sound escaped from his open mouth. "The divination must not come to pass, the prophecy must fall short of prediction if we are to rule. You endanger

us all with your actions.” He flung Jolinax against the wall of the cave as he spat out the words. “If she is indeed the one, the persona of Eric Sinclair will handle her.”

“Humans rely too much on emotion and that makes them weak, but even so, oh great one, you will need help.” Jolinax cowered on the ground where he landed, gasping.

In two strides, Gorash loomed over him. “Listen to me and listen well. I need nothing and no one, least alone a slow-witted gnome like you who just might have put eons of work in jeopardy. From this day on, you are forbidden to have further contact with Amber Drake. You will not go to her home, you will not go to her place of work and will not cast your sallow eyes upon her again, is that clear?”

“It will be as you wish your majesty,” Jolinax managed to croak as he tried to recover his breath. Eyes closed, he covered his head with his hands and prepared for what would come next.

Gorash kicked out, catching Jolinax in the stomach propelling him toward the door. “Get out of my sight.”

On his hands and knees, Jolinax quickly scrambled away. Once out the door, he leaned against the cold stone of the tunnel wall and took deep breaths. As air returned to his lungs, an angry sneer creased his lips. Once the Triad was stopped, the worlds would be at the mercy of the strongest.

By then Jolinax swore, it would be him.

Chapter Two

The next day when Serina entered Madison Square Park butterflies streamed toward her and flowers turned to follow her every move. “Not now, darlings,” she said softly with quick wave of her hand. The butterflies stopped mid-flight and then fluttered away while the flowers seemed to droop slightly before turning back to face the sun. She could see David pacing a few yards away, hands in his pockets, apparently lost in deep thought.

“David,” she called out. He acknowledged her with a toss of his head and began walking toward her. “What were you thinking last night?” she asked, as he got closer. “Amber is the only one of her kind. We have no idea what could happen if she lets her emotions free.”

Even from a distance David could see Serina’s eyes flare. He knew what was coming. He raised his hand, palm outward, to shield his eyes from the sudden shower of pebbles and dirt stirred by her irritation like the onslaught of a rising dust storm. “I know

you're pissed when you pelt me with rocks," he replied, reaching her. "Amber and I had a moment. That's all."

Serina held up her hand and, as though they hit a wall, the particles fell to the ground. "While I understand, you know these moments..." she mimicked him, "have to stop."

He nodded. "I know." He slapped his palm to the back of his neck. "I swear I would have stopped and just held her all night, but I let my feelings for her get away from me."

"Amber is coming into her own. We just don't know the extent of her emerging powers. You might not have been able to stop her. She may have wanted more."

"She's not the only one who would have wanted more. The tone of his voice left no doubt to the struggle in his heart. "But I also know how important the charge given to my family is to the success of the prophecy."

"We knew this time would be difficult, David. We must deal with her transformation the best we can, knowing the end is coming."

"I know that too." He pressed his lips together. "How was she this morning?"

"Still a little confused but she's strong. Don't worry."

"Does she know you're meeting me?" he asked.

"Of course not. I waited until she left for work."

David pounded the trunk of a nearby tree with his fist, grimacing in reaction to the pain as the rough bark tore his skin. "I should have been with her when she went home. I had to go over some papers for work and told her I'd meet her later. You have no idea how I felt when I saw the front door wide open and the living room in a shambles."

Serina held out her hand. David placed his on it. She covered his bleeding knuckles with her other hand. Light grew between her palms, its intensity illuminating David's face. When she withdrew her hand, the cuts on his skin had healed. "I know how hard this is for you."

David flexed his fingers to work out the lingering ache. "How can you?"

"Just know that I do." She put a hand on his shoulder and felt it droop as if in resignation. "Amber must follow her destiny. Nothing can change that."

"Maybe I can."

Serina shook her head. "Destiny is absolute. It is what binds our life forms to our souls. Our souls are only released when our destiny is fulfilled."

He looked exasperated as he ran a hand through his dark hair. “You’ve been with her almost since her birth. How can you not feel something?”

“You actually believe I have no feelings for her?”

“You don’t understand.”

“Oh but I do. I understand all too well that you’ve fallen in love with a young woman who is about to face obligations she doesn’t even know exist as yet and discharge duties that are far beyond anything she could even imagine.”

“Then how can you stand by and let it happen?” David challenged.

“I have no choice and neither do you. I shouldn’t have to remind you that Amber will need every ounce of strength she can muster to withstand what’s to come. She can’t afford to become distracted by you. She must concentrate on the mission for which she has been born. You can’t stop it. No one can.”

David scrubbed his hand across his face and then through his thick hair. “Why? Because I’m human? Because I love her? What a bunch of pretentious hypocrites you fairy beings are. You don’t give a damn about this world. You don’t even care about Amber. She is an anomaly, alive only to fill a purpose.” Anger danced on his handsome face. “Your kind cast her out because she was strong enough to live. My kind made sure she survived,” he said arrogantly.

Above them dark gray thunderclouds gathered in reaction to Serina’s growing anger. “She was not cast out. She was removed for her own protection. And let me remind you,” she continued as a clap of thunder echoed around them, “that if it had not been for pretentious fairy beings like me, there would be no need for humans like you. You probably would never have even been born.”

David broke contact with Serina’s angry gaze and lifted his eyes to the ominous vortex above them. She was right. He and his forebears were direct descendents of Adam, given the task of first preparing the way for the Keeper and, now that she had come, protecting her. Through the ages, the men of his family chose only purebred human women as mates, women whose family lineage was not tainted by trysts with fairies or seduction by trolls. It was necessary to ensure the integrity of the bloodline and to bear more male children to carry on the fundamental charge for which they were born.

Serina was right. Whether he loved Amber or not, there was no escaping destiny for either of them.

He took a deep cleansing breath to calm his racing heart. “When I’m with her, sometimes I forget that she’s not like me.” His eyes snapped open. “But in my arms, she feels human. When I kiss her, she tastes human. When she kisses me back, all my

basic human needs fire all at once and I want her to be human.” His voice dropped.
“Simply and imperfectly human.”

Serina’s heart went out to David but she knew nothing could be altered from what must be. The path was set. The signs were emerging.

“The First One set the stratagem from the time of beginning. There can be nothing else — nothing else for you, nothing else for her. The chaos that would result should the Triad fail is inconceivable. Amber is the adhesive element that must bind together the separating forces holding existence and all that we know in place. If she doesn’t succeed in her mission, the alternative is worse than anything you can imagine.”

He turned brilliant blue, tear-glazed eyes to her. “What could be worse than life without Amber?”

“A world without hope,” Serina said sadly. “Amber is our hope. If you can possibly imagine evil a thousand times a thousand, it would be nothing compared to the utter immorality that would overtake humankind and fae alike should the trolls gain the control they seek. If the Triad destiny is not fulfilled, your beloved Amber would be at the mercy of Gorash, their king, only a means to an end, then discarded when her use is over. Do you want that for her?”

David closed his eyes and lowered his head. “No,” he whispered. “I would spare her that, even if it means losing her forever.”

“It might.”

He looked off into the distance. “She has no idea what she’s in for.” The muscle in his angular jaw twitched. “You know, when I first met her, she was an obligation, a debt that needed to be repaid. But the more I got to know her, the more I wondered why someone hadn’t scooped her up and married her long ago.”

Serina smiled. “Believe me, I had a time preventing that from happening.”

“Well, how come I slipped through your magical cracks?”

“Because I saw your heart and let you.” She saw a glimmer of longing pass through his eyes and quickly continued. “It was a mistake.”

David smiled. “No, it wasn’t. There has to be a way to change her fate.”

“There’s nothing we can do. The task you must perform will be harder than anything you’ve ever faced. You have to prepare yourself to confront emptiness like nothing you’ve ever known.”

“Life without her,” he said sullenly.

“You’ll have to be strong when the time comes.”

“It’s soon, isn’t it?”

Serina nodded.

David swallowed hard and looked at the ground before looking back at the woman with whom he had undertaken the most important quest of his life. “I’m having second thoughts about my role in this Armageddon, Teezal.”

She put her fingertips on his lips. “You must not call me that name while we’re in this world,” she warned.

“Serina, then. But by any name, the fact remains, I love Amber.”

“The choice then will become duty or desire.”

“At one time there was no doubt about my choosing duty,” He shook his head. “Now...I don’t know.”

“Think well upon it, David,” Serina warned, “More than just your life and that of Amber rests with the road you select.”

The wind began to howl once more. David looked up into the sky. The clear blue sky had given way to billowing cumulonimbus clouds that were rapidly building to what looked like super cells. He raised his hand in front of his eyes as the dark gray clouds turned sickly green absorbing the sunlight that tried to break through them.

“Okay, Serina,” I get it. You can stop now,” he said as a microburst of violent wind uprooted a small bush to his left and blew it like a piece of paper across the park. Lightning flashed overhead, the accompanying thunder sounding like a runaway stampede of thousands of horses.

Serina’s face grew grim as hail the size of tennis balls began to pelt them. She shook her head. “It’s not me. Something or someone is coming through.”

#

As they left in opposite directions, Amber slipped from behind a nearby tree. She stared first at David’s retreating back, then at Serina’s, holding her briefcase over her head to deflect the hail that rained down from the sky. She took a few deep breaths to steady her racing heart. She had only been able to hear bits and pieces of their conversation, but Armageddon, Prophecies, Destiny, Choices, This bizarre weather. And what was that about something or someone coming through? What on earth was going on?

And who the hell was Teezal?
Chapter Three

Amber stepped into the gold colored smoked glass elevator in the lobby of Sinclair Tower headquarters for the premier land holding company where she had worked alongside her father until his retirement. She closed her eyes and leaned against the rear wall, waiting as the compartment rose carrying her up and away from street-level and the park where she had seen her best friend and the man she loved talking about some sort of covert plot that seemed to involve her. She pressed her fingertips to her temples to try to ease a building headache just as the elevator stopped at the fifteenth floor and the doors slid open with a graceful whoosh.

She walked down the richly carpeted hallway to her office, the heels of her shoes sinking into the taupe colored thick wool. At the door she paused, unsure of whether to go in or go back. Through the large glass panel that made up part of the outer office wall, she could see her assistant Susan, on the phone gesturing, her long slim hands flying through the air.

Although contradictory and very unsettling thoughts flooded her mind, she would not walk into her office looking anything but composed. She straightened her shoulders into the jacket of her navy Donna Karan suit and tossed her head to send any wayward strands of auburn hair back into place. Then she pushed open the door.

“You’re late,” Susan said when Amber entered. She held out a handful of pink telephone messages.

“I ran into a problem on the way here,” Amber countered.

Susan looked out the window. “The weather is backing up all mass transit. Weird stuff. You know, my grandmother told me that things haven’t been right since the astronauts walked on the moon.”

Amber furrowed her brows.

“You know, moon, tide, weather. Gram says they were all affected when Apollo landed. She believes that the landing shifted the orbit and this is what we get from time to time.”

Amber smiled. “Your Gram may be right.”

“Nahh, just old wives tales . But you accumulate a lot of wisdom in eighty-four years, so we just don’t write her off,” Susan said handing Amber a cup of coffee and taking one for herself. She glanced toward the window in reaction to a flash of light. “Probably just a weird dip in the jet stream or global warming.”

“Probably,” Amber agreed, taking a sip.

“I know you have a ton of things today but before you do any of them, Mr. Sinclair wants to see you,” Susan said, sinking back down into the richly padded black leather of her chair. She angled her head toward the phone. “He sounded a little...” she raised her eyebrows, “shall we say, tense.”

Amber took another sip of coffee before looking at Susan over the rim of the mug. “So what else is new,” she said walking down the hall then, pushing the door to her private office open with her hip and stepping inside. Once the door closed she slid the coffee mug onto the nearest empty space on the bookcase, then dropped onto the sofa next to the door and fought her frayed nerves for control of her shaking hands.

Battle won, she walked to her desk just as the phone rang. The caller ID flashed David’s cell number. She let the Voice Mail System answer it.

“Honey, call me as soon as you get this. We need to talk. I love you.”

Amber looked at the blinking light, pressed the red button on the console and erased the message.

#

Eric G. Sinclair stepped from around the corner and stood in the hall outside Amber’s office. He ran the fingers of his right hand through his dark hair, catching his reflection in the tinted windows. Smiling, he slowly lowered his hand to the cuff of the left sleeve of his Armani jacket and removed a wrinkle near the elbow with a sharp tug.

Trailing his fingers down the lapels and angling slightly, he admired the body he had so carefully sculpted. He was tall and lean. Too thin to some but he preferred the hungry look, knowing it made his rivals feel as though he would pounce on them at any moment. His impeccably styled salt and pepper hair and stylishly trimmed beard completed the look—the perfect specimen of a successful fifty-five year old man.

His cynical laugh came out in a rush of breath. Too bad this would be the last time anyone saw him this way.

He stopped admiring his reflection and returned to the reason he had been lurking the hallways of the company he’d built almost three decades earlier. He’d been persistent, unethical at times but the information he’d been able to piece together through the years led to Amber Drake. He snarled, angry with himself for the time wasted. He had become so distracted by the pleasures of the upworld that he had not read the signs. That would not happen again.

He’d been outside Amber’s door since six a.m. waiting, taking great pains to mask his presence from the morning cleaning crew and the early risers. He had watched her carefully over the past weeks, probing her mind with his, waiting. If she indeed had the key for which he had been searching, she did not know it. That made her ripe for the

taking and that would work to his advantage. Surprise was always his biggest ally. It would be no different this time.

In calculated silence, he had watched Amber walk down the hallway, take a few unsteady steps toward her office, grab the doorknob and then stop. She'd lowered her head, letting her hair fall forward so he couldn't see her face.

Today when he closed his eyes and reached to her, she felt different. There was something new about her, something that now made his skin prickle like static electricity..

She made a sound, like a sob that had caught in her throat and he snapped his eyes open. A snarl curled his lips. The Guardian was supposed to be strong, defiant. Not like the weak human women who let him take over their minds and bodies when his blood boiled and he felt the sexual need of upworld men, only more insatiable..

He grinned sardonically. He had waited twenty-five years, he could wait a little longer.

#

Serina knew she was running out of time. Having Amber live among the humans in plain sight rather than under the constant protection of a dozen bodyguards, was the correct decision she reaffirmed. Right up until the break-in. Now she was forced to admit that the anonymity was over and Amber would become the most hunted person in the world. Any world. Every world.

Serina had been her guardian since the day Amber had been given to Marcus and Erin Drake. She had been the gentle breeze that moved the baby's blanket back into place, the whisper that suggested the child tie her shoes, the playmate only the child can see. The Fairy Godmother, that was she. Serina Ward, her human name. But no more. The time of Serina was nearly over. The time of Teezal Thistlecomb, her true identity was at hand.

She paced the floor of the home she shared with Amber. The difficulty would be to protect her charge until the Cipher was in place and the Triad began. It would be a problem. But with David's help... She paused. Poor David. He loved Amber so and yet he would have to bring her to her death in order to save three worlds from oblivion.

But would he?

Still wrestling with the answer, the flash of an anomalous face in the mirror near the door caught Serina's eye. She turned her back to it and made an irritated face. It was a troll. She could tell by the dank, mossy odor that filled the room. If he came any closer she would pummel him until his eyes rolled and then she'd make him wish he had never left the caverns he called home. She turned back toward the door and walked slowly toward the front of the house. Closing the front drapes, she casually ruffled the fabric before

tucking it neatly into place. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw another movement and stepped closer to the wall. She almost laughed out loud when a bulging nose followed by a pair of hooded eyes protruded out of the mirror. With a movement too quick to be seen by a human eye, Serina reached inside and pulled out the interloper by his neck with both hands.

“Jolinax.” She held him up so his toes barely brushed the floor. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your slimy company?”

Jolinax’s legs bicycled in the air. His arms flayed as he tried wrest himself free.

Serina laughed in response his efforts. “You want me to let you go? Then I will.” She released her hold on his neck. As he began to drop to the ground, she pointed at him and he rose in the air until she pinned him to the ceiling.

“Perfidious Pook!” Jolinax spat out at her. “Carpet Rucker.”

“False fairy, am I?” Serina challenged, moving Jolinax across the ceiling with just the motion of her hand.

“Yellow Blurker,” he screamed as his shoulder bounced off the side of the ceiling fan.

“If you’re going to keep calling me names, I may get really angry.” She flicked her wrist and let him fall. When he was five feet from the floor, she shot out her hand and caught him with a bounce in mid-air. “Now, can you be civil? Well, as civil as a troll can be. What are you doing here anyway?”

“I was just looking,” he answered, his eyes wide as he remained suspended in the air.

“It was you who broke in here last night, wasn’t it?”

Kicking his stubby right leg downward, Jolinax tried to touch the floor. “Maybe.”

“I don’t have time for games,” Serina shot back, her voice laced with impatience. With a crook of her finger, she moved him closer. “I’ll give you one more chance to tell me voluntarily. Were you here last night?”

Jolinax’s shriek rose and faded in a crescendo of panic as Serina alternately raised and lowered him in the air. “Okay, I did it. I broke in. Now let me down.”

Serina let him drop to within three feet of the floor this time. He screeched as he fell. “Stop,” she asserted, her voice tinged with disgust, “You’re drooling all over the oriental rug.” Careful to hold him immobile with one hand, she gestured toward the kitchen. A row of paper towels floated out and promptly cleaned up his mess.

“Let me go,” he demanded tugging at the invisible bonds that held him in place.

“In a minute.” Serina sat on the couch and dialed David’s cell number. He answered on the second ring. “Sugar, get over here. We have a problem.” She listened to his concerned voice. “No, Amber’s fine. She’s still at work. Just get here as fast as you can.” When she flipped closed the lid, she heard Jolinax laugh.

“Too late,” he cackled.

Serina was on him in a second. She put her finger under his nose and raised him in the air until his eyes were even with hers. “You little gnome. Unless you want to dust the ceiling again, you’d better tell me what you know.”

“Gorash will kill me if I do.”

“Not if I kill you first.”

“You cannot Teezal Thistlecomb. Fairies do not kill for sport.”

“Okay, maybe not, but that I can make you wish you never left your cave.” She muttered ancient words into the air, rendering Jolinax rigid. Slowly she lowered him to the ground.

Grabbing a throw pillow from the sofa, she ripped it open and dumped the batting on the carpet before turning the pillow inside out.

“What are you doing?” Jolinax asked, panic in his voice.

“You know exactly what I’m doing,” Serina countered, digging into the potpourri in the dish on the counter dividing the living room from the kitchen. “Rose petals.” She held them out so he could see. “Mint, clover, lavender and a milkweed pod.” She tossed them into the pillow cover and shook it.

“Stop! Stop!” Jolinax shouted, still unable to move.

Serina sat cross-legged in front of him and set the pillow between them. A chant rose from her like a silver ribbon, curling and twisting in the air.

From the center of the pillow, a light emerged, swirling and shimmering with flashes exploding like tiny sparklers. Each time an ember hit the ground, a tiny creature appeared, sometimes male, sometimes female. Each one ran to Jolinax until a ring was made around him. The bell-like sound of fairy giggles assaulted his ears

“Twilks,” she said clapping her hands, “How they love causing mischief on troll skin.” She watched as the little creatures, poked, prodded and teased the agonized troll.

“You know what happens when they tire of play don’t you?” She eyed a particularly stout bunch of twilks as they bared their teeth and gnashed them hungrily as advanced toward the cowering troll.

“Make them go away,” he pleaded as the circle began to close on him. “I’ll tell you everything!”

#

Eric Sinclair stared out at the New York skyline in his penthouse office and looked in the direction of his homeland. He couldn’t see it, of course, blocked by towering skyscrapers and miles of distance but it was there, waiting for the Triad to begin.

The Triad. The Coming. The Prophecy.

Whatever each world called it, it was either the beginning or the ending. The snowballing change of events in place would now only culminate with either obliteration of three worlds or the creation of a new order. Only one person would make that decision. Amber Drake—a woman who could be as much as within his reach as she was beyond his grasp.

He dropped his pen onto the richly wooded mahogany desk and leaned back into the curved leather chair that had been designed and built just for him, a chair that fit his body so close to perfection that he scarcely noticed its existence. He ran his hands over the leather armrests. Someone was going to have to order another one soon. The time of Eric Sinclair Sr., a name he had created for himself in this world was at an end. Perhaps the time for all men was at an end.

He got up and walked to the window. His eyes scanned the street below. “Little people, with little ideas,” he thought as a sneer curled his lip. He raised his hand into the sunlight.

“Ilmkgoh,” He said in the ancient language of the trolls. “Younger,” he said in the language of the humans.

He watched the skin on his hand tighten and the brown spots dotting the knuckles disappear as the excess flesh and wrinkles vanished. He brought it up to his eyes, pleased with the result. Then throwing back his head he held his breath, allowing the change to complete itself.

When his skin stopped tingling, he walked to the closet and pulled open the double doors. He pushed the coats hanging there to one side and looked at his reflection in the mirror attached to the back wall. A smile curled his lips.

His clothes pulled across a body now tightened and toned to athletic perfection. Thick brown hair curled onto a smooth face sporting depthless dark eyes, a straight nose and

dimpled chin. He pressed a panel on the right door and new racks of clothes and shelves of accessories and shoes slid into place with a tinny whine.

He shed his oversized gray jacket and reached for a dark navy blue Armani. Donning it, he gazed at his reflection in the closet mirror. "Welcome Eric Sinclair, III. The quest is now yours."

He stepped to his desk and pressed a button on a keypad that looked more like an instrument panel than a telephone. His assistant answered.

"Yes, Mr. Sinclair."

"Has Ms. Drake arrived as yet?"

"No, sir. I'll ring her office again."

"You do that."

"Sir..."

Sinclair heard the hesitation in her voice and another smile curled his lips. "Yes Miss Leary?"

"Is everything all right? Do you need anything?"

"Why?" He waited, nearly laughing out loud at her ignorance.

"You sound...well, different."

"I could use some fresh water."

"Right away, sir."

He finished changing and stood in front of his desk, waiting. He knew what would happen when she saw him.

"Here's the water, Mr. Sinclair. You sounded like maybe you..." Any more words were cut by the muffled sound of the crystal carafe hitting the thick carpet. Being of the finest quality it did not shatter but merely rolled to the edge of the bookcase on the opposite wall leaving a trail of liquid in its wake.

Eric used all the control he possessed not to chide the foolish creature standing wide-eyed in front of him. He waited until the surprised look cleared her eyes. "Barbara," he paused and locked his gaze with hers, feeling her shudder and liking it. "I can call you Barbara, can't I?"

He was amused at the woman standing before him with her mouth open like a great fish. He could sense her confusion and could easily infer the questions that were running through her mind, the why's and the how's and, more importantly, the who?

She looked around the room. "Where is Mr. Sinclair?" She tried her best to return to steadfast professionalism but failed.

"My father," he said with measured slyness, "has gone away on business. He left the company in my hands."

Her brows furrowed. "Mr. Sinclair never mentioned anything about having a child."

He smiled arrogantly. "As you can see, I'm not a child. But I am his son."

His gaze penetrated her body and he felt it turn her blood cold. He sensed the chill that ran up her spine and reveled in the fear that gripped her. "You'll be working for me from now on," he continued. "Is that clear, Barbara?" he drew out her name, long, threatening. He ran a forefinger through the water on the desktop forming a 'G' on the expensive wood as she slowly nodded her response. "And Barbara, the water will ruin the finish, don't you think?" He glanced down at the desktop and broke contact with her eyes.

She gave her head a quick shake as though she was just waking from a daydream. "I'll call maintenance," she said, reaching for his phone.

He grabbed her wrist and raised his eyes to meet hers again, reconnecting an almost hypnotic link. "You clean it up."

He saw a haze come into her eyes. "Yes, sir."

Grabbing the edge of her Prada jacket, she wiped the liquid from the desktop.

Sinclair grinned, delighting in his control over her. "Pity. Now you've ruined your suit."

She stared at him. "It's all right sir, it's only water."

He reached out with his forefinger, placed it beneath her chin and held her mouth closed. He glanced at the carafe on the floor. "You had better get that."

When she bent to retrieve the decanter and he moved with her. "My father didn't say goodbye?"

"No--No, he didn't," she replied, her voice trembling.

When she reached for the stopper he made sure his fingers tangled with hers. Looking into her eyes, he could almost see her heart beating. "Pity. I know how fond of you he was."

He remembered the days and nights she'd submitted to his every whim in his persona as Eric Sinclair Sr. Her body, soft and pliable, her will weak. She was an innocent when he first took her but he'd made her a woman. And when she was ripe, he introduced her to even more of his dark needs.

She had resisted at first but he manipulated her with insignificant gifts and false promises and she gave herself over like a sacrificial lamb. He grew weary of her when her imagination waned and she could no longer find new ways to pleasure him. Her eager submission had left him bored and unsatisfied.

He longed for someone new, someone who matched his hunger and his perversion. But for now, he would keep her bound to him and use her when the craving came.

He ran his hand up her arm and across her neck. "My father went to Donahyde Castle in Ireland, early this morning. To oversee the restorations."

"But I usually make his travel plans. Why wouldn't he tell me?" She asked, her breath coming quicker.

"My father is quite capable of getting where he has to go on his own." His fingertips massaged her shoulder.

"Yes, sir but..." She stopped, her lips parting.

"He also said that you were very cooperative and would fit my needs well." He ran his hand down her arm, pleased her gaze remained locked with his. He pulled her into his arms and lowered his head toward her waiting mouth. Her eyes closed slowly as she waited. She did not resist, could not resist but opened her mouth wider to receive him.

He leaned closer, his mouth a breath away from her lips. "My father had an appointment with Miss Drake this morning. Is she coming?" he whispered.

Her eyelids flew open. Her dark eyes grew round and wide and he could see a new flush of red rise from the vee between her breasts.

"Yes, she should be here. I'll go and check."

He handed her the stopper. "That would be nice."

Barbara took it and the carafe and edged toward the door. There was something about this new Sinclair that scared her. She knew there was no way she could stay in his employ. "Is there anything else?"

“Actually, yes. There is.” He walked to her and took her hand. “Look at me, Barbara. Look closely.”

Trembling, she swallowed hard and did as he asked. For a moment she seemed to swoon and, for his added enjoyment, he allowed her to see a little of whom he really was. He saw her eyes widen to accommodate the fear building inside her. When the scream began to come, he cut it off with a brutal kiss that drained her. He broke off the kiss and moved his mouth to her ear, biting it hard. “You wouldn’t thinking of leaving me now would you Barbara?”

“No, I—I...” But he cut her off.

“Because if you did it would be a mistake. I intend to treat you even better than my father did.” When he finally released her, she fled from his office.

He threw back his head and roared with laughter. He so loved this world. The females had wills that were easily bent. They wore their emotions like a hat and he could wear them all if he chose.

Eric Sinclair III sat back down in his chair and swiveled it to the window. He looked out over the New York skyline. Yes, he liked it here. When he took over the human world, maybe he’d make this place the center of his kingdom.

Almost as soon as Amber stepped into the reception area of Eric Sinclair’s penthouse office, Barbara Leary came through the inner office door. Gasping for air, she leaned against the wall and slid to stooping. She dropped her head and began to sob.

“Miss Leary, what’s wrong?” Amber knelt beside the shaken woman. “Are you ill?”

Barbara turned her head sharply toward Amber, her hair falling across her face hiding her eyes. “No-no... no.”

Amber touched her shoulders. She was shaking. “What happened?” Amber asked with growing concern as she held onto Barbara’s forearms and pulled her to standing. “You feel like ice.” Amber removed her jacket and placed it over Barbara’s shoulders before leading her to a side chair. She brushed Barbara’s long blonde hair back from her face and tucked the ends around her ears. “Sit here. I’ll get you something to drink. Mr. Sinclair must have some coffee in there.”

Barbara jumped up so quickly, Amber’s suit jacket fell to the floor. “No! I made a fool of myself. He won’t like it if you know that.”

To Amber, it sounded like a warning. Another came from Barbara’s wide eyes. Something was wrong. She picked up the telephone but Barbara disconnected the call.

“Don’t call anyone. I’m fine.”

“I should get someone to help you.”

“No,” Barbara said firmly. “I’m just having a panic attack.”

Amber gently guided Barbara back to sitting and pulled a chair across from her. She took Barbara’s hands in hers. “Are you sure that’s all it is?”

Barbara nodded. “Just give me a minute. I’ll be fine.”

Amber shook her head. “No, its something more. You can’t stop shaking.”

When Barbara looked up, her face bore the telltale signs of stress. She pulled her lips into a thin line and shifted her gaze to Sinclair’s heavy office door. Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Don’t go in there. It’s all wrong. He’s changed.” She looked at Amber with eyes that were filled with an icy terror. “He’s a monster.”