



BAGNAROK
TANGO

MICHAEL
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RAGNAROK TANGO
a novel of erotic fantasy by

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RAGNORAK TANGO

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PROLOGUE

A man stood on the parapet of a castle that shone like frost dusted opals. Slender minarets of crystal ice rose into the air far above the castle, curving upward in fragile twists that ended in delicate pointed tips no honest building material could have attained.

Across the land snow swirled down in an uncharacteristically gentle fall.

Normally a realm of sharp fanged rocky spires and icy wastes where the wind howled ceaselessly, driving before it crystals of snow that would slice flesh from bone, it was currently much altered. At his whim the entirety of the land had taken on the appearance of a winter garbed forest full of ancient trees.

At his whim it could just as easily become a storm tossed sea decked with icebergs the size of mountains, or change to a featureless plain of sheet ice.

It was his Realm, his Domain and he could do with it anything he pleased.

Anything except make it warm.

Or make it green.

Only a woman could accomplish that, and there were no women here.

The man leaned his folded arms on the wall of the parapet and stared out into his lonely domain.

He was tall. Almost seven feet. Broad shouldered with the physique of a pagan god. Hair white as frost fell to his shoulders, tumbling downward in fall that caught the light like crystal shards. Eyes the color of ice, a grey so pale they almost appeared colorless, stared out of a face at once starkly beautiful and unutterably inhuman.

He hadn't always been as he now was.

Once, long ago he'd been as human as any man.

Back when the name he'd been called was Hrothrekr.

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It had been his name when the Vikings had sailed their longboats into the seas and put terror of their raids into any country within their grasp.

But no one had called him that in centuries.

Not since he'd been taken by the Prince of the Coldlands, made a slave to every desire and whim an inhumanly cruel mind could conceive. And there had been an infinite number of pleasures and torments over the centuries. An infinite number of endured horrors and mind dazing ecstasies.

Like many slaves before him, and many after him, he had escaped the shackles of his master.

A master he had killed.

That death had set many of his master's playthings free of their bindings.

He'd had to kill some of them rather than allow humanity to suffer under the lash of beings that should never have been called out of the Abyss.

Beings like his dead master.

A demon.

For his crime of killing the Prince he was cursed for all time.

All time.

Because his curse was immortality.

And when you can't die, time ceases to have any meaning. The past, present and future become one and the same. Nothing and everything. Infinity dancing a tango with oblivion.

Today there was a disturbance in the Mortal Realm, the taste of pain and horror breaking across his consciousness the way storm tossed seas foamed shoreward.

Someone had let a demon of destruction loose and humans were dying by the tens of thousands in one of their myriad realities. Too many, too fast. A reality spiraling down toward the totality of Mother Night's chill embrace, toward the finality of cessation.

He heard the voices of women raised in song.

A song to the being that had previously held the Coldlands, their song calling his dead master in a vain effort to summon the Prince to do their bidding.

Nothing could force him to answer their pleas. If he chose to ignore them, he could. He was not bound by their magic. But his own sense of

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morality, what precious little was left of it, wouldn't let him ignore the suffering in their Realm.

"Hear us, Raené, Lord of Winter, Prince of the Coldlands! I, the child of your flesh, daughter of your blood, Guardian of the Gate summon you to our aid!"

Raené was dead, his power subsumed by the pale man on the castle battlements.

Sighing the man who wasn't human decided to take a hand in events before the horns of Ragnarok were blown and another world went crashing down into the Eternal Dark.

It was, after all, his self appointed job.

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CHAPTER ONE

Her voice rang out in the initial invocation to the Gate and the being contained behind it. "Hear us, Raené, Lord of Winter, Prince of the Coldlands! I, the Child of your flesh, daughter of your blood, Guardian of the Gate summon you to our aid!"

High Priestess Jaella, raised her arms skyward, her naked body pale as marble in the silvery blaze of the moonlight that filled the roofless temple. Directly before her were the twin pillars that marked the position of the Gate. At her feet was a blade, a long knife she would use to make a blood sacrifice if it proved necessary. Beside it were a pile of chains with which she could bind the demon if need be. Directly before the knife and chains lay the double lines of a powerful binding circle, carved directly into the stones that formed the floor of the Temple. The rest of the Temple floor was worn and abraded by time, but those stones that formed the magic circle were as they'd been carved so long ago, no trace of passing centuries had touched their gleaming surfaces.

Behind her the Maidens of the Moon sang, their voices raised in a plea to the powerful being that lay beyond the Gate. They were begging for aid against the most terrible foe their Order had ever faced, a demonic entity known to them only as Gaurdaaz. Gaurdaaz was killing every human being he could not coerce into following him.

Thousands had already died. Hundreds had been transformed, warped into horrid aspects, no longer human, even the memories of who they'd been wiped clean. Thousands changed by the demon's unholy power. They were his army. A horde of the damned.

Men, women, even children and animals of every type were altered to his purpose.

And his ultimate purpose was the destruction of their world.

Once it was unquestioningly his, he could alter the very fabric of their entire planet, changing it to suit his own needs, his own desires and turn it into his own realm from which he could reach out to new worlds

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and warp them to his liking. Entire planets could fall. Whole civilizations would die if they could not stop him.

Nothing they did, not their strongest battalions of Maiden Warriors, nor the might of the Forest Children had stopped the ravaging legions of Gaurdaaz.

Defeated, broken, they had few options left to them. Desperate options that could bring as great an evil to their world as Gaurdaaz himself posed.

For days they had debated their remaining course of action. For days they had delayed the inevitable.

To survive they must summon the being from beyond the Gate.

They must call back the Lord of Winter, Prince of the Coldlands, the very being they had fought so long ago for possession of their once again embattled world.

In order to fight a great evil, they would call another evil.

It was the only option remaining to them, and it could well mean the end of their world anyway because Raené might take it for his own, transforming to a realm of ice, eternal blizzards, and bitter flesh rending cold making it part of the Realm he already controlled: the Coldlands from whence they were endeavoring to summon him.

"Raené! Hear us! Hear my voice and answer our plea!" Jaella shouted to the heavens, head thrown back so that her long hair fell behind her like a torrent of living flame.

It was the mark of her blood, that fall of unnaturally colored hair. Only those born of the Prince's own get were so marked. In all the land there were only two of them left. Jaella and her cousin Rayné. In their generation they were the Guardian and the Avatar.

They were the last of the demon's living bloodline.

The silver light streaming down over the bodies of the women changed, turning darker as if the silver glow were growing tarnished. Mist rose from the stones pillars that surrounded them.

Between the tallest stones, the ones that Jaella stood before there was a faint shimmering, a ripple that quickly faded.

Perhaps the Elder Warriors of the Moon had been right. Maybe the blood had grown too thin, the ability of the Gate's Guardian no longer great enough to call the demon forth.

She couldn't give up. Not when failure meant sure destruction for their world

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"Hear us, Raené, Lord of Winter, Prince of the Coldlands! I, the child of your flesh, daughter of your blood, Guardian of the Gate summon you to our aid!"

"Hear us, Raené! Answer our summons," the women standing at the surrounding pillars sang out, their voices a paean raised to the heavens.

"Raené! Heed my cry! Come to me sire of my blood! Raené I offer myself to you! My body yours to use! Answer my call!" There was a note of desperation in her summons. As she'd been warned just saying his name was not enough. Promises of pleasure, of lust sated must be given.

She glanced at the knife laying on the ground at her feet. If her body was not incentive enough, then there must be a greater sacrifice. Her blood, perhaps her very life might be required. It had been over four hundred years since anyone had dared call the Prince forth from the Coldlands. Perhaps it could no longer be done.

No, she had to keep trying no matter the cost.

"Raené, Father of my Blood, Prince of the Coldlands, Lord of Winter, heed me and come! Please aid us!"

A ripple passed in the space between the tall stones, and the rising mist thickened, chilling the air, bringing with it the sharp scent of a winter storm. A wind sprang up from no source any of the Maidens of the Moon could discern, whipping Jaella's hair, turning it into a wild streamer of living fire that crackled with the magical energies coursing through the air.

"RAENÉ! RAENÉ! RAENÉ!" the Maidens chanted. Jaella hoped their voices would carry through the Gate and serve as further enticement to the demon they were trying so desperately to bring through. By all rights there should have been a man here with them. Her own kinsman, Raené's mortal Avatar would have been best, but he wasn't there. He hadn't arrived in time and they didn't dare wait. The moon was full tonight, and the ceremony had to be performed now. Yet, without Raené's Avatar the demon might not have a physical form able to manifest outside of the protective circle, and that would present a problem.

"Prince Raené, my body is yours! Come to me, beloved Prince."

It should have been her kinsman who shouted out those words, but he wasn't there so he could not play his part. And without him, without a mortal form for Raené to inhabit, this whole effort might be fruitless.

No, we will succeed! We must!

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Beyond the area encompassed by the Temple it was the height of summer. Greenery and flowers, a riot of untamed forest surrounded them. Here in the Temple the bite of a winter wind was blowing, but she hardly felt the cold except as a tightening of her nipples. Power burned through her veins as she waited for the Gate to open.

A lambent glimmer of palest amethyst sheathed her body, ripples of darker color, rich purple spread upward from her feet to her hands, leaping free to sparkle along the tops of the pillars. One by one, each column was crowned by a nimbus of flickering violet that moved like flame but carried no heat. Rather the unholy flames sucked away what small bit of warmth remained inside the Temple until Jaella's breath formed clouds in the air.

"Raené!" she cried.

The arch above the Gate shimmered with the strange fire for a brief instant before it poured down the stones and spread across the area defined by the protective circle.

Between the pillars any trace of the real world vanished, the space between the upright stones filling with blackness. The moonlight was all but gone, the wind that had pulled at Jaella's hair stopped and everything went deathly still. It was so silent her ears ached, and she realized even her heartbeat was muted, the sound of her own breathing absent.

A murky glow like tarnished silver swept around the stones that formed the protective circle and the ground trembled beneath her feet as a wash of violet and indigo flame blazed around the circle. It flowed up the pillars that formed the Gate itself, burning bright and steady. She smiled, joy filling her heart. The magic was working. Her line still carried enough of the blood to summon her family's progenitor.

"Prince Raené!" she cried into the silence and her voice was a roar of sound that vibrated the very pillars of the Temple and sent another jolt through the ground beneath her feet. A few trees outside the Temple swayed and fell, and she was dimly aware of the sound of terrified horses.

"Prince Raené!" she shouted, desperate to get the entity to heed her call and come into their Realm.

This time Jaella was answered by a blast of frigid air that slammed outward from the Gate, carrying stinging crystals of ice and a blizzard's worth of snow on its frosty breath.

Jaella threw her hands in front of her eyes to protect them from the sting of the particles hitting her, the cold so intense she felt frostbitten in

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the span between one heartbeat and the next. The wind was so strong she was forced backward a few feet, and found herself struggling to remain upright in the gale.

Behind her she could hear the Maidens of the Moon screaming in pain and terror as the bitter cold hit their unprotected bodies. If they ran now, if they tried to leave the Temple the cold would kill them. She'd warned them of that, but she still worried they would be so frightened they might forget. Warriors or not, when it came to the darker arts they were as fearful as any farm girl.

"PRINCE RAENÉ!" she screamed it out this time, but the roaring of the wind ripped the shout out of her throat and swallowed it leaving not a trace. She tried again, but snow filled her mouth. Unable to see, unable to speak, she stood in the icy blast and prayed silently that she'd reached the demon, prayed that he would come.

Another ripple of color swept around the containment circle and flowed up the Gate, but this time it spread across the murky darkness that filled the space between the columns. Black mist curled out of the Gate, mixing with the freezing wind and its burden of frozen precipitation. Anywhere the inky mist touched frost formed, painting the monolithic columns with delicate tracteries, ferns and feathers of ice that glittered in the dimmed moonlight. Or perhaps they were so clearly visible because they were glowing, emitting their own cold light. They were beautiful, but cold as the unforgiving land from which they'd come.

The Coldlands. *His* home.

She'd done it. She'd opened the Gate.

An instant later the wind stopped leaving a drift of snow spread across the Temple floor.

That wasn't all it left behind.

Crouched in a drift directly at the center of the protective circle was a snow decked figure. Tendrils of living night, ropes of blistering cold mist, bled off the being, so much of the unholy mist rising around the dimly seen form that she could not tell exactly what it was. She couldn't tell whether she had summoned Raené or whether it was one of his minions. What had the book said? You will know him by his power, no matter the form he takes. Watch for the mist which, like a flood borne of night, will pour off of him. Touch it not, for it is deadly.

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She nodded to herself, satisfied that she'd done what she'd set out to do. As she watched the unmoving form within the piled snow, a few wisps of the mist bled through the protective barrier and laid another dusting of heavy frost across the confines of the Temple. None of it came near her or the Maidens, for which she was grateful.

"Has he come?" one of the Maidens asked in a tone that vibrated with fear.

"I think so," she replied without turning. "But I am not able to see him. There is not enough light."

"What should we do?"

"Stay where you are. I do not know if we've summoned Raené yet. If this is one of his minions we must send it back with a message for the Prince and try again."

"I'm freezing," one of the girls complained.

"Be quiet," another snapped. "We're all cold, Seena."

"I want to go home," the same girl whined.

"Be silent," several of them told her, their voices sharp with anger and annoyance.

Jaella sighed. Seena could always be counted on to whine about any situation no matter the gravity of the duty she was given.

The mist was starting to clear, but as yet the being amid the mound of snow had not moved and Jaella worried that they'd failed and all they'd managed to call forth was a lump of snow.

"Raené?" she murmured. "Please my lord, answer me."

And she was answered, by a soft chuckle that chilled her very blood. It wasn't a human sound, that laugh, and it drew little needles of terror down her spine, but she stood her ground. It wasn't a man she'd summoned, and while it might also not be Raené, the brittle crystal laughter told her that it most certainly wasn't human. Whatever it wasn't, it assuredly *was* a demon.

The roiling mist was clearing, large gaps showing that it was dissipating, the form inside the piled snow moved, shifting some of the concealing crust aside.

It was still too dark to see anything clearly, the moonlight still dimmed by the aftereffects of the magic she'd used. The blackness that had accompanied the opening of the Gate faded slowly, and finally there was enough light reflecting off the sparkling white snow, and coming from the frosty pseudo-ferns for her to make sense of what she was seeing. The shape resolved into that of a man on one knee, and both

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hands. He was coated in a thick layer of frost dusted ice that glittered like rare gems under the slowly returning power of the moon's glow.

Jaella stared.

This was not Raené. She knew what she should be seeing. A man with hair the color of flame and skin like the wind driven snow spread across the floor of the Temple. Like her kinsman, he should have eyes of an unnatural color, like the finest amethysts.

But this...

Wide-eyed Jaella watched as the form rose to its full height, ice falling away and shattering with a sound like wind-chimes in a gale as they struck the hard frozen ground. The full glory of the moon's light reasserted itself the instant he moved, giving Jaella enough light to finally see him clearly.

He was a giant of a man, and he appeared to be composed of ice. From the mane of hair that fell like a frozen waterfall over his broad shoulders, to the pallor of his frost coated skin, he was a being as cold as the Realm beyond the Gate from whence he'd come.

And his eyes, his eyes were the grey of a winter locked sea.

Handsome with the striking beauty of an ice girded mountain peak, or the chill splendor of a dawn kissed glacier, he was even taller than Jaella who topped most men by a good head in height or more.

It wasn't only his eyes or his face, nor just his height, that caught her attention. There was also the sculpted lines of a body that held her gaze as her belly flooded with an arousal so complete she was left gasping for breath. And the quiescent flesh between his long, well formed thighs only added to the wetness between her own firm thighs.

She heard a few whispered words, a quickly indrawn breath from the Maidens behind her, and she smiled. They too had noticed this creature's unholy charms.

Jaella boldly stepped toward the containment circle, regarding the being from the Gate with open curiosity. This was not how the Prince of the Coldlands had been described to her. He should have the same fiery hair she herself had. She was, according to legend, a descendant of his last visit to the Realm of Humanity.

"Who are you?" she asked him. "What are you?"

The male creature turned eyes as cold as the ice melting beneath his feet on her and replied, "Snow, Lord of the Coldlands."

* * * *

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There were a dozen beautiful women cowering behind the cluster of stone monoliths that surrounded him. Blondes, brunettes, attractive, slender, and trembling from the cold he himself was incapable of feeling. They were all mouthwatering delicacies of femininity that he would have gladly sampled, but none of them compared to the fire-haired beauty standing directly in front of him.

Despite the cold her bearing was regal, proud, and totally lacking any sign that she feared him. Her breasts showed him just how chilled she was, her nipples tight peaks that drew his gaze. He felt his cock twitch and knew it was going half hard just from looking at her. He saw her shiver, watching as the cold raised goose-bumps on skin as pale as marble.

"Snow?" she made his name a question. "If you are Lord of the Coldlands where is Raené your Prince?"

"I ate him," he replied. It wasn't a joke because, in the technical sense of the thing, he essentially *had* eaten the being that had been Raené. At least he'd taken in the essence of the demon, absorbing his power and the majority of his inhuman abilities when he'd slain the Prince. An odd thought struck him, *Since Raené is essentially gone I suppose that technically makes me the Prince of the Coldlands*. It was an intriguing thought, but it wasn't terribly important unless you went in for that whole title thing. Titles had never impressed him, not even when he'd been human.

The woman was staring at him with an expression composed of mixed shock and disbelief, her full-lipped mouth open in an 'O' of horror. "You.,," she frowned, "*ate* him?"

"In a manner of speaking," he replied and took a step toward her.

The protective circle that lay between them flared to life, throwing up a barrier of pallid light barely visible under the glow of the full moon overhead.

"You cannot come forth until I so will it," the woman warned him.

He frowned. Putting a hand out, felt the tingle as the barrier of the circle sought to bar him from entering the world to which he'd been summoned. It was weak, and he realized it wasn't meant to stop him, it was designed to prevent Raené and his creatures from escaping. He was not Raené, nor had he been one of Raené's creatures for a long time. While he did carry the demon's powers within him, Snow couldn't be totally restrained by the barrier. Not being a demon he could enter the Realms of Humanity as that was truly what he was. Human. Though a

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tainted one or the barrier would have offered no resistance whatsoever. The tingle was enough to warn him that he'd be forced to expend some of his precious energy in order to break free. Expending hoarded power was not something Snow wanted to do, not with a true demon on the loose in this world. While rest did restore expended energies, the farther he traveled from the Gate the longer such replenishment would take.

He well knew the rules and the limitations that were imposed on those with demonic powers, even humans that had stolen or been granted such powers.

There was also no point in antagonizing the woman by merely stepping through the barrier. If she was who she claimed to be—and he had no reason to doubt her, not when he could see the evidence of his former master in the fire of her hair and the shape of her too beautiful face—then she could have powers of her own that might prove detrimental to his mission. A mission they'd called him through the Gate to achieve, though he would have arrived on his own in any event. He also had to consider the fact that it was this woman, and those crouching and shivering behind the pillars, that had called him in the first place. Or rather they'd been the ones calling the demon they knew, not the pseudo-demon they ended up with. Either way they'd made his entry into their world much easier.

"What do you want of me?" he asked, following the age old formula. It wasn't often that a group of very comely mortal women were the ones seeking his aid. No, that task usually fell to wrinkled old women or arrogant young men, both of whom tended to be regarded as expendable by their people. He crossed his arms over his bare chest and waited for her reply.

A constant swirl of black mist drifted around him, layering his still body in glittering ice. Despite the containment of the barrier a few threads of the inky fog drifted away to dust the nearby pavement with sparkling frost showing him just how tenuous the magical containment surrounding him was. Seeing that, he came to the conclusion that the spell was weaker than it should be, and he wondered if it was because magic was fading in the world or whether the demon had gained so much power that it was twisting the very fabric of the world. He suspected it was the latter, rather than the former, which told him that he had a great deal of work to do if he was going to save this place from the invading entity.

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"We...I seek your aid," she explained. "A demon has come and we must have your help to destroy it."

"I know of the demon. Now tell me what you offer for my aid?" *Formalities, what a bother. Still, I don't want to disappoint her. Besides,* he thought to himself, *she's quite pleasing to look at.*

And look at her he did, his gaze taking in her full breasts and the fiery triangle of hair above the dimple that marked the start of her sex. He found himself wondering how she'd taste, what she'd sound like as he lapped at the juices of her cunt. He couldn't help the speculative smile that curled his mouth ever so slightly.

"How do we know he can help us?" a girl asked from where she clung to another of her sisters. "He's not Raené."

The fire-haired woman was frowning as she gazed at him as if she too were wondering the exact same thing. "Are you able to kill other demons as Raené could, or have our efforts been wasted?"

Snow let out a bark of harsh laughter, "I killed *him*, does that suffice as an answer?"

The woman nodded, "I think so."

An errant shift in wind carried her scent to him. Woman, and some faint odor of flowers and green growing things. He felt his cock twitch and grow fully hard, and he was quite certain the women noticed because he heard a sudden murmur of whispered words without being able to pick out anything they said clearly.

"So what would you have of me?" he asked. What he really wanted was to walk out of the circle and get about the business of hunting down the demon, though a brief detour that resulted in his cock sunk in her womanly flesh wouldn't be disdained. He inhaled her fragrant scent. No, he'd not refuse such a pleasurable distraction.

The woman was staring at his cock, and he suspected she was having a similar thought because she licked her lips and her legs shifted to reveal a wet glimmering at the apex of her thighs.

He couldn't help the faint smile that curled his lips, or the anticipatory twitching of his erection.

"Have you lost the capacity for speech?" His voice was muted, meant for her ears only.

"Your willing aid," she told him.

"Fine, you'll have that as it's why I'm here. Now can we get on with this?" Vaguely he recalled something he'd heard the woman say as he

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was being drawn through the Gate. Something about her body being part of the deal. "What do I need to do to get out of here?"

"For your aid you will gain my maidenhead and I will gain your cooperation. Is that not what most demons seek? The power of virgin blood?"

Oh, that, he mused. Deflowering virgins really didn't have a great deal of appeal to him but then he hadn't been born a demon as Raené had. Not that Raené had much use for females except as a means to breed his Avatars. On the whole Snow had always preferred experienced sexual partners. But, he had to admit as he looked the woman up and down that he certainly liked what he saw. She was shapely, if taller than most females he could recall from his days among the long houses and there was a slightly too perfect sculptured beauty about her face that showed her inhuman heritage. Sex with her certainly wouldn't be a torture, yet he didn't like the idea of the bargain. It didn't seem right forcing her into something she probably didn't really want—although there *was* the scent of arousal's perfume in the air. Most women—if he remembered right—tried to save themselves for the man they'd wed. Not that his memories of such things were all that clear after gods alone knew how long. The point of the matter was Snow wasn't a demon and he didn't require such a twisted bargain as was being offered up so willingly to him.

He'd been a man as human as any once. A man eager to have any willing woman share his bed. But that had been centuries ago in a Human Realm far removed from where they now stood.

This woman was a temptation though. One he really had no time for, unfortunately, even if the thought of having her beneath him was a powerful enticement.

He took a step forward, stopping just inside the line of protection between them. "I need no such bargain from you. I'm no demon," he explained. "And I give you my word that I'll aid you in defeating the demon whose arrival has caused so much death."

"Perhaps you aren't a demon," she replied, boldly stepping across the lines that marked the protective circle, "perhaps you are a man. Either way I'm going to have what I want of you."

If he'd been lying, if he'd been a real demon, her failure to exact a promise to do her no harm would have been a dire mistake. Her error to gain his assurance he would aid her in return for the bargain of her virginity sacrificed on the altar of his cock was just as foolish an omission on her part. Such grave miscalculation made him frown. She

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was young, but if she'd made the same blunder with a real demon, she'd have died horribly and lost her soul as well.

"Were I a true demon, you'd be in mortal peril," he warned her, speaking gently, reaching up to brush a stray lock of hair from her cheek. He could feel the heat of her body against his own icy cold flesh. It came as a near shock to him, that heat, as he'd known nothing but the bitter cold for so many years. Generations of lives as humans counted time.

"Perhaps," she replied, her gaze locked with his own. She placed both her palms flat on his chest, right over his heart, her forefingers and thumb touching to form a triangle.

How long had it been since a living human had set hand on him? So long he couldn't remember a face, name or even if the person had been male or female. Nor did it matter. He took her hands in his, pulling them away. They were wasting time, people were dying. Worse, people were accepting the demon's bargain of continued life if they but surrendered to him. Even so far away he could sense their agony as the demon granted them his *mercy* and took everything they'd been, body and soul, reshaping them into a creature with no sense of self, no volition beyond obeying its master.

Anger welled inside his being. He'd been no better than those poor wretches while he'd been under the dominion of Prince Raené. Perhaps his fate had been worse. At least they would never know the horror they caused to their fellow humans.

He did. He remembered every agonized scream he'd heard as he slaughtered every last man, woman and child in his own village. A thousand times a thousand years would never erase the horror, nor wipe away the guilt of what he'd done.

"I don't want your virginity," he growled out harshly. "Raené might have wanted it, though I doubt he'd have taken it in the way you envision, but I'm not him." He put the thoughts of his own past aside, shoving away the lust she'd awakened. There wasn't time to waste on nonsensical bargains. He wasn't what she thought he was, and he didn't want to spend any more time talking. He had work to do and the sooner it was accomplished, the better it would be both for him, and this world among the Mortal Realms.

"Then what is there for me to offer you to seal our pact?" she wanted to know.

She lay her hands on him again and he pushed them away. "We don't need to seal a pact because I won't try to destroy you, your people

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or your world. I'll kill this Gaurdaaz because it needs doing and then I'll return back through the Gate."

"Why?"

"Because I was like you once."

"Human?" she asked. She was looking up at him, her lips slightly parted. Even in the dark, with only the light of the full moon he could tell her eyes were the color of perfect emeralds. Green and mysterious as a cat's, the color striking him as being odd. Most of the progeny Raené had left scattered across the Realms were either indigo or violet eyed.

Instead of replying to him she lowered her head and pressed a light kiss over his heart directly in the middle of the fading warmth where her hands had rested.

"Yes, I was human. A very long time ago, in a different Realm than this one."

"It does not matter. You are not Raené, but the offer remains the same," she told him.

He closed his eyes. It had been a long time since he'd been with a woman. Since he'd been with anyone warm and alive the way a human was alive. How long ago had he killed Raené? A hundred years? Five hundred? A thousand? He didn't even know anymore. Time meant nothing inside the Coldlands, and it meant even less to him after so long; trapped in the icy barrens with no company other than the beings he created for his own sanity. He made them from ice so he wasn't completely alone, but even then he was still alone as the beings were just extensions of himself.

He certainly wasn't alone here. And the being touching him wasn't just an extension of his own psyche. Her lips touched his chest again, then the tip of her damp tongue swept across a nipple.

He groaned softly as a thread of warmth spread into his flesh from the place where she kissed him. The feeling was so strange, so alien that he stepped away from her, staring at the fire haired woman who regarded him so calmly in return. There was a tension in her stance, an expectancy, as if she were waiting for something to happen.

"We are wasting time," he growled, stepping toward the barrier of the protective circle.

"Wait." A single word, but it stopped him as if she held him by a leash.

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He frowned and turned to watch her warily. He could feel the thread of power touching him, a fine gossamer of enchantment that led back to her. "For what?"

She smiled, a secret hidden behind her eyes. "You aren't Raené, but you have taken his power. Isn't that right?"

"Yes," he agreed. "That's right. Why?"

The thread of warmth was working its way deeper, like a worm, creeping inside of him. Snow frowned.

Then it touched his heart.

Crying out, not sure if he was in pain or feeling pleasure, he dropped to his knees, head thrown back, body shuddering. Black coils of mist flowed off of him, laying a tracery of frost across anything it touched. Flakes of snow drifted from his hair as he shook his head violently, the warm sensation spreading, crawling through his torso, ice forming on his skin then shattering as he moved.

"Snow." He heard her speak his name and he looked at her, his face a mask of torment.

"Don't fight it," she counseled in a gentle tone, her eyes full of sadness and—no mistaking it—pity. She was holding the chains he'd seen before, walking toward him with a seductive sway of her hips. She grasped one of his wrists in her hand, her intention plain. She meant to chain him.

He fought the enchantment, the cold deepening around him until particles of ice were pattering down in an icy fall like winter sleet.

Her hand when it gripped his wrist felt as if it were composed of flame, making his skin burn and he screamed, shaking, fighting whatever she was doing. He was trapped, held in thrall by the power of the spell she'd woven to control him.

He'd thought her young and foolish, when all along he'd been the fool. Him. Snow. The man who'd been slave to Raené, Prince of the Coldlands. And he'd been caught by her almost the same way Raené had caught him so very long ago.

"Forgive me, but there is no other way," she explained as she pressed him backward, forcing him to lie down in the thick layers of snow and ice that covered the stones beneath them. She locked the chains around his wrists and touched them to the ground where they were held fast, the ice rising up to encase them as his power, the power he'd stolen from Raené, answered *her* will.

He struggled, to no avail. He could not break free.

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"What are you doing to me!" he snarled.

"Shhhh..." she knelt beside him, leaned down and kissed his mouth, her lips like a flame, burning, searing into him. "You aren't Raené, but you have his power, and at least some of his vulnerabilities."

"Damn you woman, stop this," he snarled, trying to kick her aside. A powdering of icy particles and drifting flakes dropped on them from above, dusting them both, ice forming and shattering over Snow's body as he moved. The power he'd stolen from Raené fought against whatever the woman was trying to do to him, but there was no escape and he found himself wondering if this was how an Avatar was made. A woman desiring power capturing Raené by magic and taking seed he would never give on his own.

In the end such a thing only served Raené as it gave him the ability to freely move around the Realm in which he took the body of an Avatar.

And he'd not always done it by invitation. It had been through an Avatar that Snow had become Raené's slave.

He was a thousand times a fool for letting himself fall into such a trap. Woven of lust, a spell to ensnare him in the pleasures of the flesh.

Pleasures he'd long been denied.

Ones he should never have let lay claim to his flesh.

"You don't know what you're asking of me. Or the danger you awaken here. Stop before you find that you regret what you've done," he warned her, trying to keep her from completing the spell.

"No," she told him. Her hands were on him again, touching, caressing, awakening another sort of warmth, a different heat in him even as they seared him with heat that was both pain and pleasure.

Vulnerabilities. Yes, he had those. One's drilled into him by his dead Master. Raené had used sex and pleasure, pain and humiliation to train him until he he'd been nothing but a slave to the demon's will. As they said, familiarity bred contempt, and after an interminable amount of time, and too much familiarity, he'd finally overcome the emotional bindings that the demon had set on him. One by one he'd learned to ignore the exquisite torments, the agonizing pleasures, until he'd turned the tables on Raené and used the demon's own tricks to finally kill the Prince of the Coldlands.

This was a game he knew. A game he could play on level ground with the best of them.

The chains were just loose enough for what he wanted to do. Reaching up he gripped the woman's face and locked their mouths in a

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kiss cold as a glacial wind, hot as a bonfire. Dark mist crackled in the air and the protective barrier that surrounded them glowed brighter as magic warred with magic for supremacy.

It was a game of control. The power of a virgin at the Gate battling with the being from the Gate.

Hands glided down his torso, following the curves and planes of muscle and bone and he moaned, breaking the kiss to regard the woman who was trying to bend him to her will.

"Truce," he offered. "I'll give you my promise and you keep your virginity."

She laughed, the sound sultry, full of desire. "What makes you think I want my maidenhead?"

He stared at her, frowned.

She had said she was Raené's descendent. Sex was power to the demon Prince of the Coldlands.

Sex was power.

Snow's eyes narrowed as he mulled over the truths behind the Prince's power, things that he'd never considered despite having survived the Prince's sadistic and twisted sexual games.

To defeat this Guardaaz they needed power.

Understanding that led him to fully contemplate the scope of the magical energies he'd stolen from the demon Prince, and the nature of what the woman wanted. He asked, "Have you a name?"

"Jaella."

"Jaella, Daughter of Raené, Guardian of the Gate."

"Yes."

"Fucking you will give me power, being fucked will transform your power from that of a Maiden to what, Jaella?"

"A sorceress," she replied.

"And you'll be able to fight this Gaurdaaz more effectively?"

"Yes."

"You are certain?"

"I have studied all the proper grimoires," she replied. "As a virgin I am unable to cast even the simplest of the magics that will be mine as a sorceress."

"So the magic you seek to use against me now is that of a Maiden?"

"Yes," she admitted boldly.

"A bargain then," he murmured as he pulled her down for another kiss. Her hands resumed their roaming exploration of his body, warm

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fingers touching and caressing, bringing the flesh between his thighs to stony attention until it resembled one of the surrounding columns.

Her hair fell around them and he found himself breathing in her scent, exhaling mist that turned to sparkling frost in the fire red flood. There was something in the scent, an undertone that only added to the lust coiling in his groin. More magic, unknown and possibly dangerous. Possibly just there as an enticement. It was well known to any of his descendents in the Realms that Raené really preferred men for his pleasures. He'd typically used women for nothing but breeding his Avatars, though what she would have done had Raené himself still existed, Snow had no clue.

Without an Avatar for him to inhabit, he could not have maintained human form outside of the magical circle. Snow, having been born a mortal had no such limitation. Something she would be unaware of, just as she would be ignorant that he could not be bound as a demon could. He'd stolen a demon's soul, but that had not made him one, nor did it place upon him their limitations. Two things for which he was eternally grateful.

"Will you give me what I desire?" she asked him.

"What is it you desire?" he countered, his face buried in her hair, drawing her scent deep, feeling the tingle of the magic in the fragrance. It *was* pleasant, though it appeared to have little affect on him. It had been made to entice Raené as his old master hadn't cared much for the pleasures of a woman's body. Unlike Snow. Snow loved women.

"I want the power to defeat the demon."

Snow couldn't help it, he laughed softly. "And you think this is really going to give you that?"

She nodded. "I do." Their lips touched, tongues darting out, tasting, teasing, sparring for supremacy.

He returned her kiss, feeling the heat of her mouth, reveling in the flavor. Mint and something else. Probably more magic meant to tie Raené to her, but at least he found the taste pleasant.

* * * *

It was working, the spell of enchantment cast by a Maiden tying the demon—or whatever this Snow was—to her. The freezing cold of his body, proved his words. He must have killed Raené to have the Prince of the Coldlands well documented power. She wasn't sure how tight the binding would be as he was not Rayné, but he wasn't the Prince perhaps

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this Snow would not require her kinsman's mortal shell in order to walk in their world.

She broke the kiss looking down into a face that was pale as his name. Handsome, yes he was very much that, but colorless. Skin, hair even his eyes were all shades born of winter ice. Raené had been ice, blood and gemstones. Skin like moonlight on frost, hair red as blood and eyes like amethysts. Inhuman.

Beneath her the man moaned as she licked her way down his body, touching and kissing. Anywhere her hand or mouth passed the ice stopped forming. But it still fell over them, making her shiver despite the powerful spell she'd woven into her hair that would keep her from freezing to death. She'd only just activated the charm after stepping within the protective circle that contained the battle of magic going on.

"Sit on my face. I want to taste you and since you've seen fit to chain me, I can't reach what I want."

She regarded him, staring into the almost colorless eyes, "Why?"

"Because you'll like it and because the longer we're at this the more power we generate, that's why," he told her. "Isn't that the reason you want to do this?"

"Yes." She gave him the truth readily as there was no point in denial.

"There's another reason," he told her, his voice a bass rumble, pale gaze locked with her own. "This is your first time so it should be memorable."

Jaella smiled. It was a considerate gesture on his part, far more than she'd have gotten from his former master, if the texts she'd read were true: and there was no reason to doubt them. She nodded and did what he asked, feeling odd as she straddled his face. Of course she'd read about this in one of the grimoires, but she hadn't expected to be experiencing it. Then again, she'd also been expecting to be doing this with the mortal form of Raené who would have taken her kinsman's body—maybe even his very soul. What she had not expected was this creature called Snow.

His hands gripped her hips, steadying her, his fingers like bands of frozen stone on her chilled skin. She wasn't a small woman even by the standards of the Maidens and Warriors of the Moon, but the size of the hands gripping her made her feel normal rather than like the near-giantess she was in comparison to normal people.

The cold of his flesh and the ice beneath her shins chilled her and she couldn't suppress the shiver that tore through her as she felt his

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blizzard-cold breath on her inner thighs. She threw her head back, looking up at the bright disk of the moon, smiling as a few flakes of snow drifted onto her cheeks.

She should be freezing, and she was cold, but the spell to keep her from becoming hypothermic appeared to be working properly even if nothing else had gone the way it should have.

Gentle kisses were pressed to the softness of her inner thighs.

"Don't be afraid, Jaella."

She laughed, "Why should I be? I'm a virgin, but I'm not totally ignorant of what men and women do together. The spell books were full of information."

She felt his cold breath as he chuckled. "Good enough then."

Cold and wet, something brushed against her cleft and she gasped as it delved inward, striking her clit like a shard of winter on her heated flesh. She shuddered at the contrast and moaned. It was nice really, but nice became something else as the icy touch continued. Something wonderful was happening, pleasure such as she'd never known blossomed between her thighs and she realized that the wintry thing touching her was his tongue as it struck deeper inside her, making her inner muscles clench. She looked down to see him watching her, his eyes darker than they'd been, or perhaps it was just the shadow of her body falling across him. Jaella wasn't sure. There was amusement in his gaze though, and another emotion she'd seen in the eyes of men before: lust.

A moan escaped her parted lips, the sensation from her lower body intensifying. There should have been steam rising from the contact of their flesh, hers burning like flame, his so icy that frost was forming on the fiery strands of her public hair.

Eyes that had gone dark as a stormy sky gazed up at Jaella from between her trembling legs. White flame crackled along her thighs, spreading outward from the center of life, the center of creation within her body.

Black mist drifted in frosty curtains around them and she cried out as the marvelous tongue whipped up to flick across her clit, then swept back to strike upward into her hot pussy.

Her body ignited, little glimmerings of blue-white flame licking across her skin as the power of the magic they were weaving began to build along with her impending orgasm.

The icy flesh dove and then retreated, slipping rapidly along her slit, lapping, teasing, driving her mad with passion and a need for something

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more, an ache that wanted to be filled. Dart and flit, lick and stab, in and out with increased speed until she threw her head back, the flames curling and dancing across her skin.

Panting breaths rolled from her open mouth turning to fog that spilled into the dark mist dancing around them; falling as a flurry of whiteness that lazily whirled in the air around the man and woman as power built.

Her hips rocked with the increasing urgency filling her body, dazzling her mind with light like a silver torch, and sound that brought tears to her closed eyes. Tears that flowed down her cheeks to freeze as tiny glittering crystals on her face as brittle rain of icy particles pattered gently around them.

A scream of pleasure ripped from her body as she arched in release, the cry a high-pitched note that sustained itself in echoes off of the Gate.

* * * *

Sobbing for breath she could only shudder helplessly as Snow's tongue continued to lap her juices, feeding from her as if she were the only sustenance he required. Perhaps she was.

A startled gasp was torn from her as he grabbed her hips, his mouth working her clit with merciless intensity, flinging her toward another silver-flame and blue-ice orgasm.

Jaella didn't feel the cold anymore. The mouth touching her burned hot as a smith's forge. She moaned as the tongue swept back and forth across her clit, a sensation like burning embers spreading through her lower body. A whirlwind of ebon mist and glimmering opalescent flame roiled around them, the energies her passion was generating manifesting strongly as Jaella rose toward climax.

Ice crept across her thighs, cracking and shattering away as she rocked against his face, her cries grew louder, the sound magnified by the bitterly cold air around them.

Don't cum, a voice in her mind ordered. **Let it build, but don't cum yet.**

Jaella realized the voice in her head was Snow's voice, deep as the groaning of glacial ice.

How can I not cum? she asked, the pleasure coiling inside her, wild and seeking freedom, hurrying toward completion.

Look at me, he commanded and she found herself obeying. His eyes were definitely much darker than they'd been when he'd first come

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through the Gate. She stared between her own thighs, focusing on his face, their gazes fusing tight as a winter locked sea.

Ancient and commanding, the essence of a demonic being that was Snow clamped down on her mind, reached in and held her very soul in thrall. The very core of her being cowered at the immensity of what grasped her, her soul cringing away from the contact, but unable to escape and she finally understood the danger inherent in summoning so powerful a being as the demon who was Prince of the Coldlands.

I'll not harm you,* he told her as a soothing blanket of calm assurance spread across her mind. **To gather power from this we have to hold out as long as we can. As inexperienced as you are, this is the only way in which we can manage this.

** I remember what the book said, but..** Her core of fear was still there, as was a modicum of distrust. He was, if not a demon, someone who'd stolen the power of one, and therefore not totally trustworthy.

No buts, I'll let you go when you've attained a little more magical energy. We'll need it for the next step.

His tongue was without mercy, his will reaching out and clamping down on her raging need for release. Spiraling higher and higher, there was only the feel of his mouth, his tongue, and the gaze that held hers, his eyes becoming huge in her vision. Her hips rocked with the cruel denial of her desire, cries of need pouring from her in a litany of frustrated passions.

"Please, deities, please," she begged. But his will held her as surely as she'd sought to bind him.

Flame the color of ice crackled around her, almost drowning out the sounds of her impassioned moans. Mist, black as night, poured icy flakes over them both until the Maidens watching from the safety of the pillars couldn't see anything but a veritable blizzard howling at the verge of the Gate.

* * * *

Snow held Jaella from release until he could feel magic snarling around them, threatening to totally overpower the containment of the protective circle. He relented before they overwhelmed the magic circle and brought the woman straddling his face to another gale-scream orgasm, eagerly swallowing the flavor of her sex. She draped limply across him and he shattered the chains that she'd used to restrain him as easily as a man would have snapped thread. The links were discolored

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drained of their own magic, the metal gone brittle from the emanations of their combined power.

He lapped at the cunt pressed to his face, savoring the taste of this female called Jaella. It had been too long since he'd tasted the essence of a woman, and now that he had one in his grasp it would be difficult for him to let go.

But that was exactly what he would be forced to do once his job here was done. Let her go and walk away, walk through the Gate and never look back, never return.

He shoved the vicious bite of loneliness aside. This was the life he had, dealt to him by his own failures and arrogance. There was no one to blame but himself for what he was now; Immortal, undying and painfully alone.

It would be enough to savor the memory of the moment he was stealing now, a memory he could carry for the rest of eternity if he chose. One he could relive within his own Realm with beings of ice animated by his own stolen power. He pushed that idea aside as a hollow substitute even as he pushed aside every other thought but what must be done to assure they had the power to battle with the demon Gaurdaaz.

He moved the woman away from his face, placing her in a bed of soft powdery snow, neither of them able to feel the bite of the cold. It was Raené's element, the bitter kiss of Winter. It was a power that they shared, her by blood, him by dint of the fact he'd taken everything that was Raené into himself reforming it to suit who and what he was: a man with the power of a demon prince.

Her eyes were bright emerald flame as he gazed down at her. A languorous smile curved her mouth as she reached up to twine her arms around his neck.

"That was—" she sighed, "amazing"

He returned her smile, bent down to kiss her, giving her the flavor of her own cunt from his lips and tongue. She didn't protest, instead her tongue sparred gently with his.

Her skin was made even more pale, almost pearly, by a layer of frost that covered her, but he didn't think she could feel the cold anymore. Her body was afire, like his, burning with more passion than he'd known in countless years.

* * * *

Jaella was hardly back to herself when he grabbed her around the waist and rolled her onto her back, the chains that held him crumbled,

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destroyed by the intensity of the magic. The building power glittered as dancing fire across her skin, and as mist which poured off of his body to swirl around them. Flakes of snow drifted slowly out of the grey mists, crystals of ice glittered at the foot of the Gate and the nearest columns where sheathed in diamond shards of frost.

It was beautiful. So very similar to the cold of winter, yet somehow alien and strange, a peculiar bite to the air, an odd tingle filling the atmosphere, like the feel before a lightning storm.

His kisses were fierce as a gale, stealing her breath away, making her inner muscles pulse with the need to be touched, filled. A ferocious hungering, like none she'd ever felt in the presence of a mortal man, brought a whimpering cry from her and she found herself clutching at Snow.

"Please, please." She begged, "I need you to fill me, to take me."

And fill her he did, in one swift stroke, his cock entering her, shattering the barrier to her innermost heat and pulling a cry of startled pleasure and shocked pain from her.

It hurt, bringing tears that froze on her eyelashes, turning them to ruby gems. The pain was fleeting, quickly forgotten as he moved slowly, gently probing her depths. A rod of ice encased in a sheath of living flame. She tightened her thighs around his hips, hanging on to him as he covered her breasts and face with kisses that burned. Frost-pallid fire coruscated across her skin and ebony dark mist spun a web of ice around them. Power crackled and her hair moved as if it were a living thing, the long strands wrapping around his wrists and climbing up his arms as if it sought to replace the chains with a new type of binding.

Looking up at his face she saw how black his eyes had become, even the whites gone now that the demonic power within him was finally unleashed.

He had power. Perhaps more power than Raené himself had possessed or the demon Princeling could never have been killed by this being who'd once been as human as she herself was.

Human, but that was soon to end for her as it had ended for him if the passages in the ancient texts were correct.

"Witch, you are you getting what you wanted?" he asked her, voice a low growl.

It was his deep voice rather than the cold which sent a shiver through her. She wanted to smile and speak in answer, but all she could manage was a pleased gasp as he drove the rigid shaft deeper, filing the

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depths of her cunt with enough force to wrench the startled cry from her. Groaning, she kicked him, driving her heels into his hard butt, urging him to greater efforts.

She was watching his face, studying the hard planes and sharp angles. So masculine, but there was an underlying perfection, an unnatural look that went beyond the total blackness of his gaze. Demon-touched, a demon now himself, yet she wanted him, desired him for reasons greater than his ability to turn her from virgin to Sorceress. He'd awakened something inside her, not just the power of her soul lying dormant, no, it was something even deeper. Yet she couldn't set a name to it. Not with the burning ice and the blizzard flame, the rod of flesh driving all rational thought from her mind.

They rocked together on their bed of snow, wrapped in freezing mists that coated them both in a patina of ice which shattered with the sound of breaking crystal as they moved. The glow of her skin rivaled that of the moonlight spilling around them, the darkness of his gaze burning with unholy light: the power of the demon he'd subsumed.

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The Gate was glowing as the energy built, the pace that Snow set was slow and steady, intended to make what they were doing last as long as possible. They were after power, and the kind of power they needed could only be gained by denying their bodies quick release.

Snow struggled to contain the roaring desire, his balls feeling as if they'd melt from the heat of her body, or maybe it was his own lost warmth returning. He didn't know which, but he was burning. Afire. The whole of his being filled with need greater than any he'd experienced in so long he couldn't have said when—or even if—he'd ever been enmeshed in passion the equal of having himself hilt deep in this woman who would be a Sorceress.

He watched her face, her cheeks flushed with lust's glow, skin sparkling, shimmering as her own power awakened in response to what they were doing.

Sorceress, yes, she could very well become that, but first and foremost she was of Raené's get. That also conveyed certain powers beyond those possessed by even the greatest witches among the Human Realms.

Demon blood, demon power.

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And Raené's greatest power had always lain within the scope of the unbridled lust, passion and need he wove around his prey in a dance of irresistible seduction no mortal had ever resisted.

Jaella's red tresses wrapped his forearms and held him tighter than chains. Her green eyes—so unusual in one borne of the Prince's line—glowed like those of a cat in the darkness and, cat-like, she clawed his back, nails tearing at his shoulders, his spine.

So close to the Gate such tiny wounds were fleeting, gone before they could even bleed, but even the suggestion of blood, mingled with the magic already surrounding them in a storm made manifest by the ice and fire swirling in a mad elemental dance caused a burst of additional power to surge through him and from him into the would be Sorceress. The Gate began to hum and he could hear the Maidens of the Moon by their pillars crying out in terror.

DONT RUN! TO RUN NOW IS DEATH! he shouted into their minds. He experienced their terror and felt them clinging to one another, the cold biting into their tender human flesh. He wanted to help them, but it would use power, and that use would lessen what he was trying to achieve with Jaella.

It would take away from the power they would later use to kill the invading demon, and that was something he dare not reduce.

Link hands, it will help protect you, he urged. *It's not much but it will keep you from dying.*

Beneath him Jaella cried out, body arching to meet his slow thrusts, as he tried to keep his mind occupied with thoughts that would distract him from what his flesh so desperately craved: release, which he must deny them both for the sake of the energies they must have to thwart the demon.

He shuddered and slid into the welcoming sheath of Jaella's flesh, fighting the need to thrust quickly, to rush to orgasm. But he controlled himself with the knowledge that the longer it lasted the greater would be the power they raised and more sweet the final reward would be.

Deep, languid thrusts, the strands of her hair holding him captive, Snow kissed her, tasting a faint hint of sweetness from her mouth.

The Prince had tasted of nectar and spice, sweet and so very addicting and he deepened the kiss wanting more of that remembered taste, relishing it as a starving man sought food.

A groan escaped him and he thrust harder, hips bucking faster, some of his self-control gone until he forced himself to break the kiss.

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Breathing hard, he stared into her eyes, seeing the emerald of her gaze shimmering with awakening power.

So this is the face of the Sorceress. So beautiful and as dangerous to me in her own way as Raené was for I could love her so easily. But I'll stand for no more traps. When this is done I'll go back to the Coldlands where I belong and she'll stay here to protect her people.

"More!" Jaella cried, all but screaming the demand as she gouged at his flesh with both hands, and he could feel her newly born strength, her nails actually drawing blood.

The Gate crackled, midnight dark mists flowing from it in an inky flood that left thick hoarfrost on the already ice coated ground, while icicles as thick as a man's biceps formed along the crowns of the nearest Pillars.

The protective barrier around them failed, icy wind and pale flame spun outward, sweeping across the entire Temple. The magic bathed the Maidens in lashing power that left them screaming even louder. But this time the cries were not of terror, they were of pleasure, their bodies writhing under the spell of passion the two of them were weaving at the foot of the Gate.

More power flooded into them as the Maidens collapsed in the throes of pleasure.

"Fuck me!" Jaella begged, kicking him, her eyes ablaze.

"Yes," he agreed and picked up the tempo to the music of the women's moans of pleasure as they writhed against one another.

Snow could feel Jaella's fire seeping into his body, knew his own chill was entering her, power exchanging, melding and reforming.

Transforming her. It was also changing him. Something happening to the demonic force he'd stolen from the Prince, the power warping but only becoming stronger than it had been as what she carried inside her reforged him in the crucible of her magic.

He kissed her, the taste of nectar filling his mouth, the scent of flowers invading his mind like the heat of a late spring sun. He could smell rain on her skin, taste it as he took a peaked nipple into his mouth.

Life. That was what he had from her and all of creation spread out before him, contained within the sweet curves of the woman, and he realized he wanted her, desired her in ways he'd never wanted anyone before her, not even the Prince himself.

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Instead he gave himself nothing but the power they both sought, his thrusts now pulling him toward an orgasm he could no longer continue to fight.

"FUCK ME!" she screamed and he did, their bodies moving amid a whirling gale of flame and icy shards, their bodies beginning to glow with the unleashed power surging through them.

Moans came to his ears. The Maidens crying out as the force of the magic took them into its grip more tightly.

It would not just be the pair of them that held the power to fight the demon, it would be the pair of them and all the Maidens who would carry the battle to Gaurdaaz and his minions.

He laughed then, and moved inside the enchanting creature beneath him for he was enchanted by her magic, bound by what they wrought for more than just their impending task to destroy the demon.

Her pussy wrapped his cock in a grip strong as steel, hot as a smithy's forge, with the softness of velvet and soothing wetness. He lowered his head to taste her, lips and tongue savoring the rain and flowers essence of her, the sweetness of her kisses and finally it was too much. Snow broke, his thrusts into the yielding body, the Sorceress meeting each stroke as she rocked beneath him became frantic, passion-driven and he growled low in his throat.

Fire and mist merged into a spinning column that rose higher than the stones of the Gate, spiraling upward into the night sky, a beacon in the darkness.

The writhing of the Maidens reached its peak and the women gasped as the blast of power swept across them.

A shrill scream of pleasure ripped across the silence, followed by a bellow of inhuman ecstasy that tore across the nighted land.

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Far away, in his fortress of stone Gaurdaaz lifted his horned head and sniffed the wind. There was a scent, the smell of magic intermingled with an enticing odor: virgin's blood. But there was another smell in the air, a faint tang like the taste of bitter cold. It was a scent he knew. His amber eyes narrowed, bestial muzzle contorting as he bared his fangs in a snarl.

Raené's magic. But it was not Raené who held the reins of that power for he knew the Prince of the Coldlands, his former captor, his master was dead.

And that left only one possibility.

BAGNOBAK TANGO

Raené's murderer was come to this Realm.

A low growl rumbled in his massive chest to burst forth in challenging bellow that rolled across the scorched ground around his towering lair of black basalt.

* * * *

Snow brushed tendrils of damp hair from her face, and listened to her labored breathing. He'd given her a pleasurable time, and in return they'd shared in the power gained. As had the Maidens from the panting whispers just at the edge of his hearing. "What are your plans now?" he asked.

Jaella turned her bright gaze on him, a faint smile playing at the corners of her mouth. He wanted to kiss that smile away, wanted to hear her gasping moans of pleasure, was drawn to the sweet scent of her. Instead of bending to the desire he turned his head away so he could no longer see her too tempting mouth. It wasn't any help, his eyes on the soft mounds of breasts, the central line of her body that led downward to an even greater temptation. His mouth watered at the remembered taste of her.

"Beyond pleasuring myself with you once more?" She laughed, the warm desire in her tone sending a shock of lust right to his groin.

He sighed, tried to keep his body from reacting to her words and laughter, failed miserably as his cock hardened. "Is that all you think about woman?" he asked as he started to move away.

Her hand closed around his cock, teasing him, "Right now, yes."

A growl of mirth slipped from him and he did kiss her, unable to stop himself from having another taste of her nectar sweetness. It was more muted now, less evident, but the scent of life—flowers and rain—still rose from her flesh and he came to the abrupt realization that those were not of Raené's get, those were purely of Jaella the Sorceress for the giving of life was not among the things Raené could grant—not without a woman's generative magic. "I'll allow you that, but first you tell me how you plan to defeat Gaurdaaz. Or don't you know?"

Her hand let him go and she leaned on his chest, regarding him thoughtfully before she answered, "My kinsman, Rayné was to become bearer of Raené's power, as it was in the old days before we understood how dangerous bringing a demon forth into our Realm could be."

Snow frowned. "You realize he would have died for all intents and purposes? Once Raené took over an Avatar, their souls were gone, lost."

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She nodded, "We know. But there wasn't any other way, and we were both willing to take the risks."

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know. He was supposed to arrive in time for the opening of the Gate."

"Well if he's not here, then he's probably been taken by Gaurdaaz."

Her eyes closed, a look of pain crossing her face, "I know."

CHAPTER TWO

Rayné spit blood as the world spun in his vision. Harsh laughter grated in his ears as the pain stars filled his sight. Helpless as a child, on his knees, head down in the muck, he tried to ignore the agony in his side, the way his ears still rang from the force of the slap across his face. He could feel them tying his arms behind his back, and there wasn't a damned thing he could do to prevent it.

There were just too many of them.

He willed himself not to see the torn remains of his best friend lying in the dirt where he'd fallen. They'd practically been brothers, he and Margen. They might have been more than that had the demon not arrived.

Had he not been the Avatar. Last surviving male of the Prince of the Coldland's fading bloodline.

He wanted to reach out, pull the cooling corpse into his arms and hold Margen. To say goodbye to the man who'd died in a vain effort to protect him. To save him from a fate worse than any death.

The same effort that had killed everyone in the village.

It was his fault. He shouldn't have stayed there for the night. He should have ridden on and not brought the weight of doom down on their heads.

Should have never changed a thing.

With a final, painful tug the creatures finished binding him and walked away. He could hear them rummaging around in the houses, hear the thin screams of terror from the few women and children still left alive. Better for them had they died sooner, but they were soon to die anyway and death ended both pain and sorrow.

He could hear the sounds of bones crunching and tried to shut out that as well. Tried to deny what he knew. They were eating the dead.

Cannibals, though for that to be true the Horde would have to be human, and they'd long since lost any semblance of humanity under the touch of their Master's power. It still sickened him, that terrible sound.

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The sound of friends being eaten like cattle. He closed his eyes on the tears that wanted to spill forth.

Gaurdaaz. The name filled his heart with the ashes of hate, a desire for revenge. Revenge he would never be able to exact, yet his heart burned for it with a fierce need greater than anything he'd ever known. His soul cried out for the chance to tear the demon apart, to render it into nothing more than stinking slime from whence its kind had crawled in the misty dawn of time.

Had he reached his kinswoman, had he not stopped to share a meal and a roof with Margen, he would have reached the Temple in time, he would have had the power to face Gaurdaaz.

But it wouldn't have been as himself. Raené would have consumed his soul and taken his body. He, Rayné would have served the purpose for which he'd been born, and ceased to be forever, consumed to his very soul.

Opening his eyes to the horror around him, he realized the sacrifice of his life, his entire existence would have been less painful than what he was seeing. Tears blurred his eyes, and he blinked them away fiercely. Weeping would avail him nothing, it would not bring anyone back, nor could it ease his own broken heart.

He'd loved Margen, and Margen was dead.

Somehow he had to find a way to avenge his friend and all the villagers who'd been like family to him.

He *had* to find a way to kill Gaurdaaz.

"Come on pretty one," a rough voice growled. "Time for us to move."

"Such a pretty toy," one of the Horde commented as she lapped some blood from her dog's muzzle face and tossed aside a bone that might have once been part of a man's arm.

"Master's toy," another remarked, his whole body covered in bile yellow scales. "Not for the likes of us, he ain't."

"Shame. I'd like to hear him squeal," a pig-faced one commented as a slime covered hand slid down his back. He shivered in disgust and strained at the ropes holding his arms behind his back. They were too tight, cutting off the circulation.

He was rewarded with another kick to already cracked ribs for his efforts.

BAGNOBAK TANGO

No fighting the ropes then. I'll have to wait, bide my time and watch for a chance to escape. Jaella, I'm sorry I wasn't there for you. It should have been my virginity given to Raené, my life that was stolen, not yours.

He felt one of the things grab his hair, yanking his head back painfully, its fanged muzzle moving close to his face so that he choked on the stink of its fetid breath. Piggy eyes, red as blood, glared at him.

"If it weren't for Master's orders, I'd ram my cock into that tight ass of yours and let you know your real value."

A mocking smile, more of a smirk, a challenge, curled Rayné's lips, but he kept his silence. He wanted time, a chance to win free. Being beaten to a bloody pulp would gain him nothing but pain and a body too damaged to serve him if he did find the chance he needed.

Piggy and the dog faced female pulled him to his feet and shoved him toward another creature, one that still retained most of his human appearance, but looked to have partially melted like a candle's wax expose to fire along one side.

"Get him on the beast and let's move," Melted-man ordered.

Their stench was nauseating, and had he not already lost what food lay in his stomach, he'd have heaved it up then and there as Piggy and the dog-woman lifted him to the back of something that might once have been a horse, or even a cow. Whatever it had once been it now looked like nothing but a giant slug with head of a weasel with the horns of a goat. There were no legs, a pool of mucus forming beneath it. It too stank of rot and death, and the slime of its body stung his skin in a way that warned of caustic secretions or mild toxin. He had to trust to his demonic heritage to protect him from any harmful emanations the thing might give off.

Failing that, he had to hope he'd die before they reached their Master, Gaurdaaz.

If not, if he couldn't escape—

No, he refused to think of what might happen. He wasn't completely defeated yet. Not yet. Nor did he know if Jaella had managed to summon their bloodsire from beyond the Gate.

Everything might not be lost.

The creature beneath him moved, gliding forward on its flood of slime, going much faster than any slug, even a gigantic one, should have. The rest of the Horde that had destroyed the village hurried along, surrounding him on all sides, a mob of stinking monsters when they

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should have been peaceful farmers and tradesmen, dairymaids and the daughters of scholars.

He turned his head to glance one last time at the people who'd died trying to protect him. An entire town hacked into bloody ruin, burned by caustic spit, seared by flame. Murdered down to the last whimpering babe.

"That's right, look at what you made us do," Piggy told him. "You should have come out, surrendered to us, but no, you had to fight and now they're dead."

He paid the thing no heed. The truth was the Horde would have killed everyone anyway even if he'd surrendered, and at least being dead they could not be warped into more creatures like these. Humans who'd accepted Gaurdaaz's so called bargain and joined him.

They'd lost more than the dead. The dead only lost their lives. These things had lost their souls and any trace of humanity they'd possessed.

He closed his eyes, feeling the unknown element in the slime on the weasel-slug creeping into his veins. A shiver rippled through him, and he closed his eyes. It was like a drug meant to keep him quiet, make him easy to handle, steal his will.

Rayné had to fight the smile that tried to form. Let them think he was under the spell of the slug's muck. He could fight it, and if he got the chance, he could fight them and escape. At least it dulled the pain, though it seemed to be having no effect on his mind. Inwardly he frowned, something in that alarming him.

He tried to move his fingers and found there was no response, at least none he could feel. Trying to move a leg garnered him the same lack of sensation, nor did his leg move.

Panic struck at him then, his heartbeat picking up the pace.

Piggy laughed, "Ah, you've found out the reason we brought this particular mount for you I see."

He tried to turn his head, move his eyes, and found he couldn't even manage that.

A hand reached over, Piggy gripping his hair again, turning his head to stare into his eyes, "You won't escape your fate, pretty boy. You'll lose your virginity and shed your blood on Gaurdaaz's prick and then he'll make you his slave, and you'll be glad to serve him, just as we are."

They held his body in thrall, but his mind was yet his own. Focusing his entire being on one thing alone he reached out, sending a silent plea for help to the only person who might hear him.

BAGNOBAK TANGO

Jaella! Jaella! Please, if you hear me, I have been taken from the Forest Clans by the Horde of Gaurdaaz! We are heading for his Fortress, and if I arrive there he will turn me against you and the Daughters of the Moon! You must either free me or kill me before we arrive!

He didn't know if she heard him. He didn't even know if she was still alive. What he did know was that without her he was in a hopeless situation from which only death would save him if she could not. There was no one else who would care if he fell into the hands of the enemy because everyone that had mattered to him in the world lay dead, a feast for worms and vermin.

* * * *

The prior night they had walked back to where the horses awaited them beyond the confines of the Temple of the Moon. It was late and too dark to travel through the forest surrounding the Temple, and the Maidens, for all their training as warriors were in need of rest after their ordeal.

None of them had spoken very much about the night's events, but Jaella could tell by the wary glances that passed between the women that the experience had shaken them—some more than others it was true—but none of them were unchanged.

Jaella had slept fitfully, too aware of the male in their midst, the ache between her legs, and the power that hummed through her body. She'd awakened over and over to find him standing nearby facing due south, staring into the night as if he strove to see their enemies through the trees. Each time she awakened he was in the exact same place, totally motionless, a layer of rime glittering like the dust of gemstones over him and the ground at his feet so that he appeared more like statue in a garden than he did a living man.

But *was* he a man? Was he even a living being in the manner of a human?

For that matter was she even human anymore?

She held a hand out and flexed her fingers, a dim shimmer of magical energy answered the motion and she found herself doubting her own humanity. At the heart of the matter was her understanding that the power of the demon's magic, the sexual encounter had changed more than her virginal state, it had also altered her very soul in some way.

Tainted by demon blood, kissed by untold power...no she probably wasn't human any longer.

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Glancing at her companions she wondered if the Maidens were entirely the same—human—after their encounter with the power of the Gate, or the power of Lord Snow, ruler of the Coldlands.

There were no answers to be found in the starlit darkness.

Lying back down she dozed fitfully until the faint caress of dawn had awakened the birds and the Maidens.

Snow had been standing exactly where she'd last seen him, looking to the south as if he could sense the presence of the other demon. For all she knew he could.

When it was time for them to get ready to leave he'd walked into the forest leaving a pile of ice that glittered like shards of broken glass where he'd stood. When he returned she'd discovered that he'd managed to clothe himself, but she still didn't understand how he'd accomplished it. She finally put it down to an aspect of the magic that was his and didn't bother to wonder about it after that.

The women had broken their fast on dry trail rations and water, dressed, then packed up their bedding and prepared to ride.

The sun had been in the sky less than a half an hour before the women were ready. Mounted on sturdy warhorses, the Maidens of the Moon, garbed in their battle dress of leather and bone armor rode along the forest trail heading for the village where Rayné had lived.

* * * *

Snow and Jaella rode in the middle of the line, the pair just able to keep their mounts side by side, the newly made Sorceress explaining what had happened since Gaurdaaz's had arrived in their Realm.

"...so we knew something had come through the Gate," she was telling him. "Some of the Warriors of the Moon went to the Temple to find out if Raené had returned to us. When they didn't come back some of the Maidens went to search for them. I went with them." Her expression turned grim, the supple form of her mouth hardening into a frown. "What we found told us that there was a demon on the loose, and that the demon was not Raené."

She lifted her canteen to her lips, took a drink and offered it to Snow. He shook his head. Being what he was, he had no need for water or food really, and since he would be returning to the Coldlands when this was over he didn't want any nagging appetites for things he couldn't acquire in the ice-locked wasteland.

Glancing at the woman from the corner of his eye he knew he'd already be dealing with a craving there would be no satisfying on the

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other side of the Gate. A craving for soft yielding flesh, warmth and companionship.

Her profile was one of beauty, and as they rode her breasts—full and round—swayed and jiggled with the motion of her mount. He found his gaze drawn to that motion, the shape of her face the way a northstone drew iron.

"We started searching for the thing, but Gaurdaaz wasted no time. Once he entered our world he began his work. He found a village and told them what he was, and then he convinced them that he could give them great power, great magic such as our pitiful world had never seen."

"And like fools, they believed him."

"Enough did, the rest—"

She shook her head and he watched how the sunlight sent sparks of flame through the bright torrent of her hair. His cock shifted, rousing at the sight of her beauty and he forced his gaze away, studying the space between the ears of the warhorse he rode. It did little to quell the stirring of his flesh. Jaella hadn't noticed how her nearness was affecting him. At least he hoped she hadn't. He forced his mind to hear her words, rather than the hammering of his own blood in his ears, realizing that he'd missed part of her story.

"—Well the demon lied of course and they died then and there. Only one person escaped. A young girl. She came and told the Elder Council what she'd seen. People turned to monsters before her eyes. Only then did we know for certain it wasn't Raené come back to us. He'd never turn our people into beasts."

"No, he would make them beautiful because it would have suited his aesthetic tastes. He could never abide anything ugly in his presence." He sighed, "It is why I am as you see me now. I was attractive enough while I was human to have captured his interest, but he made," the man frowned, "improvements."

Jaella turned to regard him, and Snow found himself staring into eyes bright as summer leaves. He pulled his gaze quickly away. There was no sense wanting what couldn't be attained.

"I see..." the Jaella said. "Well the books all stated that he was a demon prone to vanity, if my kinsman looked anything like Raené himself, then he was beauty personified."

"He was also as evil as he was beautiful."

"It's said the more beautiful the demon, the more dangerous."

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"Quite true. Pity I didn't know that before I foolishly agreed to becoming his pet," Snow remarked, his tone as bitter as his memories.

"Do you think Gaurdaaz really has Rayné?" Jaella asked Snow.

The big man nodded, "You said your kinsman would have come for the ceremony, even knowing his life would be forfeit should you prove successful in summoning Raené. Correct?"

"Yes. He agreed. We both knew the only way to stop the other demon was for him to become Raené in order to protect everything he loved."

"Well fortunately Raené no longer exists."

She regarded the ice pale man for a moment, "How is that fortunate? I still don't know if your power is greater than Raené's or not. What if he could have defeated Gaurdaaz and we discover that you cannot?"

The icy grey eyes turned to regard her in turn, "Raené might have been able to defeat him, but keep in mind *I* killed Raené and took his power. Wouldn't that make me greater than the Prince?"

Jaella brushed at some leaves that had fallen on her as they'd gone under a low hanging branch, "You seem to think so," she replied. "I've yet to be convinced. It might only prove that you were fortunate, or more devious."

They rode in silence for a span of time until one of the Maidens of the Moon rode back down the line to join them.

"Ophae says she is seeing signs that some of the Horde have come this way."

Jaella frowned, "How many?"

"She isn't sure, they were moving with stealth rather than openly."

"Which way?"

"Toward the village."

"Damn. How long ago?"

"Yesterday, probably right after dusk."

"So they've taken Rayné. That would be the only reason for them to come this far into the forest," Jaella remarked.

The woman nodded her agreement, "Should we continue on to the village, or skirt around it?"

"We go on. I want to make sure Rayné isn't among the dead."

"Yes Sorceress." The woman reined her horse around and headed back toward the front of their column.

* * * *

BAGNOBAK TANGO

Jaella almost smiled at the term of respect the woman had granted her, and had the news not been so dire, she would have. *Rayné I pray you are safe. Even if you are no longer needed to carry the power of the demon, you are dear to me cousin.*

"Now what I want to know is why would Gaurdaaz want your kinsman?"

"He seeks to prevent Raené from coming here."

"Well he need not worry about that," Snow remarked.

Her lips twisted in a wry bit of a smile that was not from humor, "True."

"So of what value would he be to us, or them?"

"Other than he is my only kin and that I love him dearly, he is of no use to our cause. Not unless or until he can learn to use the power that is his by birth."

"He has magic then?"

She frowned at the man, "No. He is virgin as I was. In order for Raené to be summoned we both had to be pure. For him to serve as the vessel of the Prince's power, he must be virgin." She sighed, "It is why we are the last of our kind left. Many of our ancestors and ancestresses died pure for fear the demon would be needed.

"We were the last two left and, instead of brother and sister as we should have been, we are only distant kin. It was the main reason everyone thought we'd fail. By tradition the Daughter and the Avatar must be brother and sister, and we're only distant cousins. Very distant ones. His ten times great-grandfather and my great-grandmother were siblings. Twins, and Raené was their father."

The man nodded in understanding, "You want to save him from this Gaurdaaz if you can, don't you?"

"Yes." She studied the reins in her hands, then added, "We love one another. Not in the way of men and women, but as a brother and sister would." She sighed. "He—has no fondness for women."

Snow nodded. He was Raené's Avatar, and the Prince himself had never found women to be of any interest to him, other than for the creation of new Avatars in any of the Realms he'd gained access to in the countless centuries he'd existed.

"And if the demon realizes that not having Rayné didn't prevent you from calling aid, then what will he do?"

She gripped the reins of her mount tighter, expression grim. "Gaurdaaz will fuck him and steal his power, turn him into a willing

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slave. It's probably what he has intended from the start. We're almost certain he knows of Raen's...proclivities and will use the Avatar to his advantage."

"He was imprisoned by the Prince of the Coldlands. He knows Raen's lusts and proclivities." Snow met her gaze, his eyes that pale almost colorless grey they'd been when he'd first come through the Gate. "That's the whole problem with this virgin blood crap, it makes it too easy for the other side to get something they need, and it makes it damned inconvenient for us."

She turned in the saddle, "What are you saying?"

"If this kinsman of yours can add to Gaurdaaz's power, then we need to stop the demon before he makes your cousin his slave."

"Well I'll not argue with you about that. I don't want Rayné to come to any harm, and I certainly don't want the demon to have him in any event whether it gains Gaurdaaz power or not."

Ravens' screams could be heard as they drew nearer. Ever-present heralds of doom's tidings the birds announced to them what they already suspected. The Horde had overrun the village.

They rode into the ruins a few moments later sending the harbingers of death scattering, shouting into the sky. The ravens were quick to settle in the trees to await their return to the feast, their bead-like eyes regarding the newcomers as if hoping they too would become another course of their gruesome repast.

Bodies, or what remained of them, littered the blood-washed ground, and clouds of flies boiled through the air, their buzzing nearly as strident as the calls of the death birds overhead.

The Maidens spread out, seeking survivors.

Jaella already knew there would be none to find. The Horde was very thorough in their methods of bringing down their prey.

And what wasn't prey became Horde.

She shuddered at the thought of Rayné's beautiful body turned into something horrific for that would certainly be his fate at the hands of the demon. Nothing Gaurdaaz touched retained its true form.

Scanning the remains she could see the beasts of the Horde had taken the time for their own gristly feasting. Sickness filled her belly and she had to swallow hard to prevent her breakfast from rising. She was a warrior and she'd seen death before, but this wasn't simply death, it was a massacre of the innocent.

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A hand, cool and firm touched her shoulder and she raised her gaze from the horror to see a grim faced Snow surveying the dead.

"Gaurdaaz the Destroyer," he murmured, grey eyes turning darker, a few tendrils of mist drifting away from him. Frost glittered in the sunlight wherever the mist touched, then faded to dampness under the warmth of the day.

"You know this demon?"

"No. Not directly, but I know of him. Raené had him bound as a captive." He sighed, "He escaped and fled after I killed the Prince. I'd thought him lost in the Void between worlds, but he must have found his way here." He frowned, "Either that or he was called."

"Called?" Now it was her turn to frown. "And what do you mean he escaped? Are you telling me he is here in my world because you killed Raené, Prince of the Coldlands?"

His gaze fell on her, his eyes dark as clouds before a storm, more of the mist swirling around him spreading the frost that was ever-present in his vicinity "It is a possibility. Why do you think I came here? I felt the deaths he was causing, but time here and in the Coldlands does not move in the same way. I came as soon as I felt the killing start, but it has been weeks here from what you've told me. I noticed no passage of time from the moment I felt those killings and the beginning of your invocation to Raené."

Jaella frowned. "Maybe time simply does not hold sway in the Coldlands. I don't know very much about that aspect of the Realms," she explained.

"Nor do I," Snow admitted. "I just know that nothing changes in the Coldlands unless I will such a change. And even my power over that Realm is bound by the limitations of the Realm itself,"

One of the Maidens joined them and Jaella turned her attention to the new arrival. "There is something to report?"

"Yes Sorceress. We've found your kinsman's friend, Margen."

"Dead?"

The woman nodded.

"Nothing I didn't expect considering," she gestured to the destruction around them, "all of this. Any sign of Rayné?"

"Ophae says he was definitely here."

"Then they've taken him. Damn," Jaella grumbled.

"Damn indeed," the man beside her agreed as he swung back into the saddle of the huge warhorse.

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"What are you doing?" Jaella asked.

"Going after him. Are you coming with me?"

"What about the dead?" the woman asked. "They should have a decent burial."

"We've a choice. We can stay and bury the dead, or we can ride out of here to find my kinsman who may yet live. There's nothing we can do here but honor those who are already dead and they would be the first to tell us that Rayné must come first. If Gaurdaaz sets hand to him, he's lost and so are we. If we go now we might be able to save Rayné. He's right, Clairia, and you know it as well as I do. We can't let the demon have Raené's Avatar in his power.

* * * *

The leader of the Maidens nodded, "You are right, that could very well be our downfall."

"Talking about it gets us nowhere. Let's get moving. They've got a head start on us and every minute we waste talking takes them that much closer to delivering your kinsman to their master." Snow spurred his horse onward, not waiting for them to answer.

"Follow us," Jaella said and nudged her horse after the Lord of the Coldlands.

The Maiden nodded. Raising her voice to carry to the other Maidens she ordered, "Mount up, the Sorceress says we're going after the Avatar.

* * * *

They'd left the thick tree cover of the Forest People behind, moving through a grassy area that Rayné knew was the floodplain for the Great River. As a boy he'd played on the banks of that river with Margen.

The Boat People had lived on the river not far upstream from where they rode. The Boat People like the Forest People were no more, slain or twisted into the foul minions of Gaurdaaz.

He wanted to cry but that would only if They'd won, but three elight his captors so he held the grief at bay, letting it fill his heart and turn to a mass of rage instead, but even that failed to keep him alert, his mind drifting, his ability to think fading as the day wore on.

The toxic muck that covered the slug monster he rode on was making him ill, his belly aching, mind gone numb, his vision blurring until he could hardly see his own bound hands in front of him.

They rode on, hours and hours passing until he had no concept of how long they'd held him captive, until the pain of his body grew distant and unimportant.

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They stopped sometime around mid-day, the creatures seeking shelter from the broiling heat of the sun. At least to him he felt as if he were being broiled, his lips cracked and dry, tongue swollen, mouth full of grit so that even the action of trying to swallow was painful.

Lack of water. The poison seeping into him. Both. He didn't know, and he was just too lethargic to really care anymore.

He was pulled down off the slug-beast and dropped onto the ground, hardly aware of the fact he was lying in sand, dust and gravel where once lush grasses had waved hip deep like a green, wind tossed sea.

Water was splashed across his lips and his tongue darted out, trying for more, his body's need for the fluid fueled by the fever gripping his flesh.

Laughter burned in his ears but he no longer cared.

Darkness crawled in toward him, threatening to steal consciousness away. There was no fight left in him, nor did the cloak of arrogant warrior's pride protect him from that darkness. He succumbed to the tug of exhausted and sickened flesh and dropping into slumber filled with the screams of his dying friends and the raucous mirth of the demon's minions.

* * * *

Snow, Jaella and the Maidens of the Moon had ridden hard, dismounting and walking so the horses could get some relief, stopping only once to let the animals rest when they grew too weary to keep going.

The sun had long since slipped past zenith, and was sliding toward the horizon turned to a ball of red flame by the haze of dust rising from the land ahead.

"Is there a desert in this direction?" Snow asked the sorceress as he studied the cloud of dust rising into the still air. It had gotten considerably hotter as they'd left the shade of the forest, but he seemed not to notice the heat that left the women accompanying him sweating. His horse actually had a dusting of frost silvering its mane and shoulders, though now it was sparse and kept melting as they moved.

Jaella shook her head, "No. Or at least there wasn't before. Now, though," she shrugged, "who can say? Everything the demon lays his claim on changes in some way."

Snow frowned and rose up in the stirrups of the saddle, squinting against the dying light of the sun. "I see nothing but dirt and rocks ahead."

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"From here we should be able to see the grassland of the Nomads," one of the Maidens remarked as she too stood in the stirrups of her saddle. "He's right, I see nothing green."

"Perhaps we should stop here for the night," Ophae suggested. "Who knows what things might roam the plains."

They'd entered the influence of Gaurdaaz's demesne but were, as yet, at the edge of the demon's power. But already his influence had warped the land, changing grass to dust, trees becoming twisted shapes borne of nightmare, branches on which bleached bits of material, like dried skin, whispered in the hot wind. The very river they'd followed had changed, becoming a trickle of sluggish brown muck that stank worse than any slaughterhouse.

Snow shook his head at her suggestion. "No, while there is light we should keep going. The creatures that have Rayné are well ahead of us and any delay we make only makes their head start all the greater."

He nudged his horse into motion and the women followed him.

An hour later—following the clearly visible trail left by the passage of the Horde—they were riding along another tributary that joined the river. It was pure water, untainted by the demon's aura, that eased, then eventually eliminated the stench, of the tainted fluid. The track of the Horde remained by the water even though it took them out of their master's blasted lands into an area that was still lush and green.

"Why do they follow the water?" Jaella mused out loud. "You'd think they would strike across the desert he's made and go directly toward his den."

"He may not be there," Snow replied as he scanned the horizon.

"Then where would he be?"

The big man shrugged, then said, "Turning a village into more of his creatures, perhaps. Or seeking another source of power, who can say?"

"Do you think he knows you are here?"

"Without a doubt," he answered. "I can feel him, so I'm sure he is fully aware of me, and my current location."

"Then won't he send some of his Horde to stop us?" a Maiden asked.

"If he has any to spare, yes. But it is possible that his troops are all occupied."

"Doing what?" the woman asked.

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But it was Jaella who answered her. "The same thing they've been doing since he arrived," the Sorceress' voice was flat and carried a bite like a winter wind. "They're killing people."

* * * *

Rayné looked up blearily, wondering why they'd stopped. His vision was blurred. The slime-drug still clouding his mind also numbed his body as well but the overall effect seemed less than it had been the last time they'd stopped.

It took a moment, but he realized it was almost totally dark and even the warped creatures of the Horde must require rest. Infused with the demon's power they might be, but they were still mortal living beings for all their unnatural appearance.

A paw grabbed him, the woman with the dog's muzzle pitching him to the ground. He didn't feel that either except as a dull impact. Dirt grated across his cheek and when he fell onto his side something rammed into his hip. The sudden movement had left him nauseous, and he would have vomited but there was nothing in his belly to bring up.

"Be careful with him fool bitch! Master will have our asses if we ruin his pretty face," Piggy ordered.

"Hell on you!" Dog-woman snarled.

"Hell on you if his face is ruined! Master was very specific! We are not to hurt him!"

"Our orders were for the Prince, not this human!"

"Shut your muzzle," Lizard said as he joined them.

He lay there while they argued wishing he had the strength to escape, even if the only thing he accomplished was his own death at least it would be a clean death.

"That's right! He said the Prince, and this boy isn't him!" Dog-woman agreed.

"It was the Avatar he sent us for," Piggy argued. Not the Ice Bitch of the Coldland. We got the prize our Master sent us for."

They continued to argue as Piggy pulled him to a sitting position and splashed water across his cheek to wash away the dirt.

He couldn't even feel the oily hands as he was pulled upright, could barely feel the water as it washed across his face. Piggy put a canteen to his mouth forcing him to swallow or drown. He struggled to do the first to prevent the second but his tongue was so swollen that gulping down the water to keep from drowning was difficult. The foul taste of the stuff

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left him choking and gasping and he realized the water might be fine and it was the toxic muck covering him that made everything taste foul.

Rayné didn't know or care he just wanted to sleep.

"I thought that shit was supposed to keep him quiet," dog-woman said.

"He's quiet," Piggy stated.

"He's damned near dead is what he is," he heard the bitch retort. His head was yanked back, Piggy and the Lizard leaned close to stare at him their breath fetid, the stench of rotting meat clinging to them.

He retched, the smell more than his body could bear.

"Damnation," Piggy grunted as the water they'd just forced into him came right back up all over his legs.

"Maybe we should wash that stuff off of him," Lizard suggested.

"I think you're right," Dog-woman agreed. "he's not as tough as we were told he is."

"He's the Avatar, not the Prince. Weren't we supposed to use the slugback for the Prince?" Lizard asked.

"I told you, we weren't ever trying to catch the *Prince*. We were sent for this boy." Piggy argued.

"I remember him saying something bout catching the Prince if we didn't arrive in time. Wasn't that what the slugback was for?"

"I don't know, maybe." Piggy grunted as he dumped more water over Rayné's face to wash the rest of the dirt away. He touched the boy's cheek. "Stupid bitch, his face is bruised and torn up. Master's gonna have your ass for that."

"Tell him it happened during the fight!" she snarled.

"He knows a lie if he hears it, so *you* can tell it to him."

"We putting him on the slugback or not?" Lizard asked.

"Not sure. Might kill him."

"Might at that," Lizard said as they dragged him to the base of a dying tree and propped him up against it. He coughed and what was left of the water he'd swallowed dribbled down his chin.

Feeling miserable would have been a few steps up from how he felt now, which was nearly dead.

"What about washing it off. That might at least keep him alive long enough for us to get him to Master. If he dies after that, then we've no worries, but if he dies before, we're all dead as dead," Lizard explained.

Rayné could do nothing but listen as they discussed what to do with him as if he were no more than an animal, or a piece of baggage.

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"Let's drag him to the river then," Piggy said. "We have to keep him alive or Master will flay us."

"Flaying is the least of the things he'll do to us if this pretty bitch dies," Lizard said.

A chorus of shrill ululating screams cut the night, followed by the roar of the Horde as it realized an attack was underway.

"Guard him!" Piggy ordered as he ran to see what was happening at the other end of their camp.

Rayné managed a slight smile. He knew the battle cry of the Maidens of the Moon and if they were here, that meant his kinswoman Jaella was there to save him or die trying.

"Come on, let's take him to the river," the dog-faced woman urged. "If we're overrun we can drown him, and if those virgin bitches lose then we'll have kept him from dying."

"Good idea," the scaled creature agreed. The pair of them hoisted Rayné up between them and carried him toward the water's edge.

* * * *

The Horde had rushed to meet the Maidens, the warped and twisted forms ghastly to behold in the dying light of day.

Harsh screams, roars of pain, shouts of anger went up from the opposing combatants. Bright blood spattered the grass, dark gore smeared the blades of the Maidens, neither side giving ground as the fight raged along the river.

At the center of the battle, Snow towered over Maidens and Horde alike, a great blade of ice in his hands, the weapon, and the bitter cold of his magic cutting a swath through the warped creatures of Gaurdaaz.

Jaella fought at his side, immune to the cold magic that suffused the Lord of the Coldlands, her body wreathed in white flame that withered any of the Horde it touched as lethal and deadly as the black mist pouring off of Snow.

It was a brutal, intense fight and it barely lasted more than three minutes.

Moaning, dying, dead, dismembered the Horde lay vanquished on the shores of the river, a few of them fleeing from the death that had claimed their fellows made it as far as the opposite side of the water before arrows cut them down.

They'd won, but three of the Maidens had been killed. Still it was the first time that the Maidens could claim a victory in their encounters

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with the deadly minions of Gaurdaaz, and the casualties hadn't been nearly as dire as in their prior losses to the demon

The magic they'd gained, while small by comparison to that wielded by the creatures of the Hoard, had aided them, and with the greater magic of the Sorceress and Lord Snow it turned the tide of battle in their favor.

Snow released the great blade of ice he'd fought with and the ensanguined weapon evaporated into the black mist from which it had been formed.

"Do you see him?" he asked as he shook the red-washed layers of ice that had served as armor from his body. It fell in a rapidly melting pile at his feet as he scanned the carnage.

Jaella's own gaze searched the shattered encampment of the Hoard, but there was no readily visible sign of her kinsman anywhere. None of the dead had his pale skin and vibrant blood red hair. It gave her hope that he might be among the living, that he'd somehow managed to escape or had crawled into hiding.

"No. He may be hiding." She didn't bother to voice the fact that he might be dead. It was a possibility she didn't want to consider. "We have to find him."

He just nodded. He'd shed his armor but his body was spattered with the residue of death-dealing, eyes wild and dark as night. The killing had aroused the stolen power of the demon, and it would take him a moment to bring it back under control.

Jaella moved away, already starting to search, relying on her eyes rather than her otherworldly senses as she was reluctant to expend even the small amount of energy such simple magic required. Snow joined her search. He'd know any scion of his former master's blood the instant he set eyes on it.

Then it occurred to him there was more than one way to search for Raen's Avatar. He closed his eyes to focus, seeking the magical scent of his former master, the demon-taint that the boy would carry in his blood and bones as surely as Jaella herself did. He reached out with his power, opening himself to the emanations from a being who was neither demon, nor truly human.

A thread, unseen but felt as strongly as something physical drew him toward the water's edge. One look at the boy lying in the mud told Snow he'd found what he'd sought.

He stared at the boy, seeing the Prince—the master he himself had murdered—in the young man's slender build, the flame of his hair, the

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rich violet of the wide eyes that stared up at him. But the stare was blank, dulled by only divinities knew what sort of torture, what terrible punishments or horrors they'd witnessed.

The blank-eyed the teen was a breathtaking beauty. Inhumanly so, despite the filth, bruises and blood covering him, he was simply exquisite.

* * * *

Like Raené his bloodsire.

Snow felt his groin tighten, felt his cock go semi-hard in reaction.

It might have been centuries since Raené had fathered their line, but the influence hadn't weakened in the least. At least not in the boy's case.

Snow was so strongly aroused by the sight of someone so like his former master that he found himself wanting to take the slender form in his arms and expend his passions, the unfulfilled yearnings he'd suffered for centuries on the beautiful man.

Instead he shook himself and knelt down to touch a pale cheek. The skin under his hand was soft as finest silk, the most tender petal of a newly opened blossom. The delicate face was perfect as a statue's despite the damage, the bruising and cuts. Snow felt the ache in his groin, desire rising along with the flesh between his thighs. Tendrils of black mist spun away from him as the power of the demon rose in answer to the lust he felt. Oh yes, this Rayné was so very much like his master in appearance. At least in looks. But that was more than enough to bring back the memories, the bite of dark desires—the recollection of terrible delights, inhuman needs, unholy passions.

Snow shuddered as the emotions ripped through him. Lust screamed through his blood, as a million agonized screams filled his mind, tearing at his soul like the pain of ten thousand knives, his flesh shedding black mist, a drift of icy particles falling, his mind teetering at the brink of sanity and madness as the memories of the horrors he'd committed with the Prince returned. As the terrible desires rose in his flesh.

But he was master of his own heart, the Lord of his own soul, his own Fate and the madness passed, pushed aside by something more powerful than even the Demon Prince of the Coldlands had proven to be: Snow's stubborn refusal to let himself be ruled by anyone or anything, not even his own demon twisted desires.

The man who'd once been a Viking knelt there in the mud, trembling like a frightened child, his fingers brushing across the boy's

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cheek. He watched the violet eyes blink as if the young man were waking from a terrible nightmare he'd thought he'd never escape.

Snow knew the feeling all too well from personal experience.

"Are you...real?"

The voice. It was *his* voice, the one that Snow remembered, would never forget. It had haunted his dreams for uncounted years, both before and after he'd killed the Prince. It was a voice that he could never forget, just as the boy's face, the form of his body was identical to that of the Prince.

Avatar. Living incarnation. His master's flesh and blood.

But there was no power to inhabit the body. No demon to steal the boy's living soul, to devour it and keep the body for his own use.

The boy was safe. Or as safe as he could be with Gaurdaaz seeking him for his own purposes.

"No, I'm no dream. I'm Snow and I'm real. I've come with your kinswoman Jaella to save you."

The boy nodded listlessly.

"You've been drugged?"

Another slow nod was the only answer the boy gave and Snow could tell the Avatar's mind was wandering in an out of awareness, slipping off into whatever terrible mental landscape the drug induced. But not even the listlessness could dispel the illusion that this was his master. He swallowed and let his hand drop but the feel of the soft skin lingered as a tingle on his fingertips and an ache in his groin.

"Are you badly hurt?"

The boy shook his head.

"Can you stand?"

Another negative motion that set the paired braids on the left side of his face swaying. Snow had been with these people long enough to know those braids marked the boy as a full grown warrior, a man.

But right now he looked more like a child in some ways than a man to the Immortal. A fragile child in need of protection and care. It was strange because Jaella didn't make him feel that way. Lust, the need to hold and touch, to kiss and fuck, yes, he felt that with her. There was also the undeniable attraction, the desire to end his lonely existence and stay with her in this Realm.

But he couldn't. It would be as bad for him, a man with the power of a demon, to stay here as it would be for them to permit Gaurdaaz to remain. Slowly his power, and the magic of the his own Realm—the

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Coldlands he'd taken from Raené—would bleed into this place, destroying it as surely as Gaurdaaz would though he wouldn't be doing it with the deliberate maliciousness of the invading demon.

He reached out, intending to pick the slim youth up, but was met with an icy glare and hands that gripped his forearms hard, resisting his effort to give aid.

Their eyes locked in a battle of wills, man against boy, the desire to help warring with pride.

The boy was exhausted and in pain, but he was also a warrior. Snow, understood what motivated the young man and he relented in his effort to carry Rayné. Instead he looked at the mud covered hands gripping his arms and let a tiny trickle of his own life force feed the boy. It was sucked up rapidly, power answering power, generosity filling need. The pull on his life-force became greedy, drawing energy from him the way a glutton would gorge at a banquet, but he didn't try to stop it. The boy was so weak that he needed everything Snow could give, and perhaps it would allow him to fight off the effects of the drug coursing through his veins.

The boy's eyes flickered with pallid lavender fire and he shuddered, let go of Snow's forearms and turned his head away. "Sorry."

Snow nodded and got to his feet even as the boy rose with the unnatural grace that seemed to mark Raené's get in any Realm. He'd seen enough of them to know, to recognize his former Master's influence on a human carrying his blood in their veins.

Snow remembered the passion they could instill in his master, and in himself and wisely stepped farther away to avoid the temptation the boy posed.

The violet eyes so like Raené's regarded him for a moment, then the boy asked, "Where is my cousin?"

"I'll take you to her."

* * * *

Jaella was overjoyed to see her kinsman alive, but couldn't hide her dismay at how terrible he looked. He must have suffered greatly at the hands of the Horde, but at least he still lived and they'd gotten to him before the demon Guardaaz had laid claim to him.

"Oh, Rayné! I'm so sorry," she said,

He just shrugged, "You didn't do this to me, Jaella, so why apologize for what they did?"

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"Well I'm glad you're alive!" She started to throw her arms around him. Snow stopped her with a shake of his head.

"Don't. He has some sort of slime all over him and it has a soporific effect. We need to get him cleaned up, fed and bedded down. He's lost a lot of blood."

She turned worried eyes on Snow, "A soporific?"

"It was the thing they had me riding. It looked like a titanic slug and its slime made me just not care what happened after a while," he explained as the Maidens of the Moon gathered around.

"We've got some soap, do you think that will help?" one of them asked.

Jaella looked at Snow and he shrugged, "It might work."

"I'll get it."

A few minutes later Jaella led her kinsman to the water's edge where he could scrub the slime away with sweet smelling soap. Snow followed them. "He'll need his injuries tended."

"I'll take care of that too," she stated.

Snow was studying Rayné, his eyes narrowed as he looked him up and down as if searching for something. What that might be she had no idea, nor did she ask. Even if she'd bothered to ask she wasn't sure she'd have gotten an answer.

More to the point, she wasn't sure she really wanted to know what he'd been thinking, nor why his eyes had darkened as he looked upon her kinsman.

It might have been lust. Rayné was beautiful—more so than she herself, at least she thought so—and had inspired more than one warrior or Maiden to make a fool of themselves. She suspected this went deeper, that it was something connected not so much to her kinsman but to the being in whose likeness he was formed.

Whatever the case she led her kinsman away and Rayné followed without protest.

But as they walked she could feel Snow's eyes on them and when she turned she could see how his gaze had darkened and a glance told her that it *was* desire that filled his eyes because his cock was stiff, but which one of them had caused the reaction—she didn't know.

Secretly she hoped it was her that so enticed him, but for some reason she suspected that, this time, it was Rayné who'd so excited the Lord of the Coldland.

* * * *

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Snow watched the pair head into the brush at the edge of the stream, his dick pulsing to the beat of the lust raging in his very soul. Side by side, male and female, they'd been a sight to turn the ice of his blood to steam, and make his cock go hard as stone.

He wanted them both.

His and his alone.

Permanently.

Wanted to stay with them here in this green living place.

Wanted it to be his as much as he wanted them.

And it wasn't possible.

Not staying.

Not having them.

His head bowed and he closed his eyes rather than continue to watch what he couldn't have. Couldn't keep.

But how he yearned to keep them...as slaves to his lust.

A demon's power wasn't taken without repercussions.

And taking Raené's power meant taking on some of his own penchants and flaws. For Raené they were one and the same.

Lust. Pure unadulterated desire to take and taint, to corrupt and warp others to his needs. And those needs were all sexual.

And many were things that few human minds could experience without shattering and slipping into a form of madness from which there was no return.

Sometimes he wondered if it wasn't a form of madness that had saved him from Raené in the end.

Snow shook himself.

He refused to become another demon like Raené, Prince of the Coldlands, master of perverse pleasures and sexual deviations in a Realm that never knew the slightest warmth of compassion much less the warmth of Spring.

"Damn you Raené. Damn you for all of Eternity." He sighed. "And damn me too for what I've become."

He turned away and walked out of camp all too aware of his own aching flesh and the curious stares of the Maidens of the Moon as he vanished into the dark embrace of the forest.

A swirl of snow, a crackling mass of frost marked his passage into the trees, but both quickly melted in the warm air leaving only dampness to show where he'd gone.

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His body craved the warm sheathe of Jaella's flesh or the innocent strength of Rayné, Avatar of his former master.

Oh yes, that would be a sweet tasting of flesh, taking the young warrior and fucking him into a sobbing orgasm, spending his own lusts on such tender flesh.

Like Raené had once expended his unholy needs on a young Viking man that had known nothing of another man's touch or the feel of a cock inside him, giving pleasure with every hard thrust.

He'd been hardly more than a boy then. Foolish and proud of his skills as a warrior it had been simple for Raené to seduce him. Pleasure, the promise of power beyond any he'd ever known, of delights and luxuries to please the mind and body.

A demon's hollow promises.

Much like Rayné was now, but younger. Several years younger and all the more vulnerable for it.

It had been a different world of the Mortal Realm, in an age nothing more than nearly forgotten history to the people dwelling there now.

If only he had the power to forget so completely.

Or the power not to want things he didn't dare take.

Being the recipient of the Prince's power had always been a two edged sword. Being originally human he still craved things a demon wouldn't understand. The touch of another human, the sound of voices, of life. More he craved love.

But of everything that was the one emotion no demon seemed able to comprehend.

And of them all it was the thing Snow craved most.

It was also the thing he would never have.

He tried not to think of Jaella. Soft and womanly in all the right places, yet still a warrior in her own right. A Sorceress because his cock had breached her maidenhead and granted her the power she desired.

His erection throbbed at the memory of being balls deep in the tight sheathe of her flesh and he reached for himself, hand wrapping around the hard shaft, stroking fiercely as he thought of her body beneath him.

She was so beautiful with full breasts a trim waist and lush hips and a firm, rounded ass that drew his eyes and made his pulse speed up.

He remembered watching her walk side by side with Rayné and the slender hips and narrower behind of the young warrior, along with the sleek expanse of back and his broader shoulders made Snow's breath catch.

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And they were both so damned beautiful seeing them together took his breath away and threatened to steal his reason as well.

His hand worked faster on his erection, trying to ease the need burning harsh as a glacial wind in his groin. The inky fog that was a manifestation of his power swirled thickly around him, laying down a freezing blanket of snow and ice.

He wanted to cum.

But Snow pulled his hand away and sank trembling to his knees, denying himself the release he so desperately wanted, preserving the energy that would be wasted in climax. He knelt there, gasping for breath, his flesh aching, heart hammering the blood roaring through his veins, both hands knotted into fists over which a thick layer of ice formed.

By denying his release he gave himself more magical energy with which he could fight Gaurdaaz.

But gods how he wanted the release.

He shook himself and the mantle of ice that had formed on his skin cracked and fell to the ground.

Kill Guardaaz and go back where you belong. You can't have either of them.

He knew that. But it didn't keep him from wanting them.

Or loving her for her beauty and courage.

And, gods help him, he knew that he'd fall in love with the boy given a chance.

A chance.

That brought a bitter laugh from Snow.

They'd be traveling together. They'd be going to try and kill Guardaaz.

And even with their help Snow realized he might fail. He could feel the demon's power, and it had grown stronger in the short time he'd been there.

So strong he wasn't certain he could kill Guardaaz anymore.

He flexed his hands and the ice fell away.

Every bit of power he could muster had to be hoarded.

Taking a deep breath he wrapped his hand around his cock and stroked slowly, trying to gain more power, though it worked better if he had someone there with him, it wasn't impossible to gain a reasonable amount of energy alone.

Not that he'd ever had a reason to do this before.

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He thought of Jaella's touches on his body, thought of her lips on his, their mouths exploring, savoring one another. He remembered the feel of her legs wrapped around him as his hand moved over his own rigid flesh and he groaned softly as the black mist spun around him, covering him with a gentle fall of snow.

A sound brought his head around to find the object of his thoughts standing behind him, watching.

Jaella's green eyes seemed to glow and she walked toward him, her hips moving in a languorous sway that hypnotized him. He rose to his feet and started toward her, then stopped. His eyes narrowed and the first hint of danger flowed across his lust dazed senses.

She smiled. "Love me," she murmured, lowering her head demurely so that her hair fell to cover her face.

His lips twisted in a snarl of rage. He closed his fist and a sword of ice formed there, black mist bleeding off the glassy surface.

"Nice effort," he growled and swung the blade.

The creature that had taken Jaella's form leapt back, but it wasn't quite fast enough. The tip of the icy blade caught it on one full breast and drew, not the bright crimson of human blood, but a thick green slime that quickly froze in the bitter cold surrounding them.

When the thing looked up the only resemblance between its visage and Jaella's face were the green eyes and the fiery hair. The rest of the face was changed, twisted so that the mouth gaped to show jagged fangs. The nose had slipped to one side, and the well defined cheekbones were sunken, askew as though the face had melted and reformed.

As Snow warily regarded the thing the rest of its body underwent the same sort of horrific transformation, the breasts sagging, the firm flesh withering. The stench of corruption hit him, but he stood his ground as the awful thing—had it really been a woman once?—lunged for him with a shrill bellow.

It was over almost as soon as it had begun, the creature no match for the ice sword, nor the demon-tainted man it sought vainly to kill.

Disgusted, Snow let the blade in his fist go. It fell and shattered into fragments of ice as he stalked away from the dead thing. A half dozen Maidens of the Moon came running.

"What happened?"

"We heard a scream!"

"Lord Snow, are you all right?"

The Maidens surrounded him, babbling all at once.

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"I found one of the Horde creatures we must have missed. It's dead," he bit out and kept walking.

Jaella and Rayné approached at a run, both of them with their swords drawn.

When they saw Snow both of them sheathed their blades.

"Is everything under control now?" Jaella asked. "I sensed magic..." she was looking at Snow in a way that told him she knew what he'd been doing. That didn't come as any shock, but his own reaction, the faint heat he felt come to his face did, and he turned away, but not quickly enough to miss the speculative glint in her gaze.

"Yes. It's been taken care of," he growled and stalked away before his cock got the better of him and he fucked Jaella and Rayné right then and there in front of the gathered Maidens.

CHAPTER THREE

Hours later, with the Maidens and Rayné safely bedded down and sleeping, Jaella sought out Snow.

The Lord of the Coldlands had made his bed a short distance from everyone else, obviously in need of solitude though his reasoning for that was something she hadn't chosen to speculate on too deeply. Not after realizing what he'd been doing before the Horde creature attacked him.

As with most such demon-warped creatures—or demons themselves—they were drawn by power, and Snow in his solo pursuit had been generating a great deal of that. She could still taste the slightly bittersweet flavor of magic in the air and the cold bite of winter that marked Snow's particular power lingered on as well.

Just the thought of the Lord's cock sent a flash of heat to her cunt and made her ache to be filled with the hard length of his erection.

It was an experience she would gladly welcome.

More, she found herself drawn to the tall Immortal, and the attraction went far deeper than simple desire. She wanted to keep him here, in this Realm, with her.

And she had the means to bar him from going back through the Gate.

But she also knew that such a thing would come with a high price.

He wasn't human anymore, and keeping him here was more than just risky, it had the potential to destroy their world as surely as Guardaaz.

She tried to tell herself that she could control him, could contain him.

Could keep him as her...what? Husband? Lover? Slave?

None of that was possible. Even with the binding she'd laid on him on the alter of the Gate he was too powerful and the binding would eventually fail nor did she think him foolish enough to allow himself to be caught a second time.

No, he had to return to his own Realm.

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And she had to stay here, in hers.

She'd thought him asleep, lying there on a bed of frost dusted leaves, but the instant she got within a dozen feet of him he sat up, shattering a thin blanket of ice to stare at her.

"I need to speak with you privately, and this is the best way for me to do that."

He said nothing, his pale grey eyes regarding her blankly, as if he were carved of ice rather than a living creature.

That wasn't making it any easier for her to tell him what she'd come to say.

"Snow?"

"I'm listening," he replied in a voice so soft it took her a moment to sort out the words amid the rumbling murmur.

"It's about Rayné."

The almost colorless gaze met hers. Again he didn't speak.

"His virginity poses a risk. Guardaaz..."

The man who wasn't really a man stood and walked several steps away from her. "You don't know what you're asking of me."

"I know perfectly well what I'm asking you just as I knew what I was doing when I gave you my virginity."

His back was still to her and he shook his head, a few thin tendrils of the almost ever present black mist floating away from the fall of his hair. "No, you don't," he responded, his voice gone harsh, tight from emotions she couldn't fathom.

She wanted to go to him, wrap her arms around him and kiss away whatever pain lay in his heart to cause him such evident unhappiness. She took a step forward to do just that, but stopped herself.

Now wasn't the right time to show him how she felt.

But as soon as Guardaaz was dead...yes. Then she could tell him.

"If Guardaaz gets hold of Rayné there's no telling what he would do."

"I'll tell you exactly what he'd do. He'd use Rayné to help subsume this world into a demonic Realm like the Coldlands, that's what he'd do with your kinsman. And he won't stop there. Once he holds dominion here he'll find a way to reach another Realm and do the same thing all over again."

Jaella frowned, confused. "So if you know that then surely you can see why I'm asking you to do this."

"Yes, I understand."

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"So will you?"

"No."

Jaella sighed and walked over to Snow, going around him so that she could look up, meet his gaze. His eyes were darker than normal. Lust or anger, or some other powerful emotion she didn't know. Nor did it matter right now. What was most imperative was for Rayné to be protected from Guardaaz.

"I could try to do it, but I'm not sure he'll have sex with me. He's the Avatar and..." she shrugged and gave a little sigh, "he's not attracted to women."

* * * *

"No, I don't suppose he is," Snow admitted thoughtfully. As the bloodson of the Prince, he'd be as attracted to other men as Raené himself had been while he existed. It was why all his Avatars were male. To steal their bodies he like to fuck them into submission and make them his own through pleasure. It was something Raené wouldn't do with a female, nor would he have had any desire to assume a feminine aspect. Raené had been far too vain to take a form he himself wouldn't find pleasing.

If they were going to fully protect Rayné from Gaurdaaz there was only one way to absolutely assure his safety: take his virginity.

Snow felt his cock twitch at the idea, his body eager for something his mind wasn't as sure about. The boy looked so much like his old master. Far too much. And that awoke old memories from a past he'd rather try to forget.

If he ever could.

So far he'd had no success in that endeavor, and seeing Rayné had brought it crashing through his mind sharp as shards of glass.

He stepped away from the woman, the Sorceress Jaella.

He desired her. Wanted her with an ache approaching pain.

To give her power he'd taken her virginity, however reluctant he'd been at the start, he'd done what was needed and now found that he wanted more of her.

And now he'd do what was required of him with this Avatar.

The very thought of touching that snow pale skin, of having the boy in his arms, his cock inside the slender form brought the dark mist of his power to life, particles of ice pattering to the bed of dry leaves beneath him gentle as rain.

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It would be easy to take the boy, make Rayné his, bend and shape him into a willing and eager slave.

He frowned at the whisper of warped desires rising from the dark recesses of his mind. He'd learned so many things at the hand of his former master, the Prince of the Coldlands. So many deliciously twisted, mind shattering things.

No, he wouldn't steal the boy's will. He would subject him to the things he'd once enjoyed with the Prince. He knew all too well what that was like—yet the temptation was there. And it was a strong one.

But it was a temptation he *had* to resist, just as he had to resist the desire to remain in this green and lush Realm rather than return to his own dismal land of ice and bitter cold.

He stood there considering what he'd need to do in order to assure the boy's safety. At the least he had to breach his body, let him know the feeling of being invaded. But would that be enough?

And even if it was could he stop there?

But he already knew the answer to both those questions was no.

They had to be sure Rayné wasn't in danger, and the truest way to do that would be for Snow to fuck him until they both reached completion. It would leave no possible margin for the demon to work with if he fully claimed Rayné's virgin flesh as his own.

Yes, reluctant or not, Snow would have to fuck the boy.

Doing so would serve a two-fold purpose. First it would mean even should the minions of Gaurdaaz recaptured him, it would do the demon no good as he could gain nothing from an Avatar of the Prince that had ceased to be a virgin. Second, it would allow Snow to convey some of the Prince's magic to Rayné. While the boy wouldn't be nearly as powerful as Snow, he would add another facet to the attack being leveled at the demon.

A demon every bit as powerful as Raené himself had ever been. Unlike Raené who preferred to work alone, Gaurdaaz had gathered up hundreds—possibly thousands—of minions which they might have to fight their way through in order to destroy Gaurdaaz himself. If that was the case it would take every ally and all the power they could muster to face such an army and the master of the Horde.

No, there was no other way.

"Will you do it?" Jaella asked, her arm, warm and firm, slipping around him as she pressed herself close. She had a woman's softness for

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all the muscle she carried on her lovely frame, and he turned to regard her, before leaning down to place a light kiss on her mouth.

Her arms went around his neck and she returned the kiss, the passion between them igniting, a soft moonlight silver fire playing over her skin as the black mist formed around him.

Frost glittered in the dancing light of the campfire the Maiden's had lit for warmth, but neither of them were aware of that, or of the sly glances or knowing smiles that the Maiden's cast in their direction.

Jaella stepped back, "Will you?"

It took the Lord of the Coldlands a moment for her question to sink in through the lust filling his mind. He stepped back and ran a hand through his hair, pushing it out of his face, a layer of frost forming to hold it from his eyes. He nodded but turned aside to stare into the darkness.

Somewhere out there Gaurdaaz was waiting for them.

* * * *

Rayné woke before he felt the touch of a hand on his shoulder, the scent of a winter breeze telling him who it was that had awakened him from sleep.

He sat up, head tipped back to regard the tall Immortal. There was just *something* about the big male that made his heart race, that sent the blood roaring through his veins to pool in his cock. And he knew that *something* was lust.

"Jaella said you would come to speak with me, but I know it's not words you want," he stated as the man stood over him.

"She told you I'd come?"

He nodded, a shiver of excitement, of nervousness raised chill bumps on his skin.

"What else did she say?"

"That there is no longer a Prince to steal my body from me, so my remaining a virgin is no longer important to anyone but Gaurdaaz."

"True enough."

His voice dropped to a whisper, "She also said you'd come to make sure Gaurdaaz can't use me for his own purposes."

"I see," the man murmured. "And how do you feel about that?"

"I don't know. I..." He thought of Margen wished it could have been his friend that took his virginity. But Margen was dead and it might not count if one of the Maiden's of the Moon rode him to completion. It wasn't the same, and even if they'd been sure it would work he wasn't

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sure he could stay hard encased in a woman's flesh. He'd never considered it, didn't really desire a woman's softness.

No, it had always been men that heated his blood and caused his cock to stand at rigid attention.

Snow held out his hand. "Let's go somewhere a little more private."

"Where?"

The man nodded his head toward a stand of trees just a few dozen yards away.

Rayné accepted the offered hand, felt the bite of frost coat his fingers and palm. The man was cold, just as he'd been told the Prince would be.

"You really killed him and took his power, didn't you?"

"Yes."

The man started walking and Rayné followed him feeling almost like a sacrificial animal going to its own doom. A silly thought really as the Prince would have surely taken his body and eaten his soul, and what exactly Guardaaz might have had in store for him was anyone's guess.

But with Snow there would be no such danger or uncertainty.

At least Jaella didn't think there was, but who could truly know the mind of any man, much less one that had absorbed the power of a demon?

There were times that Rayné couldn't be sure of his own desires or make up his own mind about things.

Like now.

He wanted to know how it felt to have a cock inside him, the curiosity greater than ever before now that Jaella had whispered a few of her own secrets to him. Secrets that had aroused his interest in the man who called himself Snow.

They reached the trees and Snow let his hand go before tossing down the blanket he'd taken from Rayné's meager bed so that it covered the thick bed of last fall's leaves.

He stood there, uneasy, uncertain of what to do, what to say.

The taller man turned and just stood there looking at him with eyes so pale they seemed made of colorless glass.

Snow stepped closer to him and he suddenly felt fragile as he realized just how tall and muscular Lord Snow was. Strong. Inhumanly powerful, he could see that fact written in every sculpted line of the other male's body. Hesitantly he reached out, touched the man's chest. The skin was cool under his fingers and he could feel the power lying just beneath

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that cool, silken skin. Heavy muscles overlying solid bone. The beat of a heart that sped up under his palm.

He raised his eyes from the broad expanse of chest, aware of his own racing heart and the throbbing ache in his groin. His cock was going hard and he saw that Snow's too pale eyes had darkened.

Lust. And the Lord of the Coldlands lusted after him, he could see it clearly in his eyes, and if there'd been any doubts about that one glance at the rigid hardness of Snow's cock under his garments would have dispelled those.

He stared. Snow was just as huge there as he was everywhere else.

Rayné's mouth went dry at the realization of exactly where the man's cock would be going and what it would be doing once it got there. He was a virgin, but he wasn't ignorant of the mechanics involved and the thought of how much his anus would need to stretch to accommodate that much meat...He shuddered and felt heat rise through his body from his groin.

He wanted to know, wanted to feel what the man could do to him.

* * * *

Snow saw where the boy's gaze had gone, and he noticed the way the violet eyes had widened as he took in what lay below the concealment of his pants.

He was just about to ask Rayné if he wanted to reconsider, perhaps leave it for when he was a little stronger, less tired from his ordeal. Before he got a chance to ask the boy was pressing himself to Snow, his sleek body molding to him as Rayne reached up to put his arms around Snow's neck.

Snow caressed the boy's frost-pale cheek, touched perfect lips with a thumb, watched as the boy's breath flowed over his hand, dusting it with frost.

Rayné shivered at the feeling and Snow watched the boy's eyes close. For him the reaction was so familiar that was as if nothing had changed. Every motion, every delicate shudder of rising passion was the same. To Snow it was like having the Prince back within his reach. Yet it wasn't the Prince, it was just one of his Avatars. Just a beautiful boy who'd never tasted the dark delights his master had once shown him. The gifts of pleasure that could only be found through pain.

And he wasn't sure he wanted to teach them to Rayné. Beautiful, innocent and trusting Rayné.

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"You are so much like him," he murmured as he bent down to press a kiss to the boy's mouth.

Cold, slightly sweet, his tongue slipped along the seam of the boy's lips and he felt them part under the light touch, his tongue slipping inward, getting a better taste. His mouth filled with the remembered flavor, a taste like frozen honey faintly dusted with dusky cinnamon filled his mouth. He gathered the boy to him, his hands sliding down Rayné's back, over his waist until they rested over the hard curves of his butt.

Rayné's arms moved around him, a shudder of desire sweeping through the slender form in his embrace, a hardness pressing into his thigh that he recognized for what it was—the boy's cock—proving how eager Rayné himself was for more.

So was Snow.

The Lord of the Coldlands began a slow exploration of the boy's body, touching, kissing, a rime of frost forming on Rayné's skin. Glittering transient jewels that he swept away with the firm stroke of his hands, his tongue until Rayné was moaning, helpless with passion, clinging to him while soft cries of need along with a chill mist slid from his parted lips.

Snowflakes from the Lord of the Coldlands fell around them, dusting the dark flame of Rayné's hair, lightly powdering his face.

Snow stopped his teasing exploration of the young human's body to gaze at his face, to kiss the soft perfection of the boy's lips, tasting the mist-birthered snow of his own making. It too carried the lure of passion's honey, a sweet, faintly spicy flavor that was the essence of what Raené himself had been: A demon of lust and desire.

Beneath him the boy shivered, and Snow knew it had nothing to do with the cold that surrounded them, bled off of them the way a flower exuded perfume.

He bent to take a pallid nipple into his mouth, tonguing it, tasting the boy's sweet flesh. It was intoxicating, and he moved his kisses downward, over the flat nicely defined muscles of the youth's stomach and down to the curve of a hip bone that he slid his tongue along, smiling as Rayné shivered and gasped at each new sensation.

Snow couldn't help it. He smiled and then opened his mouth just enough for the tip of his tongue to slide out and lap at the salt-sweetness of the beads of precum on Rayné's erect cock.

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Rayné gasped loudly, his hips bucking uncontrollably as instinct took over and sought the rhythm that would give release.

He put a firm hand down in the middle of the boy's belly and held him still as he lapped around the head of Rayné's cock, teasing, building up the energy that would turn the boy from a potential danger to a powerful ally.

* * * *

"Gods, oh gods," the young warrior gasped, writhing under the lash of Snow's pleasuring.

His cock was aflame, sending a blazing heat—or was it burning cold?—searing across his senses. But it wasn't just a physical sensation. There was something coiling inside him, a piece of his not quite human soul responding to the pleasure rocking his body.

He almost screamed when the entirety of Snow's mouth engulfed his aching prick, the man's nose coming to rest in the nest of curls at the base of his cock. The following sucking sensation did draw a gasping cry from him, and he felt his hips rocking wildly, his body, his entire soul crying for more.

There were several slow repetitions of the press and suck, each one wrenching a needy cry from him before he felt something touch the tight ring of his anus. The light probing sent a shudder through him, and then he felt something slide through the ring and he groaned.

It was what his body desired. It was what that dark segment of his soul had been waiting for and it eagerly answered the touch.

Thin wisps of black mist flowed from his body as the dormant part of his soul slowly awakened.

The part that belonged to the Prince of the Coldlands.

The part that made him more than a man.

Less than human.

He opened his eyes and saw a nimbus of blackness, felt the bite of bitter cold around Snow and recognized the power. His master. But not totally the ruler of his flesh, or his soul.

He was the Avatar of the Prince of the Coldlands, but this was not the Prince.

Rayné wanted to fulfill his destiny, he wanted to surrender his body and soul to be used and consumed as ordained by his blood.

The intrusion into his body was withdrawn and he whimpered at the loss.

"Please...I...belong to you."

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Snow shuddered at the sound of the boy's plea, and found himself wanting to take what was offered, though not in the way the boy expected, or had been prepared by birth to give.

He didn't need Rayné's flesh the way the Prince would have.

Nor did he need to consume the boy's soul though there was a pull there, a vague desire to bite, to drink blood and thereby take the pulsing life from the beautiful warrior.

But he didn't want to kill Rayné, he wanted to save him, to remake him into...what? Another demon-tainted killer like himself?

He sucked the flesh in his mouth, savoring the flavor that burst across his tongue as another bit of precum seeped from Rayné's cock. The flavor wasn't like anything human. Didn't taste of salt and muskiness the way a human male would taste to him. That was all the reminder he needed.

Unlike Snow, Rayné had never been fully human to start with, and so the taint had always been there. Get of Raené, he was the progeny of a demon's seed, not two humans and nothing Snow did could change that, though the taint could be made stronger. And that was his intent. To strengthen the demon within Rayné to give him at least a fighting chance against the power of Guardiaaz.

He let go of the rigid flesh in his mouth, heard the boy whimper at the lost contact and slipped another finger into the boy's anus feeling Rayné's body moving in a horizontal dance of need, hearing him begging with wordless moans and whimpers for fulfillment for what he'd been bred and born to do: surrender his flesh, and yield up his soul to his progenitor, Raené, Prince of the Coldlands.

But the Prince was dead.

And Snow had no intention of killing Rayné.

He did, however, have every intention of fucking him.

Sighing a cloud of frosty particles, Snow positioned the slender warrior so that his legs raised high enough, spread wide enough.

For a moment he just stared at the boy's flushed face, at the slender limbs, the beautiful body waiting for him, wanting him.

He looks like Raené.

Hate and love were two halves of a whole. Without one the other would not exist.

Snow closed his eyes and crystal tears froze on his cheeks.

He'd hated his master, hated the Prince enough to kill him.

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And he'd loved and adored Raené, worshipped at the alter of his cock, eagerly accepting everything the demon Prince had done to him. Had taught him about pleasure.

But then, tired of that game, Raené had inducted him into another favorite game of demons. Torture.

And Raené, a demon of lust, thrived on sexual energy, and that included pain inflicted with sex. Pain that soon crossed the lines and became pleasure to a poor deluded Viking boy.

Killing the Prince had been the most difficult thing he'd ever had to do.

And he prayed to any divine beings that might care to hear him that he'd never have to do something so hard no matter how long he existed.

And Rayné was the Avatar of his lost master.

And all it would take was a ritual held at the Gate to return the power of the demon where it belonged: back to the Prince of the Coldland who could live once more within the flesh of the boy in his arms.

The temptation was there.

But it was something he'd never do. Never allow no matter how many Avatars he encountered.

And even had he wanted to do so, it was too late now. He was already taking the boy's virginity, and it wasn't being done at the verge of the Gate.

Raené would never come back in the flesh of this Avatar. Snow had just made sure of that.

Snow opened his eyes to see the trusting violet gaze of Rayné looking up at him. Rayné not the Prince. Neither master nor lover, Rayné was just a partly demon partly human boy caught up in a situation he had no control of, and no hope of surviving if Snow didn't help him now.

He leaned down and kissed Rayné, felt the eager response, tasted the flavor of lust that was seasoned with the faintly bitter taste of dying innocence.

Snow would save the boy from Guardaaz, but he wondered who would save the boy from him because now that he had Rayné he knew he would never want to let him go.

Breaking the kiss he stared into the familiar violet eyes, touched the petal soft cheek, so perfect, inhumanly pale, cold as his own ice-locked soul.

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"Love me," Rayné whispered and again he heard the words as Raené would have spoken them. Soft, seductive.

Something filled his heart. Something hot, needy, and totally human.

Love.

He'd loved the Prince, now he could feel it for his Avatar, but unlike Raené and his dark demonic appetites, the boy was coming to him as an innocent, sacrificing virginity for power the way Jaella had done.

"Please, Snow. I want this. I want you," Rayné murmured, his hands moving over Snow's body in feather light caresses meant to encourage and tease. One of the slender but deceptively strong hands slid down until it could wrap around his cock, and he groaned and shuddered at the feel.

"I want it too," he admitted, voice choked to a rough growl by the warring emotions surging through his warped and tainted formerly human soul.

In many ways he was no better than the poor deluded creatures of the Horde. Lured by promises, deceived by a demon just as they'd been.

But he'd gotten free...hadn't he?

Doubts flitted in the dark corners of his mind.

"Snow, what's the matter?" Rayné asked softly.

He felt a hand touch his cheek, sliding across the thin icy trails of frozen tears. Snow hadn't even noticed he was crying.

Beneath him the boy moved, sat up to put both arms around him. To kiss his cheeks, his face, lock over his mouth and press a damp, sweetly flavored tongue into his mouth.

He groaned and let go of the past to wrap his arms around the present.

"Ah...yes yes!" the boy cried out as he kissed along his throat, bit gently and then wrapped a hand around the shaft of the young warrior's cock, stroking slowly.

The desperation in the cries was too much for Snow. He no longer cared about anything but being inside Rayné. Wanting Rayné who wasn't the Prince.

Rayne who he wanted now as much as he'd wanted Jaella.

He moved between the slender thighs, raised Rayné's legs, hooking one over his shoulder, putting his hand behind the bend of the knee on the other. He pressed a kiss to Rayné's parted lips, felt the boy moan as the head of his cock nudged the opening to Rayné's body.

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Ice sheathed his erection and when he rocked his hips to test Rayné's willingness for what he was about to do the boy's hips bucked in response. He slid in, the passage soothed by the ice and the boy shuddered beneath him. Rosy color flooded his face and he groaned in pleasure.

"So beautiful," he murmured as he kissed Rayné.

Violet eyes met his, the gaze full of lust. "Fuck me, Snow. Fuck me."

For a moment Snow could only stare.

It was Raené.

His Prince.

His love.

"Oh please, please."

But Raené would never have begged like that. Not with such a whimpering, helplessly needy tone in his voice.

No, Raené would have made it a command. An order to obedience that Snow couldn't have disobeyed.

Not until the very end when no order, no command to obedience, no tearful plea could stay Snow's hand.

He'd killed what he'd loved.

He'd killed what deserved nothing but the death it had reaped.

Raené, Prince of the Coldlands.

Prince of Demons.

The flesh around his cock was spasming, internal muscles fighting the intrusion, the boy's entire body trembling. The pleasure struggling against the pain of being filled so completely.

Snow remembered it well, that confusing blend of want and fear. He could taste it on the boy's skin as he kissed his throat, claimed his mouth for a deep kiss. He tried to tell himself it was the sweetness of passion he tasted there, but he could also taste the slightly acrid flavor of fear. Faint but present.

And he hated the fact that he liked the flavor.

Demon tainted forever. There was no going back for him.

And for Rayné there was no changing what he was either.

Tigers couldn't remove their stripes.

Demons, even those who weren't born that way, couldn't change what they were either.

"Snow...please...!"

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"Shhh....Just relax." He soothed, letting the tight sheath of the boy's flesh become accustomed to being stretched and filled.

The boy's eyes closed, his body shaking beneath Snow from the frustration created by unfulfilled need.

"Soon. Take it easy."

A fist stuck his ribs, gave him a flash of pain, made him think of Raené. "I don't want to relax. Oh, gods, Snow, stop torturing me!"

Tears were seeping from Rayné's tightly shut eyes. "Please..."

Snow couldn't fight his own desire anymore. He covered the boy's mouth with his and rocked his hips slowly, feeling the boy's cries of pleasure filling his mouth, sliding down his throat with the sweet intoxicating effect of mead.

He groaned, and felt Rayné tremble, his arms, slender but muscular and stronger than they appeared wrapped around his shoulders. He felt the cool dance of frost across his skin, saw a thin veil of midnight colored mist drifting round them.

The Immortal kissed Rayné, trying to take it slow, wanting to let as much magical energy build as he could because whatever he gained would help in his fight against Guardaaz, and whatever the boy got would be his greatest protection when they faced the demon.

Fingers dug into him, a thin layer of ice shattered beneath the boy's scrabbling hands as he clung to Snow.

He had enjoyed sex with Jaella, craved a chance to fuck her again.

But this, being with another male was more familiar to him after all his centuries with Raené, though he'd be the first to admit being inside Jaella had fired his blood in ways that fucking Raené never had.

And he was quickly finding that being balls deep in Rayné, while similar, wasn't the same because the boy wasn't dominating his mind, or controlling his body to gain maximum pleasure for himself while denying any hope of release to Snow.

No, this time it was Snow in control, Snow setting the pace, denying them both the fulfillment of pleasure as long as he could while the power grew, filling them until their bodies started to tingle and the visible sign of the magic thickened to whirling sheets of inky mist around them.

* * * *

Rayné gasped, head thrown back, body arching with the pleasure of what Snow's cock was doing to him. He was filled with a cold so intense he felt like he was on fire. Black mist coiled away from them to kiss the

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greenery with frost, instantly freezing the leaves and the grass beneath them, adorning the area in sparkling crystal ice.

He was freezing from the inside out, from the outside in. The hard icicle of Snow's massive cock siding in and out of him, touching a place inside his body that sent flashes like lightning through him. It felt so good. Better than he'd ever imagined and he groaned, body shaking with the sensations, the intensity of so much passion. And unlike the passion he would have shared with Raené, it would not end in his own death, the loss of his soul, everything he was and might ever become. Rayné, Avatar of the Demon Prince of the Coldlands would retain his own identity. His own life would continue, rather than his flesh living on as a host to the Prince while his soul went to feed the demon's power.

The thought of what would have happened to him had he been with Raené rather than Snow made him appreciate what was being done all the more. He would experience pleasure and live to do it again and again, though he didn't expect it to be the same with a normal man.

Being fucked by a demon in an exchange of power was not the same. Couldn't be the same.

Rayné's cries grew louder, turning to pleading whimpers, the black mist drifting around both of them, thickening as he rode the cock inside him.

Burning ice filling him, warping him into something else. Something less and more than human at one and the same time. Rayné cried out as the icy cock inside him brushed across the pleasure point, finding it unerringly. Shards of crystal ice flowed through his blood, the black mist thickening even more as it started to emanate from his own flesh.

Power exchanging, power building.

"Yes...fuck me, Snow. Make me yours," he groaned and shuddered under the lash of pleasure.

The man between his legs chuckled, slowing the strokes, and he could feel the deliberate way he nudged into the right place with the head of his prick. "I think I've already have made you mine," Snow replied and he felt a gentle kiss on his shoulder, a kiss that felt like the touch of flame on his flesh, the cold eating deeper into him.

"Gods of Light..." he groaned as the man continued the torturously slow assault of his body, pleasure blurring his thoughts, reducing him to a whimpering begging creature that no longer knew pride or arrogance. Consumed by the intensity of sensation filling him he moaned, arms

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shaking, hardly able to support him as the need overrode any other consideration. An arm slid under him and lifted, pulling him up until he was resting against Snow's thighs in an almost totally upright position, the big cock slipping even deeper than it had been.

He shuddered as strong arms supported him, as the fiery burn of lips worked their way along his shoulder and the powerful thighs rocked him slowly, the steely shaft moving within his body giving him immeasurable pleasure as the magical energy strengthened.

Mist, black as night drifted around them in thin ribbons that lay patterns of frost around them, the power rising stronger with each gasp, every moan until the streamers were wide as warbanners and the frost turned to a slow fall of snow that blanketed the ground.

Rayné noticed none of it. Didn't feel the bitter cold as it wrapped around them. All he felt was the passion burning through his body with every unerring stroke of Snow's hard cock into his willing body.

"Oh...please..." he groaned not even sure what he was asking for, but wanting more than he was being given.

"Yes, I will please you, Rayné," the deep voice of Snow rumbled into his ear as the big man held him, rocked him, the huge shaft of his erection riding over the place inside him that gave such immense pleasure. He was held, the man's large hands caressing his chest, finger tips pinching his nipples until his own untouched cock ached so much he started to whimper from need.

"Shhh.." was whispered into his ear. "Relax and just feel."

"I..am...want..." he put his hand around one of Snow's and tried to guide it down to his prick. It felt like it was on fire. Felt as if it would burst. And his balls were pulled so tight to his body it almost hurt.

Instead of gripping his erection Snow's hand cupped his balls and he shuddered and cried out, bucking and riding the hardness inside him.

"Easy.. easy....don't cum yet." Skilled fingers pressed something in his groin and some of the urgency eased, which only added to his frustration. He cried out and tried to rock harder on the flesh impaling him.

But he was held firmly to the broad chest, pressed down so that the cock moved farther inside him, but was no longer thrusting.

"Shhh...not yet. We've got a way to go if you want power from his."

Rayné couldn't help the whimper of need that slipped from his parted lips, nor could his overwhelmed mind keep him from bucking his hips in reaction to the cessation of pleasure. The cock was still buried in

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his body, the pressure an incredible torment, but there was no relief from the thrumming tension that had built up inside him.

Tension that wanted release.

* * * *

Snow held the boy to him, arms wrapped around the young warrior, head lowered to kiss the pale skin of neck and shoulder.

It was pure torment to sit there so still, unmoving with the flesh of his former master's Avatar encasing his cock, but he'd endured far worse at the hands of the Prince who'd used him, ridden him day after day with no respite until his mind was lost in a fog of ecstasy that had long since become pain the sensations alternating until they were one and the same.

And he craved them both always thanks to Raené.

He took the boy's hand in his and guided it upward, curled the fingers into his hair and felt Rayné respond to the urging by gripping his hair and pulling. He let go and went back to caressing the beautiful perfection of the boy's body. So like Raené right down to the feel and the scent.

"Harder," he murmured against the satin of the boy's skin as he tasted the sweetness of passion that oozed out of the Avatar, an enticement more addictive than the most deadly drug, the flavor alluring enough to please Raené himself.

To Snow it was a powerful reminder of everything he'd lost when he'd killed the Prince: his lover had died at his own hands.

Just another sin in a long list of them that spanned centuries.

It was also a reminder of everything he'd gained: his freedom from slavery.

And the ability to pick and chose the sins he committed now in the name of saving the human's from their own folly, rather than in the name of pleasure.

Strong young muscles rippled under his hands as Rayné tugged Snow's hair, whimpering and begging for more pleasure.

He looked and smelled like the Prince. Wrapped in his embrace Rayné even felt like the Prince. And his voice as he spoke, that was the same too.

But the way he begged, the way he cried out and whimpered his pleasure...that's where the similarity stopped.

Raené would never have begged Snow for anything.

Or rather he'd only done so once, and that had been for his life when he'd realized Snow was about to kill him.

BAGNOBARK TANGO

And Snow hadn't listened, hadn't shown any mercy.

He wasn't showing any mercy now.

He remained still, his cock seated firmly and deeply in the Avatar of his former master, hands stroking everywhere but the one place Rayné desired: his cock.

Snow kissed the side of the pale neck, nipped gently and felt the young man in his arms tremble, heard a soft whimper of need and felt his own cock throb, aching for the release he was denying them both in favor of building the magic, of giving Rayné greater power. Power to match his cousin, the Sorceress Jaella.

The hand in his hair pulled, slender hips rocked, and he groaned, wanting to give in to what they both needed.

"Shhh...not yet, Rayné." He wrapped his arms tightly around the smaller male and tensed his own thighs, gave a nudge into the yielding body and felt Rayné's body shudder at the pleasure he'd granted to the Avatar.

He closed his eyes and bent his head to taste the flavor of lust, like honey on the boy's skin. So many memories flooded his mind then. Echos of a long and sordid past in the arms of a demon Prince.

Tears froze on his cheeks at the realization he would be returning to the Coldlands alone.

Forever alone.

And this too would become another painful memory. Another agonizing thing to haunt his dreams with pleasure he couldn't attain with the icy beings of his own creation.

They weren't alive.

But this boy, this beautiful image of his lost master...he was living and sentient. Seductive and so very desirable.

He bit down just hard enough to draw a taste of blood, heard the boy gasp, felt him rocking on the cock Snow had buried deep inside of the warm, wonderfully alive flesh.

Flesh that was slowly taking on the chill of his own body, the cold of the Realm that had been home to the demon Prince Raené.

He let go and almost shoved the boy off his lap when he realized what he'd been about to do. His heart started to pound, mind reeling at the implications of that bite, of the thin trickle of blood running down the boy's shoulder, dripping and freezing on skin white and cold as the snow falling around them.

MICHAEL BARNETTE

Instead of shoving Rayné away he held him closer and licked the blood away, savoring the taste, fighting the desire to take more, to make the boy his. His forever.

To his horror the boy leaned back into the press of his mouth, the hand in his hair going even tighter, silently begging for the bite that would have taken his soul if he'd been Raené.

And what guarantee did Snow have that he wouldn't take the boy's soul himself? Was it possible that he could steal the boy's life that way as Raené could have? He carried the demon's stolen power inside himself, and the urge, the desire to bite, to take was there.

But was it just the taste of life he craved, or was it the boy's soul he wanted?

He didn't know, and he wouldn't risk that it was the second of the two that his power sought.

He was doing this to save the boy, not kill him.

He was doing it to have an ally against the growing power of Guardaaz.

"Fuck me," the boy whispered. "Fuck me and make me yours."

Snow trembled at the request. The voice pleading with such desire, the hand in his hair tugging, urging him on to a completion they both wanted.

The end of Rayné's virginity, the beginning of Snow's regrets.

He gripped the slender form in his arms and gave a quick roll of his own hips, heard the boy gasp, felt him go tense in his embrace.

"YESSSS..." Rayné hissed out loudly.

Snow was lost, the lust rising in him like a blizzard wind, driving any thought of controlling the pace, of denying himself a release, or concern that the climax would bring their gathering of power to an end.

His hips started to move, driving his cock upward into the needy flesh, feeling the boy's free hand grip shoulder, the nails cutting, drawing blood that instantly froze.

"Yes yes please..." Nails tore his skin as the boy's entire body shook with the power of the orgasm that gripped his flesh, his butt grinding into Snow's pelvis as semen spurted over the hand he had around Rayné's pulsing erection.

"Snow...Snow...more...gods more..." he heard Rayné cry out and felt a second climax rock the young man's body.

The progeny of a demon of lust, Rayné shared his bloodsire's ability to cum more than once.

BAGNOBAK TANGO

"I love you..." Snow groaned as he held Rayné tighter and thrust roughly into the strong body in his arms unaware of what he'd just said.

He was close. So very close now.

Rayné screamed, his body griped by another powerful orgasm and this time the clenching of his flesh around Snow took the Immortal over the edge.

Hips bucking hard, Snow came as the mist turned to clouds of swirling ice particles and a blizzard wind rose. Trees cracked under the onslaught of the Coldland's breath coming off the two men: One the Lord of the Coldlands, one the Avatar of its dead Prince.

* * * *

Outside of the freezing storm that concealed Snow and Rayné, Jaella and the Maidens of the Moon watched and waited.

"Will he be a Sorcerer now?"

"He was the Avatar of Raené. The best we can hope for is that he will be saved from Guardaaz."

"So he won't have power?"

She shrugged, "I don't know. The way it would have worked if Raené had still existed...well my kinsman would no longer exist after he was taken by the Prince. But with Snow—" she shook her head, "I just don't know what might happen."

CHAPTER FOUR

Rayné awoke and found he couldn't move. Memories of the Horde, of being captured rose in his disordered thoughts and he struggled frantically.

"Shhh..." a thunder-rumble voice soothed and he realized the bindings holding him were the weight of an arm and leg, and a layering of heavy ice over Snow and himself.

He tried to move, felt the soreness of his ass as the arms around him, one over one beneath his body, tightened possessively.

He opened his mouth intending to tell the Immortal that they should be going, that they should be on their way to fight the demon, but he was silenced by a kiss that drove all protest from his mind.

A hand closed around his cock which was already erect and eager for Snow's touch. He was stroked slowly, the grip just firm enough to give pleasure, but not hard enough to give satisfaction. He groaned and heard the Lord of the Coldlands laugh softly, the sound vibrating down his throat.

"So needy," Snow whispered to him as the ice covering them both shattered, the titan of a man moving to take the length of his aching flesh into his mouth.

The sensation was intense, the motion of Snow's tongue firm over his sensitive cockhead, and down the shaft.

He reached out for the man, his right hand grabbing on to a fist full of hair the left one clutching at the massive biceps of Snow's right arm which was what he could easily reach.

Instead of the slow torment of last night, he was being taken toward the heights of orgasm in a sharp upward climb that left him moaning and writhing beneath the larger male, eyes tightly shut, hips coming off the ground in quick, desperate thrusts.

He almost screamed in frustration as the mouth let him go.

Rayné opened his eyes to find Snow smiling at someone standing nearby and when he turned to look it was to find Jaella smiling at them.

BAGNOBAK TANGO

"Good morning," she said. "Sorry to interrupt, but we really should be going if we plan to reach the Fortress of Guardaaz today."

Rayné scrambled around looking for clothing, but there was so much ice and so many layers of frozen snow lying on the ground that he found no trace of the garments he'd been wearing. He gave up on his quest and pulled some icy leaves over his lap while his cheeks warmed with embarrassment.

Snow was regarding his cousin from his seat atop a mound of ice that vaguely resembled a throne. A mantle of dark mist flowed from his body, a regal cloak for the Lord of the Coldlands. A fine pattering sound, ice crystals falling from the mist, was the only sound to be heard.

Snow got to his feet, his nude body pale as the ice around him. Rayné understood his cousin's fascination as his own eyes traveled over the sculpted flesh, lingering on the cock dangling between the man's massive thighs. It was proportional to the man's build and Rayné had a keen understanding of exactly why his ass hurt.

"You're right. We should go, but I don't think we'll reach the Fortress today. From what you've told me it's a day's ride farther on, and I don't want to arrive tired and then enter the place at twilight. Demons like Guardaaz gain power with the fall of darkness."

Jaella nodded, "Then we'll stop part way there?"

"Yes," Snow agreed. "We'll need rest and another chance to increase our power."

He saw the flicker of desire pass through his cousin's eyes, but that nothing compared to the way Snow's own gaze darkened with lust as he openly took in Jaella's form. Rayné blushed hotly when Snow's appraisal fell on him. A knowing smile formed on Lord Snow's mouth before the Immortal's attention returned to his kinswoman. If he didn't know the truth of the magical energy to be had through sex with the Master of the Coldlands he would have thought it nothing but the man's desire to pleasure himself with them.

But Rayné knew the truth. There was power to be gained in the exchange of pleasure. He could still feel the tingling through his skin from the brief taste of bliss he'd gotten from Snow. Pleasure unfulfilled.

And that meant there'd been no loss of energy.

He sighed. It also meant he'd spend the day as he'd spent so many others in his life: frustrated and wanting what he couldn't have.

Maybe, just maybe, tonight would be different.

MICHAEL BARNETTE

Rayné resumed to his futile efforts to find his clothing. He gave up and was about to ask Jaella for something to wear when Snow reached into a rapidly melting flow of ice and pulled out his pants, shirt and boots. They were soaking wet and clung to his skin after he put them on. He noticed Snow staring at him and blushed when he saw that Snow's eyes were on his crotch and what the wet pants revealed: the wet fabric molded to his cock and balls.

Rayné's cock went hard and Snow laughed. "Later. You'll both have what you want later."

As they helped pack the camp back onto the horses, Rayné's gaze went from his cousin to the Immortal, then back, puzzled by the way they kept sneaking glances at one another, the glances always happening when they were convinced the other person wasn't looking their way. It was like being an observer at some type of game. Jaella would peek at Snow, then look elsewhere and Snow would gaze at Jaella, and pretend he hadn't been doing it the instant she turned her head his way. It was amusing, and he had to keep himself from laughing. Then he noticed a few telling details about Jaella. Whenever she looked at Snow her breathing quickened, emerald eyes full of emotion, and when the wind shifted he caught the unmistakable scent of an aroused female. It was a mixture that he would have called lust if he hadn't noticed other, little details like the way she blushed faintly as Snow's eyes roved over her, or the way she smiled, tentatively at Snow. Added to her hesitation to come any closer to the big man and it left Rayné wondering what was going on in his kinswoman's mind and heart.

She wanted Snow, but there was more to it than the simple craving for the meeting of flesh in passion.

Turning his own gaze on Snow he could understand why Jaella might want the man. He could understand it very well. Snow was not only an impressively formed male, he was gifted with the magic of a demon. And it wasn't just any demon, but the sire of their blood: Raené, Prince of the Coldlands.

But even that attraction didn't quite account for the way she was looking at Snow.

There was something a lot deeper than physical desire going on between his cousin and Snow but he wasn't about to call it love. From what he knew of love it too a lot more than a couple of fucks to make someone fall in love.

He'd loved Margen and they'd never even had sex.

BAGNOBAK TANGO

He'd had sex with Snow, and had to admit to himself that it wouldn't be hard to fall in love with the man. There'd been such tenderness as Snow fucked him, and a great deal of pleasure.

And that was when he remembered a groaned, "I love you," rumbling in his ears as he'd reached climax in Snow's embrace. His balls felt warm, and his cock stiffened as he recalled the words and the feel of Snow inside him.

Yes, it would be all too easy to fall in love with the Lord of the Coldlands.

An hour later they were on their way, moving through wooded and broken country that could hide an army.

Or hundreds of the Horde.

But they met nothing living, not even animals in their long ride toward the Fortress and their inevitable battle with Guardiaaz.

* * * *

Sunset washed the land in blood and gold, the failing light of day changing the already unpleasant landscape into one of nightmare shapes and shadows.

Tormented trees raised their knotted branches toward the sky. Instead of dry and sere leaves the trees were draped in a grey substance that resembled tattered burial shrouds. The substance whispered as a hot breeze passed through branches that creaked and groaned lending an altogether unpleasant feel to the place that made the horses sidle around uneasily and the Maidens set hand to their weapons even though there was no immediate sign of danger.

Patches of brown grass stood between some of the trees and the travelers and their mounts quickly learned to avoid those when a horse brushed against one and was cut deeply by the foliage which was sharp as razors.

Darkness was coming down and soon it would be too dark for them to discern any of the hazards the land presented to them, much less any enemy that might be lurking in such an unwholesome place.

Snow drew rein and halted. "We camp here."

"Camp? So close to the Fortress of Guardiaaz?" Claria asked as she surveyed their surroundings dubiously.

"Would you prefer to stop at his very gates?" Snow countered.

"No. You're right. We have to rest and stopping any closer to his domain would be even more foolish than stopping here."

MICHAEL BARNETTE

"I'll keep the watch," Snow stated. "Nothing will come upon us unawares."

"You didn't sense that thing you fought at our last camp," Seena remarked in a tone so sour he thought it must have curled her tongue.

"I was...other wise occupied," he replied and dismounted.

"So we noticed," Ophae remarked as she took his horse's reins to lead it away.

Snow just stared at her and she blushed and hurried away.

"I'll take a look around. Don't touch any of the plants," he warned.

"After that encounter with the swordgrass," —which was what they'd dubbed the strange plant—"I don't think any of us need the advice, but thanks anyway," one of the other Maidens said.

Snow walked out of the clearing he'd chosen for their camp and circled around to make sure there was nothing hostile lurking nearby. He'd made the mistake of not checking last time and damned if he'd be that much a fool a second time.

He returned quickly and positioned himself so he could see what was going on, yet be well out of their way as the Maidens worked.

The women were uneasy as they made their camp between the twisted growth, trees and a few equally unfriendly shrubs that had large berries of a deep purple clustering their stems. Thorns the length of Snow's fingers covered the bushes anywhere there were no berries and he could see some type of moisture beaded like dew on the spines.

No one even ventured near the bushes, not even their hungry mounts would approach the plants which said a great deal about the nature of the things.

Snow was aware of the way the Maidens watched him when they thought he wasn't looking. But he was much more aware of other eyes on him. Emerald and amethyst eyes that warmed him the way a caress would heat his skin.

Jaella and Rayné studying him the way a wolf watched a herd of deer, or a serpent studied a mouse. He could feel them watching. Their gazes caressing him, moving over the planes of his body.

He could feel the lust pooling in the Sorceress' belly, coiling in the young warrior's balls.

His cock twitched at the sensation, his entire being aware of their growing need, their desire for him.

BAGNOBAK TANGO

It was a heady sensation, the beat beat beat of their passion flowing into him as intoxicating as strong mead. Silent seduction, the call of their blood to the power he'd absorbed.

Black mist floated away from him and he turned and left the camp because he was filled with a desire to take both of them and make them his. His in a way that went beyond mere sex and would reach into the very depths of their souls.

And the thing that disturbed him most about that was they wanted that very thing from him. They wanted it, though he didn't believe that desire for ultimate surrender was a conscious one. He knew better. Had seen enough of his former master's Avatars die in the arms of the Prince as they gave up their very lives and souls without any resistance.

It was in their blood. The desire to die to feed Raené, to appease his hunger burned into the souls of every one of his Avatars deep as a brand in their flesh. Visible as the color of their hair, their eyes, the milkiness of their skin which marked them so clearly.

And Jaella—he had no explanation for her desire to give her life and soul up to him other than the change he'd probably wrought on Raené's power. He loved women while to Raené they'd been nothing but a means to an end. The way to create an Avatar and nothing more.

And, being a demon, he'd not even had to put his dick into a female to achieve what he wanted. No, all he'd had to do was focus his power on one, cause her to become pregnant without the need to pleasure the woman.

Or dirty himself on a female.

Snow closed his eyes and tried to drive away the need he felt for the woman.

But he knew it was hopeless and pointless at the same time.

It wasn't just pleasure the pair were seeking.

It was power.

And, in the end, he needed that as much as they did if they were going to face Guardaaz in the morning.

He turned to go back and found that he wasn't alone.

Sorceress and Avatar, they were standing there, waiting for him.

They came to him, but stopped short of touching him, of coming in arm's reach, the two of them regarding him with their jewel-bright eyes.

Eyes in which he could see the heat of desire.

A desire to match his own.

MICHAEL BARNETTE

He closed the distance between himself and Jaella, looked down at her.

"We face a battle tomorrow," she stated. "A battle of magic that none of us may survive."

It was true, but he made no reply.

"We need the power you can give us," she explained as she reached up to caress his face.

"We?" he asked, glancing from her to Rayné.

The young warrior took a step closer. "Yes."

"But you know nothing of magic, what help will you be?"

Rayné blushed and lowered his head. "I hoped to gain knowledge from you before we reach the Fortress."

"I can teach you nothing of use in such a short time," Snow told the boy bluntly. "Such learning is...complicated and takes many weeks to learn."

"Then use me to add to your own power. I don't care."

But Snow did care.

He wanted to feel the young warrior writhing in passion as he fucked him.

But Snow couldn't help his doubts. Was it him that the boy wanted, or was he simply attracted because of the remnants of Raené's power lingering within Snow? And for that matter why did Snow feel such a strong attraction for Rayné? But he did know the answer to that question. Rayné looked like his dead master. The demon. The creature he'd loved in spite of all the horror and pain he'd been subjected to for so many years.

And either way, did it really matter?

Snow wanted Rayné and they needed the energies that having sex would generate.

And he wanted the woman, the Sorceress Jaella with the same depth of passion as he wanted the boy.

Snow pulled the woman close, kissing her, but his darkening gaze was locked on Rayné, on the flushed face and violet eyes of the young warrior. He slid his hand over Jaella's firm butt, gripping it and kneading it, eliciting a moan from her.

Rayné's cock went hard, the beautiful violet eyes watching, but Snow knew that the boy's eyes weren't on Jaella. They were on Snow, the Immortal could tell what the boy was looking at. His hands touching the woman, his mouth on Jaella as they kissed.

BAGNOBAK TANGO

But it wasn't the woman's flesh that excited Rayné, it was imagining that he was the one Snow was touching. He could see it in the boy's hungry expression, feel it in the lust coming off of Rayné. The young warrior's need was a rare perfume of the soul meant to entice, to him in the manner of a bee to a flower.

But Raené was dead which was a good thing for Rayné or he'd have lost his soul already and become nothing but flesh for the Prince's use.

Flesh to be used...

Flesh Snow could use as he pleased if he would set aside his own qualms and take what was offered.

Snow trembled at the thought. He could make Rayné his, bend him to his will, subjugate and dominate the boy the way his own master had dominated him. There were so many things he could do to the young warrior. So many pleasurable things that he could teach the young man.

Other things he could teach to the Sorceress.

Dark pleasures that came amid screaming agony.

He held out his hand to Rayné and, as if under a spell he could not resist the young warrior walked toward them moving into the circle of Snow's embrace. He kissed his master's Avatar and felt the kiss returned eagerly, the boy pressing himself tightly to Snow. The Immortal felt the firmness of an erect cock pressing his thigh proving just how much Rayné wanted him.

He could smell the muskiness of female arousal.

They could be his, irrevocably.

The temptation strengthened as he felt Rayné rub his erection against Snow's thigh, heard Rayné's whimper of, "Please," and felt Jaella's breasts press tight to his chest.

"No!" he shoved them both aside, shook himself and fought the seductive touch of the midnight desires that plagued him. Haunted him with his own screams, his own tormented dreams of pleasure gained through the agony of having his soul torn, his flesh violated by Raené his lover and tormentor.

When he dared to look at them again they both wore confusion on their faces, in their eyes until their gazes found something in his own expression.

Jaella took a half step away, a trace of fear showing.

And Rayné, doomed Avatar, removed his clothing and came to him. He looked up at Snow unafraid. His arms went around Snow's neck and Rayné lifted himself to wrap his strong legs around Snow's hips offering

MICHAEL BARNETTE

himself as the sacrifice and to the darkness inside the Lord of the Coldlands.

Snow closed his eyes.

Death magic.

Raené had used it in conjunction with sex to create a blend of magical energies greater than could be accomplished by one means alone.

A death released a great deal of power.

A death during sex released exponentially greater energy.

Add blood to the mix and it created so much magical energy no human could hope to contain it, or fully control it.

Such power was something only a demon could use.

Or a very strong Immortal tainted by a demon's evil nature.

An Immortal like Snow.

"You don't know what you're offering."

"Yes I do. I'm trying to save the world, and I'm willing to die if that's what it takes." Rayné replied.

"Oh gods...oh gods..." Snow moaned it out, a litany he'd repeated when Raené had first taken him in pleasure.

Snow had screamed it when he'd first learned that there was pain greater than any flesh could experience. The Prince showing him what death was first hand by draining Snow's soul to the point where he could have died.

Then he'd given it all back, and more, almost killing him a second time with the intense agony of pleasure that being given a taste of demonic power created in human flesh.

That had been the last time he'd called on the gods because he knew they either didn't exist, or couldn't hear him.

Or perhaps they just didn't care.

"Shhh..." Rayné murmured, his lips touching Snow's in a tender kiss. "I accepted my fate long before you arrived. If I have to die, then let me die for a cause."

"Rayné no! Don't do this," Jaella called, but she came no closer to the pair of them.

Snow shook his head. "No. I...no..." He wouldn't do this. Couldn't do it. He'd be one step closer to becoming a true demon if he did such a horrible thing. He stared at the boy's face. Such beauty.

So much like his former master.

A master who'd been a demon of lust.

BAGNOBAK TANGO

A demon he'd killed with his own power.

With sex.

Lips touched his, the kiss gentle, soothing.

"Isn't there some other way?" he heard Jaella ask.

Some other way...

They needed the power of a death. Of the blood and pleasure, of the terrible sacrifice Rayné was willing to make for them to defeat Guardaaz.

And there had to be another way to accomplish it other than destroying the boy.

He wrapped his arms around Rayné and kissed him, holding the fragile mortal flesh in his arms, feeling the brightness of the soul housed inside it.

A brightness marred by a smudge of something inhuman, of something not of this world.

Demon-tainted.

Ice sheathed his cock and he gripped Rayné's hips, altering the angle of the young warrior's body, slipping inside the welcoming embrace of warmer flesh.

Flesh that chilled quickly as Rayné moaned in pleasure and ebon fog shrouded them from view.

He thrust and bucked his hips, hearing Rayné's gasping cries of pleasure, feeling the young warrior react to the penetration and his deep thrusts.

Snow took them to the ground, laying Rayné down in a bed of freezing softness, his cock sliding in and out of the Avatar. It felt so good, that joining. So right. But what he was contemplating, the thing he was considering could go so very wrong he hesitated.

Rayné's passion bright gaze locked on his, the boy holding him tightly. "Do it, Snow. It's the only way."

He lowered his head, teeth seeking flesh. He didn't have the almost fangs that marked his master as something not human—as if the violet eyes and heart's blood color of his hair hadn't done so—but he was able to break the skin easily enough.

He sucked, swallowed, trembled at the tiny flare of energy that surged through his own flesh from the fluid of life, sending sparks to his balls, through his cock, to his demon-warped soul.

Rayné's whole body reacted, the warrior groaning in ecstasy, hips bucking hard to the motion of Snow's thrusts and the flow of blood that was taking his life.

MICHAEL BARNETTE

Snow felt the boy's pleasure, noticing that there was little of the pain he'd experienced when Raené had chosen to do this very thing to him. It was a reassurance that Rayné had no second thoughts, no doubts.

It gave Snow no reason not to take what was offered...to a point.

The Lord of the Coldlands swallowed again, and again, taking life with the blood. Accepting Rayné's sacrifice. He felt a quiver of desire, unholy joy, pass through his body and he sucked and swallowed faster as he drove his cock into the willing body.

Willing flesh.

His to use.

His to *kill*.

Snow groaned and forgot his true intention, forgot he wasn't a demon, didn't really want to kill the boy under him. The taint of evil in him grew, strengthened. Thrived.

A delight of wickedness, a joy of malevolence filled him, lustful, lascivious thoughts flowed through his mind, rising out of the miasma of demonic contamination in his soul.

He could kill the boy. Take his life, his soul, animate the body with a tiny fragment of his own soul.

Make the flesh his animate doll, a plaything for his every whim, his every carnal need.

Snow reached out with the magic he'd taken from Raené and latched on to the boy's soul, heard the young warrior crying out, lost to the intense sensations ripping through him, heralding impending orgasm, looming death. Snow sucked more blood, swallowing, adding to the ecstasy of dying. Snow's deep driven cock, surging into the warrior, a distraction from the pain that made killing a human effortless.

He gripped Rayné tighter and started to draw life from him, sucking the Avatar's soul away.

He groaned, his own pleasure, the sensations a seduction of the darker half of human nature, the entirety of what formed a demon's heart, its warped and twisted soul.

Willingly given, Rayné's soul tasted better than the finest wine.

Better than the most impassioned sexual union.

Finer than the most exotic and flavorful meal he'd ever consumed.

Seductive as blackest sin itself.

His cock thrust and retreated in and out of Rayné, rough, fast as the lust overcame the last trace of Snow's reason, the man becoming more demon than human.

BAGNOBARK TANGO

The pleasure was intense. Aiding to draw the warrior's soul from his body.

Jaella stepped closer, eyes wide with horror. "Please don't do this," She moved even closer, touched Snow's hand where it gripped her cousin's hip. Frost coated her fingers and she recoiled from the cold.

"Damn you, I didn't want this. You don't need to do this!" she shouted and raised her hand to cast a spell, wanting to save her kinsman.

Rayné trembled in Snow's grasp, eyes gone glassy, unfocused. But he was aware of what was happening. "No, Jaella...this is....what has to be..."

Snow knew she was there, but he didn't care. Rayné's body and soul belonged to him, and for the moment that was everything to him.

Snow thrust harder, increased the pace, the pleasure and the stolen energy of the Avatar's soul an enticing blend of ecstasy he hadn't experienced in quite this way.

He sucked on the soul savoring it, enjoying the unholy bliss of flesh and feeding that elicited moaning cries of passion as the Avatar neared orgasm.

An orgasm that would yield ultimate satisfaction for Snow as he consumed a life, took a soul and devoured it. A sweet morsel that would leave dead meat of no use to anyone.

He looked into wide violet eyes.

His master's eyes.

Glassy. Dying.

The way they'd been the night he'd murdered Raené.

Rayné whimpered, his body arched as cum spattered Snow's belly and froze. The body of Raené's Avatar going limp, dying...

Not the Prince himself.

Raené's Avatar was dying.

Rayné was dying.

And that wasn't Snow's intention. He didn't want Rayné—fearless and unbearably beautiful Rayné—to die.

Self-loathing and the horror of what he was doing to another living thing blazed across Snow's senses. He gathered Rayné closer, kissed the boy's honey and cinnamon mouth finding it even sweeter with the Avatar so close to death. He stood, the boy cradled in his arms, energy draining into him, the last trickle of life seeping into Snow from the dying warrior.

MICHAEL BARNETTE

Temptation. The demonic corruption in his soul whispering, urging him to take the death, savor the power that ending a life would give him.

He shook himself, fighting, wanting to save Rayné from what he'd almost done.

Snow had ended a lot of lives. Human and demon both.

And this wasn't a life he wanted to take.

This wasn't his former master, it was a boy, a boy he loved and had no reason, nor any real desire to kill.

Revulsion and guilt slammed through Snow and he stared at the young warrior, seeing the bluish color of Rayné's lips, death reaching for the Avatar.

He felt the Rayné's soul wrapped in his own flesh, quietly accepting what had happened. His death for the life of his world. And end of one life to save thousands.

A death Snow had caused.

The Immortal gave a horrified moan.

He'd killed what he'd loved.

But this time he hadn't killed a demon.

He'd murdered a boy.

* * * *

Rayné went tumbling limp as a corpse to the ground and Snow, pale as his name, covered in frost and crackling ice, staggered away, eyes ebon as his own tainted soul. Heavy mist, black as foulest sin, swirled around the Immortal. A roar, like that of a wounded beast, came from Snow. A sound loud enough to send the horses bucking, fighting their lines and hobbles and cause the Maidens to reach for weapons and turn their gazes toward the sound.

Jaella caught her cousin up in a gentle embrace, but she was watching Snow as the shape of some strange reptilian thing formed around him. A phantom of half-seen whiteness amid the inky mist. A creature with a long sinuous neck, whipping tail, glittering icy scales and wings superimposed over the Lord of the Coldlands. The creature's head arched over its ridged spine, wings raised high, the tail lifted high as if the beast were suffering terrible agony.

Chains of ice, mist and something that looked to be iron were bound around the strange beast, holding it in check. Preventing it from gaining freedom. But what the creature was, or why it was bound, Jaella didn't know.

BAGNOBARK TANGO

In an instant the vision of the thing was gone leaving nothing but the Immortal himself on his knees hunched forward into a ball. Thick ice covered him and he was unmoving. A statue of carved snow and ice. A thing no more alive than the frozen water crystallized around him.

Power had a price.

And it appeared that both Rayné and Snow were paying. Rayné had paid with his life, but what price Snow was paying, Jaella couldn't begin to guess.

The Immortal was just standing there, staring at the failing body in her arms.

She touched Rayné's face, smoothed the dark red hair from unseeing eyes.

He was barely breathing. And his heart beat so slowly she had trouble finding any pulse.

It didn't matter. The body lived on, but even his flesh would die with no soul to house.

She'd been stupid to trust anything that had the power of a demon. Even more of a fool to love something like Snow.

Rayné meant more to her than anyone ever could.

And now he was dying.

"You bastard! You told me you wouldn't hurt him! You said you didn't need his life to beat Guardaaz." Her cheeks felt wet and she wondered when she'd started crying.

Snow was rocking slowly, staring at nothing, gasping for breath. He showed no sign of hearing her, or seeing anything but what lay within himself.

"Rayné," she murmured, touching a cheek gone cold and stiff as if he were already dead.

Tears spilled onto his cheeks and froze in small crystal droplets.

She heard voices. The Maidens murmuring, scared, a few of them angry, talking about killing Snow for what he'd done.

But that wouldn't bring her kinsman back, and it wouldn't leave them anyone able to kill Guardaaz.

A hand touched her shoulder. Cold as ice. Strong fingers brushing her bare skin.

"You've killed him."

"No. Not quite," Snow refuted as he knelt beside her and reached for Rayné.

"So you've come to finish what you started? Is that it?"

MICHAEL BARNETTE

"No. Let me have him."

She stubbornly held on to her cousin's body. "Leave us alone. Go hoard your power for the fight with Guardiaaz!"

He took her by the shoulders and shook her, "Fool! I'm trying to return his soul! Now let me have him!"

She stared, and he pulled Rayné from her arms, drew him close.

The expression on his face was so tender, so full of compassion and desire, it would have been easy to mistake what Snow was feeling might be love.

She refused to believe that.

Not of a demon.

Not of a demon-tainted Immortal.

Snow kissed Rayné, holding him gently as the ice formed over them, glittering like finest crystal in the flickering firelight.

Rayné drew a deep, sighing breath, his violet eyes opened and he raised his arms to wind them around Snow's neck. Color returned to his cheeks and he took a deep breath.

Jaella stared in shock when Rayné's cock went hard and a soft whimper of need came from him.

If he was aware of what had happened she would have expected Rayné to fight Snow, to make a bid to escape the Immortal's hold. But Rayné showed no fear, no desire to escape from the Lord of the Coldlands, or the lingering kiss. His reaction was just the opposite. Instead of trying to flee from Snow, he responded with eagerness to the man's kiss.

"I didn't mean lose control. I never meant to kill you," Snow whispered.

"But that was what I offered."

Snow caressed Rayné's cheek the way a man in love might. But Jaella couldn't believe that. Didn't want to believe it.

Snow had almost killed her poor cousin. That wasn't the act of a man in love.

It was the action of a demon.

But he returned Rayné's soul, didn't he?

That was something no real demon would do.

Jaella wasn't sure it was something a demon could do either.

Her cousin was caressing Snow's face, a bemused expression softening Rayné's expression into the appearance of an innocent child.

BAGNOBAK TANGO

Jaella didn't think there was much of innocence left in her kinsman. Not after what had just happened.

"Has it helped you?" Rayné questioned, his fingers brushing along Snow's lips, the man's expression blissful, eyes half closed, visage showing he was as bewildered as Rayné.

"Yes."

"Then I'm happy," Rayné replied as he kissed Snow's jaw, lips moving down the big man's throat, his hands stroking the broad shoulders.

She couldn't believe her kinsman could touch Snow, could even want the man after what had happened. But his touch, the stiffness of his cock was evidence that he wanted Snow.

The Immortal wanted him as well if the rigidity of his cock was any indication.

"Rayné, you can't be serious. He almost killed you!"

"It was what I wanted, Jaella. And it was what he needed." He smiled at her, held out a hand. "Join us. Make love with him. Guardaaz must be faced and defeated and that will take magic. Magic we can weave out of pleasure..." he caught Snow's bottom lips with his teeth, nipped and let go, "...and a bit of pain."

The startled look Snow gave Rayné when her cousin bit him was almost enough to make her laugh. She was still too upset and unable to fully comprehend how Rayné could take what had almost happened to him with such calm acceptance to voice her mirth.

Still, Rayné *had* gone to Snow willingly offering up his life and his very soul to Snow if it would help them defeat Guardaaz.

If Guardaaz wasn't killed their whole world was as good as dead because the demon would transform it into a Realm to suit himself.

And she didn't think Gaurdaaz would be amenable to returning any soul he'd taken.

She glanced around at the unhealthy growth, at the dust dry ground beneath them. Everything he'd touched had been altered, changed to suit the sort of thing he was: a demon of destruction.

It would be a world of death.

Nothing she knew or loved would survive if Guardaaz wasn't stopped, and he had to be stopped.

Even if it meant that she and Rayné must die.

She understood it at the intellectual level, but her heart didn't want to accept it.

MICHAEL BARNETTE

That was the difference between she and Rayné. He could accept that he might have to die to save what remained of their people.

She hadn't. Not yet.

"Jaella?"

"I love you, Rayné."

"I love you too, kinswoman of mine."

Jaella took her cousin's hand and crawled closer to Snow who kissed her, his coldness seeping into Jaella the way soothing oil soaked into wind-burned skin. She shivered as the chill spread through her to coil in her belly and turn to a bonfire of lust.

Demonic power. It had to be the reason. She'd never felt for anyone the way she felt for Snow. Never wanted any man—or woman—the way she wanted him.

A hand moved to her breast, touching, a thumb brushing across the hard nipple heated her, but when she looked down there was ice on her breast, and it was Rayné's fingers touching her.

She stared at her cousin, shocked speechless as he leaned closer to her and kissed her, sending more heat to her belly. She felt her juices flowing, could smell her own arousal.

The Immortal lay down where they were, and Jaella noticed that the ground beneath them was coated in a sheet of ice. Rayné was on top of Snow, impaled on Snow's cock and riding him slowly.

Snow reached for her and she let him guide her. She ended up straddling the man's head, face to face with Rayné, a cold wetness sliding into her overheated slit. She groaned and was startled when her cry was cut off by a mouth that tasted of rare spice and honey.

Rayné was kissing her as if it were the most natural thing in the world for him to do. Her man loving cousin, touching her had surprised her, but his kiss was even more of a shock.

Snow's tongue delved into her depths, his hands gripping her thighs to hold her still, frost covered her but she hardly felt it. Not when her cousin, her beautiful *homosexual* cousin whom she'd loved since childhood was cupping her breasts in his hands, fondling them and drawing a groan of pleasure from her.

He bent down, licked a nipple, left a thin coating of ice behind. Ice that smelled of cinnamon.

She could feel the magic rising with their pleasure. Tingling with the flow of energies they were creating, Rayné's hands on her breasts, Snow's tongue slipping inside of her, lapping and teasing. They'd hardly

BAGNOBAK TANGO

begun and already she could feel the power crackling in the mist drenched air, humming on her skin.

So far from the Gate, yet she was aware of it, felt the magical emanations coming from it as if they were beside it, pulling more energies from it, from the land beyond the Gate: the Coldlands.

Power coiled around them, coiled inside her.

She moaned. Snow's tongue found the nub of her clit, thrust against it and she rocked to the motion.

When she looked at Rayné his eyes were glowing bright as sun-touched gems. He arched his back, rocking on the impalement of Snow's cock, a beatific smile curling his mouth.

So sexy.

So desirable.

Untouchable.

Until now.

She reached for him intending to have more of him while he was amenable to her. She pulled him close and kissed his lips, tongue darting in for more of the honeyed taste of him, the spicy flavor of him.

Rayné. Her beautiful, no longer innocent Rayné.

He gripped her breasts, thumbs brushing over pebbled nipples and she whimpered, pressing herself into his hands, leaning into the kiss while he rode Snow's cock. A low groan vibrated through her soaked pussy, Snow's voice rumbling through her lower body, adding another layer to the strange pleasure. Rayné's taste, his touch, Snow's mouth and voice.

Magic and lust mingling.

Raené's magic.

Tears blurred her eyes as she deepened the kiss. Her beloved kinsman, the Immortal loving her. Pleasuring her.

It was everything she could want, yet it wasn't everything she wanted.

She wanted this to be forever. Wanted Snow to stay with them. Wanted Rayné to always be the way he was now. Loving her. Needing her.

But it was just the magic binding them together for a common goal.

When Guardaaz was dead, when this was over, it would come to an end.

Rayné would no longer want her.

Snow would leave.

MICHAEL BARNETTE

And she'd be a Sorceress with a broken world to repair.
Alone.

Rayné broke the kiss, touched her cheek and wiped away a tear. He brought his finger to his lips, licked away the salty frost, leaned in to kiss the rest away, and murmured, "You're too beautiful for tears."

She thought she'd lost her mind. Slipped into a dream.
Rayné calling her...beautiful?

He kissed her, lips light as the snow flakes drifting around them and just as cold. She took his head between her hands, kissed him as Snow's tongue fucked her fast and hard. But she wanted more. Wanted the stiff rod of Rayné's flesh moving inside her.

And it was as if both of them heard her thoughts.

She found herself down on her back, Rayné between her thighs, Snow looking at her from over her kinsman's shoulder.

And the Immortal was grinning.

* * * *

Rayné leaned down and kissed Jaella, tasting her, the flavor reminding him of flowers, slightly bitter and sweet at the same time. He lowered his head, took a nipple in his mouth and sucked. His lips and tongue tingled as some of her energy passed into him. He thrust his cock into her waiting flesh, felt the heat of her and cried out as his chill flesh started to burn.

Hands gripped his hips, a cock invaded his ass and he groaned, trembling as it stroked something inside him that made his vision go white then blood red.

Snow moved inside him, the pace slow, driving his cock into Jaella with each inward stroke, his body swaying between the impalement of Snow's cock and the receptive softness of Jaella's flesh.

Pleasure, so strong he thought he'd pass out from the intensity alternately froze him and burned him as if he were trapped against a bonfire in the middle of a raging blizzard.

He'd nearly died when Snow had taken his soul.

He felt as if the pleasure of what they were doing to him would take his life as surely as Snow almost had just a short time ago.

And he could feel the magical energy, the power they sought building and growing, the weakness lingering in his wounded soul fading until it was healed. And still more energy flowed into him. Dark as night, brighter than moonlight, hotter than desert stones, colder than the biting winter wind.

BAGNOBAK TANGO

He arched as he fucked Jaella, tipped his ass up for Snow's inward stroke. Filled by ice, enclosed by flame.

Don't cum. Don't let yourself cum, Snow's thoughts filled his mind, overriding the sensations.

He couldn't disobey. But he wanted release. Needed to feel his balls release their tension through his throbbing cock. Wanted to feel Jaella as she accepted his seed, came with him. And he needed to feel Snow grip him painfully tight as the Immortal exploded into his willing body.

So willing.

Body and soul he was Snow's and he knew it, accepted that he would let himself be slave to such a perfect master.

If Snow would just ask, demand, if he'd need him that much.

He gasped, the subzero burn tearing through him.

He opened his eyes.

Flaming emeralds regarded him from a face more beautiful than any goddess ever born. Red hair coiled around his forearms in a gentle embrace, binding him as surely as any chains.

Snow's cock stilled, an arm going around his hips, keeping him from moving. The man kissing his spine, his shoulders, nipping at the nape of his neck, Jaella's mouth on his, their tongues sliding, fire and ice. Honey, spice and bitter flowers.

Heat filled him, ice enclosed him.

Burning and freezing.

Power.

The magic weaving a spell of lust between them.

A spell formed from the threads of inhuman passion and bright ice from Snow. Greenness and pastel colors, spring flowers flowing from Jaella. Strong threads of amethyst and deepest red. Jewels and blood. Those were from him.

And Rayné felt something else.

Something that came from all three of them.

A pale thread of moonlight spinning in the web of power.

The light of a lover's moon.

Silver and pure.

He heard Jaella gasp.

Heard Snow whisper words in a language he didn't know.

Snow's cock drove into him in a flash of ecstasy so intense it wiped away the vision. But it didn't erase the memory of what he'd seen.

* * * *

MICHAEL BARNETTE

It couldn't be. But he'd seen it.

And so had Rayné. Snow could see the wonderment in the young warrior eyes, on the exquisite perfection of his face.

The magic weaving around them had held the silver thread of love. Thin and fragile but there.

He didn't want to think about it.

Didn't dare think about it.

He gripped the narrow hips and concentrated on fucking Rayné. Focused on moving his cock into the glory of such enjoyable flesh. That and the pleasure flushed face of the Sorceress became the narrow scope of his world.

And the feeling coming from his cock.

So good.

So perfect.

Magic sang in the air, the fog so thick that no light from outside the tiny Realm they were creating could enter. The mist, normally black, had turned a pale shade of orchid unlike anything Snow had ever seen. Not even the Prince had evinced such a strange color in his power.

Jaella was crying out in pleasure.

Rayné whimpered with each thrust of Snow's cock, gasped as he sank into Jaella, the power centering on him, passing through him with each motion, each give and take.

It took every bit of Snow's willpower to stop, to withdraw his aching cock from the young warrior's tightness, but he managed, the Avatar whimpering at the loss, reaching for him.

He bodily picked Rayné up and moved him, kissing him hungrily, devouring the sweetness of his mouth.

Jaella's hands closed on Snow's cock. "Fill me, fuck me," she begged. "I need a cock in me."

The Immortal smiled and lay Rayné in the mound of snow that was their bed. "You'll be filled soon, Sorceress. Be patient."

He lifted Jaella into his arms, his cock slipping into her waiting heat. He looked down at Rayné and then straddled the smaller man, impaling himself on Rayné's erection with a pleased groan. The Avatar's violet eyes went wide, a low moan coming from him as he sank into Snow's body.

Jaella rested her feet on the ground and Snow arched his back slightly trying for a better angle.

Rayné's hands gripped Jaella's waist.

BAGNOBAK TANGO

"Good Goddess," Jaella groaned as the three of them began to move, their pace slowed by the necessity of their position.

It felt good to have a cock inside him after so long, and Snow sighed from the sensation of the prick gliding over the spot inside him. Coupled with the heat around his cock, he was in a state of bliss.

But their position didn't lend itself to orgasm, and that was the whole idea. To sustain what they were doing without a climax that would release the energy they'd generated.

He rocked and moved with his lovers taking pleasure, the magic intensifying filling him, spilling through his contact with the Sorceress and the Avatar, coming back to him even stronger to be returned to them.

Spiraling upward.

Spinning and growing.

He moaned, body trying to rebel, mind restraining flesh, flesh crying out for an end, a dénouement of passion.

Rayné was whimpering, ready to cum.

Jaella was gasping, crying for release.

They'd had enough.

The magical energies spun around them, black lightning crackling amid the violet mist.

Shuddering, he rose up off of Rayné's cock, lay Jaella down on their frozen bed, both of them moaning at the loss of contact, the ending of the pleasure.

But it wasn't over yet.

Not quite.

He lay down, gathered Rayné to himself, pulling the young warrior into his lap the avatar groaning as his cock filled him.

Jaella returned to her place over his face and he attacked her clit at the same time he drove himself into Rayné. He wrapped his magic around them, the mist greying, bolts of energy ripping through the mist, as it grew even darker.

He took them both hard and fast, the rapid rise in power crashing around them, a tempest unleashed as the three of them screamed out their pleasure together.

* * * *

Outside the barrier that contained the trio, the Maidens clung to one another as the trees around them howled, their roots whipping under the ground, their branches crashing as if they were attempting to escape.

MICHAEL BARNETTE

The hair on the Maiden's heads was moving yet there was no wind, and their mounts stood shivering and lathered as if they'd been going full out for hours though none of them had moved since their arrival.

Above them the sky had changed from night's darkness to a rich, glowing violet in which falling stars flashed and fell in silver streamers.

And where the three were a seething barrier of intense brilliance spilled light across their encampment forcing the Maidens to turn away or risk going blind.

The wall of light exploded, brighter than a shattered star and the world went dark.

When the women were able to see again the first thing they were able to make out in the dim light of their campfire were the trees.

Trees covered in lush green leaves, surrounded by thick grass.

And where the stand of unwholesome berry bushes had stood there was now a bramble of ripe berries prized for their taste.

Ophae got to her feet and went to see where the Sorceress and the men were. She found Jaella and Rayné curled asleep, the Lord of the Coldlands cradling them. All three were asleep. At least she thought they were, though she wasn't sure Lord Snow actually slept. He did have his eyes closed, and there was a contented expression on his normally stern face.

It was a touching sight, and disturbing at the same time because they were all emitting a faint glow. Soft, violet light that sparked and crackled as tongues of black flame danced round them.

Magic. Powerful magical emanations were still streaming off of them and she had to dart aside when a streamer of chill mist flowed toward her.

She returned to the other Maidens.

"I'm not sure what might happen if any of us touches them or gets too close right now, so it's best we stay well clear of them."

The Maidens nodded their agreement, and as a group they moved their bedding and the horses just a little farther from the trio: Immortal, Sorceress and Avatar.

* * * *

The sun rose in the morning as it had done for years beyond anyone's counting. But that was where the semblance to normalcy ended. The sun that rose was the color of blood, and the sky, orange tinged by dawn, stayed that color.

BAGNOBAK TANGO

Sorceress, Avatar and Immortal stared at the sky and none of them were pleased by what they saw. Such change proved that their enemy, Guardaaz the Destroyer, was gaining power, his grasp on their Realm tightening.

"He knows we're coming, doesn't he?"

"He knows," Snow agreed as he slipped his arm around the woman's waist, pulling her close and giving her a gentle squeeze of reassurance.

"Do we have any chance of killing him?" the young warrior questioned as Snow drew him close to his other side, the caressing the silken skin that lay under both hands.

Dark flame danced over his fingers, answered by silver white flickers of magical fire where he touched Jaella, and by wisps of pale orchid mist that flowed cool over his hand from Rayné.

"A chance, yes," Snow gave them his honest reply. "But it will depend on what we have to fight before we reach his Fortress."

"Do you think he'll send some of the Horde?"

Snow looked at the greenery surrounding them. Already it was showing signs of blight, the leaves covered with yellow blotches, berries over ripe and falling to rot on the ground. "I'd just about guarantee he will."

Jaella pulled out of his embrace and looked up at him, "The sooner we go, the sooner we'll reach his lair."

He nodded and the three of them joined the Maidens who'd already broken camp and waited for them.

They mounted up and rode, the small area of green growing things was soon left behind to revert to the state that they'd found it in: warped by the taint of Guardaaz's presence in this Realm.

And the closer they got to the Fortress the worse the land looked.

Two hours after they started out, the might of the demon became even more apparent as one of the horses ridden by a Maiden began to change, its mane falling out, barbs sprouting from its tail.

They stopped and Snow examined the beast. "I can turn it to ice, but changing it back is beyond my abilities," he told the Sorceress, Avatar and the Maidens gathered around him.

The horse was sweating, shivering, eyes rolling wild with terror as the transmutation continued.

Jaella set her hand to the poor animal and whispered an invocation to the Goddess of the Moon.

MICHAEL BARNETTE

Silvery light spread outward from where Jaella's hand rested on the beast. The animal's distress eased as the light spread, but the changes remained, the barbs growing from the horse's tail were unaffected. She'd stopped the change, but could not reverse the alteration.

"Can you do something to keep the demon's power from changing the rest of the horses?" Claria asked. "Without the horses we won't be able to get very far."

"I could, but I'm not sure using so much power to save our poor beasts will be advisable," Jaella was frank with her answer.

"But we need the horses," Seena whined, her gaze going to the other Maidens for support of her words.

Snow ran his hand down the neck of the magically altered horse. The changed seemed to be physical, it's nature unaltered, but they couldn't risk that the other animals might warp into things that would attack them.

"Do what you can to ensure they remain as they are, Jaella. Take some of the energy you need from Rayné. He has no magic of his own to call upon, so what he carries is wasted if not tapped for our purposes."

Jaella reached her hand to Rayné and he took it, though he seemed reluctant.

Jaella spun a charm to protect each horse.

"If they've no protection from the demon, you might want to extend the protection to your friends," Snow advised her when she was done with their mounts.

Jaella's shock at the idea was easy enough for him to read.

"Can he do that if they are unwilling?"

Snow studied the gathered women. "I don't know, but do we want to take that sort of a chance?"

"No."

It took longer to weave a protection for the women, and at the end Rayné was trembling and weak, drained by the spells.

Snow pulled the young warrior close and let some of his own energy flow into the Avatar, but Rayné had other ideas. He dropped to his knees and pulled Snow's cock into his mouth. His cock went hard and he groaned as the Avatar pleased him.

But they didn't have time for a prolonged gathering of power.

Snow stopped what Rayné had begun, extricating his own wanting flesh from the mouth wrapped around it.

BAGNOBAK TANGO

"We don't have time," he told Rayné. "Every second we waste is another second for Guardaaz to gain a tighter hold."

"And if we reach him with no energy for magic, what then?" Jaella asked. "Rayné is right, Snow. We're both depleted."

He considered her words, reached out and gauged the energies within the Sorceress. Low. Too low considering the battle ahead of them.

His garments vanished and he took both of them to the ground with him, Jaella straddling his face, Rayné impaled on his aching cock.

He took both of them hard and fast, driving them mercilessly toward climax, the storm of mist and crackling flame rising around them so quickly it took the Maidens by surprise. They retreated with the protected horses as the Immortal, the Sorceress and the Avatar spun a web of power that caused wildflowers to burst to life in the dusty grey soil.

When the power-storm died Snow was already on his feet, moving to his horse and this time no clothing formed to cover his magnificent body.

A body they looked at in admiration, but none of them dared to touch.

Rayné and Jaella went to their mounts, the Sorceress well satisfied, the Avatar dazed, trembling and erect beneath the clinging fabric of his pants. Jaella's skin carried a faint luminescence, while Rayné's eyes glittered bright as amethysts.

"Now can we go?" Snow asked, irritable, his cock aching with the need for release which he'd denied himself and Rayné though Jaella had gotten what she wanted: climax and power both.

"Yes," Jaella agreed. "We can go."

In the company of the Maidens the three of them rode toward the towering edifice that was the Fortress of Guardaaz.

The sunlight changed the walls to the color of drying blood.

CHAPTER FIVE

The walls of the Fortress towered above them, rising from the barren, dusty plane as if the demon intended to defy the sun itself with his construction. There wasn't a single breach in the walls other than one massive doorway they'd located on the southern side where they presently stood. The doors, like the rest of the huge construction were blacker than a starless night and seemed to devour even the light of the mid-day sun.

"This is it," Jaella stated as they dismounted. It had taken them the better part of the morning just to ride around the circumference of the huge building and their horses were tired.

"So it appears," Snow agreed as he swung down from his mount.

Rayné dropped to the ground from the back of his horse and cast his gaze on the immense doors. They were three times as tall as the huge Immortal, and there was no telling how thick they might be, nor how heavy as they appeared to be fashioned of the same stone that formed the walls of the Fortress itself.

For that matter they might not even really *be* doors.

"How can we open those?" he asked.

Snow just smiled and walked forward. He set his hands to the huge portals, their height dwarfing even his inhumanly tall frame. Massive shoulder muscles bunched and Snow pushed.

The doors groaned, but didn't move.

Snow stepped back, looked upward, and actually smiled.

"They're locked. Do you think he's afraid of us?" he asked, his tone full of mocking amusement.

"I FEAR NO MORTAL BEING!" a voice like thunder rolled out from the building, echoing like the roar of an avalanche across the barren plane.

This sound was so loud that Rayné was staggered by it and Jaella was forced to cover her ears with her hands. Sorceress and Avatar or not,

BAGNOBAK TANGO

All three horses shrilled their terror and bolted, running from the terrible noise.

Rayné tried to go after them but it was already too late. The ground opened up in a cloud of dust and the terrified screams of the horses came to them over the echoes of the demon's voice. An instant later the gaping rift in the ground closed like a mouth around a meal, the grating, grinding of stone and an upwelling of dust the only thing to mark the end of their loyal beasts.

Snow stood unmoved by the paltry display, his face a mask of contempt, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. If the loss of their steeds perturbed him he showed no sign of it. He lifted his head, nostrils expanding as if he caught a scent on the wind. Smiling Snow replied to the demon's assertion in a normal conversational tone. "I smell fear in the air. Such an enticing aroma. You wear it well, Guardaaz."

From inside the edifice there was a loud, rumbling noise that resembled the roar of a wounded bull magnified several hundred times over. The ground beneath their feet shook.

Rayné collapsed to his knees under the onslaught of sound, and Jaella staggered, as the ground pitched worse than a storm tossed ship beneath their feet.

"Such theatrics. Do you really think that will impress me or frighten the Sorceress and Avatar away?" Snow mocked, the small space beneath his own feet was steady beneath a glittering layer of ice.

The bull's bellow was replaced by a sound that could have been the voices of a million damned souls, or simply another effort by the demon to instill fear.

Whatever it was, again Snow was unaffected. Jaella grabbed Rayné and the two stumbled closer to the Lord of the Coldlands, seeking his protection from the demon's wrath.

"THEN ENTER MY DOMAIN AT YOUR OWN PERIL!"

"Oh for the sake of the gods..." Snow muttered, "can you leave off the mightier than thou posturing and let's just get on with this? You're boring the piss out of me!"

Another enraged shout reverberated through the air and shook the ground beneath them, but this time it had no effect on either Rayné nor Jaella as they were within Snow's small area of influence and his power protected them.

"You truly do not fear him?" Jaella asked in a whisper.

MICHAEL BARNETTE

Snow looked at her. "Fear is the best weapon any demon has because it comes from inside yourself. Don't help him defeat you and you'll stand a better chance of survival."

She nodded and Snow saw her cast a glance in Rayné's direction. He knew she was hoping Rayné's experience at the hands of the Horde hadn't rattled the young warrior's courage too much. If he lost it in the Fortress of Guardaaz he was as good as dead.

She might doubt her kinsman, but Snow had no such worry. Rayné was stronger than his slim body and fragile beauty made him appear. He was every bit the Prince of the Coldland's progeny.

"Promise me you'll make love to me again when this is all over, Snow," Rayné pleaded as he put a hand on Snow's arm, fingers gripping tight.

The plea was almost enough to make him want to lay the boy down and fuck him right then and there. He had to stop himself from bending down to kiss Rayné. The growing desire, the need to possess the boy was strengthening, becoming more urgent, more desperate with every touch, every plea that Rayné made.

Snow pushed aside the weakness of yearning, the loneliness of a barren existence in a Realm composed of ice.

Ice that had to reclaim his own heart before he did something stupid. Before he whispered words that would change everything.

"When this is over I'll be leaving," Snow replied. He still hadn't decided what he was going to do regarding the Sorceress and the Avatar. He could leave them to their lives, kill them—gods, gods, no not that again, killing what he loved, he just couldn't do it, wouldn't do it—and that left only the option of taking them through the Gate back to the Coldlands.

And if they refused...

He wouldn't think about that.

Not until he'd reached that point in time where he had to choose.

Let them live here.

Or take their lives.

Until then the only thing he needed to focus on was the destruction of Guardaaz...and keeping Rayné and Jaella alive if he could.

"Well I suppose I'll have to find another way for us to get in," Snow commented as he considered exactly how he might be able to breach the doors or walls.

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He'd no more than said that when they heard a grinding, groaning sound.

The huge portals swung slowly inward, opening to admit them, though there was no sign of any motive force, no guards or demons to work the massive portals.

"Ah, he's given us the invitation to enter his domain. How terribly polite," Snow remarked as a few traces of the black mist spun slowly away from him to swirl through the opening and lay down a powdering of frost and a few flakes of snow ahead of them in mimicry of a royal carpet. The sword of ice that was his chosen weapon formed in his fist as he stepped boldly through the doorway with Jaella and Rayné right behind him.

They drew their own swords, nothing but good honest steel as their protection, but having them at his back was a comfort just the same. Brave as his words had been, he wasn't sure they stood much chance against a demon in his own lair.

He'd defeated Raené by guile, not direct conflict. And while other demons had fallen to him in the centuries since then, none had approached the might of Guardaaz, another Prince of demonkind. One fully as powerful as Raené with an entire army of creatures to do his bidding.

After glancing at his companions and giving Rayné a reassuring pat on the shoulder because the young man looked ready to run in terror from the place, Snow led the way in, the Sorceress and Avatar following him.

As Snow moved forward threads of black mist slid around him, forming armor from the same magical ice as the sword he carried.

He paused, glanced back at Jaella and Rayné. "Stay close and watch for anything that might come at us from behind. We can't afford to be taken by surprise."

Rayné snorted softly. "I'd say we can't afford to be taken at all."

Snow nodded. "Good point."

The big man turned around and started down the corridor.

Behind them the door swung slowly closed, blocking the sunlight.

"Let me make a light," Jaella murmured as she sheathed her sword in order to cast her spell.

"No need," Snow told her as his iceblade began to glow with a dim radiance. It wasn't much, and it only lit a short distance ahead of them, and even less space behind them, but it would have to do.

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"We don't want anything brighter than this," Snow explained. "As it is anything out there waiting for us will know where we are long before we see them."

They started across the large entryway, and found that it narrowed into a corridor that was barely as wide as Snow was tall. If it came down to a fight it would be impossible for Snow to get a good swing of his sword. But it would also mean only a limited number of attackers could come at them in such close confines.

Other than their own soft footfalls it was silent as a tomb in the place. Not a sound to be heard, other than their own movements and soft breathing. It was something that Snow noticed immediately but felt there was no reason to mention.

The other two were already scared, and adding to that wouldn't help matters.

They continued to walk along the corridor which neither branched nor turned as they walked.

There was a harsh cast to Snow's features, a frown composed of uneasiness and distrust. No demon's lair he'd ever breeched had been so quiet, shown so few signs of minions or other horrors.

When they reached an intersection Snow stopped, listening for anything that might indicate danger. He waited for any sign of impending resistance, any sound that would mark the stealthy approach of Gaurdaaz's minions.

But there was nothing. No sound. No scent. Not even the magical aura of any demonic creatures nearby.

"What is it?" Jaella asked, her voice a bare whisper that still seemed to echo in the complete silence.

He held up his hand to indicate she should not speak and she frowned at him, but kept quiet.

* * * *

Rayné looked behind them. It was too dark to see more than a few feet back the way they had come, yet he could have sworn he'd seen movement, the faint glint of....something.

"Snow?"

A frown met his query, Snow almost glaring at the sound of his voice. Rayné pointed the way they'd come and saw the Immortal raise a pallid eyebrow, the questioning expression plain to see even in the dim light.

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Rayné, keeping his own silence now, pointed to his eye, then down the corridor hoping the Lord of the Coldlands would understand his meaning.

That Snow did understand was quickly apparent as the glow of his sword winked into nothingness, leaving them blind.

Strong fingers gripped Rayné's shoulder and drew him aside until he was pressed to the damp wall. He felt Snow, unhindered by the lightlessness, move past him. Icy mist flowed over him, a tender caress of frost along his cheek, down his bare arm. A shudder of pent up desire gripped him as the cold seeped into his flesh.

Scared as he was of this place—of his inability to see—just the touch of that magical cloud, Snow's ever-present chill aroused him and took away the fear.

Focus on what you have to do. You can find a way to convince him to stay in this Realm once Guardaaz is dead.

Or maybe you can just go with him through the Gate and live in his Realm. The thought of being fucked night after night by the Lord of the Coldlands stiffened his cock and pulled a whimper of need from his parted lips.

Snow's cock searing him with ice borne passions greater than anything he'd imagined even in his wildest fantasies. Pleasures no human could ever give him. And now was no time for what he craved.

A quick glance down the corridor showed him a scattering of dim lights that flickered on and off. It took only an instant before he realized they weren't lights. They were eyes.

Demon eyes.

Rayné raised his sword as he heard the whisper of Jaella's blade come free of its scabbard.

"Guard my back. I can handle them," Snow stated as his own blade ignited with a cold fire that oozed a banner of black mist as he moved away from the pair of them.

Rayné could clearly see a half dozen demons in the passageway, but Snow didn't appear to be the least intimidated by their numbers.

Rayné watched as the Lord of the Coldlands swung his blade in a short arc, taking the first of the things between neck and shoulder. Foul green slime splashed over the wall and the first of the things died, its flesh frozen solid. It hit the floor and shattered.

The young warrior heard a soft sound behind them and turned to see a gape-mouthed *thing* coming at them from the opposite direction. It was

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a head, two legs and a mass of writhing tentacles and he barely got his sword up in time to block the first lashing appendage, the barbed tip almost striking his face.

The flesh fell to the ground and lay there twisting like a decapitated serpent, the barbs scraping the stone floor, gouging the hard surface.

"Jaella, don't let it touch you. Those barbs will rip the flesh right off our bodies," he warned as he hacked a second tentacle. Bluish goo splattered the wall and the gaping mouth emitted a thin scream of pain, or rage, Rayné didn't really know or care.

Shimmering with a rainbow of light, Jaella's sword darted past Rayné to hack another tentacle from the beast. The light stuck to the wound and the cut length melted into a stain on the floor while the light on the severed end still attached to the monster spread, eating into the beast.

It shrielled and redoubled its efforts to kill them, another mass of tentacles sprouting from its head-body and coming for them.

"Use magic if you can," Jaella told him. "We might not be able to slay it otherwise."

He tried to call up the black mist, but he didn't know how. Forced to rely on steel, he swung his blade and chopped through another pair of tentacles.

Something touched his foot and he glanced down to see that the severed pieces were crawling toward him, the first one already trying to wind around his leg just as a snake would. He kicked and dislodged it, but it quickly began to slither toward him.

"The tentacles can still attack us once they're cut off!" he warned Jaella.

A burst of light washed across the floor and the animate hunks of flesh quivered and smoked but kept coming on.

Black mist poured along the floor and the writhing bits of the thing went still, frozen solid by the mist.

"Stand aside, Rayné, I'll handle this thing."

But he wasn't ready to give up yet. He chopped off another tentacle, saw it fall and freeze on the ground amid the swirling mist bleeding off of Snow.

What good am I? Why did they bring me here? I have no magic and that's what this is, a magical battle.

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He looked at Snow and found the Lord of the Coldlands was raging on, the Immortal driving the demons back. Three were already dead. Frozen and shattered on the floor of the corridor.

More of the flailing tentacles were coming toward them, coming for his face and this time the creature itself was moving, getting closer the shrilling noise growing louder, the mouth gaping wider as though it sought to swallow them whole.

* * * *

Jaella stepped in front of her kinsman, her sword raised until the tip of the blade almost touched the ceiling above them. The blade was still shimmering slightly from the last spell she'd used, but the magic was fading fast and needed to be replenished.

She chose a different spell. "Power of the Goddess Moon, drive back this spawn of Darkness."

The light from her blade brightened and the thing recoiled, cringing from her magic.

She heard the remaining demons fighting with Snow wail and nodded in satisfaction as they too were affected by her spell.

"MOONLIGHT!" she shouted the word and the light of her blade intensified even more.

The tentacled thing scuttled farther away from her, trying to get out of the light. Some of its flesh started to run like hot wax, and a few of the newest tentacles dropped smoking and melting to the stone.

Beside her Rayné advanced on the monster.

"Stay back," she told him, but he didn't listen. His sword flashed in the light and cut through more of the lashing tentacles. They fell smoking to the ground.

Squealing, the thing began to retreat in earnest, scuttling past the junction of the crossing corridors.

Rayné would have followed it, but she grabbed him by the shoulder and stopped his advance.

"Don't."

"Why? It's going to escape."

"Let it but don't move into the open. We don't know what might be lurking in those other passageways."

"She's right," Snow agreed as he joined them. He was spattered in muck from the demons he'd killed and she wrinkled her nose at the stink clinging to him.

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He noticed her reaction and the ice armor covering him sloughed off in a fast melting pile.

"Let's go," he told them and took the lead, pausing in the crossway of the corridors. He sensed...something. She saw him glance down the side passage on their left. "Keep an eye on our backs. There's something else coming our way," he told the pair before striding along after the retreating horror.

The spell on Jaella's blade faded and the gape-mouthed thing charged at them.

Bellowing shrilly a multi-legged pincher armed thing came at them from one of the cross corridors they'd just passed. It looked like a huge scorpion, but instead of a stinger at the end of the horror's tail, it had the head of a lion—or would have if lions were covered in scales the color of blood—that roared as it snapped at her.

She ducked and drove her blade at it, noticing the spell was too faded to do much harm.

But she didn't dare keep using her magic so rapidly. She had to save strength for the battle with Guardaaz because she didn't think even Lord Snow was powerful enough to take on the might of the other demon single-handed.

The fact that he'd brought them along seemed to confirm that he wasn't any more certain of his ability to kill the demon alone than she was.

"Shit," she heard Rayné snarl as he stabbed at the head that was now roaring and snapping at him. The teeth were missing him by little more than the width of the blade he was using to fend them off.

She echoed his curse and slashed at a claw that was trying to get a grip on her body. From the way those claws looked she wasn't sure she'd survive if it closed around her. They were sharp and seemed more than able to cut a human in two.

Her blade collided with the hard outer covering of the pseudo-scorpion only to bounce off of the tough armor. It hadn't even left a notch to show where the steel impacted on the tough shell.

"Normal steel can't hurt this thing," he told her as he dodged the snapping jaws of the lion. His blade skittered across the scales with similar results to her attack on the claw: which was to say none.

The sounds of Snow's fight with the beast of the tentacles showed he wouldn't be able to come to their aid, so she had no recourse but to resort to using her own magic.

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"Mother Moon aid me now!" she cried and her blade's glow brightened as the magic was pulled from her reserves of energy. Reserves that depleted with every spell she cast.

The thing didn't even seem to notice the light, nor did it recoil as the other horrors had as the light touched it.

Rayne was hit by the lion-headed tail and he went down, barely evading the snapping jaws. Jaws that were now dripping a thick black muck that Jaella suspected was pure poison.

She jammed her blade into the thing's eye and the lion roared, almost wrenching the sword from her grip as the tail was drawn back.

She'd wounded the thing, but an instant later the tail was back, snapping and bellowing at her, the eye already restored telling her that her weaker light based magic wasn't going to bring this thing down.

Rayné's cry of pain brought her head around to find him well locked between the pinchers, his eyes full of terror as the claw compressed his ribs.

With no time to waste she spoke a single word and felt the power thrum through her as the spell rippled down her arm and out of her fingertips to impact the limb that was trying to crush her kinsman.

The claw shattered into shards of carapace and flesh and Rayné was released, the Avatar falling to the ground, gasping. Blood ran down his body from the deep cuts the claw had ripped into his flesh.

She raised her hand to cast a second spell, but Snow pushed past her, his iceblade gone, a great battle ax of the same material glittering in his fists.

"Help Rayné, I'll deal with this thing."

A flood of chill mist flowed over her as he moved past and she reached out to gather up the threads of magic it contained, weaving them into a spell to heal her kinsman.

But the wounds were already starting to heal, the black threads of power seeping into his damaged body of their own accord.

Jaella reached him, touched his cheek, "Are you hurt inside?"

He was gasping as if he couldn't draw a full breath.

"Rayné?"

More of the black mist was flowing into him, sinking into his skin, but whether it would fully heal him or not she had no way of knowing.

"Save...your spells...mist is...helping me," Rayné told her. He tried to get to his feet but she stopped him.

"No, rest. You've been badly hurt."

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"I'll be all right."

"Let me be the judge of that," Jaella stated as she started to examine his injuries. She wasn't worried about Snow, the Lord of the Coldlands was more powerful than either of them, and he seemed to have a knack for demonslaying.

* * * *

Snow brought the ax down on the thing, shattering the shell covering its body, grinning with blood-lust as it stumbled, leaving what was left of it open to a killing blow which he took. The thing collapsed, limbs twitching, the tail whipping toward him. He swung the ax in a short arc and removed the lion-head which fell and rolled down the corridor to be lost in the darkness.

He turned to rejoin his lovers as the body fell into a stinking mass of corruption behind him.

The ax in his fist and the icy layer of armor over him fell to the stone floor as he discarded them.

The boy looked bad. Pale and shaking in terror. Snow looked at the steel blade that lay on the floor and frowned. He picked it up and turned it in his hands seeing the notches that the fight with the scorpion-thing had left in the blade. He gave an experimental swing, getting the heft of the blade then he tossed it down the corridor.

Rayné watched it vanish with a stark expression of loss until Snow handed him a blade made from ice. "This will work better for you."

The young warrior took it, "But I can't sustain the magic that made it. Won't this drain your power?"

Snow shook his head. "It will draw its existence from the magic in you. You are still of Raené's blood." He motioned to the mist coming off of him and moving toward the red-haired man, the stuff going directly to his wounds and sinking into them, healing them. "Power knows power, blood knows blood. Keep the sword."

He reached down and pulled Rayné to his feet, gave the terrified young man a deep, exploring kiss that fed him power and fully healed the damage done by the scorpion-thing.

Snow let the boy go, saw wild, lust-burning violet eyes looking up at him with an undeniable hunger that was more than a desire for sex, it was also a desire for more of what Snow had: the power he'd gained from the Prince of the Coldlands.

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For a moment Snow just stood there, regarding the young warrior, Raené's Avatar. He touched the boy's face, felt the chill of skin soft as the petals of a flower.

Desire thrummed through his body, coiling in his groin, a whirlpool of lust ready to pull him down.

He caught himself in time, stepped away and refused to look into eyes that reminded him of things best forgotten.

It was over. Raené was dead.

And the Realms—mortal and otherwise—were better off without him.

"Ready to move on now?"

Rayné nodded.

"Then let's go. We don't know how long these corridors go on."

"What if we never reach him? We didn't bring anything to eat or drink," Jaella stated.

"We'll worry about that if it becomes a problem," Snow told her.

"All right. But I'm getting thirsty."

He frowned. Humans were so fragile, and he forgot that they needed such things because he seldom had anything living around him.

He held out his hand and ice formed in his palm. "Suck on that, it should help."

She took the ice and slipped it into her mouth.

Rayné surprised Snow by reaching out and pulling the Immortal's hand to his mouth. He sucked on a finger, licking a little clinging frost from it and making Snow's balls ache with a fierce need to take the boy right then and there and to hell with Guardaaz and the creatures that were waiting for them out in the darkness.

Instead he let a trickle of power flow into the Avatar, felt Rayné absorbing it the way sand devoured blood...or the way most demons swallowed souls.

He'd almost killed this boy, and now the boy was feeding off of his energy the way the Prince of the Coldlands used to feed from him.

Shuddering he pulled his hand away and started off into the darkness.

"Enough. We've got demons to kill."

* * * *

Rayné followed the Lord of the Coldlands, watching the man's broad back, the way his firm ass tightened, the ripple of his thighs with

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an ache, a hunger that burned hot as molten steel, and cold as hoarfrost in his groin.

His cock was hard. Wanting.

Lust.

Heat in his groin, ice in his veins.

That's all it was, nothing but lust and a need to have a hard cock thrusting into him, giving him the pleasure he wanted more than he wanted food or water. More than he wanted life.

Rayné trembled at the memory of the blinding passion, the otherworldly joy of feeling his soul touched, taken, devoured and he stumbled, his legs gone weak.

Pleasure and power.

His flesh hungered for the touch of the magical mist that bled off the man, sank into his skin and filled him with energy. The joy that left the feeling he could battle armies, the desire to make Snow his....what?

His master?

Snow was already that.

So what was it that the dark corner of his soul wanted if not to be mastered?

But he knew the answer.

It wasn't *mastering* he wanted.

It was being the master that he desired.

Snow's master.

Rayné shivered, but it had nothing to do with the thin layer of ice trying to form over his clothing and everything to do with the image of Snow chained and helpless, on his knees at Rayné's feet.

He wanted that. Wanted to dominate the Immortal, wanted to make him beg for pleasure, beg for release...beg for death.

Rayné shivered at the alienness of the thoughts filling his mind, of the dark passions, the lustful need to force Snow to submit to him.

He wanted Snow to chain *him* and fuck him until he begged for the mercy of release.

He wanted to be the one on his knees at Snow's feet, whimpering for the Immortal's touch.

He didn't want Snow bound and trembling in a paroxysm of lust and terror at his feet. He didn't want to see tears flowing from Snow's eyes.

Those weren't his thoughts.

He knew that the same way he knew the ice trying to form on his skin wasn't because he'd absorbed some of Snow's power.

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It was something else.
Or someone else, invading his mind.
He wanted to warn Snow.
Wanted to tell Jaella that something was wrong with him.
But his tongue wouldn't form the words. His mouth wouldn't work.
His steps faltered, slowed.
And *something* slipped through his mind, a moving shadow, barely felt, unseen but present.
He stopped walking.
Tendrils of mist, black as the darkness beyond Jaella's light flowed around him. Frost caressed his skin, giving pleasure, cooling the heat in his crotch.
He trembled as that unseen *something* filled his mind.
I can give him to you. I can give you Snow and so much more...a voice whispered in his head. You can be what you were meant to be if you just surrender. Just let yourself become what you were meant to be, what fate has decreed you are.
Rayné frowned.
Who are you?
There was laughter. **You know who I am.**
Guardaaz?
No! There was anger in the thought, a blizzard wind that tore at his mind, bit into his soul.
Raené?
Yes my beloved Avatar.
How is that possible? Snow told me that you were dead!
Demons cannot die. My soul lives on in Snow, waiting for my Avatar to accept my offer and become what destiny decrees you are to be: mine body and soul to do with as I please.
NO! I won't die for you! I won't!
He wanted to run, wanted to escape. He couldn't even move.
Raené was in his mind, seeping into his soul trying to take it, claim it the way he'd already partially claimed his flesh.
He fought, eyes wide open and staring, seeing darkness in which no trace of Jaella's magical light was visible.
He wanted to cry for help. Wanted Snow to save him from the demon seeping into his soul, nibbling away at it, the encroaching darkness terrifying him in ways that Snow's taking of his soul hadn't effected him.

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Hands gripped his shoulders, shook him roughly.

He blinked, saw pale grey eyes looking into his own.

"Snow?"

"It's a trick Don't let Guardaaz inside your mind, he'll only try to confuse you and turn you against us."

"This shouldn't be happening," he heard Jaella say. "You've taken him, made him your own, Guardaaz shouldn't be able to influence him anymore."

"No, he shouldn't be able to take Rayné, but look at him! He's being possessed, I can see it in his eyes, I can feel the taint growing in his soul."

Rayné shook his head. "Not...Guardaaz..." he choked out. "Not Guardaaz. It's Raené! The Prince...."

Snow's eyes widened, then went as lightless as the corridors around them. "Impossible!" he growled. The Immortal shook Rayné roughly, the refusal to believe, to accept the truth as clear as the anger chilling his skin as the Coldlands' power flowed around the big man. Frost covered his exposed skin as the enraged Immortal shook him.

"Raené is *dead!* Do you hear me! *HE'S DEAD!*" the man snarled in his face. "It's Guardaaz. Don't let him fool you!"

But it wasn't Guardaaz. Rayné knew this touch, knew the feel of his progenitor instinctively. He knew it in his very soul.

And he couldn't fight it.

Wasn't meant to fight it.

And he didn't want to die.

"Please...Snow...please help me...it's not Guardaaz. It's not..." he whimpered, trying vainly to break Snow's painful grip on his arms.

But there was no escape from Snow and no escaping the draining tug of the demon Prince of the Coldlands either.

Power fighting power and him the battle ground on which they fought.

Victor take his soul.

He whimpered wordlessly, wanting to run from Snow, surrender to Raené's demands. At the same time he wanted to press himself to the Lord of the Coldlands and seek his protection.

And he couldn't move.

There was no way to retreat from Snow, and Snow wouldn't let him surrender to the demon trying to take him.

A demon Snow mistakenly thought was Guardaaz.

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And neither was willing to give him up.

"Snow, you're going to kill him!" Jaella's plea was strident, full of fear.

"Better that I kill him than let Guardaaz take him. Either way he'll die!" he heard the Lord of the Coldlands say.

The Immortal shook him roughly, "Fight him damn you! Fight him! He has no hold on you that you don't give him."

But it wasn't true because it wasn't Guardaaz he was battling, it was Raené and he was the demon's Avatar.

He couldn't fight.

Wasn't meant to fight Raené.

Cold filled him, Snow's power.

The power of the Prince.

"Please...please..." he moaned no longer even sure who he was pleading with.

"I won't let you have him!" Snow growled in his face, as if he were speaking directly to the demon and not the confused boy in his grip.

"Rayné you have to fight. Try. Please try," he heard Jaella begging. He was barely aware of her touching his shoulder. "Rayné, don't let him take you! I love you, Rayné! Do you hear me!"

He blinked. Turned his head slowly to look at her face.

Green eyes.

Her lips closed over his, kissing him, a tongue slipping into his mouth.

He wanted to gag, to choke.

A female was...kissing him.

But it wasn't Rayné feeling the disgust, it was the Prince.

"Son of a demon whore!" Snow, cursing, even more furious. "It is the Prince. Guardaaz wouldn't react like that to a woman but Raené sure as hell would!"

The lips left his and he whimpered, the demon trying to take him was angry, made him struggle to escape Snow's grip before the *female* could kiss him again.

"How can it be Raené? You told me he was dead."

"I thought he was!"

"Well how do we protect Rayné from him now? I thought taking his virginity kept Raené from claiming him the same way it would keep him safe from being used by Guardaaz."

"That's what I thought too, so I have no clue how this is happening."

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A hand cracked against his cheek, "Rayné he can't take you. You're not a virgin. Don't let him seduce your mind."

Rayné blinked, wanted to fight, but the Prince's soul was sinking deeper, smothering him.

Until Jaella's lips touched his.

The Prince recoiled as if he'd been scalded by the woman's contact with his Avatar. Rayné whimpered, wanted to pull his cousin closer, beg her to touch him, to drive the demon away.

"That's the answer," he heard Snow tell her. "The Prince hates women."

As if she heard him her hand closed around his limp cock and stroked it to hardness. He moaned and felt Snow let go of him, Jaella embracing him, her kiss deepening, becoming impassioned.

Rayné felt the entity in his mind, the thing clinging to his soul and sucking his life away recoil. Sensed its disgust of Jaella's mouth, her hand.

But he wasn't fully in charge of his own body and he felt himself move, felt himself struggling to escape, his head turning away, breaking the kiss.

And he saw a way to fight off the demon. Rayné thought about how it had felt when Jaella's flesh had surrounded his cock, the pleasure it had given him.

Snow had moved behind him, his strong arms restraining him so his unwilling efforts to be free of Jaella were thwarted, the Prince prevented from escaping her touch. Jaella's mouth closed over his, her moist tongue invading him, sending a wave of disgust through him that wasn't part of his own thoughts or feelings. He loved Jaella. Loved her as much as he loved and wanted Snow. But it didn't keep him from being forced to turn his head. The kiss breaking as Raené controlled the actions of his body.

"Help..." he managed to get the plea through stiff lips.

"Let him go, Raené. You're dead and your time is over. I won't let you return to torment any more humans."

Jaella's mouth closed over his in a hungry, needing kiss.

But Raené wasn't about to relent and let him go. Instead he found his legs moving, kicking Jaella aside.

Grunting in pain she fell, clutching her belly, gasping for breath.

Something rose up inside of Rayné. A fury of cold, of unrelenting ice.

Emotions beat at his soul, stronger than anything human.

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Rage. Disgust. Hate.

But those were directed at Jaella.

There were other emotions, other much darker passions directed at Snow.

Anger. Displeasure. A profound hunger.

And something strange.

Something that might have been...love.

But demons didn't know love. It was the one human emotion that lay beyond the scope of any demon born thing to comprehend.

Rayné shuddered as *something* took full control of him, an entity he instinctively understood that it was his fate to serve: to die for.

Raené.

His master.

Prince of the Coldlands.

"No, beloved betrayer, you cannot kill what cannot die." He heard himself say, saw a commingling of rage and agony on Snow's face and then it was as though a cloud wrapped around his mind.

Everything went black.

When the power that had taken control of him faded he was on the floor, face aching as if he'd been slapped by the side of a building. He could taste blood, but had no idea what had occurred.

"SON OF A DEMON WHORE!" he heard Snow raging, felt the bite of a cold so deep he wondered if he was going to freeze solid. Flakes of snow were falling on his face which felt stiff as if the flesh *had* started to freeze.

Jaella took him in her arms and pulled him close, cradling him. She felt warm as a fire, her skin soft as silk against his cheek. He could see Snow standing over them, his eyes black as the Abyss itself. "Don't kill him, Snow, please! It's not his fault!"

"RAENÉ almost took him! What will we do if he does steal your cousin's body while we're fighting with Guardiaaz?"

"Kill him if we have to, but I'd rather have the Prince fighting on our side than dead if you want to know the truth."

"I don't!" Rayné heard Snow growl at her. "You don't know him the way I do! He's—"

"A demon and a powerful one," she retorted.

Rayné blinked and wondered why it was so difficult to think, as if his mind were wrapped in layer upon layer of thick wool.

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He tried to sit up but his body wouldn't respond and Jaella's arms tightened around him.

"Rest," she told him, but her eyes were still on the tall Immortal who was glaring down at both of them. Angry. And...scared. Rayné wasn't sure how he knew that but he did. Snow, powerful and unable to die was afraid of...what?

But he knew the answer to that.

He was afraid of Raené.

His Prince.

His lover.

The demon he'd killed.

The man turned and stalked away a few steps, not looking at them. Not looking at him.

Turning his back on Rayné the Avatar of his former master.

"What happened," Rayné asked. He could remember some of what had happened, but parts were a blur. The stiffness he felt wasn't just part of his face, even his tongue felt thick and sluggish, hard to move and his arms and legs were numb.

"Don't worry about it right now. Just rest for a while."

"All right," he agreed and let his eyes close.

* * * *

Snow slammed his fist into the stone wall and chips flew from the impact, ice spreading in a ring around the damaged rock, filling in the cracks and layering the wall in glittering frost for several feet outward.

He glanced at the boy unable to believe what had happened.

Raené, his master...dead yet...alive...somehow a part of the power he'd taken. A piece that had escaped from his own flesh to take momentary control of the boy.

And he'd acted the part of an asshole and taken it out on the Avatar, lashing out at the helpless flesh rather than the remnants of the demon itself.

Once a fool, always a fool.

But in all this time he'd felt not one stirring of the thing that had been Raené inside his mind or soul.

Or *had* it been there all this time? Had it been whispering guilt into his mind, waiting for the right moment to leap out and take him, make him a slave again?

He glanced at Rayné.

Beautiful, honey-flavored Rayné.

BAGNOBARK TANGO

He could have his master back if the boy surrendered his life to Raené. That was the promise the demon had offered Snow.

Pleasure for allowing Raené to live again.

And it was so tempting.

He closed his eyes and stood there trembling as he remembered the sweet torments that Raené could grant. The delights of the flesh that the Prince had shown him.

But he hadn't forgotten the pain and torture he'd endured at the demon's hands.

And fool or not, he wasn't stupid enough to trust anything Raené might promise him.

Not this time.

That was one lesson he'd learned and learned well.

Raené was a demon.

And demons lied.

He opened his eyes, looked at the boy lying still and silent in Jaella's arms.

Rayné, an Avatar of the Prince of the Coldlands.

The boy was pale as frost, dusted with ice crystals that the fading magical light still spilling from the Sorceress' blade turned into tiny glittering gems.

It was a look that the Prince of the Coldlands had often used to make his already exotic appearance that of immeasurable beauty to the mortals he lured to their deaths.

And there had been so many the Prince had killed. Not just his own Avatars but others. Innocents and a rare few that deserved death for their crimes against their fellow men. All of them so bedazzled by Raené's beauty they'd failed to realize the danger until it was too late. Until their souls were being drawn from their bodies as the demon consumed them.

Snow had often wondered why—of all the mortals the Prince had taken—he'd been spared that brutal and final ending.

Not one other had lived more than a few short years beyond their taking.

Most didn't live that long. Raené was fickle, and easily bored which meant his lovers seldom lasted more than a few weeks. And in the centuries that Raené had kept him, thousands had died to appease the demon Prince, their lives and souls consumed to feed Raené's hunger.

But only after they'd appeased his lust.

Snow had belonged to Raené for centuries.

MICHAEL BARNETTE

Demons didn't know what love was.
Or mercy either.
So why hadn't Raené killed him?
It was a question for which he would never have an answer.
Unless....

No! No! I won't let him take Rayné! I won't!

Because that would mean Raené would live again.

And Raené, demon Prince of the Coldlands couldn't be allowed to return no matter how much he wanted to know why Raené had spared his life.

No matter how much he missed the demon's touch.

Or the feel of an untiring cock up his ass.

Demons lied.

And he couldn't believe any promise Raené would give him, or anything the demon might say if he brought him back through Rayné.

The temptation was there.

But he could resist it.

He *had* to resist it.

Tears froze on his eyelashes.

* * * *

"We need to go," the Lord of the Coldlands told her.

"Give him a few more minutes. He's exhausted."

"We may not have much more time."

She frowned but started to shake Rayné trying to awaken him.

He gave a soft moan but his eyes remained closed.

"Can you carry him?" she asked.

"And if we run into demons what then?" Snow countered. "I can't fight and hold him both."

"Well I can't wake him up!" She knew her tone was too shrill, showing her growing fear, the panic that was filling her, choking her with a sense of futility and helplessness.

Snow came to her then, knelt down and cupped her face in his hands. He knelt there looking into her eyes. "Don't be afraid. Your fear gives him power over you."

His lips touched hers, the kiss tender, compassionate.

A lover's kiss which she returned.

"Better?" he asked when they were both breathless.

BAGNOBARK TANGO

She nodded and sat there gazing at him. She touched his cheek, fingers moving over the sharp line of his cheekbone, brushing the sensual form of his mouth.

His lips met hers hungrily, their tongues entwining, tasting, savoring.

When he broke away his breathing was ragged, eyes dark with barely controlled passion. "If I don't survive...."

She touched his lips, stopped his words, kissed him and said, "Don't even think it. Don't give him that sort of hold on you. Isn't that what you'd tell me?"

"Yes."

"Then listen to your own advice," she told him.

He smiled, and there was something in his gaze, a longing, a hint of something far superior to lust that she tried to identify. Whatever the emotion might be was hidden when Snow lowered his gaze to look at Rayné. He touched her cousin's cheek, the caress leaving the familiar frost glittering on his pale skin. Her kinsman whimpered. His eyelids fluttered but remaining closed.

Snow frowned at her. "Raené my former master has nearly drained him."

"Can you give him some of your power then?"

"I don't know. I think that might be how Raené entered his body in the first place." The man seemed unhappy about that. "Maybe if you feed him some of your magical energy I can give you some of mine. Raené won't try to take you, he's disgusted by females."

"So I've gathered," she agreed dryly and bent down to kiss Rayné hoping to revive him with her store of magical energy.

She felt the pulling as his weakened soul drew strength from her. His violet eyes opened and he embraced her, clinging to her as tightly as she'd seen him cling to Snow.

Gasping she broke the kiss and gave him a wry smile. "Feeling better?"

He nodded and sat up, his eyes seeking out and fastening on Snow. She could see the hunger in his gaze, and noticed the hard bar of flesh that tightened his pants. Rayné had nearly died, but he got hard by simply setting his eyes on the muscular form of the Immortal.

Snow stood and held out his hand, another iceblade forming. The faint glow he'd created earlier filled this sword, brightening the corridor enough for them to see.

MICHAEL BARNETTE

"What will Rayné do for a weapon. His sword is broken and that iceblade you gave him might very well been the avenue that the Prince employed to gain entry to his soul," she said.

"Give him yours."

"And what will I fight with?"

Snow turned and touched her palm. An iceblade of the same length and weigh as her own sword formed in her hand.

The hilt of the iceblade was freezing her hand, and she had to weave a spell to protect her fingers from the gnawing cold.

She hadn't finished her spell before Snow walked away from them. They had no choice but to follow.

* * * *

None of them spoke as the traversed dark passageways that felt as if they went on forever. Jaella didn't know how much time had passed, but she was getting tired and Rayné had stumbled and almost fallen several times. His wounds were healed, but he was fatigued from his ordeals. They crossed only one intersection in all that time, but the Immortal kept going the way they'd been traveling. They hadn't gone far beyond the junction of the corridors before Snow stopped and stood where he was. His face was twisted by anger and he pointed at the wall to his left.

There was a spiderweb of shattered stone, and chips of the wall littered the ground.

"By the Goddess," she muttered realizing where they were.

"We've just walked in a huge circle," he stated. "I suspected we were, but until we got back here I wasn't positive."

"Now what do we do?"

"We go back and try that intersection. It has to lead somewhere."

Rayné sighed and leaned against the wall.

She took Rayné's hand in hers and gave it a squeeze. "We'll rest soon," she promised him and though he'd not complained he gave her a wan smile to show his gratitude for her concern.

As Snow passed them, taking the lead as he always did, he gave her a chunk of ice and bent to kiss her, feeding strength into her that she passed in part on to Rayné who gave her another feeble smile.

When they reached the crossing of corridors they took the left hand way. It wasn't long after that before they noticed a change. The corridor was sloping downward in a very gentle barely noticeable descent.

Her stomach growled.

But that wasn't the only growling they heard.

BAGNOBAK TANGO

Lights, red as blood appeared from around a bend ahead of them.
Within heartbeats the glints of light resolved themselves into eyes.
And the eyes were in the heads of a swarm of rats the size of large dogs.

Swearing Snow met them with a sweep of his iceblade that killed the first four that came at him in a welter of gore.

They flowed around him, leaping at his back, trying to bring him down.

Rayné, armed only with the steel sword she'd given him, plunged into the fight and she joined him, their blades swinging.

A rat leaped on her, teeth tearing into her arm as another of the giant rodents snapped at her legs.

They were surrounded, the squealing mob of rats swarming, trying to bring down their prey.

Jaella chopped at the rat on her arm and felt the iceblade bite into flesh. Squealing the rat let go as the one trying to bite her legs jumped for her face.

"Windblades," she cried the spell out and moved her free hand in a snapping motion at the rat. It was cut almost in two by the magic and three others menacing her also died, but she felt the energy that powered her spells draining with every one she cast. At this rate it would take only a few more such encounters to exhaust it completely.

She heard Rayné gasp and looked up in time to see him almost go down under a half dozen of the horrible rats. He was fighting bravely, slashing at them with the sword, and he'd already killed two of the monstrous rodents. But he had no magic to use to aid him and he was being overwhelmed by the sheer weight of the mutated beasts.

Jaella started to go to his aid, but found herself forced to battle a gang of the rodents that had come after her. She couldn't aid Rayné because then she risked being taken down herself.

"Rayné try to call up the mist! I can't help you," she told him as she slashed at a pair of rats, the iceblade sparkling with a new spell. The rats she cut died the instant her blade sliced into them, but more of the horrors surged forward to take their place.

* * * *

Rayné was doing his best. He was a warrior, but the rats were fast and harder to kill than they should have been. Even his fiercest blows scarcely damaged the creatures and he suspected that mortal steel was

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not going to kill much of anything in Guardaaz's Fortress as the things were all demon-tainted.

But so was he.

Instead of using the sword he kicked one of the rats and heard it squeal in pain. But there were so many of them leaping and snapping at him he didn't dare try the same tactic a second time, even though it seemed to have more effect than the blade in his fist.

Not for the first time since they'd entered the Fortress did he regret his inability to use magic, any magic, to aid himself or his allies.

He was a liability to his cousin and the Lord of the Coldlands rather than being of any assistance to them.

A chopping sword swing removed the paw of a rat as it lunged for him, but it was hardly affected by the injury, joining its companions in their efforts to bring him down.

The situation was hopeless.

Screaming the rats came at him, their very weight enough to bring him down. He found himself fighting for his life bare handed against the snapping, squealing horde of stinking animals. Teeth ripped at him and he couldn't help the cry of pain that escaped as he was bitten in half a dozen places.

Black mist swirled around him, the rats freezing solid in span of a heartbeat then Snow was pulling him from beneath the things, the rats shattering into hunks of nastiness as Snow broke him free.

Shuddering he was pulled into the man's embrace, strong arms wrapping around him, soothing away his terror with a kiss. Energy trickled into him, and he responded hungrily, wanting more of the other man's otherworldly power. While he couldn't harness the energy the way his cousin could, it was sustaining him, bolstering his strength, healing his wounds, keeping him on his feet long after hunger and weariness should have claimed him.

A hard cock pressed to his hip and his own cock hardened in response, eager for the pleasure Snow could give him. He moaned into the kiss and put his arms around Snow's neck, rising up on tip toes to do it.

The kiss was broken. Snow looking down at him, smoothed a lock of hair from his eyes in a gentle caress.

A lover's caress.

He shivered. He wanted so much to be Snow's lover. Wanted Snow to claim him and...

BAGNOBAK TANGO

And what?

Stay here in their own Realm?

It couldn't work. Snow was a demon. His power would change and warp their world just as Guardiaaz was doing.

But he could go back through the Gate with Snow.

The man kissed him a second time and Rayné pressed himself tightly to Snow, his cock against Snow's thigh, his hands stroking along the bare skin of the Lord of the Coldlands' ass in a caress meant to entice.

Snow ended the kiss with a none too gentle shove. He turned his back to Rayné and moved away, putting distance between them. "Enough. Let's move. There no way to tell what the stink of all this blood might draw here."

Jaella patted Rayné on the shoulder, "He's right. This isn't a good place to linger."

Rayné nodded his agreement—retrieved the useless steel blade because it was the only weapon he had—and followed the other two.

They'd barely gotten past the last of the dead rats when Rayne felt a current of air slide over him. He turned in time to see a section of wall fissure and open a handsbreadth. Something dark as sin *oozed* out of the narrow break in the wall, a tendril of transparent flesh touched the floor.

"Behind us!" Rayné cried as he reached to draw his sword.

Snow shoved him roughly aside and he collided with Jaella who caught him the two of them hitting the wall before they regained their balance. Jaella hauled him bodily away from whatever the horror was that Snow had moved to confront.

It rose up in a mass and the light from Snow's iceblade glittered on a covering of slime as the *thing* resolved itself into some sort of semi-transparent slug-thing that reminded him of the beast he'd been forced to ride while in the grip of the Horde. But this thing was many times bigger than the toxic mount he'd ridden while in the Horde's grasp.

"It might be poisonous," he warned.

Snow shot a grin at him and faced the creature, the iceblade in his fist sweeping for the thing.

The blade hit and rebounded, almost taking Snow off his feet from the abrupt change in the weapon's direction.

Swearing the Immortal hopped aside as a gelatinous extrusion erupted from the creature with such speed it nearly caught Snow, the entire mass almost coming down over him.

MICHAEL BARNETTE

Droplets of fluid that stank of decay splattered him, and he started to curse loudly as the liquid burned through the ice armor and ate into his flesh.

He couldn't be killed by such wounds, but he did feel pain as evidenced by the way he jumped away from the thing as it tried for him a second time.

"Get back!" he snapped at them and Rayné almost yanked Jaella off her feet as he pulled her out of the way, Snow almost stepping on her toes as he too retreated.

"What should we do?" he asked Snow.

"Stay the hell out of my way!" the Lord of the Coldlands told him as a flood of mist swept away from the Immortal to wreath the slug-thing.

Rayné expected it to freeze solid the way everything else touched by the mist had done, but the slug came on, gathering speed.

"Son of a bitch," Snow swore. "Move! Move!" he snapped at them as another of the almost tentacles from the creature was launched their way.

This time a droplet of the liquid hit Jaella and she screamed in agony, and slapped her hand over the injury, fingers glowing like moonlight.

Rayné hauled her out of the slug's way as Snow threw his useless iceblade at the it, trying to disrupt the formation of another of the acid flinging limbs.

"How do we kill it?" he asked Snow.

"I have no damned clue," the Immortal replied as he made a hurling motion that sent a blizzard of jagged ice at the thing.

The first actual spell Rayné had seen Snow use since they'd entered the Fortress hit the slug creature with enough shards to have torn a battalion of warriors to shreds.

But nothing seemed to affect the thing, and it slid closer to them, unaffected by the icy attack.

Snow threw up a barrier of solid ice as a pair of the appendages rose from the thing, the ice stopping the droplets of fluid but not the slug which flowed through the holes its attack had burned through the wall of ice. The two separate parts merged together and continued to slide toward them.

The Immortal threw up a second defensive wall, and Rayné watched as it too melted under the slug's onslaught.

BAGNOBAK TANGO

Jaella, her arm showing a burn almost the size of her palm, murmured a word and a gesture sent a ball of sun-bright light at the thing. It struck the slug as it flowed through the remains of the second wall of ice, and burned its way deep into the thing.

If it felt the pain of the wound it didn't react and the deep hole sealed the second the spell winked out.

"Not good," Snow commented as he conjured another sheet of ice. Before it was even fully formed the slug shattered it with a blow from one of the gelatinous arms it continued to extrude.

More of the fluid splattered Snow as the man deliberately moved front of them, protecting the two of them with his own body.

Snow hissed in pain and his flesh smocked. Ice formed a layer of armor over him, hiding the terrible burns. Black mist filled the armor creating a layer between Snow's flesh and the ice, hiding his terrible injuries from them.

"Anyone have any ideas?" Snow asked as he hacked ineffectually at the thing with an ax of ice.

Rayné didn't think it would help, but he drew his sword and struck at the next of the acid coated limbs. The steel bit deeply, but drops of the fluid splattered across his arm and face.

A scream clawed out of his throat as the liquid burned into him. He felt himself fall, barely felt the floor as it rushed up and slammed into him.

The acid etching into his flesh hurt like nothing he'd ever felt. Pain lashed through his consciousness, tearing at his mind, trying to peel his soul right out of his flesh. He was going to die from the pain.

The shadow presence in him returned. Raené, the Prince of the Coldlands moving to stand between him and the demon magic that was trying to claim him.

The pull on his soul ended, but the pain, the horrible agony continued.

Yield yourself to me and it will be over.

He couldn't speak, couldn't move, and he wouldn't give in to the Prince's demand. To do so would be death as sure and swift as that offered by the slug's deadly poison.

Poison coursing through his body, weakening him, killing him.

He felt hands on him. The warmth of magic washing over his burned flesh.

Jaella trying to save him.

MICHAEL BARNETTE

Give yourself to me. I'll end the pain.

You'll end my life!

Your life will only begin once you are mine. This pitiful existence you suffer through, that's not life, it's nothing.

The Prince's magic, his need hammered at Rayné trying to coerce him with more pain, with the promise of unspeakable pleasure.

But he didn't want to die. If he died he'd never feel Snow's lips on his, never feel the man's cock inside him, giving him pleasure.

The demon's attack faltered as he thought about Snow fucking him, kissing him.

A scream of fury, loud as a storm wind roared through his mind.

HE IS MINE! MINE! JUST AS YOU ARE MINE!

No...I...won't...give in...I won't let you...kill me...

YOU HAVE NO CHOICE!

Yes...I..do...

He forced his eyes open, saw his lover entrapped in the beast struggling, trying to get free of the creature holding him.

Snow was struggling, but whipping appendages held his arms, binding them to his sides. His face was contorted in a way that told Rayné he was being wracked by the same kind of agony that had torn at him. Snow was Immortal, could it kill him or would he spend the rest of eternity dying, trapped in unending torment?

He couldn't bear the thought of his lover suffering like that.

There had to be some way he could help Snow.

His lover.

My lover. He belongs to me!

No. Your time is over. You are dead and you can't have me. And you can't have him. I belong to Snow, and he belongs to me, Rayné told the demon Prince.

You'll both die.

He could feel the demon Prince invading his body, his mind, getting deeper, reaching for his soul. This time Rayné knew what was happening, understood what the remnants of the Prince of the Coldlands was trying to do, and he wasn't going to let it happen.

If he died so would Snow.

There was the darkness at the center of his soul, demon-tainted, touched by Snow when he'd taken Rayné to the edge of death. It was a part of him, not of the invading entity.

BAGNOBAK TANGO

He had to help Snow. He had to prevent Raené, his rightful master, from taking him. The demon couldn't be trusted to rescue the Immortal. Not when Snow was the person who'd ended his existence.

What the demon wanted was revenge on his former slave.

And Rayné wouldn't let him have it.

Not against the man he loved.

Rayné's head lowered, and he reached inside himself, grasped the heart of his own soul and felt it answer his demand: Let me help him.

YEILD!

NO!

Strength poured into Rayné from that dark place at the core of his own being. Screaming he threw off the demon's efforts to subjugate him.

I WONT DIE FOR YOU, BUT YOU CAN DIE TO SAVE SNOW!

Something inside him shattered and the remnants of Raené, Prince of the Coldlands was engulfed by that dark core from within his own soul. Whimpering, Raené was drawn in, twisted into a new form and attacked by his own Avatar.

Black mist swirled around him, layering his skin with ice as he fought with the demon trying to conquer his mind and steal his body, his soul. Giving a final defeated cry, Raené went down into the true darkness of oblivion, sharing the fate he'd given to thousands of humans and dozens of lesser demons. Rayné shuddered, his mouth curling into a razor-edge smile of immense satisfaction as he devoured the bit of demon soul.

Rayné staggered to his feet, dizzy with the energy of a consumed soul, the true death of a demon Prince filling him with unholy joy.

Jaella was several feet away from him, down the corridor staring behind him with a look of pure horror on her face.

He found that the slug thing had totally enveloped Snow, the Immortal struggling to protect himself using a mass of ice to keep the digestive fluids from eating away at his flesh. But powerful as he was, Snow was starting to warp which showed them that not even an Immortal would survive the corrosive fluids that filled the thing unscathed. Snow's body was melting little by little under the onslaught. Whether the thing could truly kill Snow, Rayne didn't know and he sure didn't want to wait and find out.

He reached deep into himself, searching for the strength that had allowed him do drive off Raené. He found it, claimed it, made it his own.

MICHAEL BARNETTE

Black mist wrapped around him, thickening the layer of ice armor already covering his body. But he didn't even notice it. His eyes were on Snow and the Immortal's struggle to stay alive inside a demon.

Rayné picked up the steel sword he'd dropped.

Jaella overcame her own horror rushed over to stop him, grabbing Rayné by the arm and holding on tightly. "No, we can't help him. You'll only get killed too."

There was panic in her gaze, fear paling her face.

"Let me go. I can do this," he told her.

But she didn't release him. Angry, he shrugged her off and pushed her away walked toward the slug with a determined stride. It was apparent that it was no longer able to attack with such large and violently resisting prey inside its body.

Which would make things much easier for Rayné.

A faint twist of his mouth changed Rayné's expression to cruel amusement that altered to smug satisfaction as Rayné drove the steel blade deep and twisted. It was like attacking water, the thing's flesh gave so little resistance. And, unlike the magical iceblade Snow had been wielding, the steel didn't melt or show any signs of weakening from the digestive juices.

A feral grin bared Rayné's teeth as he pulled the blade free and drove it in a second time, the power of his arm and back behind the thrust. He shoved the steel in so far that his hand was covered in the demon's corrosive flesh. The ice over his hand smoked, rippled and reformed as fast as the fluid ate at it leaving him unharmed.

He leaned into the blade and it sank even farther into the thing. The steel touched the ice covering Snow and Rayné pulled the blade back angling it, exerting himself as he split that side of the creature wide open.

The slug convulsed and Snow came tumbling out, still covered in ice that steamed and cracked when it hit the air.

Heaving upward the slug lurched forward to cover both Snow and Rayné briefly with its digestive flesh. But it came in contact with the sword that the young warrior had in his fist and the whole mass of goo recoiled.

Rayne drove the blade into the monster's body slicing, chopping and hacking at the thing. The slug heaved upward one last time and went still, the remains twitching, quivering as it died.

Rayné extracted himself from the liquefying muck and reached out to grasp Snow's hand.

BAGNOBARK TANGO

The Immortal was burned from face to toes, even his hair was ragged from contact with the fluid, but he didn't appear to be injured enough to bring his existence to an end.

He stared at Rayné, raised an eyebrow and then shrugged.

Rayné could tell the man was curious about how he'd just done that, but wasn't about to ask any questions.

He also knew why Snow didn't ask.

It was because Snow didn't want the answer.

Rayné smirked and the unusual expression drew his cousin's gaze, the woman frowning.

"Rayné, are you all right?"

He nodded. "I'm fine. Perfectly fine."

But that wasn't exactly true.

He *wasn't* harmed, but he did feel odd. Different somehow, not that the change was bad. At least he didn't think so.

He considered it, then let it go.

Whatever had happened—had he really devoured the faded remains of the Prince?—it had allow him to save Snow from the slug and that was what really mattered.

Wasn't it?

Snow wrapped himself in dark mist. When it faded away the terrible burns from the creature were gone as if they'd never been.

Rayné let his gaze rove over the man's beautiful form, taking in the hard lines of muscle and bone under skin as pale as frost. He licked his lips and took a step forward wanting to touch, to kiss, to take Snow's cock into his mouth and...

He blinked at the thought that had come to him.

His mind had formed the word 'feed' at the thought of sucking Snow to climax and that wasn't normal for him.

For a demon of lust like Raené his progenitor, yes, that would be a normal thing, but for a mostly human warrior it was far removed from his usual way of thought.

He tried to gain any sense of the demon's presence in his mind, or lurking in his soul, but there was no longer a shadow creeping around within his being. There was nothing but himself.

Or was there?

Had that stain on his soul grown? Was it darker?

MICHAEL BARNETTE

But he knew what he'd done, and there was no denying the tingle that ran through him or the sharp jab of need that hit him when he let his gaze linger on Snow's magnificent body.

"Let's get away from this stinking thing," Snow said, interrupting Rayné's musings. The Immortal motioned them both onward the tattered ice covering him sloughing to the floor as new ice formed.

Jaella touched Rayné's arm. "He's right, it does stink. Come on kinsman, let's move on."

He followed without comment. He had other things to occupy his mind, like how he'd been able to help Snow. He kept searching for any trace of the demon that had invaded his mind and soul earlier, but he found nothing and that worried him far more than if he'd located the lingering entity that had been Raené the Prince of the Coldlands.

He looked inward and found the core of darkness at his soul. The thing he'd tapped to help Snow defeat the slug-thing. But it wasn't Raené, this was an aspect of himself, the bit of demonic heritage in his blood.

Part of him.

And it didn't answer his question regarding where Raené—or what remained of him—had gone.

CHAPTER SIX

They reached the end of the corridor, a vast expanse of darkness stretching out to both sides of them.

Snow could feel demonic emanations ahead of them.

Dozens and dozens of them.

Jaella moved closer to him. "What is that ahead of us?"

"Horde creatures," Rayné replied ahead of Snow's, "Guardaaz's creatures."

Jaella glanced over her shoulder. "You feel them too?"

Rayné gave a curt nod. "I was captive to these things. I know their feel."

"There are too many of them," Snow murmured. "We need to find another way."

A grinding sound in the passageway sent Snow bolting past them the way they'd come, but it was too late. The corridor was blocked by a solid mass of stone.

"Godsforsaken demon," Snow swore, voice a growl of rage. "He's going to make us fight and struggle every step of the way. The coward might not even let us get close to him. He'll keep sending his creatures against us until we've exhausted our magic, or died trying to reach him."

"What can we do now?"

"Nothing to do but go forward."

"Into the cavern full of Horde creatures?" Rayné asked, an eyebrow raised in skepticism.

"Yes."

"We'll never get out of there," Jaella remarked as she watched Snow form a new, heavier type of armor that included a helmet. There was an iceblade in his right hand and a short hafted battle ax in his left.

"We can't face that many of them out in that room. We'll be overrun," Rayné observed as he drew the steel blade he still carried and wrapped himself in mist that laid armor over his torso, upper arms and legs.

MICHAEL BARNETTE

Snow watched as her cousin armored himself. He seemed puzzled, but he didn't ask how Rayné was accomplishing magic when Snow knew didn't have the command of such spells.

While Jaella wanted to ask how her kinsman was managing such feats of sorcery, she refrained because now wasn't the time.

"Let me worry about the Horde. You two just worry about keeping yourselves alive."

Mist so thick it cut off the dim glow of Snow's weapons rose around the Immortal. They could hear him speaking, but the language was unknown to them.

A wind rose at their backs, blowing the fog into the blackness of the large cave and where it touched it left frost that glowed, lighting the floor of the cavern.

Snow raised his weapons over his head and the mist spun around him.

Out somewhere past the dusting of frost, they could hear a sound, a dull roaring noise that grew in volume.

The sound was the wordless screaming of the Horde as they drove in for the kill.

Snow's power flowed outward in a rising tide of thickening mist. As it moved it laid down icy pavement. When the mist cleared there was a wall of glowing ice that formed a ten foot high rampart topped with a walkway. More of the midnight fog poured from Snow as he strode forward.

They moved with him and a barrier of ice filled the corridor's mouth, blocking anything from coming at them from that direction.

Crenellations formed along the walkway to provide protection for anyone on top of the wall. But with only three of them to guard the small fortress that Snow had created, it would be difficult to keep the Horde out. There was just too much area to protect.

The light from the ice gave them enough light by which they could see and Jaella and Rayné followed Snow out into the ice paved area, the Sorceress and Avatar staring at the structure that continued to form as the Immortal exerted his demonic abilities in the middle of Guardiaaz's own lair.

Jaella watched, awed by the display of such immense power, left breathless by the scope of Snow's magic.

But what good it could do them to have such a creation she couldn't fathom.

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Snow stopped in the middle of his creation while the noise of the oncoming creatures increased in volume to a ground shaking roar.

He set aside the ax and used his iceblade to cut a gash across his forearm. He swept his arm outward, spattering blood across the ice pavement.

Raising his voice in a shout that equaled the noise of the oncoming Horde, Snow said, "ARISE MY WARRIORS AND PROTECT MY DOMAIN."

From the spatters of blood he'd cast across the frozen ground rose swirls of mist that soon took shape as dozens of warriors made of ice that carried dark cores of writhing mist.

As Jaella watched in amazed silence the warriors climbed to the top of the wall, weapons growing from their hands. Swords, axes, spears.

Jaella stared as the full might of the Lord of the Coldlands was revealed. He *did* carry the full scope of Raené's legendary power.

The ice warriors on the wall threw spears, and there were screams as the first of the Horde died trying to scale the wall.

"I'm leaving it to the two of you to keep anything from breaking in from the corridor."

"Shouldn't we help you on the wall?"

"No. My creatures will take care of defending the wall, you make sure nothing breaks through behind us. We can hold the Horde at bay so long as we're not attacked from behind."

"All right, we'll handle defending your flank," Rayné agreed. "Besides it's such a nice flank I'd hate to see anything happen to it."

Her cousin was laughing, unafraid. Jaella found it remarkable that he could be in such high spirits with the odds they faced, but perhaps he was trying to overcome his own terror.

Snow grinned at Rayné and hurried away with a shout, "Try not to get yourselves killed and stay off the wall."

* * * *

Snow joined his warriors on the rampart, fighting, killing the warped creatures that had once been human. There were hundreds of them out there and they charged toward the wall. Mist flowed, freezing the first few dozen that came in contact with Snow's defensive structure. The next wave was met by a shower of icicle like projectiles that impaled and slew half a hundred of the things.

The third wave was stopped by spears thrown by Snow's icewarriors.

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The fourth wave slammed into the barrier and tried to climb.

Spikes a full five feet in length shot from the walls, impaling more of the Horde, but there were hundreds out there and they'd hardly made a dent in the number of attackers.

Something swooped down from above, a creature with batwings, a dozen lashing tails tipped with sharp spines and huge talons that reached for Snow.

Two of his ice warriors raised their spears, wounding the monster. It circled and tried to come in for another strike. Snow hurled his ax and struck it in the chest, the thing dropping into the writhing mass of the army below. The dead were piling up, the living creatures climbing over the heaped corpses. It wouldn't take long before the mound of dead reached the top of the wall.

Snow's smile was grim. He had other things he could call upon, more creatures he could create. And he'd retained enough space in the huge cavern that he could raise a second rampart if he had to retreat.

A new ax formed in his hand as his warriors fought. They were untiring, and unkillable so long as Snow had the magic to sustain them.

Which, of course, was the problem. Immortal or not, wielding the power of the Coldlands or not, he was far from the Gate and he wasn't inexhaustible. He was already feeling the drain from sustaining such a large area of influence in the domain of another demon.

He hacked and chopped at the newest wave of attackers, killing the beasts and shoving them off the wall. As fast as he killed there was always more of the creatures waiting to die.

Another pair of the winged things swooped in, tails and claws coming for Snow. One of them got through the defense of his ice warriors and struck him. Snow went backward off the wall and hit the ice below with a jarring impact.

He was bleeding, wounded by one of the spines which he pulled out.

Blood flowed freely from the wound, pooling on the icy pavement. Cursing, Snow got to his knees, his cracked and damaged armor falling to shards around him.

Screeching the winged horror dove for him.

He'd lost his sword and ax and had no time to make another weapon. He braced for impact, ready to fight bare handed.

An eye-tormenting light struck the flyer, incinerating its head. Flapping, tails lashing, it fell from the air and died as it hit the ground

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smoke trailing up from the corpse. It stank, and foul blood spilled from the thing's remains.

He looked up and cast a thankful glance in Jaella's direction.

"Are you all right?" she questioned as she hurried toward him.

"I'll live," he told her, getting to his feet. Blood poured down his side and he set a hand to the wound, tendrils of mist spilling from beneath his palm. When he moved his hand there was frozen blood clogging the wound.

"Should I heal it?" Jaella asked.

He shook his head as armor formed over his body. "It will heal and you shouldn't waste any of your magic on me. Save it."

"Not even to keep one of those things from tearing you apart?"

He gave her a lopsided smile, "All right, I'll grant you permission to waste magic to protect me if you feel the need." He actually winked at her. "We're being attacked. I should go."

She pressed a hot kiss to his lips. "So go."

On the rampart his warriors battled on, fighting to protect the area Snow had claimed as his own. The din of the battle shook the floor.

Two of the ice warriors were shattered, broken, the centers of mist escaping, flowing to the floor.

Drops of Snow's blood lay there on the ice.

New warriors sprang forth and raced to take places on the walkway.

Seeing the puddles of blood he'd left on the floor, Snow raised his arms high and cried out, "WYVERNS OF WINTER ARISE!"

Two reptilian things of glittering ice rose from the blood and launched themselves into the air, their wing beats sending particles of ice and a blast of cold over Snow's temporary domain. They quickly vanished into the dark vault overhead, but their screams as they battled the flyers of the Horde showed that they were doing their duty to their master and protecting what was his which included Jaella and Rayné.

* * * *

Jaella watched Lord Snow rejoin his creatures, the Immortal in the heart of the fighting while she and her kinsman stood around safe and doing nothing.

"We should go and help him," she told Rayné.

"No, Jaella. We should stay right where we are and do what he told us to do," he countered. He was peering at the block of ice filling the corridor. A frown creased his brow and he took a few steps closer to the blockage. "I think I see movement."

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She hadn't taken more than a step toward the mass of ice when it burst apart and a beast bigger than the wyverns of Snow's creation barrelled into their small fortification. It had the appearance of a huge sea creature, the body tapering from a bullet head, but instead of fins it had six legs that propelled it along the ice. Thick scales sheathed its body, and a bony plate protected its head.

The thing was heading for the rampart.

"JAELLA!" her kinsman shouted.

She understood. If the beast hit the wall it would shatter and Snow and his ice warriors would fall with it leaving all of them open for attack by the Horde.

She gathered up a powerful spell, "Sunfire!" Energy drained from her as a ball of roiling flame the color of the noonday sun burst forth from her out-flung hand.

The fiery ball struck the armor plate of the creature's head and burned inward, charring bone, eating away the flesh. Bellowing the thing swung toward the source of its pain, juggernauting in Jaella's direction. She ran, attempting to evade being crushed but it spun to follow her circular progress.

A flurry of ice shards tore into the damaged flesh and it spun, charging at Rayné, the cry of pain and the stomping feet shaking the ground, shattering the layer of ice beneath its feet and sending cracks up the defensive walls on which Snow and his warriors fought.

"THE WALLS!" she shouted to her cousin. He dodged the charge of the beast and it was up to her to give him the time to do whatever he could to keep the rampart from collapsing. She hit the thing with another spell, a lesser version of the sunfire she'd initially used, targeting the same point.

Shrill screaming told her she'd wounded it again. And this time when it charged at her the movement was slower, more sluggish.

Raising her right hand Jaella made a throwing motion and a lance of silvery light left her hand to vanish into the gaping wound.

* * * *

Swirling fog the color of night spun away from Rayné to layer thick ice over the crumbling defenses, sealing the gaps made by the elephantine charge of the thing they were fighting. A second cloud rolled away from him, filling the opening of the corridor with a thinner plug of ice.

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His kinswoman had brought the beast down, the thing sagging with a whimpering cry. The six legs churned the ice, and then it lay still.

A dead winged thing dropped from above, hitting the ground with a hard thud and Rayné glanced up to see one of the ice things that Snow had created fly past.

Several of the Horde creatures had reached the top of wall, but only corpses gained entry to the small fortress Snow had created.

Jaella was walking toward him, smiling. "We took care of it didn't we cousin?"

He was about to nod agreement when he saw the thing she'd slain move, the scaly hide rippling, splitting.

"Jaella look out!" he shouted and raising his hands he sent a blast of icy fragments raining toward the dead thing. The skin split to emit slimy man-shaped things that shrilled out a battle cry and charged for them. The ice knives hit them and tore their flesh, but they continued on, slime dripping claws ready to rend and tear.

Jaella spun at his warning, a shower of burning light spraying the things.

They started to burn, but his cousin's attack did no more to stop them than his own had done.

Screeching, one of the wyverns swooped down, laying the breath of winter across the things. Ice glittered on the slime, but they came on, and Jaella ran while Rayné threw up a thin wall of ice in their path. They crashed through it, hardly slowed by the barrier.

"What do we do?" he asked her as he hit the things with another shower of ice blades.

In answer to his question she raised her hands. White fire danced up her body, reached her hair which stood up, crackling and spilling light. "Retribution of the Moon!" she shouted.

A brilliant flash left her hands, arced into the creatures and burst in a blinding eruption of light that left Rayné dazzled and unable to see.

To be safe he erected a dome of ice around them, and was rewarded by a series of thumps and some clattering on the protective barrier.

When he could see Jaella was sitting down, a dazed expression on her face. The dome over them was streaked with yellow muck, and hunks of some unknown stuff clung to the ice. It didn't take much effort to realize the stuff was what remained of the things that Jaella had blasted.

He knelt down beside her, touched her cheek. "Jaella?"

She was trembling and he gathered her into his embrace. "Cousin?"

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"I..did it.."

"Yes, you did," he agreed, uncertain why she was acting so strangely. He put it down to the drain of the magic she'd used. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," she agreed. "I just can't believe I was able to use that spell. It takes a lot of magical energy and not many of our ancestresses have been able to use it."

He hugged her. "Well how many have had cause?"

She gave him a shaky hug in response, and replied, "I guess you're right."

The dome around them cracked and Rayné stood to see what was attacking them.

There was a large form outside, and at first he couldn't tell what it was, then he took note of the shape.

The dome fell to pieces with the next blow to reveal Snow, face creased with worry, a huge battle ax clutched in his grip. "I thought you were hurt in there."

Rayné shook his head. "No, we're fine. A bit shaken up, but unhurt."

Snow dropped the ax and pulled Jaella to her feet. "Time to go."

"Can we rest a few minutes?"

He shook his head. "Too much death."

Rayné looked around. The ice had mostly melted leaving mounds of the dead.

"Come on," Snow said.

The stink of decay strengthened, the stench thick enough to choke the young warrior. As with all of Guardaaz's creatures, the dead things around them were slipping into mounds of rapidly deliquescing flesh.

"Good idea," he agreed as a noxious pool of ooze flowed toward them from the remains of the armored juggernaut they'd killed.

* * * *

Snow led them onward but after only a short time they had to stop. Jaella was staggering with exhaustion and Rayné, for all his almost miraculous use of magic during the battle with the slug, was only keeping on his feet from pride.

"We rest," Snow told them and sank to the floor where he was.

They collapsed beside him, Rayné so close their thighs were touching.

Snow put an arm around both of them and they were quickly asleep.

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Worried that danger might come on them while they were unable to fight, Snow wrapped the mist around them, ice filling in the corridor, sealing them in a protective block that would keep even demons from being able to attack them without warning.

He didn't really need to sleep, he'd lost that human requirement so long ago he couldn't recall the last time he actually slept because he needed it.

But he did close his eyes, letting his inhuman senses, his awareness of what lay around them take over for his eyes and ears. Sealed in his icy mini-realm within Guardaaz's domain he felt safe enough. Nothing could come at them that he wouldn't be aware of before it reached them.

But he hadn't sensed most of the demon's creatures until they'd been on top of them which brought a frown to twist his mouth.

He recalled how the slug had appeared from a crack in the wall of the corridor, and came to the conclusion that the reason he hadn't sensed any of the horrors sooner was they were being placed in their path when it pleased Guardaaz.

He was toying with them.

Playing with his prey before killing it.

And that meant he was confident he'd be able to kill them easily.

Typical demon behavior.

So was underestimating your opponent.

Snow just wondered which of them was guilty of that last demonic failing: Guardaaz or himself?

He pulled the two part-demons close and let some of his own vitality seep into them. It wouldn't restore them the way a good round of passionate sexmagic would, but it was enough to replenish the energy their bodies needed in place of the food they'd neglected to bring with them.

Snow had thought they'd be long done with the task of killing Guardaaz by now. And that *was* a mistake on his part. Guardaaz was obviously counting on weakening them as much as he could before they met.

And so far from the Gate Snow wasn't regaining his energies as quickly as he would have otherwise.

In fact, now that he was aware of his own condition he realized he hadn't regained *any* of the energy he'd lost since entering this place.

Guardaaz was doing a good job of cutting him off from the Gate, and the power from his own Realm.

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Snow swore, voice a basso-rumble.

Rayné sat up and looked at him. The violet eyes were bright, alert.

Snow didn't resist when Rayné kissed him, the young warrior's arms going around his neck, body pressed to him, clinging in a way that expressed desire.

He ended the kiss by gently pushing Rayné away, urging him to stop which he did. It was what Snow wanted, but when the soft lips were gone he found that he regretted ending the kiss. His cock was hard, and a hand brushed across it.

But it wasn't Rayné touching him, it was Jaella.

He stood and walked away from them as far as the wall of ice would permit. He touched the barrier and it started to melt, water pouring off of the frozen surface.

"We should go if you're both rested."

"Snow, I don't know how many more spells I can use," he heard the Sorceress say, but he didn't want to listen because he knew what she wanted.

He knew what Rayné had been asking for too.

He stepped aside when the two of them started to catch the meltwater in their hands drinking it eagerly.

"I'm hungry," Jaella remarked, but when she glanced at Snow it wasn't his face she was looking at, it was his crotch.

"Not here," he told her. "Not in his Fortress."

She stepped closer to him.

His cock was already stiff and when he felt Jaella's hand touch his chest his cock jumped, and his heart started to pound.

Rayné joined them, and his touch was bold, his hand falling on Snow's cock and grasping it.

He pulled away from both of them. "Not here."

"We won't survive this, Snow. Not without the power this can give us," Jaella argued.

Snow deliberately turned away from them and headed down the corridor through the hole in the ice wall before his own resolve melted the same way the ice he'd created to protect them was doing.

"I'm burning up my reserves by casting all these spells," Jaella told him. "I need to replenish my magic soon or—"

He cut her off. "Let me do the fighting for now."

"And what if we run into creatures attacking us from both directions?" she countered.

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"We'll talk about it later," he snarled, his cock aching, the need thrumming through him carried by the very beat of his heart.

Want.

Need.

And a demon waiting for them at the end.

A demon that might very well kill all three of them.

His hands closed into fists, mind fighting the lust.

Lord of the Coldlands in place of that Realm's Prince.

A Prince who'd taught him what lust could do.

He kept walking, refused to give in to his own weaknesses.

Hands gripped him, touching, wanting.

He could feel Rayné's need as if it were his own.

As if the boy were his old master.

"Snow, can't you see we need it? We're not like you, we're mortal and our energy goes more quickly," Jaella told him as she pressed her lips to his shoulder, her arms going around his waist.

Rayné slipped around him, dropped to his knees and reached for Snow's cock taking it into his mouth, sucking, tongue sweeping across the head.

Snow groaned, fingers moving through the softness of hair the color of blood as he yielded to their desires.

His weakness wasn't controlling him. It was their need he had to submit to, not anything inside himself.

But they were vulnerable with the unknown stretching ahead of them, and possible danger creeping up in their wake.

He pulled away, grunting at the loss of the sweet mouth on his erection. He debated for only an instant before he threw his hands out.

Mist transformed to walls of ice that filled the corridor on both sides of them, once again making a safe haven in the heart of the enemy's lair.

They engulfed Snow in kisses and caresses that covered him in frost, wrapped in a blaze of heat and lust that stole his breath and left him panting beneath them.

* * * *

Jaella's mouth locked over Snow's, kissing him, one hand caressing his chest, fingers trailing down to his flat belly, her other hand rested on the back of Rayné's head as he sucked Snow's cock, making the man groan.

She'd already stripped off her undergarment and felt a hand slide up her thigh, strong fingers delving into her, slipping inside eased by the

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juices of her need. The fingers thrust, the pad of a thumb bumping her clit. Cold and heat merging inside her.

She heard Rayné's breath catch and smiled, knowing what Snow's other hand must be doing.

The fingers moved inside her, inflaming her, freezing her and she moaned into the kiss as she spread her knees wider.

A groan rolled down her throat and she felt Snow's hips bucking as Rayné granted the Immortal no mercy. A quick glance showed her cousin's head bobbing fast, taking Snow's cock down his throat as far as he could manage.

The two fingers were joined by a third and she gasped, legs spreading wider to give him more room, to let him pleasure her as the magical forces grew along with their passion.

Mist and motes of light spun in a slow dance around them, and their breath steamed in the air as the area contained by Snow's magic chilled.

The fingers thrust into her, and she moaned each time Snow's thumb struck her clit, taking her closer to climax.

Snow was fucking her with his hand, but she wanted more than that. She wanted Snow's cock but Rayné had what she wanted in his mouth. She used the hand she had on his head, gripping his hair and forcing his head away from the flesh she wanted deep inside her. Inexorably she pulled Rayné away, guiding him to Snow's eager mouth.

With Rayné busy kissing Snow, Jaella straddled the Immortal's cock, riding him roughly, moaning out her pleasure, hearing him groan from what she was doing to him.

* * * *

Rayné was upset at the loss of the mouthful of cock he'd tongued and sucked, relishing the flavor of Snow. But Jaella had taken the treat away from him, leaving him to kiss the Immortal. It wasn't what he wanted, but Snow's hand was still wrapped around his cock, stroking him faster. He felt his balls draw tight to his body, an impending orgasm nearing. He whimpered as the hand on his cock slowed tormented him, refusing to give him what he wanted: his release.

He thrust into the hand and Snow let go, removing any chance for him to get what he wanted.

The Immortal broke the kiss, touched his cheek, a smile curving the man's mouth. "Come here," Snow said as he pulled Rayné to his knees, urging him to kneel over his face, cock near his mouth.

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Rayné's breathing stilled, his heart racing at what was about to happen. His cock in Snow's mouth. Snow rose up on an elbow and engulfed Rayné's cock.

He cried out as Snow sucked him, teased him. Aching for release he gripped Snow's silky hair and thrust into the man's mouth. Teeth grazed him lightly and he gasped, pain making the next stroke of the firm muscle of Snow's tongue twice as pleasurable.

So close, so very close.

Snow broke the contact and he groaned in misery as what he wanted was denied. Rayné was moved aside, Jaella rolled to her back and Snow started to drive himself into her, leaving Rayné to wait.

* * * *

"I'm going to—" Jaella moaned.

"Don't," Snow growled into her ear as he slowed his thrusts into her, trying to stave off her climax.

It was too late. Jaella couldn't hold out. She fell over the precipice, soaring upward, crying out as the magical energies spilled free.

Snow gathered up the energy, drawing as much of it into himself as he could, trying not to lose any when they were so desperate for every bit of magical force they could generate.

He reached for Rayné, pulled the young warrior beneath him and drove his cock into him, thrusting, taking Rayné's erection in his hand and pumping it until the Avatar was gasping and crying out, cum spattering Snow's belly.

He drew the energy in, kissed Rayné and gave some of it to the gasping male lying beneath him.

"Rest. When you're both ready we'll move on," Snow told them, but he was still kissing the honey sweetness of Rayné's mouth, and showed no inclination to end his slow exploration.

"You didn't cum did you?" Jaella asked, her hand touching his shoulder, sliding down his spine to come to rest on his ass, a finger slipping into the crack, teasing. He smiled.

"No. We did this for the energy not for the pleasure, remember?"

She nodded, "I remember, but.."

"Don't worry about it. We've still got that demon to kill. After that—" he shrugged, "we'll see what happens."

* * * *

They weren't walking very long before Snow stopped and held his hand out keep them where they were. "I feel a demon ahead of us."

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"How far?" Jaella asked. Her hand touched Rayné's arm and he glanced at her, seeing worry in her expression.

"I'm not sure of the distance. It's a strong emanation and it just came into being right before I stopped." Snow was frowning as he turned to look at them, but his eyes were on Rayné. "This is something too powerful for either of you to face. I want you to stay back and keep alert for any other trouble."

Rayné was staring at him, expression enigmatic, eyes narrowed.

So much like the Prince, and totally different at the same time.

"I seem to have handled that slug better than you did," the young warrior remarked, his tone cool.

Snow made no effort to deny that statement. Not when it came down to simple truth. Rayné *had* saved him from the thing which was something Snow wasn't ready to examine too closely.

He'd been unable to harm the horror, yet Rayné, the weakest of them magically, had killed it.

But he wasn't ready to argue over his instructions either. "Hang back. If I get in trouble you can come save me again."

Rayné's stare remained the same but he nodded in acceptance.

Snow headed down the hallway, his iceblade griped in his hand, the armor he wore thickening, the mist swirling around him as if he wore a cloak.

* * * *

Jaella sighed. "I don't know how you did it either, but be careful Rayné. There's a price to be paid for the kind of power you displayed."

"I know. And I know the price I've paid. Don't worry about me Jaella."

And that was it, she *was* worried about what he might have done to gain such magic.

She'd lost her virginity to a demon—or something near enough like one not to matter—for it. That had been a price she was more than willing to pay for the ability to wield such spells as those at her command.

She doubted Rayné's newfound magic came from such a mild sacrifice, but she wasn't going to pressure him for the how or why of it either.

If she thought the source of Rayné's power would become a threat to Snow or herself later she'd demand to know how he'd come by it, but for the time being he could keep his secret.

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They followed Snow at a distance, the Lord of the Coldlands walking cautiously ahead of them. It unnerved her since he'd shown so little care when they'd met the slug, or even when they'd gone to battle the Horde.

"Do you see anything?" she asked him.

"No, but I still feel it. Be on your guard, I think we're heading into some real trouble this time."

"Worse than the things we've already faced?"

"Definitely," he replied.

Already uneasy, the blunt reply made Jaella's anxiety increase several times over.

They'd reached a three way intersection and Snow paused. Frowning he turned to say something to them, but what he intended to tell them they would never know.

The wall of the corridor parted and tentacles boiled out of the gap, enmeshing Snow.

"MOTHER OF HELL!" Snow bellowed, and tried to break free.

Ice covered the creature but it had no effect that Jaella could see.

Snow hacked at one of the tentacles with his ice blade and that too failed to make any significant impression on the thing dragging him into the wall.

She wracked her brain for spell she could use that wouldn't injure the man covered by the thrashing limbs, but she couldn't think of a thing powerful enough that wouldn't also badly injure the Immortal.

Snow was fighting, struggling, enveloped by the thing, and it was drawing him inexorably into the cleft in the wall.

She reached out and slapped at the nearest tentacle, a spell going off that charred that bit of flesh she'd touched, but the rest of the writhing meat was undamaged.

That was the point where she decided it was better for her to risk hurting Snow than to let the thing take him. She gathered up the magic and hurled a ball of light into the opening, past the struggling Immortal. There was a bright flash inside the hole, but instead of dropping Snow the creature started to retreat faster, dragging the enmeshed Immortal with it.

Rayné had drawn his steel blade and was chopping at the mass of tentacles wrapped around Snow, but as with the majority of the things here, the sword had no effect.

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He struck a tentacle bare handed and Jaella saw his grim smile of satisfaction as the flesh he'd touched froze and shattered.

Coldlands magic.

The sort of magic Snow wielded.

The kind of magic that Rayné's body would have been capable of if the Prince had taken over his Avatar's flesh.

But Rayné was still himself and on his own he shouldn't have had the command of such power.

Power not even brought up by the casting of a spell such as Jaella needed to use.

He slapped another of the tentacles, trying to free Snow who was using his own magic, icy mist slowly freezing the beast that had hold of him. It made no sense but Rayné's magic seemed to have the greater effect and that made Jaella wonder if somehow Rayné was tapping the Prince's power through Snow somehow because he was using magic he he'd never been trained to use.

Jaella used another of her own spells to sever two of the appendages holding the big man, but as rapidly as they removed each tentacle others came to take their place.

"BEHIND YOU!" Snow shouted and she whirled around to find a shambling beast coming toward them.

At first glance it looked like the biggest bear she'd ever set eyes on, then she noticed that there were spines along its back, and three sets of legs.

It roared and raised up on its rear legs, the front and middle sets menacing her, flailing and slashing the air.

And it was close. So close she could smell its fetid odor as it shambled nearer.

The claws on the ends of its paws were long as knives and struck sparks from the stones.

"Sunglow!" She hurled the spell at the thing's face, hoping to blind it.

Light wrapped around the creature's head, bright and dazzling, the spell burning into fur and flesh.

Roaring it lunged for her, and whether it could see or not was moot. Its claws slashed powerfully in all directions and the blow of those paws would be more than sufficient to maim or kill her.

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"SNOW!" she heard her kinsman's despairing cry as she was forced to retreat. She bumped into something and found she was back to back with her cousin.

The wall was closing on her right, and the last glimpse of the Immortal she had were his rage darkened eyes. Blistering cold mist flowed around her as the Lord of the Coldlands made one last bid for freedom—or maybe he was just trying to protect them from the bear-thing—then the wall closed and he was gone.

Rayné screamed and Jaella wasn't sure if it was grief or rage that gripped her cousin, but the slender warrior raised his sword and went for the bear-thing.

A huge paw caught him a glancing blow before she could stop him, but instead of going down he staggered, screamed out a wordless battle cry and drove the point of the steel into the breast of the huge monster.

Paws flailed, blood splattered and Jaella didn't dare get any closer because the thing was tearing at the walls, flailing wildly in an effort to kill Rayné.

And her cousin was...*laughing* the sound the least sane thing she'd ever heard in her life.

She was too horror struck to do anything to save him as the mad sound rolled over her, washing her mind with grief that her cousin, her precious kinsman had been driven mad by the things they'd endured here.

Gone mad from the loss of their champion, Lord Snow.

The monster bear whimpered and fell to all six feet before it lurched sideways and crumpled to the floor each breath a ragged gasp of pain. A moment later, minus it's head, it stopped breathing.

Rayné, dripping blood, inky fog flowing around his feet leaving heavy frost on the floor, stumbled toward her.

Jaella caught him, her hand finding blood, a deep set of claw torn gouges in his side that were cold as ice. He didn't even flinch from the pain she must have caused him.

"We have to find Snow," he told her, gaze blank and staring at nothing.

There was a deep gash in her cousin's thigh, blood running down his leg, freezing in the mist at his feet.

She eased him to the floor. "I need to tend your wounds."

"I want to find Snow."

"We'll find him after I take care of your injuries. You're bleeding to death, Rayné."

MICHAEL BARNETTE

He glanced down at himself. "I am?"

He didn't even seem aware of the pain that he must be in from such terrible wounds. Examining them she wasn't certain how he'd kept his feet long enough to kill the bear, much less walk the few feet to where she'd been standing too shocked to react.

She was hoping it was just some type of battle frenzy, or, at worst, a momentary slip of his sanity, but looking into his glassy stare she feared her cousin was suffering more than a minor break with sanity.

When he looked at the wall into which Snow had vanished and just giggled she felt the icy grip of terror.

Snow was gone, and Rayné had gone insane.

How could she hope to save either of them?

Any hope that they'd had to defeat Guardaaz had died.

Now the best she could hope for was to get Rayné—or what remained of him—out of the Fortress alive.

She bandaged his wounds and pulled him to his feet. With one of his arms over her shoulders she helped him along, heading back the way they'd come. She was worried about their survival, worried about Snow and what Guardaaz might have in store for them because she couldn't see Guardaaz allowing them to walk out of his lair.

But that's what she was going to do if she could. They would retrace their route and leave.

Jaella cast a fretful glance at Rayné's deeply wounded leg, frowning at the blood already oozing through the makeshift bandage. He'd lost a lot of blood. Too much really, and she was starting to fear they'd never make it out alive.

She was no longer considering how they might defeat Guardaaz because the demon had already won.

Snow was gone, Rayne had lost his sanity, and Sorceress or not, she couldn't stand against the might of such a powerful demon.

She frowned when she reached a flight of stairs that led up. Stairs that had not been there earlier.

She'd been right. Guardaaz wouldn't let them walk out.

But she made one more effort and encountered another set of stairs leading up.

With no alternative she started the climb up, bearing Rayné along. He was dull-eyed and unresponsive to anything she said, but he did let her guide him.

BAGNOBAK TANGO

Bringing Rayné along in his weakened state wasn't easy through and Jaella found it rough going. Climbing up the steep stairway with his weight dragging at her took all her strength—and what remained of his—to make it to a landing.

Jaella couldn't go any farther and Rayné was barely managing to stay on his feet after the long climb, so they stopped.

Rayné was quickly asleep, a luxury that Jaella dared not engage in when the very walls might open to reveal a new horror they must fight.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Snow woke up with a huge hand grasping his chin, a tongue rolling slick and foul within his mouth. Fetid breath filled his nostrils and he retched, getting slime down his throat for his trouble. The tongue continued to invade his mouth going deeper, slipping down his throat, almost choking him.

His body was numb, unresponsive. He tried to move, tried to escape the disgusting invasion of the tongue, but he discovered escape wasn't possible.

He was chained. Bound and helpless in the grip of Guardaaz, the demon's grasping hands holding him still as it forced his jaw open wider, the tongue going down, down into his body, into his belly.

He didn't need to breathe, he was an Immortal, but the instinctive human reaction to being denied breath was there, making him struggle.

The tongue made him want to vomit.

Another instinctive human trait.

But the ability to do either thing was denied him.

Snow did the only thing he could under the circumstances, he bit down on the intruding flesh, sinking his teeth into the nastiness. A foul liquid spurted over his teeth, his lips and tongue.

Demon blood. Stinking and slimy. So totally different than the perfumed sweetness that had been the flavor of Raené's blood.

But Raené had been a creature of hedonistic pleasures. Unholy lusts. Inhuman passions.

Guardaaz the Destroyer was a demon of ruination and corruption. Foulness and filth. And it was pouring into Snow, the demon making an effort to corrupt him, to turn him into another of his slaves.

He bit down harder, teeth sinking into the rubbery muscle of Guardaaz's tongue until he hit something and felt the tongue quiver in his mouth. He'd have grinned if his mouth hadn't been stretched close to splitting at the corners. He ground his teeth.

BAGNOBAK TANGO

Bellowing Guardaaz recoiled, rage burning in his dark eyes, tongue retreating.

"Damn you!" it snarled at him.

Snow spat the slime from his mouth, and drew in a breath. "Already damned," he retorted. He spit again. "And before you try to impress anyone else with your kisses you might consider a more pleasing form and less slime."

He spat again, but this time he returned the muck to Guardaaz, spitting it into the demon's eyes.

Guardaaz snarled at Snow and back-handed the Immortal, the force behind the blow enough to send the former human the short distance to the floor.

The tang of blood filled Snow's mouth. He swallowed, grimacing at the taste of the lingering muck soiling his teeth, but spitting his own blood in the demon's lair wasn't advisable. Every aspect of this place was of Guardaaz's creation. Giving the demon a taste of his blood by spitting it on the floor would be the same as making a willing offering, and Snow was unwilling to give anything of himself to the demon.

He wasn't that much of a fool.

Or rather being Raené's pet for so long had taught him a great deal.

He wasn't about to make such simple mistakes.

Not when it could mean being overwhelmed by Guardaaz, and giving in to an enemy wasn't something Snow ever considered.

The demon's hand closed on his jaw, forced him to look at the thing's less than attractive visage. Reeking breath almost choked him as the demon spoke, "I'll have you begging for death. Never fear that. But first I have to deal with your pets." The thing licked its lips as if tasting their deaths already. "Such dainty morsels they'll be."

It let him go and Snow fought the chains binding him, to no avail. They were too strong for him to break.

"Still afraid of me are you, Guardaaz?"

The fanged mouth opened to roar out the demon's mirth. The stone beneath him shook, trembling with the demon's unholy joy.

The chains tightened, crushing him to the stone, holding him immobile. He was face down, naked, a prisoner of the demon.

A clawed hand touched him, slid along his spine, sharp claws cutting into his skin. "I think I'll amuse myself until they arrive."

A talon touched the crack of his ass and Snow's eyes narrowed.

MICHAEL BARNETTE

"It might take them a long time to get here, and I wouldn't want you get lonely."

The demon knelt behind him, and the tongue swept across his ass.

Snow started to laugh. "You, a demon of destruction, plan to rape someone that spent centuries as the slave of a demon of lust?" His own macabre amusement rattled the chains holding him. "Should I be prepared to rate you as a lover, Guardaaz or would that be too embarrassing?"

Guardaaz roared and rammed himself into the Immortal who'd mocked him, but all it gained him was more of the same scornful laughter.

* * * *

Rayné opened his eyes. It was dark. Dark as only a place that had never known light could be. He sat up, held out his hand and touched nothing.

"Jaella?"

There was no answer.

He groped in the dark, seeking her, wondering where he was, where she might be. His hand grazed something. Warm, soft. He felt heat fill his face as he realized what lay under his hand was one of her breasts. He moved his hand, shook her and heard her mutter and awaken.

"Rayné?"

"Yes."

He recoiled at the flare of light that sprang into being in the middle of her palm. The light floated toward the ceiling and drifted there.

His cousin was spattered in drying blood, and in the magelight she was wan, her brow creased with worry.

"Are you all right?" she asked, her hand brushing his cheek.

"I'll live." He gave her a wry smile. "Until Guardaaz kills me anyway."

"I was trying to find a way out of here," she told him. "You...weren't yourself."

Now it was his turn to frown. "No, I guess I wasn't." He sighed and swallowed, mouth dry, heart aching. "It took him, Jaella and there wasn't anything I could do to stop it."

"I know."

"So what do we do now?"

"Try to get out of here and go tell our people that we've failed."

BAGNOBAK TANGO

He sank down on the floor and sat there staring into the darkness. "I don't want to leave him."

"Me either but what choice do we have?"

"We can go face Guardaaz on our own."

"And die."

He looked at her. Jaella was exhausted, but so was he.

What he wasn't was ready to give up and accept defeat.

"He might not be dead."

"Guardaaz has killed him by now."

"But I'm not sure he can be killed, Jaella."

Her shoulders sagged and her head lowered. "He was a man. He can be killed."

He put a hand on her arm. "He *was* a man. He's not one anymore Jaella. And demons can't die. Raené still exists in a way."

She looked at him when he said that. "How?"

"I'm his Avatar, remember?"

She nodded. "You don't have his power."

Rayné offered her a faint smile. "You're right, I don't. I've got my own."

He got to his feet, held his hand out to her. "Come on. We've got our lover to find and a demon to kill and we won't manage either sitting here."

"Rayné we aren't going to manage either anyway."

The smile on his face grew sharp, cunning, "Don't be so certain of that, cousin Jaella. If we can find Snow, we've got a chance to beat Guardaaz yet."

* * * *

"Rayné, please listen. We don't have time to argue about this," she told him, angry and scared.

"You're right, we don't, so let's go."

"Rayné it's no use. Please listen to me," she said as she lay a hand on his arm trying to make him see how hopeless the situation was. They didn't have the power to face Guardaaz. Snow had been their only hope of that, and with him gone any prayer they'd succeed had vanished with him.

"You at least have to go back," she argued.

"Go back? Why?"

"Someone has to tell our people we've failed. Someone has to go back and warn them."

MICHAEL BARNETTE

"We haven't failed yet."

"Guardaaz has him, Rayne. It's over. I want you to—"

He pulled away from her, anger turning his eyes darker and she couldn't help but stare. Snow's eyes did that when he was angry, and in all his almost nineteen years she'd never seen Rayné's change.

And now that she was thinking about it, his eyes were a brighter shade of violet than they'd been before—

Before he had been claimed by Snow. Before he'd lost his virginity to the Immortal, the Lord of the Coldlands.

But it didn't mean the two of them could fight Guardaaz and live, much less defeat him.

"I won't leave Snow, Jaella."

"Rayné—" she was trying to plead, but the set of his jaw, the blaze of anger in his eyes told her he wasn't going to do what she wanted.

"No, Jaella, you listen to me. I've got no intention of leaving here without Snow."

"You'll be killed."

He shrugged. "If Raené had been here to help us I'd already be dead anyway."

"But—"

He shook his head. "I...love him Jaella. I won't abandon him to Guardaaz even if it means I die trying. I'm going after him."

"I don't want you to die, Rayné."

"Don't you understand, Jaella? Without him—" he closed his eyes, unable to find the words to explain what was in his heart. "Without him I've got no reason to live. Do you think even if we find a way to beat Guardaaz that I'll be able to forget Snow's touch? Do you think I could forgive myself if I walk out of here, if I desert him?"

"No," she sighed. "It's why I want to stay, Rayné. It's why I have to try to save him. I..." She met his gaze, "I love him too even if it makes no sense."

He touched her cheek, "But it makes perfect sense, Jaella. All our lives we've waited for the Prince to come for us, to make us his own. It's what we were born and bred for cousin. And though Snow isn't Raené, he does hold the Prince's power, and that makes us his no matter what any of us might want. We belong to him."

She stood there, staring at him. What he'd said made sense and explained some of her attraction to Snow. She did want him, but it wasn't just the physical attraction that drew her to him. There was something

BAGNOBAK TANGO

more, a pull that went all the way to her soul and the stain of her demonic heritage.

"How can we find him?"

"Guardaaz will lead us to him," he replied and took her hand. "Come on."

She followed and the pair started up the steps.

Not long after that they came out into a broad expanse of hallway that was lit on both sides with flickering torches that burned an unnatural shade of blue-green.

The floor was uneven, covered in dancing shadows. They stepped out of the stairway and Jaella stumbled, discovering that the floor was composed of something that moved under her feet. She squinted trying to tell what she was stepping on, the strange light playing tricks on her eyes.

"Mother Moon," she gasped as she realized that they were walking on human skulls. Hundreds of them that lined the hallway as far as she could see.

Rayné's face was grim, but he started walking, treading on the skulls as if he were taking a walk on the rocky shore of a stream and not striding over the remains of hundreds of people.

"It isn't going to get any better than this, Jaella. Don't let him win with fear," he told her.

Her own face set into grim lines she nodded and followed him down the hallway. They reached the end of the corridor of skulls, a pair of massive doors preventing them from going any further.

She was considering trying to open them with a spell, but hesitated to waste her magic when the doors rippled and two human shaped demons—their bodies covered in dark green scales—stepped out of the doors.

"No human may enter here," the first demon said in a squeaky voice.

"Turn back or die," the second grated.

"We, aren't going back," she told them.

Rayné smiled coldly at them. "And what makes you think we're human?" he asked, voice gone soft, almost sensual in tone.

Amazed, Jaella watched as frost layered her cousin's skin, tendrils of mist wafting away from him. He was manifesting power, magic that her kinsman, Rayné didn't possess.

MICHAEL BARNETTE

Couldn't possess as the unclaimed Avatar of a dead Prince of demonkind.

But there was no denying that she was seeing her kinsman use the magic that was attributed to the Coldlands, and this time Snow wasn't with them so he couldn't be pulling it from the Immortal as she'd suspected he'd done during battles with the slug and the Horde.

The first demon smirked, "Pretty little part-demon, you'll make a tender morsel for Guardaaz's next feasting."

"Whether he will do the feasting or dying remains to be seen," Rayné all but purred as he closed the distance between himself and the pair of guardian demons.

Jaella drew on her own power, ready to cast a spell in defense of her cousin. She had no idea what he was doing—or thought he was doing—because she couldn't see how he planned to get past the demons.

He licked his lips as if he hungered, reached out and caressed the slimy looking scales of the first one's face.

It shuddered, moaned and reached for him, the sharp prick between its thighs standing rigid.

But Rayné was already touching the second demon.

They both went for him, cocks hard, eyes burning with inhuman lust.

Laughing he dodged out of their reach, "Do you plan to share me then?"

"No," they both growled and turned on one another, tearing with their claws they started to fight. Biting and snarling they went down in a wildly flailing, snapping rending maelstrom of mutual destruction.

"Shall we, cousin?" Rayné asked and motioned toward the doors.

"Rayné?" she made a question of his name, no longer so sure that he was really her kinsman. He'd changed drastically just since they'd entered Guardaaz's Fortress and she was beginning to doubt, to distrust the thing that looked so much like her kinsman.

Maybe he'd been taken when they weren't watching. Maybe Guardaaz was controlling him somehow.

"Don't trust me anymore?" he asked.

"I..umm...that is..."

He smiled. "No? Well no matter."

Rayné shoved the doors open.

The room was massive. Titanic columns lined both sides of the vast cavern, their unseen tops vanished into the darkness above them.

BAGNOBAK TANGO

Massive candelabras made a line down the middle of the room, the stink of burning human flesh filled the air, and Jaella realized the candles were made of human fat.

At the far end of the room was a massive throne on which sat a huge demon. Twice as tall as Snow, it was human-shaped like the guardians from the doorway, but that's where it's similarity to anything human ended. A long tail curved down the dias on which the throne sat, huge horns like those of a bull crowned its head amid a writhing flames of green. And it was covered in scales of a deep green.

Beside the enthroned demon was Snow. He wasn't moving, but there were black chains holding him, so Jaella didn't think he was dead. You didn't typically need to chain the dead.

At least she didn't think so.

But with a demon one never knew.

"Come and beg for my mercy," the demon told them and motioned them to come closer with a wiggle of a clawed hand.

The two of them walked closer until they were a few dozen feet from the dias.

Guardaaz gestured to Snow who lay unmoving beside the throne. "You thought he could kill me. Me the mighty Guardaaz. Look at him. How pitiful. He was nothing! Nothing!"

But they were both looking at their battered and bloody lover, not the demon who sought their attention.

Seeing Snow chained and helpless angered Jaella, but she couldn't think of a thing to do that would help him, or win his freedom from the chains.

And even if she got him free what then?

"He's helpless to escape the binding I've laid upon him," the demon gloated. "What can the two of you do against me? Me the ruler of this Realm. A Realm I will reshape to suit me."

The demon leaned forward in his seat, the end of his tail twitching. "And I'll reshape the pair of you to suit me also." He leered at Jaella. "I'll relish fucking your tight hole, and no matter how many times I tear your ass or pussy with my cock you'll always be tight. I'll make sure of it."

Jaella started to raise her hand but Rayné stopped her, shook his head and glanced at Snow.

Pale grey eyes were regarding them. He was at least awake.

"No, I didn't think you'd dare attack me." The demon smirked. "I'll rule you and this realm both."

MICHAEL BARNETTE

"You aren't ruler here yet," Rayné stated. His words were spoken in a calm voice that lacked any trace of threat.

Guardaaz laughed. "Perhaps not, but who will stand against me now that your champion is my captive?"

Jaella wanted to deny Guardaaz, she wanted to say he was wrong, but with Snow enslaved there wasn't much she could say.

"I will," Rayné stated in the same calm tone. He took a step closer to the demon. There were faint traces of mist spinning away from his feet, frost sparkled in the light and a creeping cold slid up her legs.

"YOU?" the demon roared out his laughter, the sound making the entire Fortress shake. Strange as it was, it didn't have the same effect they'd suffered while outside of the structure.

Jaella glanced sideways at her kinsman and wondered what he was going to do, the whole question of the magic he was using coming to the forefront of her mind.

Rayné leaned closer to her, whispering, "I'll distract him, see if you can get to Snow and get him free."

Se nodded. "Be careful."

"Don't worry about me," he said offering her a wry smile. "We're both good as dead anyway. Free Snow if you can, he's our only hope to get out of this mess."

He was right and she knew it. If Snow died they died, and so did their entire world.

* * * *

Rayné walked slowly toward Guardaaz. "So you find me amusing, do you demon?"

Guardaaz grinned, showing off a crag of fangs that looked fully able to bite Rayné in half if that was the demon's desire. "Few humans have been as entertaining as the three of you," it said.

Rayné gave Guardaaz a frosty smile in return. "Well we'll just see how amusing you find this."

The black mist that was a mark of Raené's power—and that of anything owed its origin to the Coldlands—swirled into being around Rayné.

From the corner of his eye he could see Jaella staring at him in amazement. At some point he'd have to tell her what was happening to him, but at the moment he had other concerns.

BAGNOBAK TANGO

Guardaaz chuckled. "Such an impressive display for a human," he sneered. "I'm almost loath to tell you that it doesn't impress me in the least."

"No? Pity. Perhaps I should try harder," Rayné remarked.

The mist surrounding him vanished as if it had never existed.

Guardaaz rose from his throne to tower over Rayné in an overt bid to make him afraid. He should have been scared witless, he really should be, but he felt not a trace of terror. He felt nothing but a sense of growing contempt for the demon and his petty efforts to dominate and terrify them.

"Pathetic," he said, gaze lifted to meet the demon's stare.

Obsidian eyes narrowed and Guardaaz's lips twisted into a snarl. "Yes, you are quite pathetic," he growled trying to redirect Rayné's insult.

Rayné's icy smile didn't waver.

"And now that your pitiable demonstration is over—" The demon took a step forward, its tail rising as if the demon planned to smash Rayné.

Jaella screamed, "No! Please!"

The demon smiled. "What will you offer me to keep from crushing him?"

"I..."

"She'll offer nothing," Rayné stated. "I've only just gotten started with my demonstration."

Guardaaz grinned. "Really? My you do want to be crushed don't you?"

"No. If anyone around here needs to be crushed, it's you." Rayné made a two-handed sweeping motion that was directed at Guardaaz.

A blast of frigid wind with the force of a gale slammed into the demon sending him tumbling off the dais and across the room almost to the pillars on the far right side of the room.

It left Snow unguarded and served to redirect all of Guardaaz attention to Rayné.

"Be ready," he told Jaella and saw her nod.

Roaring in fury the demon regained its feet and stalked slowly toward Rayné. "For that I'll fuck you until you split in two."

"With a pitiful tool like that?" Rayne retorted acidly, his gaze focused on the demon's prick. "I'll hardly notice something that small."

MICHAEL BARNETTE

"Goddess...have you gone totally mad Rayné?" he heard Jaella whisper.

"I told you, don't worry about me," he replied as Guardaaz bellowed and charged at them.

"Run Jaella. Save Snow. I'll give you as much time as I can," Rayne told her as he repeated the sweeping gesture.

Guardaaz's tail clipped him, but the blistering cold wind knocked Guardaaz flying head over heels even as the Avatar was sent tumbling in the opposite direction. He came to a stop and found that his left arm wouldn't move. It didn't matter, Jaella was on her way up the dias toward Snow.

Guardaaz was coming for him again, oblivious to anything that Jaella was doing, which was the whole point in Rayné enraging the demon. While it chased and tried to kill him Jaella would be free to aid Snow however she could.

Rayné ran, fleeing for the forest of pillars on the far side of the room, a flurry of ice shards coming down on Guardaaz to ensure the angry demon would follow him.

And Guardaaz did follow Rayné, the demon screaming out his anger.

Rayné dodged behind a pillar which exploded in a shower of stone shards as Guardaaz's tail impacted with it. If he'd been a split second slower it would have been his spine shattering under the force, rather than the stone.

Black fog rose up Rayné forming armor, a sword and a thin wall of ice that deflected Guardaaz's reaching claws long enough for Rayne to evade yet another of the demon's potentially deadly attacks.

"This is the best you can do?" he taunted the horror from beyond the Abyss.

He leaped behind a pillar as more chips of stone rained across the ground. The column toppled and Rayné scrambled out of the way as broken stone cascaded in a deadly fall around him.

Guardaaz was struck by two of the stones and Rayné took advantage of the opening in his opponent's defenses to hurl hail the size of melons at the demon.

A roar shook the pillars and Rayné started running again as more stone fell from above.

* * * *

BAGNOBAK TANGO

Jaella's heart jolted at the sight that met her eyes when she reached the top of the dais and could actually see Lord Snow.

He was covered in blood and slime. Bites and the marks of claws marred his skin which had taken on a grey pallor as if she viewed a corpse. Even his buttocks were bitten. There was blood pooled beneath him, so much blood that no mortal could live through such loss.

Her eyes took in the details of his horrific wounds, and she gasped. He'd been raped brutally.

She wanted to go to him, to cradle his head in her lap and soothe away his terrible wounds with her magic, to kiss away the awful memories.

Snow was lying so still that Jaella feared he might be beyond her help, but the Immortal raised his head to look at her with pain-dulled eyes.

"Get me out of these damned chains if you can."

She reached out to touch one of them.

"Don't. They're enchanted to dampen magic, and I don't want you caught in their spell."

Heeding his warning she refrained from touching the heavy chains. "I'm not sure how to break them without hurting you."

"Hurt me then. Your spells are at least clean, unlike this foulness which binds me."

"Snow..."

"Don't argue!" he snapped out. "These things are sapping more than my magic, they are warping my soul. If you don't want me to become one of his mindless slaves, you'll free me. And if you can't free me, then kill me if you can."

She didn't want to think about doing that, wasn't even sure she could kill an Immortal with the limited magical energy she retained.

Summoning up the most powerful spell she dared to use, she gripped her right wrist with her left hand, held her hand palm out at the nearest chain, and focused. "Sunrazor," she murmured. A bright line of intense light, of seething fire bit into the chain, melting, softening it.

Grunting from the effort, Snow tensed the muscles of his arm, ignoring the heat scorching his wrist. With a crack the chain broke.

Snow was gasping from the strain. "Good. Do another."

The Sorceress flexed the fingers of her right hand which was aching from the spell she'd just used. "I'm not sure I can."

"Jaella, you have to."

MICHAEL BARNETTE

She looked into his pleading gaze and nodded. A moment later the second chain fell free. Hurting, staggering with weakness she cast the spell a third time and watched the magic burn into the chain around his waist. He strained, pushing up on his hands and knees and that chain failed.

Trembling from weakness she focused on the next chain, but long before the spell died Snow had his leg free. She quickly changed her focus to the last chain the magic dying too soon. He couldn't break the chain.

Whimpering from pain, her hand swollen, the nails burnt from the spell's power, she cast it one last time, crying out when her own flesh started to char. Gasping her knees buckled and she stayed there, tears filling her eyes, sliding down her cheeks

Jaella had achieved her goal. Snow was free.

Fighting the pain she crept to Snow. The chains were broken, but he lay there insensate, eyes closed, lips and face as grey as those of a dead man. She'd freed him at the cost of her own hand, but she'd burned him too and she wondered if, coupled with the damage done by Guardiaaz, he'd actually succumbed to the pull of death.

But can something like him die? she wondered.

She brushed the long hair from his face with her uninjured hand. "Snow?"

Pale grey eyes opened but they were unfocused, dulled by pain and suffering.

A rolling boom brought her eyes up from the fallen Lord of the Coldlands to seek out her cousin. He was still fighting Guardiaaz, only his greater agility keeping him alive as he dodged out of reach of the demon's lashing tail. It collided with a pillar at the side of the hall and chunks of stone were torn free amid another of the echoing booms.

Rayné couldn't last much longer without help.

But one look at Snow told her that her kinsman was on his own, possibly for the rest of the battle if she couldn't get the big Immortal onto his feet and she had no idea how to accomplish that. Unless....

She glanced at Rayné as he spun away from the demon's talons, black mist wrapping around him and forming a shield of ice that the claws struck and shattered.

The Coldlands' magic her kinsman could wield seemed to have no effect on Guardiaaz and she wondered if it was a matter of not enough

BAGNOBARK TANGO

skill or whether Snow's greater ability had proven just as ineffective as Rayné was against the demon.

Yet Snow had told them Guardaaz was a captive of Raené's, so the Prince had somehow used the Coldlands' magic to bind the other demon.

More stone shattered and Jaella decided to try her idea. She grasped the flaccid meat between Snow's legs and stroked it firmly. It came instantly to life— proving he wasn't dead—and the colorless eyes blinked and darkened slightly.

A few rough strokes had Snow hard and she slipped off her undergarment and straddled the man, lowering herself until he was tightly sheathed in her flesh.

She felt filled with ice and she heard him groan, barely making out a, "Yes," in the sound he made.

Her hips rocked, internal muscles gripping him, pumping his flesh and as she watched some of the bruises on his face visibly faded, bites filling with ice and closing as life returned to his body.

Her own pain faded, her scorched hand going cold as he gently grasped it, ice flowing over the burn, the charred skin healing.

She moved faster because they had no time to waste. Snow needed the energy as did she, and Rayné needed their help before the demon killed him. The big cock filling her coupled with the way she clenched and rode it sent fast cresting waves of pleasure through her.

Beneath her Snow groaned and began to match her pace stroke for stroke.

Hard and fast, Jaella drove herself along his erection, building the energy, healing both of them. Tendrils of inky cold wafted away from them, spreading frost on the broken chains that surrounded them. The scent of flowers and rain rose with the mist, and pallid flickers of heatless flame burned along her thighs.

There was an angered roar, the sound of something running across the pavement, coming closer.

She turned her head, saw Rayné running for his life, the demon in pursuit.

Snow's hands gripped her hips, and she looked, saw his eyes were black as pitch, his wounds totally healed. He somehow got to his knees without breaking contact with her and she wrapped her legs around him, rolling her hips to keep the magic flowing between them.

By the time Rayné reached them Snow was thrusting into her in a frenzy, both of them ready to cum.

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Instead of letting herself achieve the release she desired, Jaella dropped to her feet and together the three of them faced Guardaaz who paused a dozen feet away to regard them. In as much as she could read the face of a demon Guardaaz appeared wary. Unsure of what they had done.

* * * *

Even with the power gained by what they'd just done, Snow knew they couldn't win unless...

He looked down into Rayné's eyes. "You are the Avatar."

Snow saw the understanding in the boy's gaze, a knowing smile curled the young warrior's mouth.

"It could kill you," Snow warned, but there was something strange in the twist of Rayné's mouth, in the way he lowered his eyelids as if trying to hide something lurking in the violet depths of his gaze.

Snow scowled. "Rayné?"

Rayné shook his head. "I *was* the Avatar and it might have killed him. I'm not the Avatar anymore. But you suspect that, don't you?"

Snow touched the cool cheek and the eyes turned up to regard him. Eyes he knew. "Yes. But...how can this be?"

"You devoured him, but your soul vomited part of him up when you took my soul and killed me. That gave him the chance he'd been waiting for all along."

Jaella was frowning and he could see her trying to follow their conversation and not quite managing. "What are you talking about?"

"Killing Guardaaz," Snow explained without really explaining anything.

Snow kissed Rayné and Coldlands fog poured off of them. Rayné moaned, Snow groaned and held Rayné tighter. He could see Guardaaz staring at them.

The demon looked uneasy, as unsure of what was happening as Jaella. Taloned hands flexed, claws clicking, the demon's tail twitching. He didn't want to give it more time to think of a plan of attack, or to summon help if he had any minions left to call.

Snow broke his kiss with Rayné and grinned at the thing from the Abyss. What they were going to do might work, or it might get them all killed but they'd known this battle would be winner takes all, including the soul of the loser or losers.

"Be ready," he whispered to Jaella and took her hand in his, drawing some of the magic she'd gained from their brief sexmagic encounter. She

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didn't resist, but her curious expression told him she had no idea what was coming.

And he couldn't explain. There wasn't any time.

"You cannot defeat me with your pitiful fuckmagic. Don't you understand that?" Guardaaz asked as he took a step toward them.

Snow continued to grin. "We know. But we've got a weapon greater than that," he stated as he pulled Rayné close. Bending down, eyes still on the demon he kissed Rayné and let a flood of the energy he'd gained with Jaella flow into the young warrior. Raené's Avatar, now something else. Something changed and warped because of what he'd done.

Because he'd further tainted the young warrior's soul.

He remembered Rayné's words, *'I'm trying to save the world, and I'm willing to die if that's what it takes.'*

And the power he gave to Rayné included the entire scope of the power that had belonged to Raené. The Coldlands power leaving Snow to fill Raené's former Avatar.

When he broke the kiss he whispered, "I love you."

Rayné's eyes met his, the violet growing brighter as the magic Snow had just worked began to claim his flesh.

A slender hand touched Snow's cheek. Icy cold. Gentle as a lover. "I know."

Rayné's head lowered, eyes closing as the traces of mist fluttered away from him, delicate as a strands of gossamer. Tiny particles of ice tapped on the black marble pavement, glittering there like a scattering of tiny gems in the dim light.

Guardaaz snarled and Snow saw the glint of comprehension light the demon's eyes. "I'LL KILL YOU ALL!" he roared and launched himself at them.

The red-haired warrior who'd been Rayné spun around to face Guardaaz, arms raised, a snarl of rage twisting his sensuous mouth.

"THEY ARE MINE!" the voice that tore out of Rayné's throat wasn't any more human than the bellowing of Guardaaz.

A blast of frigid wind struck Guardaaz and knocked the huge demon off his feet and sent him tumbling across the floor. Ice coated the creature, a loud bellow of rage coming from the gaping maw as it got to its feet.

Snow smiled and pulled Jaella close. "Time to find out if we live or die," he told her.

"RAENÉ I'LL KILL YOU!" the demon shrieked.

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"You've said that before," Rayné replied voice dripping contempt. Snow held his hand out and the iceblade formed.

Jaella stepped up beside her kinsman and whispered the words of a spell. Her hands shimmered as the magic built. She understood they had to give Rayné more time while he gained knowledge of the magic he'd just been given, but her own energies were limited, the magic used to free Snow had drained her reserves dangerously low.

Guardaaz charged at them, tail whipping toward Snow. The sword met the appendage. Dark blood splattered the floor and Snow was sent staggering backward, the blade broken. He tossed the haft aside and another formed in its place.

A dazzling brilliance erupted from Jaella's moving hands as the Sorceress took her turn at attacking Guardaaz.

The demon shrieked and staggered away, the scales of its face burning, charred bits falling to the floor where they hissed and emitted foul smelling smoke.

Guardaaz tore at the seared flesh, shook itself, half-blinded. Mad with rage it shrilled and came for the trio, to be met with another spell Jaella had woven. A blast of light cut across the demon's torso, spilling gore, bits of flesh sliced from the demon fell to the floor smoldering.

Screaming in agony, Guardaaz retreated, vanishing amid the forest of pillars to the left side of the immense room.

"We can't give it any chance to summon aid or regain its strength," Snow warned.

"I know," Jaella responded, glancing at her kinsman.

Rayné was covered in frost, mist spilling from him to lay a sheet of ice beneath him. "Keep him busy for a moment more, Sorceress."

She made a sweeping motion of her hands and tiny glimmers the color of rainbows appeared just beyond the tips of her fingers. They danced toward the hiding demon, gaining speed. When they reached the pillars they expanded into fiery blossoms that burst and blackened the pillars.

Burned, oozing fluids and noxious stench, Guardaaz came raging out of the columns, a seething blade forged from nothing but the lightless Void in the thing's grip. It came at them screaming guttural noises that had the sound of a curse.

Inky mist bled off of Rayné as Snow rushed forward to meet the charging demon. Glittering armor formed over his naked flesh and a new

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iceblade formed in his right fist, a short hafted battle ax appearing in his left hand.

Blades collided, the demon and the Immortal struggling for supremacy, each of them trying to overpower his opponent.

Jaella mentally sought a spell she could use to swing the battle in Snow's favor, but so many of them that she knew had the potential of hitting him, none she could think of with the type of pinpoint precision needed for such an attack.

She saw movement from the corner of her eye and turned to see Rayné drawing an arrow of ice with a bow of the same substance. A thread of his hair made the bowstring. She grinned. "Good thinking kinsman."

He returned her grin with a fierce expression of joy that wasn't quite human. He let the arrow fly and it struck the taller demon in the chest.

A bellow of pain came from Guardaaz's gaping mouth, and Rayné let fly with a second arrow that had formed. It too struck the demon who roared and redoubled its attack on Snow, striking the Immortal with its tail, sending Snow tumbling to crash against the side of the throne.

A blast of cold so intense it shattered the marble under their feet blew past Jaella, leaving her shivering, teeth chattering so badly she couldn't utter a sound.

Guardaaz staggered, slipping on the ice, tripping on the broken marble under his feet. Layers of ice shattered and fell from the demon. As fast as the ice cracked more formed, slowing the demon's efforts to retreat to the protection of the pillars.

Black mist flowed like a cloak from Rayné's shoulders. Jagged spikes of ice crowned his red-as-blood hair. Laughing he went striding toward the demon.

Jaella stared. It was her kinsman, and yet—it wasn't.

Her eyes widened as her mind wrapped around the truth.

It wasn't her cousin Rayné, it was the Prince of the Coldlands: Raené had been reborn somehow.

Guardaaz was staring at the apparition, teeth bared in a snarl. "What trickery is this?"

"No trickery," Snow said as he got to his feet and came forward.

Laughter, mocking and cruel spilled from Rayné's mouth, and Jaella feared her kinsman would be lost to her forever. She wanted to cry.

Guardaaz struck the Immortal, sending him flying, deep gashes from his claws spilling blood.

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Anger flashed in the violet eyes and Rayné hurled a javelin of ice into Guardaaz, the demon roaring in agony as it pierced his belly.

"TOUCH WHAT IS MINE AGAIN, AND YOU'LL SUFFER FOR A THOUSAND GENERATIONS OF MORTAL KIND!" Rayné warned.

Guardaaz pulled the javelin out and hurled it at her cousin. It flew true and struck him in the chest, falling to powdery snow at his feet.

"Very foolish, Guardaaz. That which is of my own magic cannot harm me, or have you forgotten even the most basic rules of power?"

A second javelin arched toward her cousin, this one of the same light-eating substance Guardaaz made his swords from. It too hit Rayné, but it sank into him unhindered, and her cousin smiled. "Demon essence cast against one greater than you? Also foolish."

Jaella felt as if her heart had turned to stone, or filled with ice. This wasn't her Rayné. It wasn't her kinsman. It was Raené come back to life, and that meant her sweet cousin whom she loved was...dead.

* * * *

The demon was watching him, and he could smell its fear, taste it in the air. "You have dared to try and take what is mine. Fool! I captured you last time, but this time you will die!"

Bellowing Guardaaz hurled the first spell that any of them had seen him use, a bolt of blackness arcing for Rayné. It hit a wall of ice that had formed before the former Avatar, the magic washing across the surface, dispersing into a pool of stink.

"Was that the best you could do?" Rayné sneered.

Guardaaz crouched, eyes blazing red as a glimpse into hell. "You were dead! I see I'll have to kill you myself to make sure of it."

The demon stalked toward Rayné, the black sword forming along with heavy armor, a sign that he'd learned caution along with his fear of them.

Snow moved to interpose himself between Guardaaz and Rayné pinned his lover to the spot where he stood with a sharp look. The man scowled but stayed where he was. Rayné shook his head at Guardaaz. "I'm not Snow to face you in fair combat, Guardaaz." A smile twisted Rayné's mouth into a demonic vision of unholy beauty.

Snow groaned and whispered, "Master," just loud enough for Rayné to hear him.

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"Oh Goddess..." he heard Jaella breathe, and he caught the scent of female lust-musk in the air. He shivered, aroused, wanting to sink his cock into both of them.

Such pleasant thoughts.

And only one thing standing in his way...

Guardaaz swung his sword at Rayné, but he vanished in a swirl of black mist only to reappear behind the other demon.

Guardaaz growled. "Damn you!"

"You should realize we're all of us damned from birth."

A slender hand was lifted and Guardaaz vainly sought to escape, but it was too late.

A blast of frigid air carried a fury of icy particles that coalesced into a myriad of tiny blades that shredded the demon's flesh.

With a final whimper of sound, Guardaaz crumpled to the marble, the demon's entire form slipping and melting like a candle left in the sun until the only thing left was a stinking pool of greenish-grey ooze which slowly smoked, evaporating into nothingness.

"And so dies another fiend that should never have set foot into the Mortal Realms," Snow said on a tired sigh as Jaella bound the deep gashes in his arm. He was healing still, even this far from the Gate, his source of power, but it was slow, and blood ran sluggishly from the deep wounds.

Rayné leaned against the tall throne that had belonged to the demon. He was exhausted from the battle and the struggle to use and contain the power of the Coldlands that Snow had given him. The fight was over, and he let his hold on it go, the demon's power returning to the Immortal where it belonged.

The throne shifted and he jumped aside, staggering as it turned into nothing more than a pile of stinking, oozing clay.

He cast a puzzled look at what had, an instant before, been a gleaming throne of gold and sparkling gems. "What the hell?" he muttered, mouth pulling into a frown, amethyst eyes narrowing in confusion.

"Ummm...this might be bad," the young warrior remarked as he jumped from the dais on which the throne had been set. It too was slowly shifting, turning to nothing but mud.

The stones of the fortress began to shake, dust and clods of dirt sifting down over them, small bits of broken rock pattering onto a floor that was suddenly nothing more than dirt.

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Rayné stared at his lovers, "Correction, this *is* bad."

"I think he has a point," Snow agreed as he swept the halls of the great chamber with eyes that still retained the darkness of his prior fury.

A huge crack appeared in the wall behind the melted throne and a dull roaring could be heard from somewhere in the depths of the structure.

The magical adhesion that held the Fortress together was as dead as its creator. The whole place was starting to come apart.

"Bad! Very bad!" Rayné shouted and made a violent gesture with his hands that overlaid the crumbling stone with thick layers of ice that instantly started to fracture. Unable to hold back the tide of destruction tearing the Fortress apart, the ice started to break under the pressure of the stone.

Snow regarded Jaella. "Running might be a good idea," he stated as he grabbed the boy around the waist and took Jaella's hand.

The Lord of the Coldlands ran, bringing Rayné and the woman along, the three of them racing toward the doors that led out of the throne room.

The columns at the sides of the room were collapsing, cracking and crumbling. Gobs of clay fell from the ceiling and the candelabras fell with echoing crashes and sprays of hot tallow that burned the three of them.

Snow grabbed Jaella and Rayné as the last of the candelabras came down right in front of them. A wall of ice screened them from the hot tallow for an instant then he was running, half carrying both of them as the walls started to fall inward.

Huge stones cracked and crumbled around them.

Ahead of them great blocks shifted and shook.

They started to run as the whole place started to crumble.

Stone melted, turned to clay that clutched at their feet.

"I don't believe this. We kill Guardaaz only to die under the ruins of his Fortress!" Jaella gasped out as they reached the corridor of skulls.

"We're not dead yet," Snow told her.

"There were stairs here!" Rayné said. But the stairs that had brought them to the corridor of skulls were gone.

"We need to make our own way out somehow," Snow told them as he ran to the nearest wall. His fist smashed into it, and Snow was nearly mired as the wall started to run, fetid water and stinking mud oozing down almost covering him.

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Rayné froze the mud and the Immortal searched for another way to get them out.

The floor beneath their feet collapsed with a roar, but once again Rayné's quick thinking saved them as a thick sheet of ice formed under them. With Jaella screaming in fright they slid down down, down into the darkness to come to a crashing stop against a pile of stone that started to bleed water the instant they struck it.

Snow had to pick Rayné up, the young warrior too dazed by the impact to stand. Jaella gasped for breath, but lifted her hand, a ball of heatless light filling it. They searched the darkness for any way out of the room.

"Are those doors?" Jaella asked and pointed.

Bits of stone and melting ice rained down on them along with gobs of stinking muck and chill wads of mud.

"I think so," Snow said. "Come on we need to get out of here."

He hefted Rayné in his arms and the pair of them ran.

Before they even reached the far side of the room, the doors they thought they'd found collapsed outward with a roar, hunks of the wall going with them.

Past the hole they could see...

Stars. Stars filling the night sky.

Gasping they ran out of the Fortress just as the whole structure toppled, and collapsed returning to the mud and stones from which it had been built.

Exhausted Snow came to a stop just beyond the edge of the ruin, Jaella clinging to him.

They were free.

And Guardaaz was dead.

Elated, Snow kissed the woman at his side.

"Hey, what about me?" Rayné asked from his arms.

Snow kissed him thoroughly to silence his complaint.

* * * *

Once more Jaella stood before the Gate but this time Snow and Rayné were with her, and this time the Maidens weren't cowering beside the pillars.

"I can't leave you here. Not when what I've done might create an Avatar of my blood."

She looked up at him. "Not an Avatar, a line of sorceresses capable of summoning you."

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"I can't permit that. Not here. Guardaaz has all but destroyed this Realm's defenses against demonkind. If I leave you here it could start another disaster like the one we just averted. I can't keep coming back here to save your people. I'm sorry."

Rayné's amethyst eyes narrowed and frost spread across his skin as he showed how prepared he was to fight even the man he loved to protect the woman he loved. Jaella sighed.

"What do you mean to do with my cousin?" Rayné asked, hand going to the hilt of his new sword.

Jaella watched Snow, watched the way he stood there, unmoving and unmoved by the implied threat in Rayné's voice. But then why should he be afraid of Rayné? Her kinsman's power was nothing compared to that the Lord of the Coldlands.

"Then what will you do? Kill me?"

"I.. won't..." he shook his head, "I can't do that."

"Then what? Will you use your powers to take the child from my womb? Or will you simply kill it inside me."

"I can't do that either."

"We have an impasse then."

"Yes," he agreed, then he tipped his head to one side and stood there studying them both. "Unless...."

"Unless?"

"You return to the Coldlands with me. Both of you, because I can't leave an Avatar of my former Master—especially one that has taken some of his soul into himself—behind either."

She stared at him open mouthed. "Go there! *With* you?"

"Both of us?" Rayné asked, echoing her own shock. But she saw the speculative look in her cousin's eyes.

Snow nodded, his grey eyes full of emotion, a plea and something more: lust perhaps. Or was it...? But no, she couldn't believe that.

"I love you, Jaella." Snow looked at her kinsman, "And you also, Rayné."

They were both staring at him.

Rayné nodded and put his arms around Snow. "I love you too, I just wasn't sure you'd meant it when you said it to me before."

Snow caressed Rayné's face, bent down to kiss him gently. "I did and I do."

Rayné offered Snow the barest trace of a smile. "Do you?"

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"Yes," the Immortal replied as he cupped Rayné's butt in his hands and pulled him close.

* * * *

Jaella smiled and stood there looking at the two men. She could see that they were in love, had known it from the first time Snow had made love to Rayne even if the two men hadn't realized it. They were both very attractive in their own ways. All she needed to do was look at Snow and she wanted him. She'd wanted Rayné, her untouchable kinsman for far longer. And he was no longer an untouchable virgin in love with another man. He was the get of a lust demon who'd learned the pleasures of the flesh, and found that even feminine flesh had the ability to please him. She slipped her arms around him from behind and kissed his pale, frost dusted shoulder. Even his skin tasted of honey and spices now.

"Will you go?"

"Yes," they both agreed.

"Then what are we waiting for?" Snow asked.

"For you to take us home, of course," Jaella replied.

Snow kissed her gently. "All right then. Let's go."

"Why do you always kiss her first?" Rayné complained. "What am I, a pet?"

She watched Snow as he turned a measuring look on her kinsman. "Do you want to be a pet?" the Immortal leaned in close, his lips almost touching Rayné's. "You'd make a lovely pet. I could make you a pretty collar of ice."

A blush colored her kinsman's face.

"Snow don't tease him like that."

"Why not? Can't you see he likes it?"

The color staining Rayné's cheeks darkened. "I.."

"Come on, we can talk about this once we're home."

Home. It was a wonderful word.

Jaella squealed when Snow scooped her into his arms and started for the Gate.

* * * *

The Gate opened, churning black mist and blizzard bitter wind pouring forth for the last time.

Snow kissed Jaella soundly before he stepped through. Rayné, had an arm around the Immortal and was walking at his side.

"I'm going to get jealous here," the former Avatar complained.

"Hmm.. sounds like a pet asking to be punished."

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"I am not!"

"Not a pet or not asking to be punished?" Snow asked as the Gate started to shimmer.

"I'm not a pet!"

"Oh, so you *do* want to be punished!"

"NO!"

The Maidens of the Moon giggled as the Lord of the Coldlands, the Sorceress and the Avatar faded from sight as the Gate closed. The stones that framed it turning black and crumbling to dust as they watched.

Without the bloodline of Raené in their world, the Gate could no longer exist, and no demon would ever be able to return to their Realm. They would be safe, forever.

The women turned away, leaving the Temple. It would be part of their history, but it was no longer of importance to their future.

The horns of Ragnarok would never sound in their Realm, and at least here the demons from beyond the Abyss would never again dance a tango across the souls of humanity.

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EPILOGUE

Icy particles fell with a quiet hiss through the frozen forest. The light fall slowed. Stopped.

There was a hushed silence, then a tiny motion became noticeable at the ends of one frozen tree branch.

A tiny bud burst through the layer of powdery snow to unfurl a pale pink blossom.

Spring had come to at last to the Coldlands.

A woman's laughter chimed through the spires of ice that formed the crystal Palace, followed by a man's booming roar of mirth.

"I'll get you both, I swear I will," a second male voice threatened. "Get this thing off of me! I'm not a pet!" But he was laughing as loudly as his companions as life burst forth in the once dead land. "Keep laughing, go on! See if I pleasure either of you! I mean it! Really! I do!"

"I bet he won't last an hour," the rumbling voice remarked.

"I don't know, he can be pretty stubborn."

"Oh come on, let me out of this cage. I'll be good!"

Laughter rolled across the land spreading warmth, the land bursting forth with life.

The Coldlands were no more. Spring had finally come to the winter locked land.

Wild laughter, untamed and free filled the Palace, transforming the towering fingers of ice to sparkling crystal, bright as diamonds, that glittered with the myriad colors of love.

MICHAEL BARNETTE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Barnette was nominated for a Spectrum Award in 2003 for his first published erotic short story *Zoner*, which has now appeared internationally in both English and Italian language editions. *Zoner* has become the first story in the *Through Neon Eyes* series.

Once a resident of Coconut Grove and South Beach in Florida, Michael relocated to Georgia where there were fewer gunshots and yard to yard searches for suspects to disturb the writing muses. He has since moved on and now lives in a very small town in the Midwest.

To find out more about Michael's works visit these sites on the Internet.

<http://www.michaelbarnette.com>
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To chat directly with Michael and some of his readers join his Immortal Heroes chat group.

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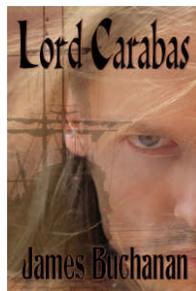
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