



PHAZE
HEAT SHEET

Smuggler

MICHAEL BARNETTE

Midwinter's Night

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Midwinter's Night

Also by Michael Barnette

Apocalypse Dance

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He stood by the double-paned window of his cabin and watched the fury of the blizzard. Winter had well and truly gripped the land in its frigid talons, and he knew that it wouldn't let up until the warmth of spring returned.

He sipped hot cider from the mug in his hands and tried not to think, tried not to feel.

There was only now. Only the screaming storm and the cup in his hands.

No past.

No future, either.

He sighed and shook his head.

But the inescapable memories were there, rooted in his head like some noxious weed that he couldn't excise.

And they were always strongest when the winter winds blew cold as death's hands.

"No point in tormenting yourself with things you cannot change," he whispered.

It was a bad habit, talking to himself. But there wasn't anyone else to talk to these days. Even the traders that had come up the pass in the late spring, and went down the pass in early fall, had stopped using the narrow track that passed near his cabin. And he couldn't even recall the last time he'd seen a fur trapper on his lonely mountain.

Thinking about the past was an even worse habit than talking to himself. The long winter nights—when the only sounds were the wailing of wind and wolves—seemed to bring out the worst of those memories, because it was then that he remembered *her*.

For a moment he stopped eyeing the blowing snow in the window and saw instead the reflection of a face he hardly knew. Pale and gaunt, the eyes once bright as summer leaves were dulled to grey; hair once the color of new forged gold had lost its shine and dimmed to the color of sun-bleached straw.

He turned aside from the stranger he'd become to himself, preferring not to see the toll that the years away from his homeland had wrought on his body.

He already knew the price he'd paid within his soul.

Finishing the cider at one swallow, he set the cup in the basin and reached for the lamp to dim its bright glow. It was one of the few remaining luxuries from his past; a bit of home to cling to in a life with few such indulgences.

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It was something he should have purged from his life due to the bitterness and pain it awoke in his heart. But he couldn't bear to part with it, and really it was the only light he could rely on as it took no fuel and would never burn out.

Slender fingers marred by the faint lines of old scars touched the delicate crystal. Wrought from a cluster of yellow roses tinged with a blush of soft pink on the edges of each petal, the lamp gave off the fragrance of the flowers from which it had been fashioned as he touched it.

The past flooded his mind as the scent wrapped around him. Spring's gentle warmth. The sound of water spilling along the stones of the creek bed. Her laughter as she ran from him, her body pale as moonlit mist, flashing between mossy trees. Hair dark as midnight cascading to conceal the perfection of her form.

He'd raced after her, his blood hot, cock aching for the welcome her body promised.

The scent of roses filled the air with rich perfume.

But no flower could match the heady scent of her body, a light muskiness of arousal that he could detect even above the fragrance of the roses.

He blinked. His pulse was racing, blood pooling, turning flaccid flesh hard and aching. He pulled his hand away from the lamp as if he'd been scorched.

In a way he had.

Scorched by memories he wanted to forget.

He looked at his hand, but there was no redness and the pain was in his heart, not in the pale fingers. The lamp made no heat. There was no flame in the magically endowed petals to wound him.

But his fingers still felt scalded, his blood still burned and the flesh of his groin ached in ways he'd thought he'd never experience again.

He shook his head.

It wasn't the lamp that had burned him. It was the power of his mind alone, the bitterness of his own past tormenting him.

He closed his eyes, remembering the feel of her lips on his fingers in the very same place he'd thought himself burnt. He recalled her perfect face. Lips soft and sweet as a dew kissed flower. Skin so pale it seemed to glow by moonlight, and the drape of her hair. Black as the wing of a raven, all dark mystery touched with the blue of summer lightning around a body as slim and graceful as a young willow.

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But the thing he remembered with the greatest clarity were her eyes.
Eyes changeable as the sea, neither blue nor green nor grey but a mixture
of all that drew him in until he'd all but drowned in her beauty.

And she had been beautiful.

He'd been in love.

Still was.

So long ago.

So very far away.

And like the land of his birth, she was forever lost to him.

Tears slid down his cheeks.

He'd lost so much.

Not for the first time he contemplated simply walking out of the
door, going into the night and letting the elements claim him.

His life would end, and then none of the past—none of his pain—
would matter.

He would cease to be.

But, of all he was and all he was not, he'd never been a coward, and
he'd never chosen the easy path.

Though it had often tempted him.

Like tonight.

He opened his eyes on the dismal confines of his domain. A small
cabin of hand hewn logs chinked with mud and moss to keep out the
cold. A fireplace of river stone with a hearth to match. A pitiful bit of
furniture, all hand made, none of it more than functional. A trio of pots, a
single wash basin, a cracked pitcher and a few wooden bowls and plates.
An ax hung on the wall over the fireplace, balanced on a pair of
protruding stones he'd set there to hold it.

Those were the entirety of his possessions. That, and the lamp.

And the sword he kept under his bed.

Sighing he reached for the lamp, but a sound stopped his hand.

Puzzled he went to the window and peered out into the blizzard.

Whiteness. Even through the doubled panes of glass, he could feel
the intense cold. Anyone caught out there would be dead within
moments.

At least anything mortal would.

He stood there listening, looking, waiting. Whatever the sound had
been it wasn't repeated.

"Probably a branch torn from a tree," he decided and turned away.

Something dark moved amid the shrouds of wind-driven snow.

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He moved even closer to the glass and stared as a face came into view.

It was a face pale as the snow itself, a delicate oval tinged blue despite the hood that framed it. Tendrils of dark hair—black or deep brown—whipped by the wind alternately revealed and hid the being's face.

A gloved hand touched the glass in silent entreaty before the apparition vanished from his sight.

"Holy Mother of All," he swore and tore at the heavy bolt holding the cabin door shut. His haste was so great that he cracked the wooden catch, then tossed it aside and pulled the door open.

The blizzard's teeth bit sharply through his thin garments, but he didn't care, not when there was a living being in mortal peril somewhere out in the storm.

* * * *

Talons of cold ripped at flesh, despite the spells woven into the woolen garments. He was freezing, his limbs going stiff, numbed by the cold.

A motion—something approaching—drew his gaze. A shape coming out of the swirling chaos of the storm.

Delicate as the tracery of frost on glass, the face was partially obscured by hair hardly darker than the snow itself. Eyes of a washed out grey regarded him for a moment. He couldn't help staring at the other person. At the tips of ears that were pointed. The slight slant of the eyes.

So it was true. One of *them* did live up here on this mountain.

But was it the one he'd spent the last two years searching for?

An arm wrapped around him, pulled him to his feet, and then he was being carried toward a square of light that turned out to be nothing more magical than the door into the cabin that he'd stumbled across.

Mind as sluggish from the intense cold as was his body, it took several minutes for awareness of his surroundings to sink in past the exhaustion.

By the time his mind caught up with events, he'd been stripped of his wet clothing, wrapped in a blanket, and placed in a chair before the blazing fire with a steaming mug of cider in his chilled hands.

He blinked and looked around for any sign of his rescuer and found him sitting in a rough wooden chair on the other side of an equally inexpertly made table.

The only object on the table caught his attention.

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A spray of pink tinged yellow roses set in a vase of perfect crystal, the whole enchanted to emit heatless light.

If nothing else, that lamp might prove he'd found the right person, though by its glow he could clearly see the being didn't match the description he'd been given. The hair was too pale, the eyes almost without color.

What was it that my grandam told me? he asked himself. *Something about the Seelie kind fading slowly away if they were severed from the magic of their homeland for too long.*

Gold to near white. Bright green to grey. Yes, it might just be him after all.

But he looks...old.

It was the eyes. They were old, but the face itself was youthful.

"Why are you here, boy?"

Direct and to the point. That too was what he'd been told to expect of the Seelie fae he'd left home to find.

"Are you Aerdyn ar Shenlae of the Summer Country?"

The grey eyes narrowed. "He's dead."

"No, he went into exile," he replied. "And I've come to find him."

"Why?" The single word question was bit off and spat out like something foul tasting.

"Because I know he didn't commit the crime he was accused of. Together we can seek his pardon."

"It's too late for that now."

"Why?" Now it was his turn to ask a question.

"Because everything that mattered to him is lost."

"Ellian, Princess of the Unseelie?"

The Seelie male nodded, his face blank, but his eyes betraying the pain.

"I know you didn't kill her. You can go back, and I'll make a case for your pardon," he told him as he left his chair and went to stand at the older male's side.

"Come back to what? The pity of my former people? The cruel jests of yours?"

"She wasn't fully lost," he whispered as he laid a snow pale hand over the shoulder of his rescuer.

The grey eyes rose to regard him.

He saw the understanding fill the other male's gaze.

"You?"

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He nodded. "To save her essence and her magic she joined her soul to mine."

Aerdyn reached up, touched his cheek with a hand that shook, the taller Seelie male standing to look down at him, to gaze into his eyes. "Ellian?"

"In part, yes."

The hope died in the grey eyes and he stepped away, going to the window to stare out into the storm.

"Why come here to stir up old ghosts?"

"Because the part of her that lives in me loves you," he admitted. "And she's dying for want of your love."

He didn't turn but he nodded and said, "And without her you will cease to exist, too."

"Yes. We're irrevocably joined. Her death is my death."

"Why did you accept the burden of carrying her essence and magic? Why come here to torment me with it?"

"You don't remember me, do you?"

"No."

"I'm Lian, her younger brother."

The Seelie did turn to look at him then. He watched Aerdyn seeing the past reflected in his eyes.

He dropped the blanket to reveal his body and saw the shock as it registered in the Seelie's face. They were of a kind, he and his dead sister. Slim and pale, with long dark hair and eyes that shifted color. Though in his case there were hints of violet amid the blue, green, and grey.

Aerdyn turned away. "The one you seek died the day his beloved was murdered. There is nothing left of him."

Lian stepped closer, his slim body, catching the soft lamp light, glowed as if touched by the moon. "Look at me, Aerdyn."

"No." The word carried the pain of deep anguish.

Lian's voice grew softer, the notes sweeter as he said, "Please, beloved."

"I am *not* your beloved!" Aerdyn snarled, rage burning in his time-dulled eyes as he turned and gripped Lian's upper arms in hands that were surprisingly strong for a Seelie that had faded so greatly.

Heart filled with pain, fueled by the acrid taste of anguish, the color of red murder, Aerdyn shook the smaller Unseelie male. The last dregs of

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his depleted magic rose, ready to help him kill the Unseelie bastard that dared claim to carry the remnants of his lost love.

It isn't possible. It can't be.

Unseelie trap. Unseelie revenge after all this time. Yes, that he could believe.

But he wouldn't believe that this too-beautiful young male harbored the lingering remains of his lost love. Couldn't accept that any part of her still existed. Not after so long.

When their eyes met—changeable sea colors and the grey of his own grief—it was her face he saw. Her eyes full of fear. Her lips soft as petals, trembling with emotion.

And it was him scaring her. Him hurting her.

But one couldn't hurt the dead, could they?

He shoved Lian back, then took a few staggering steps away from the young Unseelie.

Her brother.

A Prince of the Dark Fae.

He closed his eyes trying to deny what he'd seen, what he'd felt.

"Aerdyn." It was her voice...almost. A bit deeper, but so hauntingly familiar.

A trap. It has to be a trap. He's come for revenge after all this time. Revenge for his sister's death.

Grief choked him until he could hardly draw a breath into his constricted lungs.

A gentle hand touched his shoulder, slid along his neck to caress his face.

He stepped away, stumbled, and shook his head. He wouldn't look. Didn't want to see the Unseelie's beauty. So like her. So different.

"Aerdyn." His name, spoken softly, spoken with love. He could hear it. Feel it in the slender hand that stroked his cheek, brushed the faded hair from his brow.

The touch sent a chill through him. A faint tingle of magic that his body absorbed the way dry ground took in water.

Or spilled blood.

"Aerdyn, my beloved."

And it was her. It was *her*.

Her touch. Her voice.

His love.

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But when he opened his eyes he saw another male, one of the Unseelie. Pale and slender as his lost love.

Lian. Her brother.

But never truly her.

Tears burned his eyes as a pair of arms encircled him, held him close to warm flesh, pressed his face to a shoulder veiled in ink dark hair.

Hands removed his clothing, tender lips kissed him, touching, caressing, awakening a body that had known nothing of pleasure in decades.

And he didn't resist. Not even when he was led to his meager bed and pushed gently down upon the straw-filled mattress.

He groaned as her scent wrapped around him, her voice whispered words of love.

But it's not her. She's dead.

He felt the weight of the Unseelie on him, felt a hard, lean body and an erect cock pressing to his thigh.

"NO!" he snarled and shoved his would-be seducer to the floor.

Lian landed in a sprawl, his long hair half covering his pale body, surrounding the jutting shaft of his erection so that it resembled a white spire amid a stormy sea.

Aerdyn's gaze fell on the young Unseelie, took in the almost helplessness of his form, the grace of his limbs, the pallor and beauty of his skin beneath the spun silk of his hair.

Lian wasn't Ellian.

But he *was* beautiful.

He wrenched his eyes from the Unseelie male as he rose to his feet.

This time Lian kept his distance, didn't seek to touch him, to kiss him.

Aerdyn could still feel the sweet burn of the kisses that Lian had placed on his lips and face. Could still smell the soft musk of arousal amid the scent of roses that filled the room from the lamp. His own arousal, and the lighter musk of Lian's body, which was similar to Ellian's but not exactly the same.

The smell of roses almost over powered both musky scents.

The lamp.

He walked past Lian, ignoring the hurt stare he was given as he examined the lamp. It was brighter, the light it emitted now accompanied by the scent of roses that had only come when he'd touched it for so long

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he'd almost forgotten it had once continually oozed the perfume of roses in her presence because it was a part of her, created by her spells.

Aerdyn started when he felt a hand touch his arm, slide down it and brush across the surface of a crystalline petal.

And there it was again, the heady fragrance of freshly blooming roses.

He put a hand on the one touching the lamp. Slender, pale. So like hers. He could almost pretend it *was* her. Almost.

An arm slid around his waist.

"I don't want to die again," the voice that was almost hers whispered.

He closed his eyes, felt the touch of firm flesh against the back of his thigh.

It's not her.

But it was.

"Please, I'm begging you, don't let her die again."

He turned and gazed into the eyes he almost knew. Looked at a face that was so like hers, but wasn't.

Her brother.

Her essence. Her magic lingering on in the flesh of her closest kin.

Aerdyn lowered his head to kiss Lian gently, hesitantly.

He broke the kiss almost immediately to stare into the sea colored eyes, to brush his fingertips through hair dark as night and try to feel her presence.

It was there. *She* was there.

Aerdyn put his arms around Lian and felt the slender arms of the Unseelie male wrap around his neck as the body in his embrace pressed closer.

No breasts and the rigid shaft against his thigh dispelled the illusion of being with Ellian, but he could *feel* her presence.

"I...never stopped loving you," he whispered to the remains of her spirit.

"Nor I, you," what remained of Ellian replied through her brother.

He held the Unseelie closer, felt the tender press of lips over his heart just as she'd done when she'd promised to have no other lover but him.

Unseelie Princess.

Seelie Knight.

They'd defied the rules.

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And they'd paid the price in pain and blood, in a betrayal he couldn't even recall. A betrayal he knew had occurred because he would *never* have killed her himself regardless of the evidence against him.

Tears flooded his eyes as he lifted Lian and carried the brother of his lost love to his bed where he lay him down, kissing his face, his chest, tasting the sharp flavor of fear on his skin. Savoring the faint trace of sweet violets that was love and lust seeping from the pores of an Unseelie of royal blood.

And he knew that taste so well.

Craved it as he'd never stopped craving it in all his lonely years.

Hands caressed him, urging him on as a voice whispered soothingly to him. "I love you, Aerdyn. I love you with all the strength of my heart and down to the very last glimmering of magic I possess, from the depths of my spirit to the end of all time."

Her promise spoken to him.

"And I will love you for all eternity."

And that had been his promise to her.

So long ago.

He rose up on his hands and looked down into the ever-changing eyes of a young Unseelie male, seeing her, seeing him. Remembering.

Arms reached for him. "Love me, please."

"I...I have no magic left."

"I've magic enough for us both, Aerdyn," Lian replied and kissed him.

He felt a tingle, a gentle warmth invade his mouth, then his face. It flowed down his neck, into his chest and arms then spread throughout him like the return of life to a winter-locked tree or as rain to an area blighted by drought. And it had been partially the drought of magic in this land that had worn him away, the passage of years stealing the very essence of his life.

Hair that had been the color of sun-burnt straw turned brighter and his eyes warmed to a rich green as his spirit absorbed the magic in the kiss.

And he knew without any doubts that Lian and Ellian were one, joined by magic, her lingering spirit enmeshed with that of her brother because this was her kiss, her love flowing into his blighted body.

He pulled Lian closer, the kiss deepening, more of the magic that was the life of all fae sliding into his flesh. There was still the pressure of

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an erection pressed to his body. The touch of a flat masculine chest, but those things no longer mattered.

Lian held Ellian within him, and they were together, still in love, still able to express that love.

He kissed Lian tenderly and was kissed in return, the power of the Unseelie Prince's magic wrapping around him, flowing into his starved body.

Lian was kissing, caressing, touching, fingers tracing the marks of old wounds, the scars fading because the fae did not normally carry such marrings on their bodies no matter how grave the injury. A hand slipped between them, fingers wrapping around his erect flesh, stroking him in a firm grip that brought such pleasure. Aerdyn moaned.

His hand sought the mirror of his own desire, fingers and palm closing around Lian's erection, which brought a softly murmured, "My love," from Lian's parted lips, the young Unseelie's arms twining around his neck as his body arched into Aerdyn's touch.

He pressed his mouth to Lian's in another tentative kiss that quickly warmed into an exploration of his new lover's mouth. The taste of Lian's lips was like violets, a flavorful perfume that flowed across his senses, fueling his desire. When his tongue slipped into Lian's mouth, it was the sweetness of honeysuckle he found there, the taste enticing him to explore the other secrets of Lian's body. He kissed along the Unseelie's jaw, finding that his lover's hair smelled of roses and lightning just as Ellian's had and that the soft skin of Lian's throat was like satin. The flesh where shoulder and neck joined was so sensitive that when he nipped it gently, the cock in his hand surged and his lover shuddered from head to toe with the pleasure. It was a pleasure he gladly gave, his teeth nipping down the arch of his lover's collar bone, sucking lightly as Lian moaned his enjoyment; his voice almost the same throaty gasp he remembered Ellian making.

From there he kissed his way down Lian's chest, savoring the faint honey sweetness of the Unseelie's skin. He paused and took a nipple pale as dawn's first blush into his mouth and sucked delicately as he slowly stroked the hard rod of flesh in his hand.

"Aerdyn...." Lian's hips lifted off the bed, his eyes closed in passion, both arms going tight around him. His cock was no longer in Lian's grip, his own attention so fully held by the flavor of his lover's passion, he hadn't noticed when it had been released.

"Aerdyn...please...please..."

Hearing his name gasped, feeling the vibration of Lian's moans through his lips, he suckled harder, tasting more sweetness as it oozed from the Unseelie.

His own eyes closed, the passion rising within his own body almost too much to control. His balls ached; his cock throbbed to the rapidly increasing beat of his own heart. It was more than enough proof of his desire for the slim Unseelie male beneath him.

Nothing mattered now. Not why Lian had come to him, not his own fears that this was an elaborate form of revenge, not that it was a feverish dream brought on by his own impending death.

He took the other nipple into his mouth and rolled his tongue over it, savoring the honeyed taste before he kissed his way lower, licking and nipping pale skin that grew increasingly sweeter as Lian became increasingly more aroused.

He reached the Unseelie's cock. Beads of crystalline fluid had dripped down over his hand, and he put out the tip of his tongue to taste it, the flavor of violets and passion, of honey, roses and the brittle flavor of lightning exploding through his senses.

And the pain of Aerdyn's past withered, changing to reveal the tiny bud of hope. Hope for a future with Lian. The traces of Ellian's essence within the male Unseelie burned away the grief he'd lived under for so long, and he started to laugh as tears streamed down his face.

She *lived*. She still existed wrapped in the flesh of her brother, spirit joined to spirit for all of time.

Hands caressed his shoulders, stroked through his hair, touching him, soothing his heart and spirit. The warm glow of magic—Ellian's and Lian's both—flowed into him with each caress, filling the void where his own magic had once lain. Healing almost a century of slow dying, the creeping ashes of death stealing his eternity away.

He took the flesh that he had gripped in his hand into his mouth, a shiver of awakening joy, of returning life spilled into him and he sucked and swallowed every drop of the precum that seeped from his lover's erection.

"Please...Aerdyn..."

The flesh touched the back of his throat and he drew back, rolling his tongue across the highly sensitive head, tasting more of the energizing life, the power of magic that seeped from his lover's arousal.

Unseelie sex magic to ensnare a Seelie lover and bind him as surely as any iron chain, as securely as the most powerful ensorcelment.

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"Aerdyn..."

The hands tore at his shoulders, nails tearing skin with need.

He was wanted. Loved.

* * * *

Lian was burning. On fire, every inch of his skin, the very beating of his heart adding to the passion searing him. Wanting. Needing more desperately than any desire he'd ever felt.

"Aerdyn...please please," he gasped as the hot mouth worked his flesh, teasing him, tormenting him.

His fingers tore at the Seelie Knight's skin, drawing blood he could smell but not lap off of the other fae's silken skin. He brought his fingers to his lips and licked the few drops that clung there, whimpering and writhing at the taste of sunlight, the scent of rain.

He heard his lover groan, felt him grip his thighs and take his cock deeper, sucking harder. His hips shook as he tried to remain still, and failed, his body rocking to the bobbing of Aerdyn's head along his shaft.

He almost screamed as a finger slipped inside his body. He'd had no warning, hadn't been prepared for the flame that ignited inside him at the intrusion. Another finger joined the first and he whimpered and moaned, one hand tearing at Aerdyn's shoulder, drawing blood, the other tangled in hair that was now the color of sun-ripened wheat.

"Aerdyn!" His hips rose off the bed and he bucked sharply into his lover's mouth as he came, power and life, magic and strength spilling into the Seelie.

He felt the roll of Aerdyn's tongue over his cockhead and groaned and shuddered as his lover swallowed every pulsing release from his tormented flesh.

Trembling he bucked harder into his lover's mouth as his body convulsed a second time, spilling more of his seed, the sensations too strong for him to resist as he was suckled. The fingers thrusting into his body urged him toward a third quivering release, and he did scream as the pleasure intensified.

His ability to think vanished as the light behind his eyes burst into a shatter of rainbow colors. The scent of roses and violets filled his nostrils, joined by the sweet scent of rain on warm ground, of green growing things and life.

Seelie life.

Panting, shaking and dizzy Lian came back to himself wrapped in the warm comforting scent of his Knight. *His* Knight.

He was being kissed slowly. Tenderly. Fingers moved inside him, stroking the spot that gave him such pleasure. Cool air blew gently across his heated erection, and he opened his eyes to find the air was Aerdyn's breath, and there were eyes the color of a summer leaves gazing at him with hot lust and deep love.

"Tell me what you want," the Seelie Knight demanded in a velvet growl.

He shivered at the sound and held out his arms. "You. I want you."

Aerdyn rose up and moved between his legs, the Seelie looked so different. So strong and young, all traces of his ordeal gone.

But he could tell it was just the appearance of strength. A false front created by the infusion of so much of Lian's own energy. If they remained here, it would fade once more but for now the illusion was enough for Lian. There was time enough to work miracles later, and time enough to show Aerdyn the answer he had for them both.

The Seelie Knight rested there, his weight on his hands, looking deeply into Lian's eyes. "I love you..." he murmured and kissed Lian's mouth, the touch of his lips light as the brush of butterfly wings. "I love you both," he added then raised Lian's legs over his shoulders.

His breath caught as he felt the hardness touch his well fingered anus. He was ready and eager for what Aerdyn was about to do.

"Fuck me, beloved," he murmured and kissed the other fae.

Flesh slid home, Aerdyn's hips bumping into his ass as the Seelie seated himself to his balls in Lian's body.

"Oh blessed Father of All..." he groaned as the hard shaft stroked fully across the inflamed and needy place inside him.

His taste and scent were a trap to the Seelie, but the skill of a Seelie lover was an equal trap to any Unseelie foolish enough to take one of the Light fae to their bed.

It had been his sister's death and Aerdyn's undoing, but he'd gladly suffer that and more for the pleasures he was being given.

Another pleading cry came from Lian as the Unseelie ran his hands along Aerdyn's shoulders and down his back. The touch felt hot to his awakened senses, the hands roving over him urging him on, begging for more as did the soft sounds that the other male made. Sounds of pleasure and need.

The Seelie eased his hips back, all the while a scattering of tears fell on Lian's face as the Knight kissed him, as his hard shaft probed the

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depths of the Lian's flesh, sliding in and out in a primal rhythm older than even the fae race itself.

* * * *

The firm grip of Lian's flesh around his cock was the most perfect of all torments an Unseelie could grant one of his kind, and it was the most exquisite bliss they could share, but one: the merging of souls and magic.

And that was the single thing he'd never shared with Ellian. He'd had the experience of her body welcoming his into its silken heat, but never had they shared the deepest of all joinings, that of spirit with spirit, magic to magic. They'd loved, they'd promised one another eternity, but the truth was they'd never actually given that to one another, never bound themselves to one another.

If they had, he'd be just as dead as she nearly was.

But in his own way, he had been dead.

It hardly mattered. Not now. Not when he was sunk balls deep in Lian, kissing and touching, being kissed and touched. Being loved and giving pleasure.

And it was the one thing he knew he would never share. Not with Lian. Not with anyone fae or otherwise.

And that didn't matter either. Not when he could feel such joy in the simple merging of flesh with flesh, the joining of matching passions. And there was no lack of passion from Lian, the Unseelie's urgent cries, his every touch, spoke of want, of need and a desire to please his newfound lover.

Aerdyn thrust slowly, feeling sensations he'd thought long dead, experiencing the pleasures that he'd only know in the embrace of a specter that haunted him from the brittle remains of his past.

"Ellian...Lian," he corrected himself.

"No, call to her. She's here with us because she is a part of me," Lian murmured as he touched Aerdyn's body in ways that gave comfort yet also caused the Seelie to drive his rigid flesh harder into Lian.

Lian's lips touched his softly, a tongue tip licked away the traces of tears from his mouth. Aerdyn claimed those lips, kissing the Unseelie male deeply, savoring the violets and storm flavor of him.

"My poor beloved," Lian sighed when the kiss was ended.

Aerdyn gave no reply except to cover Lian's mouth with his and drink of the desire and need he could taste there as Lian's hands clutched at him, begging silently for completion.

Aerdyn wanted it to last, wanted this to be their forever, but that wasn't a possibility even in the Fae Realms as he no longer had magic, much less the power that would entail. And it certainly couldn't be accomplished in the Mortal Realm, no matter if he'd had many times his former abilities.

Reluctant as he was to let it end—and his body couldn't last much longer—the growing need for release could not be denied. And Lian's cries, his caresses and nips were quickening Aerdyn's flesh even more than the grip and slide of his cock inside Lian's body.

"Aerdyn, PLEASE!" Lian cried out, his nails cutting stinging furrows into his skin. Cuts deep enough to draw beads of blood that trickled down his spine.

The touch of pain brought feverish cries of ecstasy from Aerdyn. The mingled sensations of pleasure, pain and having a small fraction of his life drawn away was what he truly needed to reach release. His balls drew tight to his body as his cock erupted powerfully, every spurt of seed into Lian's body making the Unseelie cry out.

Aerdyn groaned and trembled, his thrusts becoming more urgent as his body was pushed to the brink.

"Lian..." he moaned and felt teeth sink into his shoulder, felt a tongue lap at the newly created wound. He shuddered, gasped, and felt the teeth go deeper, felt blood, the most basic essence of life being taken from him.

Heat bloomed in Aerdyn's groin, and he threw his head back, gasping loudly as he came a second time, his hips grinding into Lian's ass, his whole body gone rigid while his cock pumped into his lover.

He managed to move just enough to wrap a hand around Lian's pulsing cock which he stroked fast, the Unseelie bucking wildly beneath him as his cum spattered them both. His teeth tore into Aerdyn's shoulder and the Seelie Knight didn't care. He wanted the pain, wanted to feel his blood being pulled from the wound.

Tears flooded his eyes as he remembered Ellian.

Beloved....

Her voice in his head. Her ghost speaking to him.

Bright light filled his eyes as he rocked to another powerful orgasm. The air around them started to shimmer in a dance of colors, violet, grey, and blue, the colors of Lian's own spirit mingled with the forest shadow green of Ellian's. The colors spun in a whirl that carried the scent of rain and violets, of roses and the sharp tang of stormy weather.

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More sparkling light joined the dance. The gold of sunlight, the blue of a summer sky. The fragrance of green growing things, of soft fertile ground and honeysuckle filled the air.

Lian's teeth tore deeper but rather than any sense of pain, Aerdyn felt only intense pleasure greater than the most powerful orgasm he'd ever known. Lian's body shook beneath him, and he was bathed in the Unseelie's seed a second time, the fluid tingling on his skin.

Sparkling light spun around them bright as stars pulled from the Midwinter's Eve sky, the magic of the fae, Seelie and Unseelie, conjoined. Entwined body and soul, they rocked to the power of a bonding nothing, not even the hand of death could ever break.

Exhausted, Aerdyn sank down on the bed beside his lover, pulled the smaller Unseelie closer, and was soon wrapped in the first peaceful slumber he'd known in half a century.

* * * *

Aerdyn's eyes opened to the gentle light of dawn, but it wasn't the light that had awakened him. It was an unaccountable sensation of cold, a creeping chill moving across his body that drove him from the warmth of his lover's arms.

His eyes narrowed as he looked down on the sleeping Unseelie Prince, distrust and suspicion warring with the love he felt. He shook his head. After what they'd shared last night, no, Lian wouldn't have betrayed him. He couldn't believe that or it would drive him to madness.

But the icy touch of danger hummed across his awareness and the flavor of magic, Unseelie magic rolled over his newly reawakened power.

He quickly dressed and was reaching under his bed for the other piece of his past when he noticed the shifting-color gaze of Lian leveled on him.

"What is it?"

"Did you intend to have them take me in my sleep?" he asked softly as he drew the bundle of rags that held his sword from beneath the bed, unable to totally trust his new lover regardless that they were so closely bound. It wouldn't be the first time an Unseelie had died for vengeance: he doubted it would be the last.

The beautiful gaze widened in a passable display of shock. "What? What are you—?" He saw the disbelief, then the flash of anger cross Lian's face. "I'd not betray you, my love."

"No? Not even for vengeance?" he asked as he pulled the rags away to reveal the gold worked leather of belt and scabbard, the bright glint of silver wire that wrapped the hilt, the dull red-gold gleam of a dragonseye stone set in the pommel. The stone caught the light and seemed to glow as he buckled the sword belt around his trim waist.

"What need for that? I know she didn't die by your hand."

Aerdyn stared at him, "Yes, I suppose you do. So, tell me why you've led another Unseelie here."

"I didn't. Not intentionally. I didn't think anyone *could* follow me, nor was there any reason for them to do so."

"You're a Prince and one of them did follow." He could sense malevolence, and great power. Both were familiar to him, but he just couldn't place who—or what—it was.

Yet he felt a sense of growing resignation, a feeling of impending doom he couldn't shake. His hands were shaking as he settled the belt firmly around his hips and touched the hilt of his sword. A cold chill slid through his flesh and he turned to face Lian.

The slender Unseelie reached for his own garments and whispered a word of power. In an instant he was clothed and not for the first time did Aerdyn rue the loss of his own magic over the years he'd been an exile in the Mortal Realm.

Exiled....

He would never have killed her. Any fool should have realized that. But they hadn't and he'd been sentenced to the living death, thrown through the Gate between Realms and sent here to die slowly, wasting away as his magic faded more and more with every passing year.

But there'd been many among the Unseelie who'd demanded his death. A slow and brutal one far worse than the fate he'd been condemned to, or at least that was their thought. Aerdyn couldn't think of a death worse than the one he'd been living until Lian's arrival.

Until *she* had come back to him wrapped in the flesh of her own brother.

And now, finally, an Unseelie had found him.

Her own brother who meant only to bring him love.

Who might, instead, have brought the death he'd been waiting for all these years.

He started for the door, only to be stopped by Lian who pressed his mouth to Aerdyn's in a passionate kiss that left the Seelie Knight gasping and burning with a fever of power.

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He caught a glimpse of himself in a small mirror on the wall. No longer was he the faded wretch of the prior evening. His hair and eyes were as they'd once been, bright and full of life, sustained by fae magic.

"You're sure they mean us harm?"

Aerdyn nodded and opened his mouth to explain how he knew when the door burst in. A slender male clad in dark green armor of an Unseelie nobleman entered. He was carrying a sword that shimmered with barely contained power, the color reminded Aerdyn of storms. The faint scent of rain and lightning rode in on the icy wind of the winter that lay outside. For some reason, Aerdyn had expected it to be Spring outside, perhaps because, for the first time in decades, he felt renewed. But this was still the Mortal Realm, not that of the fae.

The Knight knew the too handsome Unseelie fae the instant his eyes fell upon him. Things he'd been unable to remember—the exact manner of Ellian's death, his own wounding—came back in that instant. His undoing had been his inability to recall who had murdered Ellian, or wounded him. Magic had been used to determine who had killed her, and every spell pointed to him. It was madness, insanity. But there was no arguing with Seelie magic.

But his memory of who the real killer had been came flooding back the second he saw the killer.

"Jaerlon! You murderous bastard!" he snarled.

The Unseelie fae just smirked. "So, I find the wolf at bay in a hovel. Old and toothless, and entirely impotent. How befitting," the silken voice was laced with amusement, dripping with contempt.

For the long years of slow death, Aerdyn had dreamed of his moment, of a chance to get revenge. It had been a futile and shapeless desire. He'd neither recalled who the killer was, nor could he have gone to find him because his exile prevented his return to any Realm of the Fae, not just those of the Dark or Light alone.

But he knew, and the chance to make Jaerlon pay for his crime was right before him. He set hand to the hilt of his sword. "Have you come here to die?" he asked.

The Unseelie laughed in his face. "Why you're just as amusing now as you were then."

"Jaerlon? Cousin why are you here?" he heard Lian ask.

"To finish what I started, kinsman."

"Finish...what?" he heard Lian question, his voice hesitant, confused. From the corner of his eye Aerdyn saw Lian raise his hand to

his mouth and back away, horror clear to see on his face and in the eyes that were now wholly like those of Ellian, shifting blue-to-green-to-grey like the restless sea.

"Father of All..." he heard the smaller Unseelie breathe, "it was you...it was..." Lian swayed and sank to his knees. Aerdyn wished with all his heart he dared to comfort his lover, but he didn't dare, not even when the look of horror was replaced by remembered terror and pain.

"Oh...oh..." the young Unseelie moaned, his hands going to his chest, eyes seeing nothing but the manner of his sister's death for the first time as the magic that had prevented either Ellian or Aerdyn from remembering what Jaerlon had done came unraveled.

They weren't in the Realms of the Fae anymore and a spell created there could break if certain conditions were met.

And since Aerdyn could remember it all, so would the faded remains of Ellian that lived on in Lian.

The Unseelie nobleman just smiled and took a step into the cabin. "So pretty, but not very bright," he remarked and Aerdyn didn't know if he was talking about his dead Ellian or her brother Lian.

"But this will make a convenient end of it, and then my own plans will go forward. Of course, no one will question Lian's death. After all, he came here seeking the exiled murderer of his own sister. Who would think it strange if that same condemned creature—gone half-mad with guilt—chose to murder her brother as well?"

Aerdyn stepped between Lian—his beloved Ellian—and drew his sword as the memories flooded his mind. Pain and a scream. A splash of blood, warm, precious. The laughter of a voice he would never forget, the very voice that had triggered the end of the spell that kept him from knowing what had been done. The memories ended in darkness and the voice, that hated voice saying, "Die or live, you'll never be a threat to me again, Seelie whelp."

Jaerlon was laughing softly at his words.

"I swear I'll kill you," he stated. His voice sounded calm, but he wasn't calm. Fear lay in his heart, filling his mouth with the bitter flavor of defeat: bile rose and he almost choked.

"What? After last time, you think you have a chance to defeat me? Why not lay the sword down and accept your fate? I'll make sure of your demise this time." Jaerlon smiled coldly, "One way or another."

The sunlight streaming in through the windows caught the shine of the blade gripped in Aerdyn's fist, and it burned gold as the sun itself.

"Not this time."

"Oh, please. You weren't my match then, and you're all but dead now," Jaerlon told him as he took another step into the room.

The Knight's sword came up to block the Unseelie's blade as it swept for him. The weapons collided in a fury of light that all but blinded Aerdyn and sent him reeling backward from the magical onslaught.

It was how he'd died last time. The Unseelie nobleman had the upper hand in magic, and it would only be worse this time as Aerdyn had been so very long without contact with the Realms of the Seelie.

His own magic was a pale shadow of its former self. No match for the powerful Unseelie.

"How pitiful. Is that the best you can muster now?" Jaerlon mocked. "Why you're little more than a mortal are you?"

Jaerlon was right. Despite the infusion of magic from Lian, he *was* weak. Too weak to face Jaerlon in a combat that included such magical exchanges.

He barely got his blade up to in time to stop a second attack. This one drove him to his knees and left him so dizzy he wasn't sure he'd be able to live through another such attack.

"Lian, run!" he shouted and forced himself to his feet, his sword sweeping for his armored opponent. He called up the magic Lian had infused him with, determined to die well if he could do nothing else.

Their swords struck in a blaze of green and gold, sparks dancing across the stone floor as they struggled blade to blade in a war of Unseelie might against the faded remnants of a Seelie Knight. A Knight who'd never been the match of the male he was fighting, and who was certainly even less a threat to the bladewizard as he now was, weak and barely able to raise any magical force.

The weapons screamed, Aerdyn face to face with the killer of his Ellian. Anger rose amid the desperation, and he threw his fast dissipating power into the battle.

A cool smile curled an already cruel mouth into a sneer. "This time I'll just kill you rather than make you the scapegoat. No one will be the wiser, and I can say it was done for vengeance. After all, you will have already killed poor deluded Lian."

Aerdyn felt the vestiges of his magic fading, felt his body dying under the onslaught of the other fae's violent attack. He couldn't retreat, but he didn't have the power to do more than hold on and wonder if Lian would sit and watch him die.

"I'll make it easier on you," Jaerlon whispered into his ear as their swords continued to burn, locked in a duel Aerdyn was doomed to lose. An acrid stink, the smell of his body starting to die filled his nostrils.

"Sweet perfume," Jaerlon murmured to him, "the odor of a Seelie dying. I so love that smell." Lips brushed his cheek. "I like the taste even better. Sweet with fear, spiced with pain."

Aerdyn tried to pull away, struggling to escape the way a fly fought the web of a spider.

But it was no use. He was locked, helpless in the grip of the Unseelie bladewizard's spell.

It was the same way he'd been taken the day Ellian had died.

A whimper rose in his throat, the sound quickly squelched. He hadn't begged for his life last time. He wouldn't do it now.

His only regret was that Lian, bound by the intertwining of their souls would die with him.

"Perhaps a slower death is suitable. I can have my fun with you helpless to fight me," Jaerlon murmured, his lips touching Aerdyn's cheek, the tip of his tongue darting out to flick along the curve of the Seelie Knight's ear. "I can pleasure myself on your body as you fade into nothingness. And if you die here, in the Mortal Realm... Well, that's a death there is no returning from."

"I'm not dead yet." Aerdyn snarled, but even his voice was weak, and Jaerlon simply snickered at the threat as he took another savoring taste of Aerdyn's skin.

The feel of the Unseelie's tongue on his body made Aerdyn think of the slime of slugs and he shuddered and fought the chains of the spell, to no avail. He was well locked in the magic and there was no escape.

"A fact easily remedied." The bladewizard twisted his body, and Aerdyn felt an intense pain just above the arch of his hipbone. Icy cold burned into his body, but he didn't dare look down, didn't dare take either of his own hands from the hilt of his sword.

Jaerlon's shoulders rolled and he fell to the floor, barely aware of the impact.

* * * *

Searing pain, blood choking her mouth, silencing her scream of fear, a hand reaching for her fallen beloved. Ellian's memories, her agonizing death, seeing Aerdyn fall helpless in the grip of Jaerlon's spell—so much pain and terror—and all of it came flooding like a poisoned tide into Lian's mind. He *knew* how she'd died. He finally *knew*.

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Shuddering at the phantom agony of a sword ripping into his body—*her body*— he raised his tear-streaked face to see Ellian's killer standing over the fallen knight. Her Knight. Her beloved Aerdyn.

His own lover.

Rage filled his heart, and he got to his feet to face the older Unseelie male, to face his sister's killer.

"Will you try to fight me now, too? You've no more power than she did, and her attack did me no harm at all."

Lian summoned his power, reached deep, and laid full claim to the remnants of his sister's magic, determined not to let Aerdyn suffer at Jaerlon's hands. Determined to win no matter the cost.

"You couldn't have her or the throne you craved, so you killed her. And now you'll kill me and think to gain the throne of the Unseelie." Lian offered his kinsman a slight, wry smile. "You're a fool. Our father has chosen our mother's brother to reign in his place *if* he ever chooses to step aside. Killing Ellian and I will gain you nothing at all."

Jaerlon just smirked. "That's where you're wrong. With the two of you out of the way, I'll have the backing of most of the noblemen, since I'm the son of his own brother and directly of the Royal Blood, unlike that fool your idiot father chose."

Aerdyn's hand wrapped tightly around the hilt of his sword, and Lian could see that his lover still clung to life—somehow. But with an icetooth dagger imbedded into his body, he couldn't last much longer. Not with it sucking what little life he still had right out of him.

Jaerlon lunged for Lian, sword raised high, but Aerdyn managed to get the tip of his sword beneath the Unseelie's foot and Jaerlon stumbled. Lian saw the Seelie Knight get to his feet, amazed that Aerdyn could manage it as he was dying. The Knight once more placed himself between Jaerlon and Lian, his sword deflecting the blow meant to kill the unarmed Prince.

Jaerlon staggered and regarded the Seelie Knight in shock. "Why won't you just die?" he asked.

"Because you have to die first," Aerdyn replied as he raised his sword, ready to protect Lian who reached out and sent a flow of energy into his lover's failing body. But the dagger in his side sucked it away, tried to latch onto Lian's own life force and the Unseelie had to break the contact or be taken by the spell on the blade himself.

Jaerlon regarded them both for a moment, his eyes burning with rage.

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Bright blood poured from Aerdyn's injured side, more spilling free when he wrenched the icetooth from his body and tossed it away.

"We'll see who dies and who lives," Jaerlon snarled as he lunged for Aerdyn.

The Knight parried, blood spattering the floor as he twisted, the tip of his sword scoring, drawing blood.

The bladewizard leapt back, hand going to his face, fingers coming away bloody. "You'll pay for that audacity, Seelie" Jaerlon hissed and lunged for the Knight a second time.

Their blades locked, and Lian saw the pain flash across his lover's face.

He had to do something, but combat wasn't a skill he knew very well. It had also been his sister's failing. Her undoing.

But he couldn't let Aerdyn die.

Wouldn't let him die.

If he couldn't call on the power of death, he could call on the power of life.

And love.

Lian raised his arms over his head, "Love and hope, life and joy, set my power free."

The smell of roses erupted in the room, the scent becoming an almost palpable force. The lamp burst into a shower of bright shards. Those that struck Aerdyn turned to the soft petals the crystal had been formed of while those that hit Jaerlon struck with the fury of dozens of tiny blades that pierced through armor as if it were no more protection than the leaves from which it seemed to be formed. The shards bit into flesh and drew blood.

Battered and driven almost out of the door by the attack, Jaerlon fell against the cabin wall. He raised a hand to touch his face, which was streaked with blood from a myriad of tiny wounds the sword all but forgotten in his hand.

"It will be my pleasure to kill you both slowly," he snarled as he struggled to regain his footing.

* * * *

Aerdyn staggered forward unsteadily. "Not this time," he retorted as he lifted his blade.

The golden glory of a Seelie Knight's sword burned through the air.

The bladewizard saw it coming, but—like the victims he'd made of Ellian and Aerdyn—he wasn't able to save himself. He screamed, seeing

death coming as surely as it came to any Mortal. And death in this Realm was forever. He tried to evade the attack, struggled to reach the door, vainly tried to tear a Gate in the fabric of a Realm that resisted his effort.

In the end, there was no escape. The blade hit him between shoulder and neck, his scream ending abruptly. There was an acrid wash of air as his body instantly dissipated, but even that was quickly gone, lost amid the lingering aroma of sun-touched roses and the bitter bite of the chill wind.

The only sign remaining to show where Jaerlon had met his end was a scattering of bloody rose petals that were swept out of the door on a bitter cold gust of wind where they were quickly lost in the falling snow.

Lian hurried to Aerdyn's side, arriving to catch the wounded Seelie and ease him to the bed where he fell, eyes staring dully at the ceiling and beyond it into the nothingness of a fae's death. A death that would be forever here in the Mortal Realm.

The icy breath of winter swept around the small cabin, stealing the meager heat that the fireplace provided. The icetooth dagger took more than a fae's life, it also drew heat. And the bitter cold of the thing, combined with the wind, could kill Aerdyn even though the blade was no longer in contact with his flesh. Lian gestured and the dagger clattered across the stone floor and was whipped outside by another gust of winter's breath. The door then swung closed, the bolt dropping into place to keep out the freezing cold. Another two handed gesture warded the entire cabin against the malignant power of the dagger.

Aerdyn sighed as if relieved of a pain too great to bear.

Trembling with exhaustion, Lian kissed his lover's face. "Don't leave me, beloved," he murmured. "Please not now. I just found you."

He touched the Knight's cheek, felt the chill of flesh losing all traces of magic, of the life of a fae. He sobbed, not for his own life, which would end with Aerdyn's as surely as the moon would rise, but for all the things that the other fae had suffered.

The loss of his love. Exile. The slow death of the Mortal Realm.

He could already feel its slow drain on his own power.

"Aerdyn, stay with me."

He took the Seelie's hand in his own, kissed the cooling fingertips. "Please, Aerdyn. I've just found you. Don't do this. Don't go."

The Knight's eyes had faded to near grey, but they blinked, moved to focus on him. Lian gave him a watery smile, hope rising amid the tears. "I love you."

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The fingers moved, squeezed his hand. "Don't worry...not going anywhere...not now..."

The pale eyes closed, but it was sleep that took Aerdyn, not the finality of death.

By the time Lian got Aerdyn's clothing moved aside so he could tend the Seelie's wounds, they already showed the first signs of healing, fae vitality keeping his lover alive when a mortal would surely have died.

He leaned down and kissed Aerdyn, feeding his own life force, his own magic, into the Seelie to assure that Aerdyn would live. If he had to, he'd give every last bit of his own magic to assure his beloved Aerdyn would survive.

"Rest my love. Rest and heal."

* * * *

The last lingering rays of sunlight turned the frosted panes of glass to beautiful gold lace on the windows as Midwinter's Day drew slowly to an end. Soon it would be Midwinter's Night, the end of one year in the Mortal Realm and the birth of another.

Somewhere, the Mortals were celebrating, feasting and drinking mulled cider, exchanging gifts and singing songs learned from the fae folk even if they no longer remembered who'd taught them the tunes.

Aerdyn was seated in a chair by the fire staring into the leaping flames. He had a mug of hot cider in his hands, a thick blanket wrapped around him to stave off the chill that still lingered within his flesh from the icetooth dagger that had nearly killed him.

But he was still alive—somehow.

He watched Lian by the fire, stirring the cider and humming softly to himself. The Unseelie turned and smiled at him. "Now that Jaerlon is dead we can go back," Lian told him as he ladled up a cup of cider for himself.

"I don't know if I can face my people," Aerdyn admitted, staring into the warm golden color of the cider.

"Then we can go live among mine," Lian suggested. But he shook his head immediately. "No, that won't work will it?"

"No," Aerdyn agreed. He was too weak yet to deal with Unseelie tricks, much less an attack by one or more of Jaerlon's possible friends or supporters.

There was also the fact that he was still under exile from the Fae Realms. Jaerlon might be dead, but that didn't change anything.

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Aerdyn put the cup aside and got to his feet. He was still unsteady, but he could manage to walk. He took the cup from Lian's hands and pulled him close. "I love you," Aerdyn murmured, and kissed the Unseelie male tenderly.

"I know," Lian replied when the kiss ended. He was looking up into Aerdyn's eyes. "And I knew we'd never be able to go back."

"My exile is still in force anyway."

"I suspected it would be."

"The magic will fade and then we'll both be trapped here without hope. We'll die just as any mortal dies," Aerdyn warned.

Lian smiled and shook his head. "No beloved." He slipped out of his lover's embrace, searched through his clothing and came back with a small stone on which had been carved a single rune. A sigil of power, the symbol that of a Gate. Even in his magically depleted state, Aerdyn could feel the power emanating from the stone.

Aerdyn reached out to touch it and felt as if he'd been scalded. He pulled his hand back and met Lian's gaze. "How did you come by such a thing?"

Lian turned it in his fingers. "I made it for you... for us."

"But I cannot return to the lands of the Fae."

"Nor will we."

"Then—where does this lead?"

"To the Unicorn's Glade."

"But how can we go there? Only their kind can pass through that Gate."

Lian placed the stone in Aerdyn's hand, but this time there was no discomfort. A pale light spilled from Lian's skin and between one breath and the next it was no longer a pale skinned Unseelie male standing before him but a black maned unicorn with a hide pure as alabaster. "My power is that of shapechanging, and my form is that of a Unicorn. By their own laws that means I'm welcome in their realm," Lian said as he returned to his normal appearance.

"And what of me? No such rule applies."

"You are my mate, and that means you are perfectly acceptable." Lian reached out and took Aerdyn's hand in the one where the Gate stone didn't lay. "Will you come with me, beloved?"

Aerdyn nodded. "Wherever you go will I follow."

Lian smirked. "It's not every Unicorn that can claim a Seelie Knight for its lover you know."

Midwinter's Night

"Nor may many Knights may claim to love their steeds," Aerdyn said with a smile and kissed Lian. He picked up his scabbarded sword from where it lay on the table and buckled it around him as he gave a final glance at the cabin that had been his home.

No, not his home: his prison.

"Ready?" Lian asked.

Aerdyn nodded. There was nothing to hold him here, and every reason to leave.

Lian led the older Seelie out of the cabin into the bitter cold of the twilight of Midwinter's Day. He threw the Gate stone ahead of them and the portal opened instantly on a Realm of lush grass dotted with wildflowers, shady forest and bright sunshine.

"After you, my Prince," Aerdyn said.

Laughing, hand in hand, Lian led Aerdyn from the dismal Realm of Mortals into the bright eternal Spring of the Unicorn's Glade.

Neither of them looked back as the Gate closed behind them.

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MICHAEL BARNETTE

About the Author

Michael Barnette's work has been appearing around the small press for a number of years. Once primarily an author of vampire/goth and cyberpunk poetry and stories, some with mildly erotic themes, he decided to try an out and out erotic short story. In 2003 Michael's first erotic story, *Zoner*, was nominated for a 2003 Spectrum Award. The anthology in which *Zoner* was published- *Wired Hard 3: Even More Erotica for a Gay Universe*- was a 2003 Lambda Literary Award Finalist. 'Zoner' has now appeared internationally in both English and Italian language editions.

Because *Zoner* was so well received in the gay and m/m reader community Michael changed his writing focus. In the past year has sold over a dozen erotic novels and stories to various small press publishers. The books span the gamut of sexual content from out and out gay romance to heterosexual BDSM and fetish works and he's recently started writing yaoi, gay romances based on the ideals found in Japanese manga and anime. *Midwinter's Night* is one such story.

Once a resident of Coconut Grove in Florida, Michael relocated to Georgia a few years ago where there are fewer gunshots and yard to yard searches for suspects to disturb the writing muses.

To find out more about Michael's books and novels, please join his yahoo group which is at:
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/immortal_heroes/.