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The book cover features a central illustration of a woman with long, dark brown hair and striking red eyes. She is looking directly at the viewer with a serious expression. Her right hand is raised to her chin, holding a glowing, pinkish-red pendant on a thin chain. The background is dark and atmospheric, with a wooden archway behind her and a small, glowing orb on a shelf to the right. The overall color palette is dominated by dark browns, blacks, and the vibrant red of her eyes and the pendant.

MAGIC
AND
THE PAGAN

SHAYNE CARMICHAEL
& MICHAEL BLACK

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Magic and the Pagan

Mychael Black and Shayne Carmichael

Dedication

To Shayne's daughter, Indy, who promises to be our biggest fan when she grows up.

Thanks to Linda for her hard work and patience during the edits.

And finally, a huge thanks to Anne Cain for bringing Aidan Lorie! to life for the cover!

Chapter One

“Rain again.” Aidan Loriei stared out the window, watching the gray haze surround the keep.

A low growl answered the pronouncement.

“Yes, I know, my friend. I feel it, too.”

“And what will you have me do, Master?” The question was more of a rumble than actual words.

“Welcome him as always, Arael. Make him comfortable, but not to the point where he would want to stay. I am much too busy to cater to a king’s fancies this evening.”

“As you wish, Master.”

Aidan turned and watched with only a mild interest as his servant left the room. The creature’s wings folded down when he ducked under the doorway. The sinewy lines of the demon’s body twisted and he stalked down the corridor, his heavy footfalls nearly shaking the stone foundations of the keep. A brief smile broke through Aidan’s otherwise stoic features. Arael was much happier when he didn’t have to hide his true form. With the king’s impending arrival, however, he would have to do just that.

Aidan looked back out the window with a perturbed sigh. “The king is going to kill me yet.”

“Master, he is here.”

The demon’s growl reverberated through Aidan’s mind, drawing another annoyed sigh from the magician. Heavens above, if avoiding the king’s advances didn’t kill him, then the queen surely would.

“Show him into the great library, Arael. I will be with him shortly.”

“Yes, Master.”

Aidan took his time making his way down the three floors to the great library. His keep lay just outside the king’s borders and it gave him an edge when he wished to pay

no one any allegiance. The king knew him enough to know that Aidan didn't rush himself on any matter. As he stepped into the library, King Tordis stood and bowed. The motion brought a wry grin to Aidan's lips.

"Fealty to a wizard," Aidan quipped as he went to a small bar behind the line of plush couches. "What would your subjects say?" He began pouring two glasses full of a fragrant, deep purple wine. The aroma of exotic fruits wafted up from the glass bottle and Aidan closed his eyes for a moment, relishing the fruit of his people, before handing one glass to the king.

"But my subjects do not know." King Tordis smirked and took the offered glass. He sipped a tiny bit of the wine and shuddered.

"Ah, but your queen certainly does." Aidan drank a lengthy swallow of his own wine, hiding the amused smile when he caught sight of the king's stunned stare. Dark Wine was a precious prize and only the richest could afford the elixir which originated within the Sacarata, the ruling court of Aidan's people. The dark fae had many wondrous gifts; Dark Wine was one of the best.

"I have come to present my offer once more," the king said.

Aidan chuckled. "Once more? Have you given up the chase already? It has only been twenty years."

King Tordis didn't bother to answer as he sat on one of the couches. "You are too enticing to give up. Therefore I present you with my offer yet again. Come to the capital, take residence in the palace as my court magician and you will never want for anything."

Aidan looked around his library and then back to the king. "But I want for nothing now."

The king stood and moved slowly toward him. "But you have no one." His gaze traveled down the magician's toned body. "No one to share your bed with you."

Aidan took another drink of his wine. "Forgive me, King Tordis, but I am a man of magic. Such frivolous pursuits are not important to me."

"Yes, but you are a man, nonetheless. Surely you must have...needs."

"I do," Aidan said with a slow nod. He leaned forward just enough to brush his lips lightly over the king's. "And I do well by taking care of them myself."

"You delight in tormenting me, sorcerer."

"Where else would I seek my entertainment?" Aidan stepped back. As he neared one of the couches, his gaze traveled fleetingly over the bookcase behind it. He paid the

shelves of books little mind until an empty space caught his eye. "It's gone," he murmured.

"Hm? What's that?" the king asked between sips of wine.

Aidan shook his head and, with considerable effort, tore his gaze from the vacant spot. "Nothing. I simply seemed to have misplaced one of my books."

"Ah, is that all?"

He shot the king a disbelieving look, but quickly reined it in. The king knew nothing of magic. To him, a missing book was nothing. But to Aidan, it was not so easily dismissed. The missing book was one of his highly prized spell books, written in his hand. The muscles of his jaw tightened. He had not misplaced the book. Someone had taken it. He downed the last of his wine in one hefty swallow.

"I regret that our visit this evening cannot be any longer, but I have much work to do. Atael will show you to your room. Should you need anything, please do not hesitate to call him. I bid you a good evening."

Without waiting for a response from the rather stunned king, Aidan turned on his heel and left the room. He met Atael in the entryway and placed a hand on the demon's shoulder.

"Take care, Atael. My journal has gone missing. I want no one to leave this keep until it is found."

The demon bowed his head, which was now covered in flowing blond hair. His face resembled any other man's, as did his body. He wore a dark tunic of gray wool and a pair of thin black pants. "As you wish, Master." He started to walk away, but stopped. "Is there, by chance, a possibility that the king has it?"

"I doubt it. King Tordis wouldn't know such value unless it had two legs and a cock. He would not have it."

Upon entering his workroom, Aidan thought to tear the place apart. The prospect of the clean-up, however, stilled his temper before he could do anything. Instead, he collapsed into his chair and scowled at the empty air. He had no idea who could have taken the book, but he was convinced someone had. That book held his personal notes from the past six hundred years, not to mention some of his most powerful spells. To utter a single spell from the book would prove disastrous for the thief. The book was charmed, and no matter the purposes of the spells within, anyone besides Aidan himself

would be immediately transported to his keep. It was a foolproof way of binding and protecting a book: to bring the thief before the owner.

A knock sounded on the door, pulling Aidan out of his brooding. "Enter."

"Master, the king is in his chambers. The door has been sealed until morning."

Aidan nodded absently. "Very good. Thank you, Arael."

The demon started across the room, dropping the illusion as he neared Aidan's chair. When Aidan looked up, he was greeted with a smile full of razor sharp teeth. Two massive, black horns curled from the sides of Arael's head, the points nearly touching the floor as Arael bowed low. He flexed his leathery wings slowly, a groan of contentment sounding from somewhere in his eight-foot-tall frame. As he knelt before Aidan, the hooves of his feet grated along the stone floor, emitting red sparks.

"Master," he said, looking up at Aidan. "May I?"

Aidan held out his hand. "Yes, my friend. Take what you need."

Arael curled his fingers around Aidan's wrist and drew it to his lips. As his fangs sank into the pale flesh, Aidan winced slightly. It was a necessary component to the ongoing spell that kept the demon with him. In order for Arael to serve him, Aidan had to provide his own blood. When Arael had taken what he needed, he released Aidan's hand.

"Thank you, Master."

"It is a small payment for your devoted services, my friend."

"What of your book?"

Aidan settled back into the chair, placing his elbows on the arms and linking his fingers together before him. "It was one of the enchanted ones."

Arael's toothy grin spread across his face. Aidan knew that look well. He nodded.

"Yes, Arael. When the thief shows up, unaware of what he has done, you may have him. So long as he gives me my book. I must have that book back."

"Yes, of course. Do you have any thoughts as to who might have taken it?"

"No." Aidan unlinked his fingers to tuck a strand of his auburn hair behind his right ear. "But I will find out. I want everyone in the keep down in the courtyard come morning. I will pick every mind apart until I find some information."

"Yes, Master. What of the king?"

Aidan groaned and closed his eyes, leaning his head back. "What of the king, indeed. He will be our guest for several more days, I fear. He can be taken to the courtyard with

the others, but he is not to be touched in any way. I don't need the Sercenian royal court breathing down my neck."

* * *

By the time the sun began to rise over the Brase Mountains, Aidan was already wide awake. The issue of his book weighed heavily on his mind, so much so that it was a wonder he had gotten to sleep at all the night before. He sighed as he stared out of the window from where he lay on his bed. A brisk breeze blew in, ruffling the red gossamer drapes surrounding his bed. He slid off of the mattress, hissing when his bare feet touched the cold stone of the floor. Lifting his robe from its hook on the wall, he slipped it on and buttoned it up. The crimson silk fabric warmed with the contact to his flesh, and he slid his feet into a pair of red silk slippers.

Aidan took his time getting outside to the inner courtyard. As instructed, Atael had lined everyone up in the keep in four perfectly straight rows. Servants, their families and even the king stood stock still, waiting for the keep's master. As he made his way toward them, he caught no hint of fear from anyone. He stopped before them and crossed his arms over his chest, scanning the crowd slowly, studying each face. Not a single muscle twitched on their faces even when his presence slipped into their minds. As he drew back out, the looks of relief were clear.

"I see nothing to indicate that any of them know anything," he said as Atael came to stand beside him. It was clear the demon was not happy hiding beneath his illusion. Aidan placed his hand on Atael's shoulder, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "Only a few days more."

Aidan began walking down each row, perusing deeper through each person's mind. He soon began to wonder if his efforts were futile, but then a stray thought brought him to stand before a young girl, not much older than ten. She trembled under his piercing stare, and Aidan softened it, crouching down to eye level with her.

"You are Janil's daughter, are you not?" he asked. "You saw something, didn't you? It's all right, you are not in trouble."

She nodded. "Yes, Master Lorie. Just four nights ago, I saw Leland enter the great library. When he came back out, he was carrying a shiny purple book. I didn't tell anyone because I thought he was getting it for you."

Aidan hid the anger and smiled at her. “Thank you for telling me.” He stood and turned to the middle-aged man beside her. “You have a beautiful, honest daughter, Janil. In gratitude, I would like for you and your family to dine at my table this evening.”

“Th-thank you, Master Lorie!” The man bowed low. Beside him, his daughter curtsied.

“Thank you,” Aidan said with a bow of his own. He turned and walked back to Atael, a wry grin creasing his lips. “Leland.”

A deep growl rumbled within Atael’s chest. “Leland,” he echoed. “Then I shall enjoy feasting on his flesh.”

“Yes, my friend. Once I have my book, he is yours.” Aidan started back into the keep. “Dismiss them.”

“Yes, Master.”

For the remainder of the morning, Aidan cloistered himself in the great library, pulling all his spell books from the shelves. With Atael’s help, he carried all two hundred and sixty-seven books to his workroom. For the next four hours, he strengthened the protection spells on each book, ensuring that the same fate would not befall them as had his personal journal. Should any of the books be removed from the boundaries of the outer wall, the thief would find himself frozen for all time, a statue of ice incapable of melting. The book would be safely transported back to the workroom.

By evening, Aidan was quite hungry and went upstairs to change clothes for dinner. Slipping off the robe, he caught sight of himself in the full-length, gilded mirror. After two-thousand three-hundred fifty-six years, he looked no more than twenty-seven. He combed his fingers through his waist-length, auburn hair before turning away to dress. While he much preferred his robe, for dinner he slipped on a pair of crimson pants and a black tunic. After pulling on a pair of knee boots, he started downstairs.

His guests—King Tordis, Janil, Janil’s wife Leighette, and their daughter Aril—were seated around the circular table. When he entered the room, they all stood. He smiled as he took his own seat. Once he was seated, he nodded and the others sat down once more.

“I thank you all for joining me this evening,” he said as servants began bringing food and wine. “It is not often I have so many visitors. King Tordis, I’m sure you know Janil and his family. Janil works in my stables and is the preferred groom for my stallion, Destrier.”

King Tordis bowed his head in acknowledgement, as did the others. “It is a pleasure. I have heard much in your favor regarding the handling of horses.”

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Janil said. “It is an honor to work for Master Lorie.”

Dinner was peaceful, a much needed time of relaxation for Aidan. The issue of his book ate away at him, but with the wine flowing and the jovial laughter from his guests, he was able to relax for the first time since the night before. By the time the meal was over, Aril was leaning half-asleep against her mother and Janil said their goodbyes, taking care to thank Aidan no less than six times for the meal.

King Tordis joined Aidan in the great library, where they sat talking and drinking more wine until nearly dawn of the next morning. He saw the king to his chambers himself, having given Atael the evening off, and then he retired to his own room. Sleep came swiftly and with it, the hope that his book would soon be returned to his hands.

Chapter Two

“Oh, fucking hell!”

The small flash of an explosion, followed by a cloud of black smoke, hit Evan in the face and he choked. Hurriedly, he put out the small fire in the metal bowl, coughing with the noxious fumes. He'd obviously messed up the stupid spell. As he wiped at his face, his fingers streaked through the black soot on his skin. He opened the nearest window to let out the smoke and smell and ran a hand through his hair, frowning as he looked over at the book laid out on the desk. Reading over the instructions, he checked them off against what he'd done. It wasn't until he reached the amount of sulfur needed that he realized he'd overdone it. After smacking himself in the forehead, he closed the book with a snap.

Now he needed a shower, but at least the smell had already started dissipating from the room. Thankfully his parents weren't home or he would have never heard the end of it. He generally caught enough flak from them for his hair. He walked into the bathroom and caught sight of his black-streaked face in the mirror, grimacing at the contrast to his purple hair. Once the water was warm enough, he stepped into the tub and took a quick shower to get the soot and smell off of him. He didn't want to waste too much time because he wanted to make a quick trip down to his favorite bookstore before he met up with his best friend Shelly.

It took him about twenty minutes to get dressed and make the drive to Hidden on a Shelf. A nice woman named Lily Langtry owned the store and Evan pretty much knew Lily's inventory inside and out. He always showed up on the days she got in a new supply of books, and she let him search through the boxes and pick out what he wanted before the stock was put on the shelves.

When he walked into the store, Evan waved at Lily then made his way to the back room. There were three boxes of new stock waiting for him. He carefully handled the books as he sorted through them since most of them were very old. Every once in a while

Evan found an interesting one and he set it aside before continuing to look through the rest.

There were only a few more books left in the last box when he picked up a dark purple one. The light shimmered over the book and Evan ran his fingers across the cover, surprised by the velvet-like texture of it.

Opening it, Evan stared spellbound at the picture on the first page. The image was of a man with auburn hair and haunting red eyes. He appeared pensive, his gaze cast downward. The man's thumb half hid his lips.

Evan took in the details of the eerily beautiful face and tried to still the pace of his own heart. Failing that, he touched one finger delicately to the paper, tracing the line of the man's jaw. He'd never seen anybody so fucking gorgeous, but then he was in the middle of Bible Belt America. He'd yet to find anyone even halfway decent who wouldn't chase him with a baseball if he looked at them wrong.

Evan thumbed carefully through the rest of the book. The words were written in a mixture of English and a language he'd never seen before, but it was clearly a spell book of some kind. He closed the book and set it on the small pile he'd chosen before he repacked the rest of the books. Then he took his treasured horde out to the front of the store where Lily rang him up.

"Looks like you have a nice haul there, Evan." Lily smiled as she took his money.

"It'll keep me busy until your next lot comes in."

"I've got a shipment coming in on the twenty-fourth—mostly from the early thirties and a few from the seventies."

"I'll be here, Lily. You know that."

After she gave him his change, Evan headed out of the store. As he stepped out onto the sidewalk, he saw an odd little man standing near the doorway. Black hair streaked with white and gray stuck out at odd angles from the man's head, and he was dressed in a black trench coat. Considering it was a fairly warm July day, that one fact was very weird. The man stared at Evan before looking at the books in Evan's arms. An odd smile crept over his lips when he looked back up at him.

Then the man turned and scurried down the street. Evan headed to the car and shook his head as he got in, placing the books on the passenger seat. He was more anxious to get home and study what he'd found.

Ten minutes later, he sat cross-legged on his bed and opened the purple book in his lap. The picture once again held him fascinated. Nobody ever looked that good in real life, but Evan had one hell of a fantasy life and the man in the picture fit right in.

Finally turning the page, he tried to decipher some of the text. It was handwritten and not printed. That alone made the book an exceptional find since it was obviously somebody's personal notes. There was a name on the first page: Aidan Loriel. The flourish of curls had an old fashioned look, downright elegant compared to Evan's cramped scrawls. Turning the next page, he tried to read the mixture of English and the unknown language.

Thankfully, the spell instructions seemed to be mostly English, though he little understood the references to Aurora or what the hell Sacarata meant. In between reading, he kept turning back to the first page to see the picture of the man who he assumed to be Aidan. He closely eyed the man's partially seen lips. He could have sworn the last time he looked there hadn't been a slight frown.

"Wow, that's fucking weird."

Evan placed the book on the bed and stretched out on his side. The rest of the books were scattered beside him and he thumbed through them quickly. When he looked at his watch, he realized he was probably going to be late going out with Shelly, the only damn friend he had in this whole fucking place. It hadn't been easy for either of them growing up in this small town. Traditional tree-lined suburban streets reflected the inner morals of the community itself, and the entire town was about as straight-laced as it could get.

Evan always knew he was attracted to guys. That alone put him in the freak bracket. Add his purple hair and darker interests, and he was a complete outcast. Pagan beliefs, a practitioner of spells and rituals and a thirst for a deeper knowledge of the secrets of the world had no place in the small Christian community. He'd ceased going to church a few years back, much to the dismay of his mother.

The only person who knew he was a gay pagan with a serious belief in magic was Shelly. Being lesbian, she'd never felt comfortable around the giggling high school girls who talked about sex, boyfriends, getting married and having kids. And Evan had never felt at ease with the testosterone-driven guys or the Ivy League preps who dominated Lakeview High School. Yeah, a few of them were cute, but damn, not a one of them was gay as far as he knew. He and Shel had been friends since they were in diapers, and the older they got, the closer they became. The only place either of them was comfortable was with each other.

Quickly grabbing his jacket, Evan headed outside to walk over to Shelly's house. Halfway across the connecting front yards, he spotted her at her front door.

"Hey, Shel," he called out as he went to her. "Are we going to the Arbor tonight?"

It was the only decent place to hang out at, at least for them. Only problem was, it was about a thirty minute drive. There were a few clubs in Lakeview that allowed people under twenty-one, but they were serious hot places—something that interested neither of them. So most times, they ended up at the Arbor, where the atmosphere was a bit more relaxed.

"Yeah, I told Kathy I would meet her there and..." Shel trailed off, giving a pointed look at her watch before continuing. "We're going to be late."

Shel had met her girlfriend at the Arbor, but he'd had no luck as yet. A year ago, she'd asked him to perform a spell for her to find the right one. He did the spell, and Kathy showed up in her life two weeks later. Since then the two women had been inseparable.

"Sorry about that. New set of books." Evan cleared his throat, giving her a sheepish look that made her chuckle.

"You and your books, Evan." She just shook her head.

"You should see this one I found. It has a picture of the most gorgeous man I have ever seen in my entire fucking life. I swear, Shelley."

His friend eyed him with a great deal of curiosity as she smiled. "I'll check it out later. Must be impressive since I've never heard you say that."

When he turned to head to his car, Evan glanced down the street. To his surprise, the same odd man he'd seen before stood near one of the lampposts. Before he could be noticed, Evan quickly faced Shelly with a muttered, "Oh, shit."

"What's wrong?"

"There was this weird guy outside the book store, and now he's standing over there."

"What?" Wisely, Shelly didn't look at the other guy right away. She stared at Evan then very carefully looked in the other guy's direction as she kept her head facing Evan.

"Yeah, he was just standing outside the door, and when I came out, he looked at me and gave me a really weird smile. Then he just walked away."

"Maybe you should call the cops."

"For what? He's just standing there. You know he really did have a strange look on his face when he looked at the books I had." Evan wondered if that was what this was

about. It was the only thing that he could think of. “Shel, do me a favor. Go back into the house and wait in the backyard for me. I got a bad feeling and I want you to keep my new books in your room for me.”

“Yeah, sure, Evan.”

He turned away from her and walked casually back across the lawn to his house. In a louder voice meant to be overheard, he called over his shoulder to her, “Give me about five minutes, Shel, and I’ll meet you at the car.”

“That’s cool.” She disappeared back into her house as he entered his.

He raced upstairs to get his books. He wasn’t sure which one the other man might be interested in, or even if it was the books. However, he grabbed all five of them and sprinted back down the stairs and out to the backyard. The privacy fences around both yards insured nobody could see anything. Shel waited for him by the low chain link fence separating their yards.

Handing the books over to her, Evan gave her a quick smile. “Thanks, Shel. I don’t know if that weird guy and my books are connected, but I’m not taking the chance.” Since they were going out for the rest of the evening, he didn’t want to come home and find any of his books missing.

“No problem. Give me a minute or two and I’ll meet you at your car.”

As he dug his car keys out of his pocket, Evan went back into the house. He couldn’t lock the door because his younger sister hadn’t taken her keys with her when she’d left in a hurry earlier. When he got to the car, he opened the door and slid into the driver’s side. Shel came out of her house a minute later and got in.

“That guy is still there, Evan.”

“Yeah, I know. If he’s still there when we get home, I might call the cops anyway.”

He started the car and eased out of the driveway. As they drove past the guy, Evan stared at him, letting him know he’d been seen. The guy didn’t look in their direction.

“I’ll probably get a ride back with Kathy, so you don’t have to worry about getting me home, Evan.”

“I figured you’d be staying out later than me.”

“I probably won’t be back until tomorrow night. Kathy wants to go apartment hunting in the morning. Damn, I can’t wait until we move in together.”

Evan knew Shel's parents didn't have a problem with her relationship with Kathy. They'd just been concerned Shel wouldn't go to college as she planned, but Kathy had proven to be willing to help Shel reach that goal.

"A whole summer with Kathy will be heaven."

"I know, I know. You've told me a million times. I can't wait to get out to California next week." Evan planned to stay the entire summer at his cousin's apartment before he started the fall semester.

"Have not," Shel shot back, grimacing at him.

"Yes, you have."

"All right, so I do talk about her a lot. Wait until you're in love."

Evan wrinkled his nose, making his own face at her. "The only gay guys I've met want to fuck against a wall and move on to the next. Love is the last thing on their minds."

"Most men are pigs, but there's got to be some decent ones out there. I've never looked, but I'm sure there are."

"Not a lot of them around here, decent or otherwise. Maybe I shouldn't be so picky."

"I don't think you should even go there. You are so not the wall-fuck type."

Shel kept up the lighthearted chatter about her and Kathy and Evan going to college. When they pulled into the parking lot of the Arbor, it was already fairly packed. Once inside, Shel separated from him on the lookout for her girlfriend. The heavy thrum of music vibrated the building and a pack of bodies were dancing to the beat on the dance floor. Evan made his way toward the bar to get himself a soda. Shel joined him a few moments later with Kathy in tow. Waving to Kathy, Evan grinned at her.

"Hey, Evan, I've already spotted a few so it might be a good night for you." Kathy had picked up Shel's habit of trying to set him up.

As the two stood together, Shel slipped her arm around Kathy. The diminutive redhead seemed a perfect fit for Shel. Evan noticed their personalities blended well together, and he was pleased his little spell had been a resounding success for his best friend. Looking over the crowd, he just wished the same for himself. To be sure, he saw more than one or two who attracted his attention, but the eye candy rarely lasted through actually meeting and talking.

"I'm not holding out much hope, Kathy." Evan shrugged.

"Hey, Kath." A stranger joined them, nodding toward Shel and Evan.

“This is my cousin, Lee,” Kathy added. “Lee, this is Shelly and Evan.”

Evan gave the man a bit of a smile. The young blond was more than an eyeful and in the white pants and open white vest, a great deal of him was visible.

“Hi, Lee,” Shel said. “Kathy told me you were from New York City. You enjoying the back waters of the earth?”

“It’s a lot quieter here, but not too bad.” The words were addressed to Shel, but Lee’s gaze was on Evan.

“Lee’s on break from college and staying with me for the next month.” From the look Kathy directed at him, Evan had the sinking suspicion they were trying to set him up.

“I got kicked out, but it’s no big deal,” Lee said. “Dad smoothed it over and I’ll be back in next term.”

Evan glanced between the three of them. He wasn’t at all surprised when Shel tugged Kathy toward the dance floor, saying, “Let’s dance.”

Lee moved closer to him and leaned up against the counter. “Nice hair. You’d fit right in where I live.”

“Just not too well around here, I know.” Evan cracked a smile as he sipped at his soda.

“I noticed it’s seriously uptight here. How in the hell do you stand it?” When the bartender approached, Lee fished out his ID and ordered a rum and coke.

Evan laughed. “By counting the days until I head to California.”

“If I’m lucky, something will amuse me until I’m out of this God-forsaken place.”

From Lee’s tone and his slow, lingering look, it wasn’t hard to tell the man was thinking of Evan as the amusement. Glancing back over at the blond and the exposed expanse of lean flesh, Evan almost felt tempted.

Lee took a drink from his glass, a small smirk on his lips as his gaze met Evan’s. Evan had the feeling he was already naked. A downward glance caught the near-straining bulge at the front of Lee’s pants. Lee wanted to fuck him, but Evan felt curiously empty at the thought. The image of an auburn-haired man with red eyes flashed in his mind, making Evan stifle the groan struggling to escape. Suddenly it didn’t seem like such a good idea to be in this place. The soft sound he whispered remained unheard over the music: “Aidan.”

Evan set his glass down and pushed away from the counter. Giving Lee a faintly strained smile, he said, "I wish you luck, Lee. I'm gonna head home, I'm not feeling too well."

Lee looked at him in surprise before he nodded. "It was nice to meet you, Evan."

"You, too." Evan was going on pure automatic and he didn't want to be here. After he pulled Shel aside, he told her he wasn't feeling good and wanted to go home. She took one look at him and told him to get his ass going.

On the way home, he couldn't keep his thoughts away from what had happened. Before he even knew it, he drove into his driveway and shut off the car. He stared up at the house, not quite sure how he even got there. He got out of his car and ran across the lawn to Shelly's house. When he knocked at the door, her mom opened it.

"You're home early, Evan."

"Hello, Mrs. Smith. I left a few books with Shelley and wanted to get them. She put them in her room for me."

She stepped to the side and held the door open for him. "You can get them. I'm in the middle of getting cookies baked for the PTA's bake sale."

"Thanks." Evan dashed up the stairs to Shel's room. He spotted the books on her bed and scooped them up then returned downstairs. "Any chance of stealing a couple of cookies?"

Mrs. Smith chuckled at the hopeful look Evan directed at her. "Sure, help yourself, but no more than a couple."

He grinned and took two chocolate chip cookies from the plate on the counter. "Thanks again."

A few minutes later, he was on his bed, munching on the cookies and staring at the open book in his lap. For some reason, the picture hypnotized him. An aura of isolated loneliness showed in Aidan's face, and it tugged at Evan's heart. Every time he looked at the picture, it seemed to change.

"What is it about you that's so special?"

Nothing answered his question and with a sigh, Evan reached for another book. Maybe it was time to perform the same spell he'd done for Kathy. The temptation Lee had brought out in him made him cringe inwardly. That wasn't what he wanted. He wanted something solid, something durable. Not just a quick fuck in some dark corner.

Evan already had everything necessary to do the spell. After gathering all the ingredients, he carefully set up the candles and incense. As he sat cross legged in front of the low table with the purple book in his lap, the flicker of candlelight danced over the picture of Aidan, bringing an odd glow to the red eyes. Part of Evan wasn't sure if he wanted to find Aidan or find somebody who would love him. He knew the spell by heart and quietly chanted the words. He closed his eyes and opened himself to the flow of energy. A powerful longing swept through him, strengthening the influence of the spell. His fingers rested against the image of Aidan as he remained motionless, putting his entire heart and soul into what he needed before he released it.

When he was done, he left the candles to burn as he stretched out on the bed. He settled on his side and stared into Aidan's red eyes. Evan refused to let go of the book and kept it open beside him. He heard the sound of his sister's music and her singing through the wall, but he ignored it. Finally, he turned the page, trying to block out something that seemed to be hurting inside him.

"Fei ard leignor..." He'd barely begun to phonetically sound out the words when a blinding darkness descended over him.

Chapter Three

The blackness slowly cleared from Evan's mind and when he could see again, he blinked at his surroundings. He was in a stone room with only a door and a window. He shook his head and closed his eyes, convinced he was seeing things.

"Who put the acid in my drink?"

When he opened his eyes again, nothing had changed. He grabbed the book beside him and scrambled to his feet. A glimpse out the window showed a clear view of a mountain range. There were no fucking mountains in his backyard.

Disoriented, he made his way to the door and opened it. He stepped out into the hallway, keeping the book clutched under his arm.

"I'm gonna kill the mother fucker who spiked my drink."

Farther down the corridor, there was movement. Massive leathery wings the color of cinnamon brushed along the walls on either side of the...creature. Two giant horns protruded from its head, and when it turned to face Evan, a wide grin broke across the creature's face, revealing rows of razor-sharp teeth. The creature's gaze flickered to the book and back up to Evan. Within seconds, it turned and disappeared into thin air.

Evan bolted down the hall in the opposite direction. His mind raced, trying to make sense of whatever the hell that was. He'd never seen anything like it in his life and he hoped never to see it again. Finding a set of stairs, he ran down them, taking the steps three at a time. His heart pounded as he desperately searched for a way out of the place. It was a maze of corridors and rooms. Finally finding another staircase, he raced down it. Three people stood at the bottom. Evan half expected them to try and stop him, but they only stared at him.

Out of a doorway behind the small group, a man emerged. He was dressed in a red robe and had auburn hair and piercing red eyes. His eyes widened when he saw the book cradled in Evan's arms. Evan skidded to a halt.

“Leave us.” With the command, the group hurried out of the main hall. “You can stop running now. If you cooperate, you will not be harmed. Come. Join me.”

Blue sparks engulfed his only escape route. Evan whirled around, wildly scanning for another doorway, hall, anything. Then he dared to glance at the man. Evan’s mouth opened in complete shock when he realized it was the man in the picture. Holy shit... He blinked and for the first real time in his life, knew how a deer felt when caught in headlights. Here he was, looking at the most gorgeous creature he’d ever laid eyes on, and all he could do was stare like an idiot while contemplating escape.

“What in the hell is going on?” Evan asked.

The man gestured for him to follow, and, dazed, Evan obeyed. Once they were both in the room, the man shut the door behind them. He walked around to stand before Evan, his gaze curious.

“That is precisely what I would like to know. You are not Leland, yet you have my book.” His brow furrowed and he cocked his head to the side. A lock of red hair fell, revealing the barest tip of a pointed ear. “Are you fae? I have not seen any of your kind, but then, I haven’t been out for some time.”

Evan shifted and tugged at the hem of his fishnet shirt. He kept the other hand tight around the book, though the book obviously belonged to the man in front of him. “You’re kidding me, right?”

When he caught sight of the pointed ear, Evan opened his mouth to say something more, but then just as quickly shut it. He closed his eyes and shook his head in an attempt to clear it. He looked again, but the pointed ear hadn’t disappeared like it should have.

“Somebody is seriously going to pay for spiking my drink. I’m seeing things.”

“May I have my book?” The man reached out and it was clear that “no” would not be an acceptable answer. “You are an odd-looking sort, whatever you are.”

“First I see some horned creature straight from Dante’s nightmare, and now I’m seeing an angel. Either I’m high or I’m dead, gotta be one or the other. At least for a delusion, I can come up with some good shit.” Sighing, Evan handed over the book. “I don’t know how the hell I got here. I don’t even know where here is. I was lying in my bed, reading your book, and bam, I’m here.”

“Ah, so you’ve seen Atael. And an angel?” The man laughed. “My friend, I am no angel.” He took the book and thumbed through it. “Well, at least it is intact. I thank you for that much. This book is protected and to read any spell within its pages would result

in bringing the reader here. Now, how did you come by this? For your sake, I hope you are not in league with Leland.”

“I bought it in a bookstore. Where is here? Like Colorado or something? And who’s Leland?”

“You are in Sercenia, the smallest yet one of the most strategic countries in all of Aurora. And I find it hard to believe that you found this in a bookstore anywhere near here, as I own all five stores on this island.” The man walked to a small bar. “Leland was my servant, second only to Atael. He stole the book from me and for that he will be put to death.” He turned and handed Evan a glass of dark purple wine. “Where are you from?”

“I’ve never heard of that country. Of course, I know there are, like, over a hundred or something. I’m from Lakeview, Virginia.” Evan paused. Not getting a look of recognition with the name, he added, “You know, the United States? Wait a minute. You can’t kill somebody for stealing a book. It’s against the law!”

“You’re from Earth,” the man said quietly. “And outside of the king’s borders, I am the law.” He stepped forward, holding out a slender hand. “My name is Aidan Loriel. I am one of the Heads of the Wizards’ Guild of Aurora.”

“Yeah, I’m from Earth. Where in the hell else would I be from? Mars?” Eyeing the hand then Aidan, Evan took it tentatively, giving it a quick shake. “I’m Evan Bartholomew. Wizards’ Guild? I never heard of them and I’ve never heard of a place called Aurora, either.” A feeling of dread settled in the pit of his stomach and he muttered, “Toto, we’re so not in Kansas anymore.”

Aidan cocked an eyebrow at him before turning to sit on the edge of a desk. He set the book beside him and folded his hands in his lap, eyeing Evan curiously once more. “Well, you are not fae if you are from Earth. That’s a bit refreshing, I must admit. I haven’t been home in some time, but I hadn’t thought it had been quite that long. Earth exists on another plane from this one. I had not thought that anyone would dare take my book quite that far away, but apparently Leland did just that. I would venture to guess that the clumsy oaf lost it once he entered Earth’s realm.” His gaze narrowed. “You look very odd, even from the pictures I have seen of those from Earth.”

Suddenly, it occurred to Evan to ask about the little man who’d been following him. “Hey, wait a minute. This Leland, is he like a really strange-looking guy? Looks kind of like a skunk with black and white hair sticking all out?” He paused and couldn’t help but laugh. “There are other people who dye their hair, just not many who like purple.”

Reaching up, he combed through the short strands. *Think, Evan, think.* Gorgeous guy, weird house, big demon—it had to be a dream.

Aidan nodded slowly. “That would be Leland.” A wry smile crept across his full lips. “Only those with knowledge of magic can change their appearance, as can the fae.” His gaze followed Evan’s hand and he fell silent for a moment before asking, “How old are you?”

Evan looked around for a chair and collapsed into the first one he saw. “I’m eighteen. That little fuck, Leland, was outside the bookstore then he followed me home.” He studied Aidan for a moment. “You’re from Earth? ’Cuz they really don’t make them like you anymore. And I can’t believe I just said that. I can’t believe I’m not running around the room screaming, either.”

“Leland obviously wanted that book back. Perhaps...” Aidan’s words trailed off. “Me? From Earth? Not quite, my young friend. I was born and raised here in Aurora. And no, there are no others like me. It is why they tolerate me sitting in representation of the Dark Arts in the Guild. There are very few of us, and I am the eldest.” He slid off of the desk and clapped his hands together once. At that moment, the door opened and a blond man appeared. Something about the man’s eyes felt...familiar.

“Yes, Master?”

“Atael, please show our unexpected guest to a room. Be sure to put him near my chambers. I want him far away from the king. He is too young for such nonsense.”

“I’m dreaming,” Evan muttered. “Yes, I am.” He had to be. The only place where a world like this could exist would be in a dream...or a crazy mind. When Aidan addressed the blond as Atael, Evan put two and two together. It was the demon he’d seen earlier, and he wasn’t sure of anything anymore. “I’m not fucking going anywhere.”

Aidan shot him a stern look. “Very well.” He gripped Evan’s arm and snapped his fingers. Seconds later they were standing in a decadent room of dark crimson and rich wood. “This is your room. The bathroom, as you call it, is through that door.” He pointed to a door just to the right of the massive bed. “Should you need anything at any time, please do not hesitate to call on Atael or anyone else.”

Evan didn’t think it possible to feel more bemused and bewildered. When he spoke, it didn’t make too much sense even to him. “I forgot the ruby slippers.”

“Ruby slippers? If you really want a pair, you may borrow some of mine.” Aidan lifted his robe the slightest bit to reveal red satin slippers on his feet. He released Evan’s arm and paused. “Such strange material,” he said as he ran his fingertips over the fishnet

covering Evan's chest. He stepped back and his gaze traveled over Evan's body. "Very interesting clothing."

"Huh?" Evan blinked and electricity tingled over his skin as those fingers ran over his shirt. "It was a *Wizard of Oz* sort of thing. Dorothy needed a pair of ruby slippers to get home. Just a joke, kind of." He ran a self-conscious hand over the smooth vinyl of his pants. "Lots of people wear stuff like this."

Aidan's gaze followed the subtle movement. Then he looked back up. "Purple eyes as well," he murmured. "My, but you are unusual."

Evan shifted from foot to foot. He knew he was staring, but he couldn't help himself. "I'm pretty ordinary. I'd say you're the unusual one. I've never seen anybody with eyes like yours."

"Even in my own world, I am unusual. I have no interest in women and I practice arts darker than most would care to admit. Yet a village sits in my lower bailey, just beyond the inner courtyard, and none have ever complained of me as a lord."

"You're gay?" Of course, that would be the one fact that Evan would pick up. It figured. He thanked whatever deity had placed him here.

"Gay?" Aidan looked at him quizzically.

"Um, meaning you like men and not women, right?" Evan glanced briefly at the rest of the room. He probably shouldn't have asked that.

"Ah," Aidan said with a soft chuckle. "That is a term I am not familiar with, but yes, that is the case. The penalty here in Aurora for a man lying with another is death. It is considered unnatural. Those who do enjoy such things do it behind locked doors."

"That's medieval! Where I come from, your parents try to shove you into a church where a preacher tells you you're going to hell. Not that it really does much good. But nobody puts you to death for it. Though in some places, they still gay bash, which is just as bad."

Aidan's smile spread just a bit further. "Your manner of speech is infinitely intriguing." He walked toward the bed, stopping to slide his fingertips gently over the brocade curtain. "Our worlds are different, yet they are the same. When you speak, I find myself wanting to know more about where you come from. Although I have the ability to travel to Earth, I have never done so. I never saw a need to. Perhaps it would be worth it just to observe."

Evan followed Aidan's movements and he stared when the man looked away. For a moment, he watched the slender fingers brushing the curtain. That sight so close to a bed was a damn tempting one. "Not that I ever told my parents, but it still wouldn't have done much good anyway. But to some, being gay is okay. They're even trying to fight for gays to get married, though that isn't too popular as yet. It's an all right place, I guess."

"Perhaps that is why so many want to live within the grounds of my keep," Aidan mused. "It lies just outside the king's borders and as such, out of his rule. However, he does make frequent trips here, if only to try to convince me once more to lie with him. The queen would be less enthusiastic, I dare say." Aidan turned and leaned against the bedpost. "And what of you, young Evan? Why would you be interested in such an arcane text as my book?"

"You sleep with a king?" Evan blurted out before he realized it. "And he's married?"

"No, I do not sleep with him, much to his dismay. He feels that sex can win my allegiance. He is sorely mistaken."

"Oh." Evan went to the bed and drew back the drape around it to sit on the edge. "I've always had an interest in magic. Not that my parents knew about that, either. They would have had a fit. I got some books when I was about ten and I've been trying to learn more since."

Aidan looked down at Evan. "An interest in magic? How much do you know?"

Evan felt kind of sorry for the king and had no problem understanding why the man wanted Aidan, though he doubted it had anything to do with allegiance. "I know magic is mostly about will. I'm not sure if I'm very successful at it, though."

"For the most part, it does," Aidan said with a nod. He crossed his arms over his chest as he peered down at Evan. "Somehow I doubt you lack the will."

Chapter Four

Sliding his hands behind him, Evan leaned back on the bed and looked up at Aidan. The ruby eyes held his gaze and he tried not to turn away. He never would have believed it if anybody had told him he'd be in a bedroom with this drop-dead gorgeous man. The same man whose portrait he'd drooled over.

"I did sort of help Shelley get her girlfriend. About a couple of weeks before she met Kathy, I did a spell for her so she would find somebody, and she did, though some might say it was pure coincidence."

"Nothing is pure coincidence," Aidan said. He fell silent for a moment as if lost in thought, then continued. "It is a shame that you wish to return home."

Evan thought about that for a moment. At first, he'd had almost a panicked need to go home, but sitting and talking to Aidan quelled that need...at least for now. "Why do you say it's a shame?"

"Because I find you intriguing. You are not fae, yet in this world, you might as well be. I haven't seen my people for nearly eight hundred years. You remind me of them."

A flush crept over Evan's cheeks. Hearing an impossibly handsome man call him "intriguing" was a completely new one to him. "T-thanks. Wait... You're eight hundred years old?"

"Hardly," Aidan laughed. "I am two thousand three hundred fifty-six years old. I simply haven't seen another fae without the aid of a mirror for eight hundred years. Like the phoenix and the wild horses, we are a rare species."

"Uh, you don't look a day over thirty." The large number of years was totally beyond Evan's comprehension. He'd always thought he'd be lucky to reach forty.

A brief spark lit the ardent depths of Aidan's eyes, then it disappeared. "Thank you. We don't age like others. While in human years I am over two thousand years old, to my people, I am only twenty-eight. How soon do you want to go home? I can send you there

any time you wish.” There was the smallest hint of reluctance in the mage’s voice, yet his expression did not change.

Evan thought about it. “You don’t sound like you want me to go home. And I’m not sure if I really want to right away. I mean, what would staying here a few days hurt? Maybe I can learn something. Or maybe you can let me read more of your book.” He gave Aidan a hopeful look.

“I would like very much for you to stay, if only for a few days. It is not often I have someone to talk to about such things. As for my book, I would prefer you start on something a little less...dangerous. The only thing to remember while you are here is that Atael is in charge, second only to me. You must do what he says. He will not harm anyone without my word.”

“Okay, I guess I can buy that as long as I still get to learn.” Evan drew up one leg as he asked, “He’s a demon thing, isn’t he? So what’s with the blond locks, anyway?”

Aidan’s attention seemed to be distracted momentarily and Evan felt that stare like a touch. “Yes, he’s a demon. He uses an illusion when others are about to prevent scaring them. When you saw him at first, he had not yet changed his appearance.”

“Yeah, I can see that. He scared the shit of me. The minute I saw him I thought I was fucked.”

“No, despite the fact that you had my book, he would not have harmed you unless ordered to. But you need not worry about that happening.”

Evan curled up on his side so he could see Aidan better. He sensed the interest beneath the mage’s gaze, but he figured it had more to do with him being from another world. “Good, because I don’t think I could hold my own against a dude like that.”

“Dude,” Aidan echoed in an amused tone. “You say the strangest things.” He held out a hand to Evan. “Come. If it’s knowledge you seek, then I will show my workroom. I moved my most prized books in there.”

Evan took Aidan’s hand and got up from the bed. “How many of them do I get to read?”

“There are two hundred and sixty-seven, not including the one you returned to me. You may have your pick,” Aidan said. His breath stilled for the briefest moment as their bodies came closer together.

Evan froze, his eyes widening as they fastened on Aidan's ruby ones. He'd never been this close to a man as fascinating as Aidan and he wanted to get a hell of a lot closer. "Maybe I can find the time to read all of them."

Aidan slipped a finger beneath Evan's chin and tilted his head up slowly. The depths of his eyes seemed to spark into flames as he leaned down to press his lips softly to Evan's in a chaste kiss. "I won't deny you that."

Evan nearly melted. His hands itched to touch Aidan, but he didn't know where to put them. At eighteen, he'd never even kissed anybody. Not so strange, since where he came from none of the guys were gay and he sure as hell never felt the impulse to kiss a girl. Evan didn't want it to end and when it did, he turned a somewhat bemused expression on Aidan.

Aidan stepped back and smiled. He curled his fingers around Evan's hand and led the way out of the room. Evan had a feeling he might be in a little over his head.

Aidan led him downstairs to a set of great double doors and pushed them open. He waved Evan inside. All four walls were lined with shelves and two large tables stood along the sides. A chair which greatly resembled a throne sat at the far end.

Evan let go of Aidan's hand and walked past him farther into the room. The books caught his attention and he looked at them. "Fucking heaven," he whispered. He hurried to one shelf just to take in the titles.

"You are welcome to read whatever you wish. Should you need further explanation of anything, just ask me."

"These books aren't like that one where I start reading and end up gods know where, right?" Evan looked back over his shoulder at Aidan. One experience like the last was quite enough, thank you.

Aidan laughed and stepped up, reaching around Evan to pull a book from the shelf. "No, they are not. But I must caution you not to remove them beyond the outer wall of my land. The price is not a pleasant one to pay."

Evan tried to be good, but with Aidan that close, all he wanted to do was lean back for the chance to feel the man against him. He swore he felt the heat behind him. "I'll remember that."

Aidan took Evan's right hand in his. He placed the book in it and leaned down to whisper in Evan's ear, "Should you have questions about anything, do not hesitate to come to me."

Evan shivered with the touch of the mage's lips on his ear. The soft cadence of the words did damnable things to his insides. He sort of forgot about the book placed in his hand. "I will."

"You are far too enticing," Aidan murmured. He turned Evan's head with his other hand and touched the tip of his tongue to Evan's lips. He groaned and curled his fingers to Evan's left hip.

The vibration of that sound ran straight through Evan, and the touch of Aidan's tongue drew a soft whimper from him. Uncertainty and arousal filled him as he finally leaned against Aidan.

"You have never done this, have you?" Aidan whispered.

Evan fixed his gaze on the books in front of him and shrugged. He sure as hell didn't want to admit it, not at the age of eighteen.

Aidan turned Evan's head once more, fixing a soft gaze on him. "It is all right, Evan. We all have to start somewhere." He drew Evan's face back to him, then slid his tongue slowly across Evan's lips. "Open your mouth for me," he whispered. "And just do what feels right."

Okay, it was embarrassing as hell to be assessed so quickly, but the glide of Aidan's tongue made him forget that. He parted his lips as instructed and just barely touched Aidan's tongue with his own. Maybe he could explain later. Right now, he just wanted to be kissed.

Taking it slow, Aidan stroked his tongue over Evan's. Then he deepened the kiss, exploring every inch of Evan's mouth. Evan shuddered and swallowed Aidan's moan. The mage's hold on Evan's hip tightened just the slightest bit. Evan's thoughts, which had been wildly out of control, calmed with the gentleness Aidan showed him.

Aidan ended the kiss and smiled. "You learn quickly," he said. "And you learn well. However, I will do nothing more unless I am certain that you want it. Most would imagine me to be coarse and demanding, given my magical proclivities. But in truth, I am not."

"When I first saw your picture, I thought you were the most beautiful man I'd ever seen." Once the words were out, Evan's cheeks flushed again with a touch of embarrassment.

Aidan laughed softly. "Thank you. And I must admit, you intrigue me. It has been a long time since I've felt the desire to kiss anyone, yet you feed that desire easily. Perhaps

it is your thirst for knowledge, or simply your appearance. I find myself wanting to touch you, which is something I haven't felt in a very long time."

The urge to acknowledge the same rose within Evan, but he lacked the words to express it. Tongue-tied, it took a few seconds for him to finally find his voice. "I thought it was because I'm from a different place."

"No. I have been to many worlds and have seen many unusual things. But you are something entirely different, my friend." Aidan turned Evan around to face him fully. Slipping an arm around Evan's waist, Aidan pulled him close. "And I find myself wanting another kiss."

Evan had a hard time meeting the man's gaze. He'd never expected that someone he'd dreamed about would be staring at him. And certainly he never thought he'd see anything vaguely resembling any kind of interest. It brought an odd sensation in the pit of his stomach, warming him. Hesitantly, he raised his face to the mage's and brushed his lips against Aidan's. Aidan's hold on him tightened and the mage's tongue slipped inside. A soft groan accompanied the kiss, though Evan was no longer sure which of them had made it. Aidan's other hand slid up Evan's spine and finally through his hair, holding his head.

Evan let Aidan lead him in this and the kiss tingled all the way through him. The feel of the solid body against his played havoc with his senses. As he felt Aidan's cock pressing into him, he responded as well, his own hardening. Things were very quickly moving out of his control.

With a low groan, Aidan broke the kiss. "Whatever happens, we'll go as slow as you wish to. If you do want to continue, then tell me. If you do, then I will teach you, one lesson at a time."

No way in hell would Evan be able to sleep until he took care of things. His body wanted everything, but his mind tried to slow him down. "I've never done anything before. Except...you know, jack off. Nobody where I live is gay. And girls never appealed to me."

"Do you want me to join you while you do that? I will not touch if you don't want me to, but I would love nothing more than to see you pleasure yourself."

The thought alone almost made Evan come right then and there. He'd naively convinced himself he'd probably never get laid, and now it all was being handed to him on a silver platter. "I think..." His voice started out at a slightly higher pitch until he cleared his throat to continue. "I think I might like that."

“Your room? Or mine?”

“Yours?” Evan asked tentatively.

“Very well,” Aidan said with a nod.

He took Evan’s hand and snapped his fingers. A split second later they were in a magnificent room, dominated by an enormous bed draped in sheer red curtains. Keeping Evan’s hand in his, Aidan made his way to the bed and stopped.

“Have you ever seen another man unclothed?” Aidan released Evan’s hand and began unbuttoning his robe, his gaze never leaving Evan’s.

“Yeah, but only in magazines, on the net and in a locker room.” It took Evan a moment to realize he should undress. He stared at Aidan’s hands before he reached for the edge of his own shirt and tugged it over his head.

Aidan’s robe slipped from his shoulders, revealing a muscular, slender body. No hair was visible anywhere on him, save for the auburn length of his hair. He sat down on the bed and leaned back, propping himself on his elbows as he watched Evan undress. A hungry, burning red gaze swept over Evan’s body.

Evan’s mouth watered and he couldn’t look away from Aidan’s thick cock. God, he wanted to taste that. Nervous fingers tugged at the fastening of his pants and he got them undone then pulled off his sneakers. He hopped on one foot, trying to tug off his pants. Nearly falling to the floor, Evan hastily grabbed the bed post for support. Once he got himself undressed, he hovered uncertainly near the edge of the bed.

The hunger in Aidan’s eyes deepened as he studied Evan. His tongue snaked out to lick at his lips, wetting them slowly. His cock lay against his stomach, hard and leaking. “Come.”

Evan tried to cover himself with his hand. He already had a raging hard on and there was no way he could compare with the magnificence laid out on the bed. Crawling onto the mattress, he wasn’t sure where to lie so he remained on his hands and knees, looking over at Aidan.

“If you remain in such a position for too long, I fear I may go back on my promise to not touch you,” Aidan said. He scooted up to the headboard and leaned back against it. “Relax and do what you always do. There is no need to feel self-conscious before me.” His right hand drifted down his stomach and finally wrapped around the hard length of his shaft. From base to tip, he squeezed as he stroked it once.

Evan felt nervous and excited all in one fell swoop. Self-conscious was barely the tip of the iceberg. He gingerly stretched out on his stomach, but once there, he was riveted to the sight of Aidan's hand circling his cock. Oh hell, he wanted to do that. Without really thinking, he reached out to touch.

Aidan released himself and moved lower, stretching out on his back beside Evan. He took Evan's hand and wrapped Evan's fingers around his cock. With his own hand covering Evan's, Aidan resumed stroking himself, his hips rocking in response, eyes drifting closed.

Evan tightened his grip as he felt the glide of the firm flesh against his palm. He let Aidan guide him as he shifted closer. The rhythm was very familiar since he'd had so much practice. He watched Aidan's expression and with each rocking thrust, he squeezed a little more.

The rhythm of Aidan's hips began to speed up and he tightened his hand around Evan's. "Harder," he breathed. "Yes, like that. So good..." His chest rose and fell with the quickened pace and his thrusts into Evan's fist began to increase.

Evan's gaze drifted back down to watch the pump of Aidan's hips. The glistening tip of Aidan's cock enthralled him and he leaned over just enough to reach it with his mouth. He lowered his head and licked the tip.

Aidan gasped and threaded the fingers of his left hand through Evan's hair. "Yes," he purred. "Open your mouth for me. Taste me..." His hand left Evan's hair and slipped between them to wrap tightly around Evan. "Such a beautiful cock you have."

Holding to the base, Evan swallowed, wanting Aidan's whole cock in his mouth. When he gagged, he drew back. He thrust into Aidan's fist, the sensations sparking along his spine. It wouldn't take him long at all.

"Don't stop, Evan," Aidan pleaded breathlessly. His strokes on Evan's cock sped up, tightening and releasing with every slide from the base to the tip.

Evan's mouth tightened around Aidan and he sucked. What he lacked in expertise, he more than made up for in enthusiasm. He tried to keep his mind on sucking Aidan off, but the mage was slowly driving him mad. He was so close, so fucking close. Every glide of Aidan's hand on him ratcheted the need coiling deep inside, up another notch. Oh, gods...just a little more...

"Come for me."

With Aidan's words, lightning shot straight through Evan's body. He cried out, the sound muffled by Aidan's cock as he came, heat spreading onto the blanket beneath him. He'd barely come to his senses when Aidan's strokes in his mouth quickened.

A few seconds later, a deep, guttural growl filled the room and Aidan's body went rigid as he came hard, his seed pouring down Evan's throat. When Aidan finally stopped shuddering, he pulled his hand from Evan's cock and brought it to his lips, tongue flicking out to lick away the semen coating his palm.

"Are you sure you've never done that before?" Aidan asked with a soft chuckle. He slipped his arm under Evan and pulled him up close.

Evan went willingly, his brain still nothing but mush. "No, I haven't, but I sure as hell want to do it some more."

Aidan laughed and kissed his hair. "Stay in my bed tonight and you can do whatever you like."

Good, because Evan didn't want to leave Aidan's bed now. He'd gotten his first taste and he wanted much more. As he nudged up against Aidan's side, he lifted his head. "You might have more of a problem getting me out of it than convincing me to stay."

"Is that a promise?" Aidan traced his fingertips over Evan's chest, pausing to circle his left nipple lightly. "Careful what you wish for," he said quietly. His gaze slid up to meet Evan's. "You just might get it."

Every nerve in Evan's body honed in on that touch. He knew he was in over his head, but that paled in comparison to what they did—and what he hoped they would do. A small shiver ran through him and goose bumps rose on his arms. He should be worried about what everyone at home was thinking, he should be worried about this strange yet enigmatic man beside him, but as he lifted his gaze to meet Aidan's, Evan couldn't bring himself to care.

Chapter Five

Evan curled up in an armchair in one of the chambers on the second floor. Wanting to stay out of everybody's way, he'd found a little-used room to settle in and read. His legs dangled over one side and the book was propped in his lap. He'd spent the day trying to avoid running into Aidan because he was so damn confused.

When he'd woken up earlier, he'd been alone. As the memories of the night before flooded back to him, he'd ended up crawling out of bed and dressing as quickly as possible. Atael had taken him to Aidan's library then left him.

He tried, for what felt like the thousandth time, to read the book splayed open against his legs, but he couldn't focus on the words when all he could think about was Aidan. The man's touch haunted him, every slight draft of air in the room translating to a ghost of a caress. The whole room—the entire...house?—smelled like Aidan, musky with a hint of something rich, something sweet. When Evan closed his eyes, all he saw in his mind was red. Without a doubt, he'd never look at that color the same way again.

And then, then there was Aidan's touch. Sweet gods, a single stroke of the man's fingers was enough to spark an inferno. It shocked Evan how quickly he'd given in the night before, but up against Aidan's power, Evan didn't stand a chance. It was never like that with anyone else. Whenever someone tried to touch him in the past, he always removed the hand because it made him uncomfortable. Hell, he'd turned down Lee just the night before. What in the hell was so different about Aidan?

A knock sounded on the door and before Evan could answer, the door opened. Atael walked in, carrying a small lump of cloth and a pair of boots. He placed them on the floor in front of Evan with a bow.

“Master instructed me to bring you a change of clothes. He insists you wear them for dinner, as the king is our guest for a few days.”

Evan eyed the clothes with a “you’ve got to be kidding me” look. He closed the book and set it down on the table then leaned over just enough to pick the clothes up. “Uh, thanks, Arael. What’s with the drab wear?”

The demon chuckled. “The Master wants you as inconspicuous as possible in the king’s presence. I daresay he is fearful that the king might make a move for you, since his advances on Aidan go unanswered.” With that, the demon turned toward the door. “I will be waiting just outside to take you downstairs for dinner.”

Evan blinked. “O...kay.” When he stood, he laid the clothes on the chair. He pulled his shirt over his head, then put on the loose, cream-colored tunic. After he took off his own pants, he stepped into the others and muttered, “Jeez, first there’s no men interested, and now I have extras.” He sat on the edge of the chair, put on the boots, and stood. Then he headed out into the hallway. Pausing near Arael, he said, “Dinner in my room is out, huh?”

“Yes.”

Arael started down the corridor and Evan fell into step behind him. A part of him actually felt bad for the demon. Arael was once again in human form, which meant he had to hide his true self. Yeah, Evan sympathized with that, all right. All in all, he had to admit: for a demon, Arael wasn’t all that bad.

A moment later they descended the grand staircase. To their left, the dining room doors were open and laughter spilled out into the hall. Evan kept himself occupied by making faces at Arael behind the demon’s back, stopping only when they reached the dining room. Firelight reflected off of the polished wood of the doors and Arael stood aside, ushering Evan in.

Aidan rose from his seat at the far end of the table and bowed low, a slow smile playing across his lips. To his left, another man sat straight as a board, tall and regal. His blond hair, streaked with the slightest hint of gray, fell over his shoulders and his pale blue gaze traveled over Evan. He had to be the king, Evan thought. Hell, in his younger days, the king might have been handsome. Now, though, there was something about him that made Evan’s skin crawl. Maybe it was the way the man smiled—leered, really. “Good evening, Evan. I would like you to meet His Highness, King Tordis. Your Highness, this is Evan. He was kind enough to return a book of mine and is now a guest in my house.” Aidan mouthed the word “bow” to Evan.

Glancing between Aidan and the king, Evan tried not to look at the mage too long. He bowed. “Hello, your Highness.”

Aidan waved a hand to the chair at his right as he sat down. "Please, Evan, join us."

Servants began bringing platters of food out to them and filled their cups with wine. Aidan watched Evan out of the corner of his eye and the king picked up their conversation. Evan kept his expression polite, listening quietly to them. While not exactly pleased to be here since he'd wanted dinner in his room, he did his best to appear so.

"*You do not enjoy my company?*" Showing no sign of anything to the contrary, Aidan took a drink of his wine and nodded at the king.

Blinking in surprise upon hearing another voice in his head, Evan wasn't sure how to answer. He had no clue how to speak telepathically, so he simply looked at Aidan and thought the words, "*Sure, I do,*" hoping Aidan would somehow understand.

The mage smiled at Evan, winked and took a bite of cheese from his fork. "*Perhaps once this ridiculous spectacle masquerading as dinner is over, we can retire to my workroom. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have on what you have read since last night.*"

Not knowing how to answer, Evan simply nodded.

A good while later, after dinner had been consumed, another group of servants brought out more trays filled with cakes and puddings. Aidan dipped his finger into what could only be chocolate pudding and stuck it in his mouth, rolling his tongue around it with another quick wink at Evan.

Evan stifled a laugh. His mom would have slapped him silly for doing something like that. As he settled back in his chair, he looked between Aidan and the king. The king eyed him with a hint of interest and Evan squirmed a little in his seat, then stared down at the table. He had enough on his plate with Aidan and he still had no clue as to how he really felt about what had happened between them, aside from knowing it felt really damn good. Hiding his confusion and discomfort, he took one of the smaller cakes and focused on eating it.

"As I was saying," the king said as he took a bite of bread. "I hear an old friend of yours is in the capital."

Aidan rolled his eyes, a move which obviously went unnoticed by the king. "Oh, and who might that be?" He dipped his spoon into the pudding and licked it clean.

"Felius."

Aidan froze and his jaw tightened. "I see. And what business would a Sunderlind wizard have in Sercenia?"

Evan listened to the conversation, scooting down in his chair to keep a low profile. As he ate the cake, he only looked up once. Seeing Aidan's temper rise with the mention of the name, Evan glanced back down at the plate. He pushed around the remaining pieces of cake with his fork before smashing them.

"I do not know what his purpose is," the king said, "but he's been asking about you. I had hoped you would tell me what use he has for a necromancer."

Aidan took another lengthy swallow of wine. As he set down the cup, he said, "I don't know, unless it is another attempt at my secrets. He is nothing more than a young fool who only thinks he wants to know what I do."

Finally, Evan gave up on dinner. He'd made a great show of eating, though he actually ate very little. Since he couldn't stare at his plate the rest of the night, he settled back in his chair again, trying to look relaxed. He glanced over at the king and gave the monarch a faint smile.

Aidan's gaze narrowed on the king and he pushed his chair from the table. "And now if you will excuse us, your Highness, we have much work to do. I have been instructing Evan in magic. We bid you a good evening." As he stood, Aidan glanced at Evan, the expression in his eyes letting Evan know it was time to leave.

Evan stood and bowed to the king before he moved around the table toward the door. Already knowing the way to the workroom, he started for the stairs.

Aidan let out a relieved sigh beside him. "Thank the gods. I thought we'd never get out of there."

"I was thinking the same thing." Evan just didn't mention that he was still thinking it. "Is he always..." He trailed off, not sure of the appropriate word to use. Being eyed like a banquet before a starving man had been unnerving and hadn't done much for his appetite.

"He is a pompous old fool who has his finger in everyone's pie," Aidan said.

"He can leave this pie alone," Evan muttered.

"That he will." Aidan's words held a distinct touch of protectiveness, but Evan chose to push that out of his mind. When they reached the workroom, he closed the door behind them and waved his hand over one of the tables. A plate of meats and cheeses appeared. "Please, feel free. I noticed you didn't eat much. I can't exactly say I blame you."

Aidan walked over to one of the tables, reached under it and pulled out a large iron pot. He set it in the middle of the floor and a flame flared around its base, catching

nothing else on fire. Then he went to one of the shelves and began taking down various colored jars and setting them on a nearby table.

“I will not offer an excuse for the king’s behaviors. I see them as inexcusable.” With a side glance to Evan, Aidan snapped his fingers. The clothes on Evan’s body changed back to what he’d been wearing before. “Much better,” the mage said with a nod.

Evan’s mouth dropped open. To say he was dumbfounded was the understatement of the century. “How’d you do that?”

“Thought,” Aidan said as he arranged the jars in what appeared to be some kind of order. “Having seen you in your normal clothing, I only needed to picture it in my mind to bring it to you.”

Okay. Yeah. This guy, however hot he was, had to be the strangest man Evan had ever met. A loud rumble from his stomach brought those thoughts to an end, though, and Evan went over to the table and picked up a few pieces of cheese. As he ate, he began to relax somewhat without Aidan’s attention on him.

He watched intently as Aidan began grinding the herbs into powder with a mortar and pestle. It was kind of nice to see something he knew a little about for once. When he was done, Aidan picked up the bowl and tossed the contents into the cauldron. Within the black iron pot, water began to rise from out of nowhere. Blue-green smoke swirled upward from the bottom, enveloping the top and obscuring the water. Aidan waved away the cloud and peered into the black depths. His brow furrowed as an image of a middle-aged man came into focus.

“Damn.”

After Evan helped himself to some of the fruit, he stepped closer. “Something wrong?”

Aidan groaned. “Possibly, possibly not.” He looked over at Evan and gestured to the image in the water. “That is Felius, one of the lesser wizards of Sunderlind.” He went to another shelf, pulled down a large book and opened it to a map. “This is a map of Aurora. Here is Sercenia, where we are.” He pointed to a small island, just off the coast of a larger body of land. “And here,” he said, pointing to the continent itself, “is Sunderlind. It is ruled by King Rakas. He seeks to ‘acquire’ Sercenia for himself. Sercenia is a strategic point in the trade routes of Aurora. Whoever controls this island controls a great deal of the world’s trade.”

Still munching on his cheese, Evan studied the map. “So their king wants all the goodies for himself, huh? Is it possible that Felius is working for him or something?” Not

that he knew much about the inner workings of this kind of thing, but it seemed logical to him.

“He is working for Rakas,” Aidan said as he closed the book. “It is why he is here looking for me. What I failed to tell King Tordis is that Rakas has been trying to convince me to defect and join him. If he has my allegiance, he will have an easier time gaining control of Sercenia.” He chuckled. “Rumor has it that I am the key to this land, although I don’t think that is accurate.”

“Wow. You are in the middle of some deep shit, Aidan.” Evan shook his head. “So who do you support? I’ve never been much up on politics. It always sounded more boring than worth learning.”

“Politics are boring. As for sides, I pay no king allegiance. My allegiance lies with the land and its people. Rakas is not much better than Tordis, although he would be wiser in trying to take a necromancer to bed.” Aidan turned and waved his hand over the water. The image shimmered as it changed, revealing Felius talking to a familiar little man. “Well, well,” Aidan mused. “It looks as if our friend Leland has made it home. I must remember to give him a warm welcome.”

“Your life is just a joy a minute, isn’t it?” Evan had to laugh. “The skunk is back. How stupid is this guy to come back here?”

“I must admit, my life is never truly boring, especially as of late,” Aidan said, flashing Evan a quick grin. “And Leland knows me well enough to not come back here after stealing from me. No, I will have to go to him. Tell me, have you a mind to explore more of my world?”

Evan gave him a bit of a smile back. “Sure, I’d like to see more of this place.” In his own way, he felt drawn to Aidan. He just did his best to ignore it, which became easier for him when the mage was focused on other things.

“Excellent! I would love nothing more than to show you the capital. It is a wondrous place, if not a bit crowded. Perhaps while we’re there, you can find some more clothing for your stay here.”

“Since I’ve never been to another world before, it should be interesting. Just too bad I can’t write home about it.” Nobody would ever believe Evan if he told them any of this.

Aidan’s gaze traveled briefly over Evan before settling on his pants. “May I?” he asked, reaching out to brush his fingers over the material.

“Sure, if you want,” Evan said with a shrug.

Aidan knelt, stroking his fingers over Evan's thigh. "Such fascinating material," he murmured.

Evan remained still the whole time. Seeing Aidan on his knees in front of him didn't do much for his equilibrium. Neither did the mage's touch. "It's just vinyl, Aidan."

Aidan stood once more. "Ah, but it is on you. Therefore, it is fascinating." A brief spark flitted across his eyes before he turned away, mumbling under his breath as he slid his fingertip along the spines of a row of books.

Evan didn't know what to make of the comment.

"Ah yes, here it is." Aidan pulled a dusty book from the shelf and thumbed through it with blinding speed. "Yes," he murmured. "Excellent!"

He turned and began pulling more jars down from the shelves. A few minutes later, he poured another bowlful of herbs into the suddenly-empty cauldron. Pulling back the sleeve of his robe, he picked up a spoon hanging on the wall and began stirring the murky liquid bubbling up from the bottom. A flurry of muttered words sounded from his lips, but Evan couldn't make out any of the words. Then the mage reached into the boiling water.

Evan's eyes widened. "What are you doing?"

"This..." Aidan pulled his unscathed hand out of the cauldron. He turned the shiny bunch of black material into the light and handed it to Evan. "I had to approximate your size from memory," he said. "I hope you like it."

"Oh, wow," Evan said as he saw the vinyl jacket in the mage's hand. "That is fucking awesome!" Evan slipped it on then ran his hands over the material. "Thanks, man. I kept spending too much money on my books to get a jacket. Can I learn to do that?"

Aidan ran his fingertips down the left side of the jacket. "You could," he said, "but it would take time." He let his hand drop. "Longer than you want to stay here, I imagine."

Sometime Evan would have to go home—he understood that—he just didn't want to think of it yet. Not sure of the reasoning for his own reluctance, he shrugged. "Yeah, it probably would. Guess I'll just have to learn what I can."

"Perhaps." Aidan busied himself with cleaning as he talked. "So, do you have any prospects back in your own world?"

"Yeah, I start college this fall. I was sort of looking forward to getting out of the town I grew up in. Dad and Mom wanted me to go to Lakeview Community, but I won

out and got accepted by USD.” And that was the happiest damn day of his life up until now.

“I take it that’s good.” Aidan went over to his chair and sank into it with a sigh. “Maybe I will take the time to pay your world a visit.”

“I always figured once I was out of there, I could make my own life. Find somebody to love and have a life and career with.”

Aidan propped his head up with a fingertip. “It must be a nice dream.”

“I don’t think it’s a dream. I already...” Evan stopped himself from finishing what he was going to say. Shrugging, he continued. “I already have plans.”

“You already...?”

Evan compressed his lips to stifle a sigh. “I already did my own thing so I’d find somebody for myself. Same as I did for my friend Shelley.” He looked away from Aidan to the row of books near him. Most people tended to poke fun at the idea of love spells.

“Has it worked yet?” Aidan sat back, locking his fingers together behind his head. “When did you do it?”

“I performed it the same night I ended up here, and no, it hasn’t worked. It takes time for that.” Evan avoided looking at the mage. Doing something like that wasn’t the easiest to admit to. He was far too used to people who thought he was whacked in the head.

“I have known others who have performed such spells. I have seen some work well, and some that did not. I wish you luck in finding your true love. Perhaps it will find me one day.”

“I can only hope for the best in my case.”

“Do you have anything in particular you want to learn while you are here?”

Evan looked over his shoulder at the mage. “I thought you wanted to show me the capital. Or is that for another day?”

“Would you like to go now? I’m sure Destrier would enjoy some time out.” Aidan rose and held out a hand to Evan. “Come.”

“I’d thought you meant to go right away when you mentioned it.”

“I was thinking tomorrow morning, but there are inns in the capital. Most of the shops do not open until morning. However, it might be easier to find Leland at night.”

Evan hadn’t realized they would have to stay overnight. “We can wait until tomorrow if you want. I didn’t know it would put you out that much.”

“Nonsense,” Aidan said. “Nothing puts me out.”

Chapter Six

Evan remained silent, following Aidan down several corridors and stairs as the mage led the way out of the keep. To the right were the stables and as they neared them, Evan heard the expectant neigh of a horse.

“Destrier, my friend.” Aidan unlocked the gate and the horse emerged from the shadows. Its black coat shimmered blue in the moonlight and a single silver horn rose from its forehead. Aidan stroked his hand down the spiraled horn and smiled.

Evan stared and pure shock ran through him. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing. “You have a unicorn?”

“Destrier has been a close friend for over five hundred years.” With a snap of his fingers, Aidan’s robe gave way to black pants and a white tunic. He jumped and swung up onto the unicorn’s back, then reached down. Evan kind of yelped as Aidan lifted him and settled him in front.

“I’ve never ridden a horse,” Evan said, his nerves just a tad on the shaky side. “Don’t you have a car?” He tried to clutch something for balance, but was unsure where exactly to put his hands. Figuring it was either the horse or Aidan, Evan held onto the mage’s arm.

“Not in my world,” Aidan whispered in Evan’s ear. “Hold on tight and don’t let go.” With a squeeze of Aidan’s thighs, Destrier broke into a run. “Hold his mane, or hold me.” Aidan kept one hand firmly in the unicorn’s mane and the other arm wrapped tightly around Evan’s waist.

Evan really wasn’t prepared for this and he held onto Aidan’s arm for dear life. He tangled his other hand in the unicorn’s mane, the movement of a horse a totally unknown thing to him.

“Relax,” Aidan purred in his ear. “Rock your body with the horse’s movements as he breaks into a gallop. It will make the ride smoother. Don’t tense the muscles of your legs, as you are likely to have us both thrown off.”

The sound of Aidan's voice in his ear sent a shiver through Evan, but he tried to do what he was told. Forcing his body to relax, Evan leaned back against Aidan and the tension in his muscles began to ease. He prayed fervently to whatever gods were listening that the ride to town wasn't going to be a long one.

When Evan felt a hardening against his backside, he barely stifled the groan. He remembered too well the taste of that cock, and the nagging ache he'd kept down all day resurfaced. What in the hell was wrong with him? He'd never had this problem before. Sure, he'd been interested in one or two guys, but things had never been this hard to control. Then again, he'd never had the man of his dreams this damn close.

"By way of any other horse, the capital is two days' ride. Destrier can make the run in one hour." Aidan flicked his tongue across Evan's ear. "You taste exquisite."

He would have to feel this for an hour? Evan seriously tried to still the urge to press back tighter against the mage. The movement of the horse caused the most interesting friction. He whimpered and arched his throat when he felt the wet heat of Aidan's tongue. Gods, what the man could do with such a simple touch...

Aidan's hand drifted from Evan's waist to settle between his legs. He nuzzled Evan's neck, nibbling gently as his fingers danced over the vinyl covering Evan's crotch. "How I would love to feel you."

Each action and soft word wreaked havoc in Evan and he started to think the same things Aidan was whispering about. He squirmed a little, wanting to feel both the hand that brushed to his pants and the hardness behind him. This time the groan escaped him.

Aidan rocked his hips forward, the hard ridge of his cock threatening to break through the thin fabric of his pants. He closed his fingers over the length of Evan's cock and stroked slowly over the outline of the shaft. "Turn your head and kiss me."

Unable to resist, even if he wanted to, Evan turned his head. His lips caught at Aidan's and his thoughts failed at any kind of control. The kiss was heated, the mage's tongue probing Evan's mouth with slow, languorous strokes. The pressure of his hand stroking over Evan's cock increased and a soft moan filled Evan's mouth. It was enough. The sensible side of his brain lost the argument and all Evan wanted was for the horse to stop so he could be with Aidan. Kissing on a galloping unicorn wasn't the easiest thing to do, no matter how damn good it felt.

Only the need for air convinced Evan to pull away. He tried to focus on their surroundings instead of the ache in his groin.

Tall trees gave way to areas of brush and Evan could make out the shapes of three moons behind a bank of clouds. Acutely aware of the caress of Aidan's hand over his thigh, Evan glanced down. Those fingers stroked the vinyl of his pants, drawing mesmerizing patterns. When they circled near his crotch, he held his breath, only to feel disappointment when the fingers moved away again. It was a game, he realized, and much to his chagrin, he knew he was bested.

Finally, he looked back at Aidan, but before he could say anything, the mage's lips opened over his again. Without real thought, Evan answered as his tongue probed between Aidan's lips. Lost in the sharp rise of desire, Evan was barely aware of the unicorn's decrease in speed.

"Look," Aidan whispered as he broke their kiss.

Ahead of them, lamplights flanked the expanse of a bridge across a lake. In the middle of the lake, a city rose on its own island. A massive wall surrounded it and Evan could just make out the men who manned the turrets. Tall, white pinnacles gleamed in the fading light and appeared to spiral into the sky.

Aidan squeezed his thighs to Destrier's sides and the unicorn slowed his pace to a walk. Once they stopped, Aidan slid off. He looked up at Evan and smiled. "We will find a tavern and rent a room, then we will sample the local flavors. What do you say?"

Evan could only look around, somewhat dazed when the ride stopped. Sliding off of the unicorn, he nodded to Aidan. At this point, he really didn't know what the hell was going on, aware only of the unfulfilled ache inside him. "We're going sightseeing?"

Aidan led the way through the gatehouse and into the city. "Welcome to Port Valenta, capital of Sercenia."

Looking away from Aidan, Evan felt too confused to deal with the sudden withdrawal after the intensity of their kiss. The mage acted too damn casual and Evan didn't know how to take that, or exactly what had happened. He took in the towering buildings as they walked into the city. The bright gleam of lights shone over the walls of marble, distracting him, and niche fountains lined the walls leading to the main street. For a moment, Evan thought he was looking at ancient Rome, or at least some of the buildings resembled what he'd seen in pictures. The spires reminded him a bit of pictures of Persia. All of it looked like an odd blending of the two civilizations.

"Follow me. We will find an inn, then I want you. We must not show any attraction until we are behind closed doors. That is why I dismounted. Any longer and I would've made love to you."

Evan followed behind Aidan and at least managed to curb his chaotic thoughts, though he stayed well away from Aidan. He felt totally out of place and his purple hair stuck out like a sore thumb. From what he could see, the surroundings and the people—it all reminded him of something out of a fairy tale book.

Aidan stopped a few minutes later and turned to Destrier, who'd been following them. "Take care, friend. I will call when we need you." The unicorn snorted and took off down the street, disappearing out of the gate they'd come through. Aidan opened the inn door and gestured for Evan to enter. The mage walked up to the bar. After a few minutes of talking quietly with the innkeeper, he handed Evan a key. "Follow me."

When they reached their rooms, Aidan said, "Go in and wait for me."

Evan simply stared at the key in his hand for a few seconds before he could will his feet to move. He unlocked the door and slipped inside, shutting the door behind him. This wasn't quite how he imagined everything, but he was grateful it wasn't some cheap motel. Pushing away the thought, he set down the key before he went to the window to gaze out at the city. A few minutes later, two strong arms snaked around his waist.

"I would have preferred to be with you in my own bed," Aidan whispered. He raised a hand to brush away Evan's hair and began placing soft, soothing kisses on his neck. The mage's other hand remained on Evan's belly, his fingers spread and sending a warm pulse of energy through Evan.

Aidan's lips glided over Evan's neck and he slipped his hand out from under Evan's to entwine their fingers. With a slow, steady pressure, he slid their hands down to cover Evan's crotch. "I want to taste you. Please."

That was all it took for Evan. The touch of their joined hands drew the nudge of his hips and he closed his eyes. He pressed back against the solid feel of the body behind him. "I want to feel you."

With a murmur of words from Aidan, their clothes faded away into nothingness, leaving their naked bodies pressed tightly together. Too far gone to wonder anymore, Evan shuddered and any semblance of rational thought scattered. In a moment of clarity, he realized he'd let Aidan do anything to him.

Aidan rocked his hips forward slowly, grinding his cock along the crack of Evan's ass. He wrapped their fingers around Evan's cock and squeezed as he began stroking along the shaft. "Go to the bed. I want to taste you before I make love to you."

Reluctantly, Evan pulled away and headed for the bed. He slid onto the soft covers and stretched out on his back. A nervous flutter registered in his stomach, but as he watched Aidan, it began to fade.

A dark hunger radiated in the mage's eyes as he stalked toward the bed. He stopped briefly at the foot of it, his gaze gliding over Evan before he sank down and crawled on his hands and knees. With only the lightest touch from the mage, Evan spread his legs. Aidan leaned down and started at Evan's thigh, right above his knee. With every upward inch, Aidan placed another soft kiss to the inside of Evan's leg.

Whatever remained of the nervousness evaporated and a deeper tingling radiated through Evan. He needed this. Gods, he needed this—needed this man more than he thought was safe. Every kiss, every touch Aidan made was pure, torturous pleasure, and it was all Evan could do to hold on and pray he wouldn't combust from the inside out before they even got started.

When he reached Evan's cock, Aidan took it in his hand and slid the tip of his tongue slowly up the shaft. Evan's breath caught and he dug his fingers into the bed. Aidan moved back down and licked softly over Evan's balls, sucking first one and then the other gently into his mouth, and Evan nearly died—or at least that's what it felt like. He'd never felt anything remotely so good, and dear gods, the mage wasn't even inside him yet. Aidan stroked his hand up and down Evan's cock as his tongue drifted back up the shaft. Then he licked the flared head before closing his lips around it.

Evan's hips jerked upward of their own accord, the heat of Aidan's mouth pure bliss. When Aidan's mouth closed around him, Evan damn near forgot to fucking breathe. He tangled his fingers in the mage's long hair and the exquisite texture slid over his skin, much like those lips moving over his shaft.

Aidan swallowed and relaxed his throat as Evan's cock slid in to the root. Then the mage moaned softly, creating a steady vibration Evan felt from his head to his toes. Oh, gods... Aidan's other hand slid under Evan's ass, squeezing it gently as one finger teased at Evan's hole.

"Aidan." Evan spread his legs even more, the urge to push onto that finger threatening to overwhelm him.

More...please, Aidan, more... Evan moaned and began to writhe, head tossing from side to side as Aidan's lips moved up and down his shaft, the mage stopping long enough to suck the tip before swallowing him down again. Fire. That's what Aidan's mouth felt like: silken fire. Evan arched and Aidan groaned, and the whole damn world exploded

behind Evan's eyelids. He shouted Aidan's name, tears pricking his eyes as the pleasure slammed into him with enough force to leave him breathless. Aidan swallowed, then pulled slowly off of Evan's cock. He sucked a finger into his mouth as he spread Evan's legs farther apart. Teasing Evan's hole, he gently pushed his finger inside. "Push back against it."

Evan felt positively boneless, but gods, he wanted to feel Aidan and not just a finger. He bore down, a soft moan escaping him. "Aidan...more..."

Aidan rose and added a second finger and spread them both apart. Evan gasped, eyes wide as he stared at the mage. Aidan's gaze smoldered, and Evan's breath left him. He rocked his hips downward and groaned. "Now, Aidan. Oh, gods, please...now."

After a moment, Aidan withdrew his fingers and stretched his body over Evan's. A small jar suddenly appeared near Aidan's hand, hovering in mid air and Evan couldn't help but think such powers would be beyond awesome. He chewed on his bottom lip as Aidan dipped his fingers in the liquid then coated himself with it. Propping himself on one hand, Aidan positioned his cock at Evan's entrance. As he slowly pushed inside, he caught Evan's mouth in a kiss.

Oh, sweet... Evan's moan filled the kiss and he wrapped his arms and legs around Aidan, desperately trying to get the man closer, deeper. Aidan filled him until Evan was aware of nothing but the mage and the sensations coursing through him.

"Relax around me," Aidan murmured against Evan's lips. "I won't hurt you, Evan, and I won't move until you're ready." After he buried himself slowly in Evan's body, Aidan stilled. The touch of his hand along Evan's side sent a warm current through him, helping him to relax.

Evan drew his head back to rest on the pillow. A slow tremor ran through him as he inhaled deeply. Pain and pleasure edged at his senses with the fullness of Aidan's cock inside him.

Aidan stroked his fingers over Evan's cheek and smiled down at him. He cupped Evan's face and brushed their lips together. "So warm and tight." His tongue snaked out to lick at Evan's lips. "Slick...hot." More energy flowed into Evan from Aidan's light kiss, and Aidan shifted.

Evan just wanted more. He threaded his fingers through the mage's hair, combing through it, letting the strands fall over them as he whispered, "Fuck me until I can't see straight, Aidan. I want to feel it all."

Aidan groaned low and started moving his hips, his cock stroking in and out of Evan's ass in long, easy thrusts. Keeping his weight off of Evan's chest, he gripped Evan's hip with the other hand, pulling Evan up with every thrust.

The slower rhythm made it easier for Evan to follow and he soon found his own demanding pace. With the friction inside him building, he stared up into Aidan's eyes. A soft whisper escaped him almost like a prayer, "Sweet Cernunnos, I'm lost in you."

"Aye," Aidan murmured. With every stroke inside Evan, Aidan rotated his hips, grinding their bodies together in time to their rhythm. "Come for me. When you are ready, do not hold back." His fingers dug into Evan's hip as he pulled Evan up to meet his increasing thrusts, pushing deeper. Releasing his grip, Aidan wrapped his fingers around Evan's cock and began stroking.

Evan needed release from the strengthening tension created by each motion in him and on him. The racing of his heart echoed Aidan's as he kept his eyes tightly closed, lost in the feeling. A rising moan took over before he started to shake. It was too much. His back bowed and he cried out, lost in pleasure he'd never known before. It filled his entire being, leaving him dazed and breathless.

"Yes," Aidan purred. Seconds later a deep growl erupted from Aidan, and he buried himself in Evan as his cock pulsed with his release. Evan's name fell from his lips in a whispered benediction with every tremor.

Evan held on, aware of Aidan's orgasm as it filled him. His eyes flew open to watch the play of pleasure over the mage's face. Aidan chanted Evan's name, and the sound burned into his mind. He relaxed slowly beneath Aidan, far too aware of the warmth blossoming somewhere deep inside him. Aidan kissed him softly and pulled out. He rolled onto his side, pulling Evan to him. "I wish..." His words trailed off as if he was unsure of what he wanted to say.

Evan burrowed against him, closing his eyes again. "Don't talk, Aidan. It's not necessary." The words were muffled against the mage's chest.

Laughing softly, Aidan kissed Evan's hair. "Aye," he whispered. "Sleep. And know that I'm here."

Somewhere in his heart, Evan understood this was only temporary, and the knowledge hurt.

Chapter Seven

“It’s time to wake. I have a mind to show you sights of the city.”

“Mmm.” The small sound was the only thing Evan could really manage. He blinked sleepily up at Aidan.

Aidan brushed a fingertip across Evan’s face, sliding an errant strand of hair from his cheek. “What would you like for a morning meal? There are many wonderful places in the city,” he said. Then his gaze swept over Evan’s sheet-clad body. “Then again, I’d be more than happy to find something and bring it back to you,” he added as a quiet afterthought.

“Any chance of getting an Egg McMuffin for me?” Evan chuckled, already figuring the answer would be no.

“We have muffins, and we have eggs. But what exactly is a ‘mick’?”

Evan could only laugh at the utterly serious expression on the mage’s face. “Sort of short for McDonald’s. Never mind. Give me a minute and we’ll get going.”

Aidan cocked a russet eyebrow at him. “We have many McDonalds here, but somehow I don’t think you are referring to a family name.” He went to the window to look out over the city. “Shall I call Destrier? Or would you rather we walk?”

“Unless one of those McDonald’s has a fast food franchise, then no, I’m not talking about them. And I think I’d rather walk.” Evan stretched and rolled to his side. Finally, he sat up, scooted to the edge of the bed and grabbed his clothes.

“Very well,” Aidan said as he observed the world outside the window. “There’s a wonderful little place you might like.” He turned and fell silent for a moment as he watched Evan dress. “While the food isn’t the fastest in the land, it is some of the best. And they do have muffins and eggs,” he said with a smile that seemed to light up his face.

The morning after was somewhat awkward. Evan tugged the fishnet shirt back over his head. He tried to ignore the weirdness of the situation and smoothed the shirt down his chest before he reached for his pants. Slipping them on, he fastened them then pulled on his shoes. He felt a touch of something unsettling, unnamable in the pit of his stomach, but he answered Aidan normally enough. "I'm starving. I'd probably eat anything I got my hands on."

"Then shall we?" Aidan asked, gesturing toward the door once Evan had finished dressing. "It is not far from here, only a few storefronts down."

Evan tried very hard to act casual, like he woke up next to another man all the time. He had no real clue how to behave. "I'm looking forward to seeing the city better in the daylight."

Aidan reached out and pulled Evan close for a brief but soft kiss. "Then I hope you will not be disappointed. We have much to offer." He opened the door and led the way downstairs to the tavern. He nodded once to the barkeep before stepping out into the street, holding the door open for Evan.

The short kiss hadn't been enough. In fact, if anything, it only made the knot inside Evan grow. How could Aidan be so casual about everything? Evan sighed inwardly and shook it off as he got his first glimpse of the now totally crowded streets.

People were everywhere, shopping and talking amongst themselves. Several men and women gave Evan warm, friendly smiles and eyed him with curiosity. Most were dressed in the same style of tunic and pants Aidan wore. A few, obviously wealthier, carried an overwhelming array of jewelry on their persons. Glancing around, Evan made sure he wasn't too close to Aidan while they walked. A variety of animals also seemed very much at home on the streets of the capital. Evan recognized the horses and cattle, but there were several animals he'd never seen in his life. One in particular resembled an extremely large wolf except for the fact it walked on its hind legs and its fur was a rather noxious shade of blue.

Aidan nodded to several people as they passed by. Men along the streets tipped their hats to him and ladies curtsyed. Some of the younger women blushed, as did some of the younger men.

Aidan simply smiled at them as he and Evan made their way down the crowded street. "Everyone here knows me and a few even know my preference for men. However, caution must be taken. A law is a law, and while they can do nothing to me, I do not want their hands on you."

Considering Evan didn't want their hands on him either, he planned on being especially careful. His gaze darted around, taking in the narrowed, towering buildings around them and the almost cramped atmosphere of the street. Venders in front of their doors called out greetings and vocally advertised their wares. To Evan, it was a bewildering mass of sight and sound, albeit colorfully and beautifully attired.

Aidan stopped at an open-front tavern. He motioned Evan inside and went up to the small bar. A few minutes later, he brought back two mugs and set them on a table. "If you wish for something else to drink, please feel free to request it. You are welcome to order for yourself or I will get it for you. Payment is not an issue here."

Evan settled into one of the chairs. He really had no clue what was available here or how it was cooked, though he hazarded a guess that there were some similarities to Earth. "How about a couple of fried eggs, potatoes and a glass of milk?"

"Coming right up," Aidan said before going back to the bar. A few moments later, he returned to the table. "Leighette will bring it shortly. The milk is fresh, so it has not had time to cool down much. And she is a wonderful cook, that I promise you." He took a drink of his ale and sat back in his chair. "So what would you like to do first?"

"What is the payment system here, Aidan? I don't think the money I have on me is much good. Not like I have a lot anyway, but I might be able to get a shirt or two."

"Gold and silver make up the monetary system of Aurora," Aidan said. "However, I certainly hope you don't think I would let you pay for anything."

Of course it would be gold. That figured. Evan grimaced. "I only have paper money, not an ounce of gold on me." He paused, eyeing Aidan with a bit of a frown. Opening his mouth, he started to say it wasn't necessary, but then he shut it again. When he finally formulated the words, he said, "I can't let you pay for everything, Aidan. Food is one thing because I need it, but the rest isn't really necessary. I don't need all that much. Maybe another pair of pants and a shirt."

He'd love to take back at least a souvenir of his stay, not that anybody would believe him, but it would give Evan a token of remembrance.

"Nonsense," Aidan said. His smile was warm as he leaned forward, setting down the mug and cradling it between his palms. "I want to do it. It is not a matter of charity, if that is what concerns you. I'm quite fond of you, Evan, and would love nothing more than to buy whatever you happen to see while we're here."

As nice as that sounded, Evan had a very hard time agreeing to let Aidan do that. Yet...he couldn't deny the effect of Aidan's smile. It warmed him through, and he found

himself smiling back. “Just a few things, you know. Open your wallet like that and I might buy the whole city.”

“And if you wanted it, it would be yours.” Aidan gave him a cryptic look before downing the rest of his ale.

Evan lifted an eyebrow at that, but before he could ask, a woman he assumed was Leighette set a large plate full of potatoes and fried eggs in front of him.

“Thanks.” He picked up his fork and topped the potatoes with the eggs then broke the yolks, making one big mess.

“Enjoy, love,” she said.

Evan glanced up just in time to see Aidan reach into his pocket, only for Leighette to stop him.

“You know better, Aidan. A friend of yours is a friend of mine. Welcome to our city.” She curtsied gracefully before Evan and went back into the kitchen.

Aidan sat back and alternated between watching Evan and looking out the window beside their table. “How would you like to see my store? I’m sure you could find something there to interest you.”

“Is it a magic shop?”

“It is.” Aidan took a swallow of ale before continuing. “Most of what I have are books, but there are other curiosities from all areas of Aurora, most of them objects and such I have collected throughout my travels.”

He set down the mug and cocked his head to the side, studying Evan curiously. “I know just what would suit you well, too. When you are done, we will head over to the shop. Jeric will probably be relieved to see me, considering he’s been sending couriers to the keep for nearly two weeks. Apparently there have been orders placed that he hasn’t been able to fill.” He laughed. “I apologize if this sort of talk isn’t the most fascinating. I don’t usually ramble on like this.”

Evan’s interest was immediately piqued. Oh hell, yeah, he wanted to see the shop, though he probably wouldn’t be able to take any of the books or anything home. Still, he wanted to see it anyway. “No, keep talking, Aidan. I love that kind of stuff. At home, the only person who knew I was interested in magic was Shelley. My family would have had a shit fit. Magic is kind of like being gay here, only they don’t kill you for it anymore.”

“You mean you don’t find me a bore?” Aidan asked him with a teasing smile.

“No, you don’t bore me at all. I read some of your book, remember? So I know you have a lot more knowledge than I do.”

“Even Atael tends to ignore me after a while. I’m not used to having anyone to talk with. But enough about me.” Aidan set down his mug. “What about you? What about magic interests you?”

Evan fell silent for a moment, considering Aidan’s question before answering it. “I guess it’s the idea that you can shape the world or at least potentially influence it with no more than your mind. Aided by ingredients and stuff like that, but still it’s your mind. I really enjoyed helping Shelley out, and she and Kathy hit it off, so I did something good, ya know?”

A slow, contemplative smile settled on Aidan’s lips. “You are a very unique person, Evan. I only wish I had more time to teach you.” He looked out of the window and sighed quietly. An almost saddened tone crept into his voice. “Perhaps one of these days, you will find someone you love who accepts everything about you.”

Evan gave a bit of a non-caring shrug that hid a lot. “Sometimes I think that’s going to be really hard. The gay part probably won’t be so bad once I’m out on my own, but I don’t know if there are many guys interested in magic or paganism. I sort of figured I might get half my wish. And at best somebody who’ll put up with everything.”

Aidan looked back over at him, and within the ruby depths of his eyes, a flicker of something deeper was visible. Before Evan could focus too much on it, however, it was gone. “A man would be crazy not to accept you, love.” Aidan stood and straightened his tunic. “Are you ready to head over to the store?”

Evan gave the man a startled glance. The odd look in the mage’s eyes and the casual use of the word “love” surprised him, but he quickly swallowed that. To Aidan, it was probably all a part of the nature of this thing, whatever *it* was. Even where Evan was from, people didn’t hop into the sack with any great emotional attachment.

They both ignored the amused look Leighette directed at them and Aidan followed Evan out into the street. “Come,” he said as he took a left turn. “My shop is only a short walk from here. Let us see if you can find it by name alone.” He pointed at the rows of hanging wooden signs outside each storefront. A brisk wind blew through the narrow street, setting many of the signs swaying.

Evan maintained distance between them as they walked down the street. Many stores lined both sides. Evan couldn’t believe how clean the city looked. At the end of the street, the road dipped down, and Evan caught a glimpse of a small lake. Glancing up, he read

each store sign, though none seemed like something that would fit Aidan. “I guess that means it doesn’t have something as simple as the word ‘magic’ in the name.”

Aidan chuckled. “No, it does not. It is to ward off any who would be merely dabblers in such things. I will give you a hint, since you would not know otherwise. It consists of a name, the name of my former mentor. Only those versed in Auroran magic would know the name. Now, see if you can find it.”

“I think I’m a mere dabbler compared to you, but I would like to be more.”

As he studied the signs, Evan also peered through the windows to get an idea of what was in each store. Most of the stores seemed to have mundane inventory from what he could see. Then he paused in front of one in particular. The interior seemed richly appointed, but it was the row upon row of books that snagged his interest.

“Can we go in here?”

“You’re already learning, love.” Aidan opened the door for Evan. “Welcome to Tulein’s Wish.”

When Aidan opened the door, Evan entered the store and made a beeline straight for the books. He felt like the proverbial kid in a candy store as he stopped in front of the shelves. To his right, a huge, arched window presented a great view of the park and the lake he’d seen earlier. When he looked up, the beautiful painting decorating the arch of the ceiling took his breath away.

Mythical creatures inhabited lush forests and flew through bright blue skies. If Michelangelo had been pagan, Evan was pretty damn sure this would have been the Sistine Chapel. Unicorns, fairies, dragons and only the gods knew what else cavorted over his head. He took in the magnificent sights until his gaze rested on a railing around the open section of the second story.

Chapter Eight

Aidan sat in a chair as Evan browsed. When an elderly man sidled up beside the mage, nudging his elbow, Aidan waved the man away with a whispered, “In a moment.” The man simply shook his head and wandered off into the back. “There are more books in the back and upstairs.”

“More?”

Evan glanced at Aidan over his shoulder. He knew he shouldn’t bother looking through the books, but he couldn’t help himself. He pulled one of them out and thumbed through it. It seemed far more simplified than what he’d read in Aidan’s book so he had the feeling it wasn’t an advanced work, but it was still fascinating. He put it back and reached for another entitled *Aurora’s Cycle*. After flipping through it, scanning a few pages, he realized it was more of a history of Aidan’s world. There was even a section about the creatures that inhabited Aurora.

“Come, there is much more up here.”

After replacing the book, Evan followed Aidan. “I suppose I should look for a few clothes, huh?”

“Nonsense,” Aidan said as they climbed the stairs. “Please, take all the time you wish. I only wanted to show you something.” Once they reached the landing, he turned left and walked into another room. Several cabinets stood around the room, displaying odd knickknacks of all sorts. He walked over to one of the cabinets and opened it.

Evan peered into one of the cabinets. His gaze lingered over a brightly hued feather. The lavender color shimmered in the light, much like the cover of Aidan’s spellbook. Reading the place card, Evan murmured, “What is a tarapor?”

“A very ancient bird no longer in existence. The only reminders of its magic are a small number of feathers.” Aidan stepped behind Evan and lowered a gold chain in front of his face. Hanging from the chain was a brilliant ruby the size of a man’s thumbnail.

“What’s that?”

“It is The Tear of Lorie. Legend says that when Arloc Lorie first created the Lorie fae line, he shed a single tear for the beauty he created. This is the only known Tear in existence.” Aidan hooked the chain behind Evan’s neck, leaving the ruby to nestle in the hollow of Evan’s throat. “In your world, you would know the stone as a ruby. Do you like it?”

Evan turned to stare at the mage in dumbstruck silence. He noted the stone itself closely matched the mage’s eyes. He reached up and fingered the gem, barely able to form any words. “It’s beautiful, Aidan.”

“Then it is yours,” Aidan whispered as he leaned forward. He brushed his lips over Evan’s and his tongue darted out, seeking entrance.

“I can’t...” Whatever Evan thought to say faded from his mind in the wake of that tongue. He twisted around and snaked his arms around the mage’s neck.

“Please,” Aidan whispered before pulling Evan to him in a deep, devouring kiss. “*For me.*”

Thoughts scrambled from Evan’s brain as he eagerly sought Aidan’s caress and opened to the kiss. Aidan turned them both around and fell back against the wall. He spread his legs apart and stood Evan between them. With one hand on the back of Evan’s head and the other pressed to the small of his back, Aidan held him close. A groan rose in Evan’s throat and tried to escape as he felt the intimate press of Aidan’s body. He rocked against the wizard, wishing he could just crawl into him and stay there. Control was not an option when Aidan was this close. All Evan wanted was to feel the mage’s touch again.

Aidan pulled back from Evan’s lips and kissed a slow path over his chin and down his throat. He brushed his lips over the ruby before moving to nip at the front of Evan’s neck. “I want you.”

Evan had to bite his lip to prevent the words he wanted to say from coming out. He didn’t even dare think them. The only sound he made was a low moan as he tried to press as close as he physically could to Aidan. The wizard’s hand drifted from Evan’s waist to slide over his ass and his other hand slipped between them to rub slowly over the hard ridge of Evan’s cock. Aidan groaned and moved his mouth back up to Evan’s, darting his tongue into his mouth. His hips rocked forward, grinding against Evan’s body.

Evan knew he was losing it, but he didn’t care. Nothing existed but Aidan’s hands and lips on him. He pressed against the wizard’s hand as he returned the hungry kiss. He stroked his hands over Aidan’s chest, desperate to feel the skin beneath the fabric.

Aidan deftly unfastened Evan's pants and shoved them to the floor. When he closed his fist around Evan's cock, he groaned into Evan's mouth. He began stroking it slowly, squeezing it every time he neared the head. "I want to taste you," he murmured as he pulled away from Evan's lips.

Held captive by the intimate touch, Evan would let Aidan do whatever the hell he wanted. A slight pressure of his hand on Aidan's shoulder was his tacit agreement, uncaring of where they were. Aidan spun them both around again and pushed Evan against the wall. He released Evan's cock long enough to pull the fishnet shirt over Evan's head then kissed his way slowly from Evan's lips down to his chest. Closing his mouth over Evan's left nipple, he nipped it gently with his teeth.

"Oh gods, I never dreamed..." The words trailed off in a low groan and Evan hissed. The heat of Aidan's mouth teased over his skin. Eyes wide, Evan stared as Aidan licked and sucked up a mark just beside his nipple. He wrapped his hand in the silky red hair and moaned when Aidan rolled the nipple between his teeth.

"Aidan...please."

Aidan moved lower, dropping to his knees as he kissed his way down Evan's stomach. "You taste so good," he breathed on Evan's flesh. Wrapping his hand around Evan's cock, he held it tightly as he rolled his tongue around the flared head.

Evan sucked in a sharp breath. He nudged his cock against the mage's lips, aching to bury himself in that mouth. It was one hell of a fucking turn-on to see the hottest man in existence on his knees, lips, teeth and tongue threatening to devour him. Aidan looked up, locking a brilliant ruby gaze on Evan as he slowly swallowed his cock. His other hand glided up Evan's chest to tweak his nipple. Evan's hips bucked in response.

Aidan flicked his tongue over the slit at the tip. "*The nectar of the gods themselves,*" he purred in Evan's mind.

Small, random, incoherent sounds were the best Evan could do. It would take very little of feeling that hot mouth engulfing him to make him come. Closing his eyes, he rested his head back against the wall, his words coming out in a strangled whisper. "You are my dream." Helpless to the force gathering inside him, Evan tightened his grip on the mage's hair. "Now, oh gods, now, Aidan."

"Then come for me, love." Aidan slid his mouth back over Evan's cock and began a slow rhythm, sucking on the head with every stroke out before swallowing him once more. He slipped a finger into his mouth to wet it, then pressed it to Evan's entrance. He slid it gently inside, twisting it just enough to stroke over the gland within his body.

The slow tremor peaked without warning and Evan shouted, thrusting into Aidan's mouth, his fingers tangled painfully tight in the mage's hair. Aidan moaned as he swallowed Evan's come. When Evan finally blinked his eyes open, he met Aidan's hungry gaze. The ruby red of those eyes blazed with need. Aidan reached down and began unfastening his own pants. "I don't care how, but I need you to touch me. I need to feel you, Evan."

How could Evan resist such a plea? His own pleasure sated, Evan brushed Aidan's hand away before slipping his own beneath the material of the pants to curl his fingers around the wizard's length. Going to his knees, he drew Aidan's pants the rest of the way down. He licked the head of the mage's cock and stroked his fingers beneath Aidan's balls.

Aidan entangled his fingers in Evan's hair and groaned as he pushed his cock into Evan's mouth. "Take your time. When you pull back off, suck on the tip and tease your tongue over the opening. When you slide your mouth back over it, graze your teeth gently along the shaft."

Evan followed Aidan's instructions, taking the mage more fully into his mouth. It was a new, but pleasantly different sensation, one he found he was enjoying the more he took in. He sucked on the head and ran his tongue against the sensitive slit. The drops of precome were sweet and he lapped the stickiness from Aidan's skin, giving the mage's cock a slight squeeze just to watch the clear liquid bead at the tip so he could lick it off again.

"Evan." Aidan's fingers tightened in Evan's hair. A moan chased his name from the mage's lips. Evan wanted more of that sound.

When he took Aidan back into his mouth, he grazed the hard, silken flesh with the edges of his teeth. Aidan grunted and thrust, surprising Evan but not deterring him. Evan repeated the movement several times, riding the moans and gasps raining down on him. One shudder after another rocked through Aidan's body as he forced himself not to come too quickly. He tightened his grip gently in Evan's hair and rocked his hips forward. When Evan's strokes sped up, however, Aidan lost all control. A strangled cry escaped him as he came.

Evan drank every drop, then licked Aidan's skin clean. The tightening of his mouth drew another deep-seated groan out of Aidan before he slipped from Evan's mouth and dropped to his knees. "Gods, I don't want you to leave," he breathed before pulling Evan into a deep kiss.

Without protest, Evan opened to him. Aidan couldn't stop the fall now, even if Aurora itself swallowed him whole in the depths of the earth. To let this young man go would be the death of Aidan for sure.

Only the pressing need for air convinced Aidan to end the kiss, though he had to force himself away from Evan's lips. "Now, how about you go pick out some books, love. I need to go speak with Jeric about those orders. Then we will go shopping. In truth, I cannot buy you the entire city because that would entail dealing with King Tordis and his prudish queen. However, anything else is yours."

Surfacing for air, Evan blinked owlishly at him. He didn't have the experience to rein everything in as quickly as Aidan had. Without saying a word, Evan pulled away and looked around for his clothes. When he spotted them nearby, he reached over to grab them and tried to dress. Aidan stilled Evan's movements with a hand on his arm. He slipped his hand under Evan's chin and turned his head to face him. "What is it? Have I offended you by wanting you so badly?"

"No, no, you didn't offend me at all, Aidan. I figured I'd look up here a bit, then go back downstairs to look over the rest of the books."

Aidan didn't look convinced. He leaned forward and kissed Evan softly. "If I had my way," he whispered, "I would keep you with me."

Assuming he meant right at that moment, Evan shrugged. "You go ahead and do what you need to do. I'll just look a bit. I'll be fine."

Aidan thankfully let it go and refastened his pants. "If you need me," he said, "then please call me."

"I will, Aidan." Evan released the mage's hand before peering curiously into one of the nearby cabinets.

As Aidan walked out of the room, a single thought made its way to Evan: "*I would keep you for eternity.*"

Chapter Nine

Once Aidan left, Evan closed his eyes, resting his forehead against the wood of the cabinet. Part of him wanted only the safety of his own home, and it hit him each time the physical nature of things ended between them. The actions didn't balance the whisper that reached him from Aidan. He wanted to cry, but he pulled himself together to go back downstairs and find the book he'd originally chosen.

A few moments later, he stood in front of the case and reached for the book.

"That one isn't as good as *The History of Aurora*."

Evan looked around, but the only thing near him was a miniature statue of a black cat on a table beside him. Then his eyes widened as the damn thing moved. It slinked off the small marble base and onto the table. The cat shimmered as it grew in size similar to a black house cat.

"You really should get the other book, you know. It's on the bottom shelf, the large blue book, fourth on the right."

"Uh...yeah, okay, I will. Are you normal?" It was the only thing Evan could think to ask. Was he really was talking to...a statue, or was he just going insane?

Blinking up at him, the cat settled back on its haunches. "Of course I am. Why would you think I wasn't?"

Oh, yeah. He was losing it. Not quite believing he was acting on a recommendation from a talking cat statue, Evan crouched down to get the book. He wasn't sure what to make of the cat, so he kept an eye on it. He grabbed the book and straightened. "Are you for sale...or something?"

"Certainly I am, and at a very pretty piece of gold, too. Are you interested?"

Smiling, Evan had to admit he was. This would be one hell of a souvenir. "Yeah, but I don't have any gold."

The small black cat gave him a solemn look. "That's too bad. I haven't wanted anybody to buy me until you came in."

Evan eyed the cat with a great deal of curiosity, wishing he could buy it...him...whatever. "How much gold do you cost?"

The cat lifted a paw and licked it daintily. "Four hundred and sixty."

Evan's eyes nearly bugged out of his head. "Holy shit, that's a lot."

Lowering its paw, the cat looked up. "Oh, hello, Master Lorie!"

"Good morning, Pers. Are you finally itching to get out of here?"

The odd sound of what could only be a chuckle came from the cat. "Not until you brought this young lad in here." Pers looked over at Evan, ears twitching with interest. "What is your name, young one?"

"My name is Evan." He shook his head before he looked over at Aidan. "Expensive...cat?" He hesitated over the word, not quite sure if it really was a cat.

Aidan's gaze drifted from Pers to Evan, then back to Pers. "Yes, he was an interesting find in the South Lands. He surprised even me." The cat tilted his head sideways. "You had better behave yourself, Pers." Aidan winked at Evan. "He's well-trained, even if you can't always shut him up."

Evan hesitantly held his hand out to the cat, relieved when Pers just sniffed at it before licking. The sandpaper tongue made him chuckle. Keeping the book tucked under his arm, he carefully petted the cat. A rumbling purr sounded, making him laugh again. "I talk too much, too."

Aidan leaned over and whispered, "And such sweet sounds you make." He flicked his tongue over Evan's ear before pulling away. "He should bring about some interesting questions when you return home."

"I can't buy him. I was just going to get this book. He recommended it."

"He's a gift, from the owner of this shop. As is anything else you want." Aidan slid an arm around Evan's waist and pulled him close. "He needs a good home, love. And he isn't fond of Arael, otherwise I wouldn't have put him up for sale."

Evan couldn't resist resting against the mage's side. "I'd love to have him. A talking cat is definitely interesting."

"Then he is yours." Aidan kissed Evan's hair. "So what book did this old chatterbox recommend?"

“*The History of Aurora.*” Evan held out the book to show him. The cat shrank in size and returned to its base, once again becoming immobile. Apparently he expected Evan to pick him up, so Evan did.

“Ah yes,” Aidan said. “A wise choice. And quite an interesting read. You might even recognize a few names in there.” He winked before looking at Pers cradled in the crook of Evan’s other arm. “He’s relatively easy to care for. Only eats once a month and even then, just a mouse or two.”

“Then I guess it’s the book and the cat. And the necklace you gave me, Aidan.” Evan felt like it was a bit much, especially with the cost of the cat, but he was quickly learning that Aidan had a way of talking him into just about anything. “Thank you...for everything.”

Aidan slipped a finger under his chin and pulled Evan closer for a kiss. “You are more than welcome. Would you like to go look at the other shops along the streets?”

“Yeah, we can.” Evan closed his eyes with the gentle touch. A soft whimper, nearly inaudible, escaped him as Aidan pulled back.

“It kills me every time you do that.”

Evan wanted a great deal more each time Aidan kissed him, so they were even there. He didn’t know what to say. If he stayed too much longer, Evan knew he’d never want to—

“If I throw you on my bed and have my way with you when we get home, please forgive me.” Aidan gripped the back of Evan’s head and kissed him hard, his tongue demanding as it thrust between Evan’s lips, silencing any protest. Aidan backed him against the nearest wall, pinning Evan between the wood and his body. His kiss was hungry and insistent. “I can’t get enough of you, Evan. I want to get you home, so I can touch you everywhere.”

“Please.”

Aidan ended the kiss abruptly. “Home. Now.” He took Evan’s hand and tugged him out of the shop.

Evan had the worst habit of becoming completely dazed every time Aidan did that. He didn’t make a peep as he was dragged out of the store. As soon as they went out into the street, a man stepped in their path.

“Well, well, some things never change.”

Evan frowned, the unexpected encounter clearing away his earlier mood as he recognized the guy as the same one he'd seen in the cauldron. Evan remembered Aidan telling him that Felius was an enemy.

"Out of my way," Aidan growled.

"Now, now, Aidan. Is that any way to treat family?"

"I claim no relation to you any longer."

Remaining silent, listening to the two, Evan instinctively took a disliking to Felius.

"You can't deny your blood, dear brother," Felius purred.

In a blur of motion, Aidan had his fists bunched in the neckline of Felius' robe and shoved the man up against a wall. "Your blood is tainted. You ceased to exist to me when you betrayed me." He released Felius and whistled.

Destrier came down the street, meandering through the crowd. Aidan jumped onto his back and lifted Evan to sit in front of him. This time Evan wasn't surprised to find himself so abruptly hauled onto the horse. He had his book tucked under his arm and the cat clutched in his hand.

Aidan squeezed his thighs to the unicorn's side and Destrier bolted down the street. With his free hand, Evan held on for dear life to Destrier's mane as they raced out of the city. Leaning back against Aidan, he attempted to relax.

Once they were safely from the city walls, Aidan slowed Destrier's pace. He eased his hold on Evan. "I'm sorry you had to see that."

"It's all right, Aidan, I understand. I really do."

Aidan let out a deep sigh. "He was my brother. To lie with someone of the same sex is not grounds for death with the fae society, but it is grounds for banishment. Felius betrayed me in that, and he's after my secrets in magic as well."

"Your brother?" Evan hadn't realized that, and he understood what a deep betrayal it would have been to Aidan. Releasing his hold on the unicorn's mane, he moved his hand to the mage's thigh in a touch of comfort.

"Touch me like that too much and we won't make it home," Aidan murmured in Evan's ear.

It slowly sank into Evan that he had a form of the same power Aidan had over him: the ability to produce instant lust. It was a heady feeling and gave him the courage to explore it more thoroughly, but not on a horse. He returned his hand to the unicorn's mane, albeit reluctantly. "Why would he turn you in like that?"

“Because he wants my position within the Wizards’ Guild of Aurora. If something happens to me, a strategic position is left vacant. He would be among those vying for the position.” Aidan squeezed his legs to Destrier’s sides to set him into a full gallop.

Evan covered the mage’s arm with his hand, holding on to Aidan as he mulled over everything. This wasn’t his world and there was little he could do about things, but he felt troubled for Aidan’s sake. Closing his eyes, he focused more on the mage so close to him as the miles flew by in a blur.

To pass the time, Aidan told Evan about Aurora and its various kingdoms. Before Evan realized it, they were nearing Aidan’s castle. As soon as they arrived at the stables, Aidan jumped down and pulled Evan into his arms. The air around them shimmered and seconds later they were back in Aidan’s bedroom. The time for talking was over.

Aidan only partially surprised him this time since Evan knew he would end up very quickly in the mage’s bed.

Aidan undressed and crawled onto the bed. “Undress for me,” he said, the words a silky purr.

After setting down his items on a nearby table, Evan pulled off his shirt. Tossing it aside, he felt a touch more confident than the last time he’d undressed for Aidan. He slipped off his shoes, then undid his pants, letting them join his shirt. As he moved toward the bed, he felt more at ease this time, more sure of himself, maybe even decadent when he touched the satin sheets.

Aidan watched closely, the ruby red of his eyes burning with a sharp desire. He stroked a finger absently over the hard length of his cock. “I want you.”

Chapter Ten

Evan inched his way onto the bed and nudged between Aidan's legs, going for another taste of what he had earlier. Stretching out, Evan wrapped his hand around the base of Aidan's cock before he quickly enveloped the mage. He coaxed Aidan's thighs farther apart and ran a finger upward over Aidan's inner thigh before slowly brushing against his balls. He hadn't missed Aidan's reaction to that before and hoped to get a similar reaction now.

Aidan gasped and his back arched off the bed. "Evan." He fisted the blanket in both hands and sucked in a breath. "Gods, yes..."

Slowly, Evan let Aidan's cock slide out of his mouth and he moved lower, bathing Aidan's balls with soft licks as he cupped them in his hands. He lifted his gaze to watch Aidan while he experimented, stroking Aidan's cock slowly. He mimicked the rhythm over Aidan's balls with his tongue.

Aidan drew up his legs and let them fall open, giving Evan full access. A soft, tortured whimper slipped from the mage's lips and he rocked his hips downward in desperation. "Please, Evan..."

Evan played lightly with Aidan's balls and his tongue teased over the surface of his skin. The mage's reactions pleased him to no damn end as he shifted from his position.

A pleading look settled into Aidan's eyes. "I need you."

Evan got his first real taste of the power of seduction when he glanced up. The expression on Aidan's face was one of pure desperation and lust. Moving only enough to take Aidan back into his mouth, Evan began a torturously slow dance over the mage's cock. He wanted to play and learn, and he took his own sweet time doing just that. His focus sharpened on every slight sound and movement Aidan made.

"Oh gods..." Aidan released the blanket and threaded his fingers through Evan's hair. Every stroke Evan made with his mouth was met by a thrust of Aidan's hips. "Please don't stop."

Taking him in more deeply with each push, Evan closed tightly around Aidan in a slow glide of lips, tongue and teeth before quickly withdrawing. He explored with his fingers, caressing over Aidan's balls then beneath them, learning every inch, every tiny spot that elicited a response.

Aidan sucked in a quick, sharp breath as Evan's fingers caressed his balls. His grip on Evan's hair tightened and his thrusts increased in intensity. Words completely escaped him and all that fell from his lips were pleading moans. Pleasure danced on every nerve, Evan's touch chasing the current. The light scrape of Evan's teeth skimming over Aidan's shaft was nearly Aidan's undoing. Then Evan's finger circled his hole and Aidan knew he was lost. "Evan..."

The name was laced with a thick, deep growl as Aidan shoved his cock down Evan's throat. He jerked violently as he came, every pulse of his cock drawing out another guttural sound. Evan shivered and drank in the unique flavor that filled his mouth, the hard shove coming close to gagging him. It caused him to ease back to a more comfortable level.

"Push your finger deep inside me," Aidan panted. Evan felt the mage bear down on his finger, causing it to slide in a little. "Angle it toward my cock and find a small, smooth gland. Stroke it."

Evan pushed deeper. It took him a moment before he found what he was searching for, but when he did, he stroked his fingertip back and forth over it. He licked away the last of Aidan's come as he watched the mage, exploring this new territory.

"Yes... Don't stop, Evan..." With every stroke of Evan's finger, Aidan's body shook harder. "Oh gods, oh gods..." Aidan panted breathlessly. "Evan!" His back and hips lifted from the bed and he ground himself down hard on Evan's finger.

In that moment, with the rapture on Aidan's face burned into his mind, Evan realized it would be easy to need the mage too much. Aidan collapsed onto the bed, panting and covered in sweat. He drew Evan up to hold him. "Give me a moment, love. That was the most intense thing I've ever experienced."

Evan felt a great deal of pleasure giving to Aidan, but he would have a hard time explaining that, so he simply nestled in against him. His words were a soft whisper. "It was the most beautiful thing I've seen in my entire life, Aidan. The way you looked."

"I would have to argue with that." Aidan murmured against Evan's hair, "Have you ever seen yourself in the throes of pleasure? *That* is the most exquisite sight in the world."

Relaxing against him, Evan let the slow drift of his fingers play over Aidan's skin. "No, I can't say I ever have since I never looked in a mirror when I..." He trailed off, letting that one go unsaid.

Aidan slipped a hand under Evan's chin and tilted his head up. "There is no need to play coy with me," he said quietly. "I quite enjoyed watching you pleasure yourself. But now..." He rolled Evan over and smiled down at him. "It is time to show you a deeper pleasure, like what you just gave to me."

"I wasn't being coy. It's just I probably know my hand more intimately than I should." A shiver ran through Evan and it brought out the faint echo of the pulse that had ridden him earlier.

"Nonsense," Aidan said with a wicked grin. "What do you think I did for several hundred years until you came along?" He angled his head and licked a line over Evan's throat. "Open your legs for me," he whispered.

His legs parted for the wizard as Evan tangled his fingers in the auburn hair spilling over him. Aidan had a definite ability to get to him with words alone, and another shiver followed on the heels of the first.

"Just feel..." Aidan lowered his hand between Evan's legs and slid a suddenly-slick finger over Evan's hole. He locked a heated gaze on Evan and pushed his finger inside. He twisted his hand just enough to begin making slow circles inside him.

The sensation was enough to grab Evan's attention and make him want more as he tried to press down onto that finger. Closing his eyes, Evan gasped sharply and his muscles tightened around the mage's finger.

"More?" Aidan purred. His other hand moved to Evan's cock, fingers wrapping around the shaft and stroking it from base to tip.

"Aidan, yes, please." Evan squirmed, unsure of which hand to get closer to. A jerk of his hips arced upward into the stroke of Aidan's hand.

Slick heat enveloped Evan's cock and his breath left him in a rush. The friction of Aidan's mouth on his aching flesh was almost too much. Then Aidan pushed another finger inside him. Evan's eyes rolled back and he let out a moan he felt down in the pit of his stomach. Aidan's tongue swept along his shaft, the fingers inside Evan driving him insane with an ache he couldn't fully identify. "Aidan, oh gods, Aidan."

Aidan pulled out his fingers and hovered over Evan, impaling him in one swift thrust. He captured Evan's mouth in a searing kiss as he thrust repeatedly, every stroke of

his cock grazing over Evan's prostate. Evan cried out, the sound muffled by the kiss, his entire being on fire as Aidan claimed him. He clung to Aidan, riding the overwhelming sensations, legs twined around the mage's waist. Each feeling burned into Evan's mind and his hips lifted from the bed.

Aidan gripped Evan's arms and pinned them to the bed above Evan's head. He crushed his mouth to Evan's in a drugging, searing kiss, increasing the thrusts deep inside Evan's body. Evan knew...oh, sweet gods, he knew every stroke was meant to mark into his mind what he already knew: he was Aidan's.

The force of the kiss left him silent and his mind called repeatedly to Aidan, lost in the throes of what held him captive. The mage was possessing him, laying claim to Evan's body, heart and soul. Even his pleasure was Aidan's to command.

Aidan's grip on Evan's wrists tightened as his movements became harder and faster. He growled deeply into Evan's mouth. "Come for me, Evan... Come hard. I want to hear you screaming my name."

Near mindless, Evan shuddered violently. His mind scattered in fragments as his release invaded every part of him. As his head fell back to the bed, he screamed. "Aidan!"

Aidan forced Evan harder into the bed. Every brutal thrust sent another fierce bolt of pleasure through Evan. Seconds later, Aidan threw back his head and let out a sound that sent shockwaves through Evan's body. Heat flooded Evan, the mage's hips grinding against him.

After that, Evan could do nothing but collapse to the bed, trembling. His ragged breaths were the only sounds. He'd never in his life felt as acutely aware of his own body as he did now.

Barely capable of movement, he didn't protest when Aidan rolled off him and gathered him close. Another first in his life was that he felt completely exhausted.

Aidan kissed Evan's hair softly and murmured, "You will always be mine, and I will always be yours."

It was the last Evan heard before sleep overtook him.

Chapter Eleven

Evan still felt unbelievably sore from the night before and walking down the hall toward Aidan's library reminded him of everything they'd done. The funny thing about their trip to the city was that he still didn't have any other clothes, and Aidan's and Atael's were too large for him.

A few feet ahead of him, a door opened and King Tordis stepped out into the hallway. He stopped, closed the door and smiled at Evan. "Good morning, Master Evan," he said with a nod. "And what brings you out this early?"

Evan bowed his head. "Hello, your Majesty. I was heading for the library to do some reading."

The king stepped into Evan's path, never once losing his cordial smile. "You are such an unusual young man." He reached out to brush his fingers across Evan's shoulder. "Such odd clothing. I imagine that's part of what has the sorcerer so intrigued. He's a collector of unusual things, so it's no wonder you've captured his attention."

Evan flinched at the words since it didn't exactly put him in a good category. He wasn't comfortable with the king so close, but he really couldn't be rude to the man. Giving King Tordis a bit of a smile, he prevaricated, "It's just the clothes, I guess."

"Ah," the king said. "Where are you from? You do not have an accent to match any I have ever heard in all my travels throughout Aurora." His hand slid over to place a gentle but firm grip on Evan's shoulder.

Blinking, Evan didn't know how to answer that because he wasn't sure if it was okay for anybody else to know he was from another world. Thinking fast on his feet, he lied again. "I traveled a lot and I think I picked up different accents."

"I see." The king slid his hand to cup the back of Evan's neck, effectively holding him in place. "You are a very handsome young man. Perhaps you would like to see my palace. I have many beautiful things that might interest you."

“I don’t think I’ll be here long enough, your Highness.” Unable to move, Evan frowned. He had to get away from this man. He knew that first night at dinner the king was trouble.

“Well, now that is a shame,” the king said as he stepped closer. “Then perhaps we can get to know each other during your stay?” He slowly backed Evan against the nearest wall.

“Evan? What is wrong?”

Hearing Aidan’s voice in his thoughts, Evan answered silently, *“Nothing, I’m fine.”* Then he forced himself to stand a little straighter. “Look, it’s nice and all, you being king. But I’m not really interested.”

“And why is that?” the king whispered. He pressed his body to Evan’s, pinning him in place. “A king is a much better lover than a necromancer, I can assure you.” He lowered his head and his tongue darted out to lick at Evan’s lips.

Evan thought he could handle it, but quickly found out the king didn’t listen very well. Panic shot through him when he felt the heavier press of the man’s body and the touch of his tongue. He jerked his knee, connecting right between the king’s legs to catch him in the balls. A split second later, he struggled out and vaulted down the hall without looking back.

“Aidan Lorie!” the king bellowed as he doubled over with the pain. A moment later, he chased after Evan.

Evan tried to make it to the library so he could at least get behind a door he could lock. He skidded as he tried to slow enough to make it into the room. He ended up falling flat on his face before he scrambled into the room.

The king stormed into the library, his face red with rage as he advanced on Evan. Shock had Evan jumping to his feet. A second later, the door slammed shut without aid, and a strong arm slid around Evan’s waist from behind.

“Get out of my keep,” Aidan growled.

Only the sound of Aidan’s voice subdued the edge of panicked fear in Evan, and when the mage’s arm tightened on him, Evan turned to bury his face against Aidan’s chest.

The king stopped short and pointed a finger at Evan. “He attacked me!”

“I know you both well enough to know that he was provoked,” Aidan said with a distinct touch of anger. His arm tightened around Evan’s waist and his other hand kept Evan’s head to his chest. “I want you out.”

The king laughed. “You can’t expect to get away with this, sorcerer. Once the Guild finds out you’ve been fucking a man, they’ll have your head.”

“Then so be it,” Aidan said through clenched teeth. “I wonder what your subjects would say should they learn their own king enjoys the same.”

Evan knew he’d fucked up. He clung to Aidan, the mage’s shirt fisted in his hands. “I’m s-s-sorry.”

“Shh...you have done nothing wrong, love. Nothing more than what I should have done long ago.” Aidan fell silent for a moment and seconds later, the door to the library opened.

“Atael, show the king to the door and have his carriage brought to him. It is time he returns to his queen.”

“I will remember this, Lorie,” the king said. There was menace in those words, and Evan pressed closer to Aidan. Only after the king and Atael left the room did Aidan slip a hand under Evan’s chin to tilt up his head. “Are you all right?”

Evan knew he’d just brought a lot of trouble to Aidan, and he shouldn’t have kneed a king in the balls. “I’m fine. I just didn’t think he would push it. I told him I wasn’t interested.”

“I’ve been telling that burly hypocrite the same thing for over twenty years. I should have known he wouldn’t have been able to resist you. If I can’t resist you, then every other man is doomed to lose...” Aidan stopped and smiled softly. “Well, let’s just say that you did something I should have done already.” He sat on one of the chairs and pulled Evan onto his lap. “What happened?”

Evan let Aidan draw him down and he snuggled against the wizard. “I was coming to the library, and he stopped me. When he came on to me, I told him I wasn’t interested in him, but he put me against the wall. I kneed him because I didn’t think he was going to let me go.”

Aidan sighed. “I’m glad you did that,” he said. “Because had you not, he wouldn’t have stopped. The only reason he has not gone so far with me is because he fears me and my magic. I’m so sorry, Evan.”

“No, I shouldn’t have done that. He’s mad at you now. I could have just run or...” Sighing, Evan knew he was getting to be a lot trouble for the mage.

Aidan pulled back and lifted Evan’s head. “He has always been angry with me. Every time I turn down his advances, he threatens me. I am not worried about my own safety, but I fear for yours.”

“He can’t do anything to me, can he?”

“Within my keep, he cannot do anything. Outside of the walls, I do not know. I pay no king allegiance, but my outer walls lie just beyond his borders. One step within his lands and he could do whatever he wished.” Aidan slid his thumb across Evan’s lips. “But rest assured that I would never let anyone harm you. Not while there is breath in my body.”

It still really didn’t sound good to Evan. He’d never been in trouble in his entire life. It took him a moment to find his voice. “It means I can’t go to the city again.” In essence, he couldn’t even leave the mage’s land if the king had a long enough memory. From everything he’d heard about King Tordis so far, the man had a memory like an elephant.

“That is correct. I am sorry, Evan. I had hoped... I had hoped that your stay here would be pleasant.”

“No, I’m sorry. It would have been nice to go back to the city, but overall, it has been great. You’ve showed me a lot, Aidan.”

Aidan rested his head on Evan’s shoulder. “If I could, I would keep you here.”

“I wish I could, but I really can’t.” It wasn’t his world, and Evan didn’t have a place here. He had to find his own place, and it wasn’t as a piece in the mage’s collection. Those words from the king had stung him deeply.

“I understand,” Aidan said. “What did the king say to you? Despite his royal blood, he isn’t the most eloquent of men.”

“He told me I was handsome and asked if I wanted to see his palace.” Evan rolled his eyes. “Sounds like the worst pick up line I’ve ever heard.”

“Then he hasn’t improved in twenty years. You would think he wouldn’t continue to use the same approach.” Aidan gave Evan a sheepish grin. “I don’t suppose I’m much better, I imagine. I didn’t even say that much to you. I can’t help but wonder if that makes me just as bad.”

Evan had to smile at the mage’s remarks. He brushed his fingers over Aidan’s cheek. “I think you said a lot more to me, Aidan.”

“I did?” Aidan chuckled and a russet eyebrow lifted in amusement. “I recall telling you that you tasted good.”

“It was different. Trust me on that.” It had a great deal more to do with his own attraction to Aidan. Evan had felt that since the first time he laid eyes on Aidan’s picture in that book.

Aidan’s gaze narrowed playfully. “Are we even discussing the same sort of ‘talk’ anymore?”

“Yes, we are. You were nicer to me and didn’t grab me.” Being with the mage helped Evan relax and forget the worst of what had happened to him.

Aidan opened his mouth, then quickly shut it. “Yes, I suppose you’re right. Although I can’t say I didn’t want to grab you, but that is the least gentlemanly thing to do. I might be a man of dark magic, but I’m hardly crude.”

“I wouldn’t call you crude at all.” Evan’s voice softened with the words. Leaning forward, he pressed a soft kiss to Aidan’s lips before drawing back. He had to swallow everything he did want to say.

A gentle shudder shook Aidan’s body and a gasp escaped him. He closed his eyes and whispered, “You can be a very cruel man, Evan.”

“Cruel?” Evan wasn’t too sure what the mage meant by that.

“You have no idea what effect a kiss from you has on me, do you?”

Since Evan didn’t, he shook his head. However, he knew the effect Aidan’s eyes had on him as he stared into them. Lust, confusion, uncertainty, fear...even love. They all coiled inside Evan, turning everything into knots.

“In over two thousand years, no one has ever been able to scramble my thoughts with only a light brush of their lips to mine. Yet you do, with no effort at all.”

The time reference was beyond his comprehension, and Evan wasn’t sure if Aidan wasn’t saying that just to be nice. He felt fairly sure the mage had had a lot of men in that lifetime. “I’ve never known anyone like you, and I’m not sure I ever will again.”

“Likewise, love,” Aidan whispered as he pulled Evan down slowly for a kiss.

The moment Aidan’s lips touched his, Evan opened to him. A small tremble ran through his body, only this time not from fear. The lightest kiss brought out a sense of awakening desire in him, and a soft whimper escaped him.

“That...is only part of what your kiss does to me.” Aidan slipped his tongue into Evan’s mouth, and a moan filled the kiss. He shifted Evan to straddle him fully, rocking

his hips. The slight upward press of Aidan's hips was met by the downward grind of Evan's, sending sensations straight through both of them. Evan's thoughts scattered, and all he wanted was to feel Aidan inside him. A more desperate edge tinged his kiss as his lips pressed tighter to the mage's.

The moment Aidan drew back, Evan pulled off his own shirt. He really didn't care where they were or who might come in. Aidan wasted no time and caught Evan's right nipple in his mouth, rolling it gently between his teeth. He closed his hand over the bulge in Evan's pants, squeezing it. Evan's breath caught, the sensations tightening through his body.

"I need you now, Aidan."

Standing, Aidan held Evan tight against his body and walked over to the desk. He set Evan down on it and stepped back, pulling his robe over his head. With a slight wave of his hand, the lock on the library door clicked. Evan unfastened his pants and wiggled out of them.

Leaning over and pressing their bodies together, Aidan caught him in another heated kiss. "You taste exquisite, love."

Even being somewhat sore from before, Evan couldn't think of anything else but the feel of the body pressed to his. He tried to control things a bit because he wanted to take his time, but his body overrode his mind. The echo of his whisper repeated to Aidan's mind, "*Please, Aidan, I need to feel you.*"

Aidan slowly straightened and swept his hands over Evan's chest, his stomach, to his thighs. "I need to taste you." He slipped his hands under Evan's legs and lifted them, pushing them back until Evan was spread before him.

The position left Evan completely vulnerable to Aidan, and he gripped his thighs to hold them open for the wizard. His breath began to take on a ragged edge as Aidan stared back at him.

Chapter Twelve

Dropping to his knees, Aidan leaned forward and grazed his tongue along the crack of Evan's ass. When he reached Evan's hole, he licked it. With only the gentlest pressure, he pushed inside, moaning softly.

Each touch had Evan squirming, making him groan. His fingers tightened around his legs and he tried to still, pushing away the urge that wanted Aidan deeper inside him.

Aidan licked around the outside before plunging back in one last time. He stood and slid two fingers deep inside Evan, twisting them up to rub Evan's gland. His lips curled into a wicked grin, as every torturous stroke was meant to drive Evan closer to a sharp edge.

Evan knew Aidan wanted him crazy with need, and the wizard succeeded. Evan rocked against those fingers. The continuous touch triggered a trembling throughout his body. "Please, Aidan, oh gods, please." Evan wasn't even sure what he was begging for anymore. He cried out with one particularly deep, strong touch, calling to Aidan before the first wave crashed through him.

"Yes," Aidan purred. "Come for me, love."

The pulse increased sharply, breaking over Evan in a rush, inner muscles contracting around the mage's fingers. Evan's voice broke with the intense pleasure riding him. "Yes, Aidan, yes!"

Aidan pulled his fingers out quickly and in one hard, swift motion, he buried his entire length deep inside Evan's body. The jolt of painful pleasure rocked through Evan as he felt himself open to the sudden, deep penetration. Aidan gripped Evan's hips and jerked him hard against his body. Evan's eyes flew open to look at Aidan and his hands moved to grip the edge of the desk, using it for leverage.

With every hard thrust into Evan, Aidan growled possessively. His deep red gaze held Evan's, reflecting the sharpness of his thoughts. Though he didn't say it, it was clear—from every jerk of Evan's body to his, to the dark glittering of his eyes—that he

was making Evan his. Evan could feel something between them. Without really understanding it, he gave in to the harder force. His grip on the desk allowed him to grind into each thrust. Aidan closed a fist around Evan's cock and his strokes were hard and quick, matching the forceful rhythm of his hips. "Come for me. With every breath from your lips, remember my name."

The memory of Aidan had already been branded indelibly on Evan's body and mind, and it took only the sound of Aidan's voice for Evan's release to drag him under. Warm liquid spurted over the mage's hand and Evan sank beneath the sensations. Aidan's head fell back and he cried out Evan's name as he came deep inside him. The cry burned over Evan's senses and he struggled to catch his breath. Every inch of his body ached.

When Aidan finally stopped shaking, he collapsed, panting against Evan's chest. He covered Evan's skin in soft kisses, working to bring his own breathing under control. "I wish more than anything that you could stay," he whispered. "I wish..." Evan wished the same, but the king's words spoken to him earlier had only confirmed what he already believed. He needed to go back home and try to find something for himself. Closing his eyes, he didn't say anything as he held Aidan to him.

Turning his head, Evan brushed a soft kiss to the mage's hair. "I would stay if I could, but I can't, Aidan."

"You would?" Aidan's tone was one of surprise as he raised his head to look into Evan's eyes.

"To be able to learn would be nice, but I can't stay here." He really wasn't saying what he wanted to say. It was just easier not to.

Swallowing hard, Aidan closed his eyes. He nodded and rose off of Evan, pulling out of him slowly. He held out his hand and helped Evan up. "I understand, love. I know what it's like to feel out of place no matter where you go. Perhaps, one day you will find where you belong."

Aidan's words hurt more than Evan could have imagined. Maybe he'd already found that, but it really wasn't meant to be. Evan didn't want to let go, but he did. "Hopefully, I will."

Aidan reached out and stroked the backs of his fingers down Evan's cheek. The ruby hue of his eyes had dulled, as if the light within them had been taken away. "When you do find that place, don't forget me. Because in the short time you've been here, my world has seemed so much brighter."

Evan nuzzled a little into the touch. "I'm not sure I ever could, Aidan." Reluctantly, he pulled away and gathered up his clothes. The soreness of his body made his movements slightly stiff.

Aidan sat down on one of the couches as he watched Evan dress. "I truly wish," he said as he diverted his gaze to the floor, "that you felt like you belong here. You would never want for anything."

"This isn't my world. I don't belong here at all." A clear note of certainty sounded in Evan's words. It wasn't his place and he'd already caused more trouble than he was worth. Slipping his shirt over his head, he tugged it down around his chest before putting on his pants.

"But I..." Aidan paused for a moment, then seemed to rethink his words. "If I hurt you while making love to you, I am sorry."

"It felt good." That was about all Evan could say, and it really wasn't adequate. "I'm just sore as hell." Giving a half chuckle, he tried to lighten things between them.

"Well, at least it seems this old sorcerer can do something right."

"I don't suppose you have any potions that can ease aching muscles, do you?" Stretching, Evan winced. It felt like everything on him was sore. "And I need to take a shower."

"I can take care of both, love. There is a bathtub in my chambers, and while you relax, I'll find something to ease pains." Aidan rose and kissed Evan on the head and hugged him as they started for the door. "Come."

Evan knew he'd be going home shortly, and he clung as best he could to every second that was passing.

* * *

Evan felt Aidan stirring beside him, and it half woke him. Blurrily watching, he saw the mage grab his robe and head out the door. Since this was the second time it had happened, Evan was instantly wide awake. When the door shut, he scrambled off the bed and grabbed one of Aidan's shirts to slip on. Waiting for just a few seconds, he cautiously opened the door and saw the wizard disappearing down the corridor. Evan stepped out into the hall and crept silently behind him.

As Evan followed, he stayed far enough back to avoid Aidan's notice. He felt curious as hell as to what the mage was up to. When Aidan went outside, Evan was surprised, but continued to follow him. The only light was the bare flicker of torches spaced almost too distantly on the walls. Pools of darkness lay between each area of light, making it hard for Evan to see where he was going.

When they reached a small opening in the forest, Aidan stopped outside the clearing and took off his robe and draped it over a low-hanging tree branch. Within the clearing was a ring of stones in alternating shades of black and white. Aidan knelt and tipped back his head, spreading his arms out and up. After a few seconds of silence, a deep voice rumbled from within the clearing.

“Who dare disturbs our sleep this night?”

“Aidan Loriel, Reget Moireairis.”

“Then enter and offer your sacrifice, prince.”

Only barely managing not to trip in the abnormal darkness, Evan became aware of an eerie, ominous sense to the air around him. When he heard the voice, he stilled not too far from Aidan. Looking around for a spot to hide in, he crept over to one of the trees.

Aidan lowered his arms and stood, moving slowly into the ring of stones. Then he turned in Evan's direction, though his eyes were closed. A dark gray mist drifted from the ground of the perimeter of the ring, crawling over the stones. Aidan stayed motionless and expressionless as the mist curled around his naked body. Seconds later his eyes flew open and he dropped to his knees, a pained expression on his face as he sucked in a sharp breath. A line of red appeared diagonally across his chest, from his left shoulder to his right hip. The blood flowed down his body and he groaned as his body shook. His arms remained at his sides and he cried out as his semen spilled out to mix with the blood on the ground around him.

Evan plastered himself to the tree and watched in complete fascination. As the mage's body shook, Evan's gaze never left him. What was going on?

Aidan's breathing sounded ragged in the still air and he hung his head for several minutes. The mist circled around the pool of blood and semen, evaporating it and turning the gray smoke a deep red. The mist pulled back from Aidan and as it curled back over the stones, each rock seemed to pulse in a steady rhythm, the smooth, cold surfaces glowing crimson from Aidan's offering.

When Aidan stood and raised his head, his eyes glowed a brilliant ruby red. His mouth began moving as if he were chanting silently. Shadows began forming around the

outside of the circle. When they took shape, Aidan's chant died. A congregation of the dead surrounded the ring. While most were nothing more than shimmering forms, others were more tangible, having risen from their graves in less than pristine condition.

Evan couldn't look away. This was a display of true magic and it held him enthralled. One glance at Aidan's face told him the cost to the mage in pain. He was so intent on the mage that he barely noticed the forms appearing outside the circle itself. When he did, the grisly view had him biting back his own gasp. It was then he noticed he was outside the circle and within range of those things, his safety in serious question. Hugging tightly to the tree, he tried to hide himself better. He didn't dare run or it would call attention to him, and he knew better than to try to get Aidan.

"I am Aidan Lorie, Reget Moireairis, Son of Pretore Lorie, Prince of the Sacarata. I beseech you, the Moireair, for the power you provide. I have made my offering of blood and seed, those precious liquids necessary for Life." Aidan stretched his arms out to the side and closed his eyes.

The first spirit, a vaporous, wraithlike form in tattered rags, entered the circle. It stopped before Aidan, then merged with him, causing the mage to shudder hard. The next figure was one of more solid form. It seemed to glide across the ground much like the wraith had, and when it reached Aidan, it stepped inside him. Aidan winced in obvious pain.

An element of fear and fascination held Evan bound. He remained half hidden by the tree as he continued watching. Frowning, he could almost feel the pain etched on Aidan's features. As one after another of the forms approached and merged with Aidan, the mage's chest rose and fell in a rapid rhythm. When the last form merged with him, Aidan opened his eyes. Then a brilliant red fire engulfed him. His head fell back and as he began chanting silently once more. His body shook uncontrollably. The second his chanting stopped, the fire exploded around him, circling the ring of stones. Aidan cried out right before a flash of white light filled the circle.

A gasp escaped Evan and the white light made him shut his eyes to block it out. He realized Aidan knew what he was doing or he would have been even more frightened than he was. It started to sink into him just how powerful the mage was. At first the magic itself had been more of just an idea of what Aidan did. Now Evan saw the reality.

When the light disappeared abruptly, Aidan fell to his knees, his body covered in sweat and stained with his blood. His chest had healed, leaving nothing to show it ever having been cut. The stones returned to their normal appearance, and the forest fell into

an eerie quiet. The dead had departed, leaving the mage battered but breathing. The power he had gained seemed to radiate from his body as he fought to regain his senses.

Once it seemed safe to do so, Evan started to back away from the tree, trying to avoid Aidan's notice. When he reached a point where he thought he'd be safe, he turned and bolted as fast as he could to the keep. Racing through the place, he didn't stop until he reached the bedroom and dove into the bed. It took him a few moments to quiet the rhythm of his breathing and the frantic pace of his heart.

Chapter Thirteen

Since the door was open, Evan figured Aidan would be in the main room, and he walked right in. He wasn't expecting to see Atael, in demon form, with long fangs bared, sinking them into the mage's arm. Freezing near the door, he blinked as his gaze went from the demon to Aidan. A shiver ran through him and he stood spellbound, the unconscious dart of his tongue licking across his lips.

A soft moan escaped Aidan and Atael growled deep as he drank, each pull of his mouth on the mage's wrist drawing another sound of unmistakable pleasure from Aidan.

Evan trembled and compressed his lips to stop any sound from leaving them. He reached back, feeling for the wall before he moved enough to lean against it. He'd always enjoyed the taste of blood, and Shelley had even indulged him a few times. Yeah, he was a freak, but he couldn't help it. Swallowing thickly, he tried to compose himself, though he had difficulty managing it.

Aidan's eyes opened slowly and he froze, pinning a deep red gaze on Evan. Atael pulled away and licked the blood from his lips before turning to look in Evan's direction.

"Good evening, Evan," Aidan said quietly.

"Hey." Although he tried to sound casual, the one word came out a bit high-pitched. Clearing his throat, Evan looked between the two of them. "I figured I'd wait 'til you guys were done."

"We are." Aidan hadn't moved his arm, and blood seeped from the punctures in his skin.

Evan pushed away from the wall and approached Aidan. His gaze darted between the wizard's face and the small trickles of blood on the pale skin. When Evan approached them, Atael moved to the side, leaving room before Aidan.

Aidan simply watched. "You wish for a taste."

Evan shrugged and did his best to appear nonchalant. He glanced at Arael, catching the knowing look the demon shot at him, then back to Aidan. He went to his knees in front of the mage.

Aidan leaned forward and slipped a hand through Evan's hair. He lifted his other hand to Evan's lips, pressing his wrist to them. "Drink, if you wish."

Evan curled his fingers to Aidan's forearm and he tasted the drops of blood. He felt a slight tingling sensation before his mouth covered the wounds Arael had made. The rich flavor was unlike anything he'd ever known. Sharp, bold and unbelievably intense, Aidan's blood had the potential of becoming very addictive.

Aidan gasped and clenched his fingers in Evan's hair. To the mage's left, Arael rumbled and scooted closer. So intent on what he was doing, Evan barely felt the lick from the demon. The tingling sensation strengthened as he tightened his mouth around Aidan's arm to take small sips. This was nothing like his prior experiences. He lapped at Aidan's skin with the flat of his tongue, gathering any escaping drops. He couldn't drink too much, even though he desperately wanted to. He released Aidan, already inwardly mourning having to stop. Another soft, guttural sound came from Arael and the demon trailed his tongue along the curve of Evan's throat. He opened his mouth, nipping lightly along Evan's skin, hard enough for Evan to feel but not enough to break the skin.

"It seems Arael is still hungry," Aidan commented.

Instinctively, Evan arched his throat toward the bite. Something inside him wanted this, though he wasn't sure what *it* was. All he knew was that a demon tasted him, while the man of his dreams looked on. Since Aidan didn't seem freaked by it, Evan remained calm.

"He will not bite without my word," Aidan said. "Is that what you want?"

The angle of Evan's throat remained arched to Arael, encouraging him. "Yeah, I would like that." He entwined his fingers with the mage's.

Aidan looked up at Arael and something unsaid passed between them because the demon knelt behind Evan, pressing their bodies together. He tipped Evan's head back and to the side. Evan stayed compliant, allowing Arael to guide him wherever he needed to be. He relaxed back against the demon's body.

A soft scatter of kisses covered Evan's neck and then he felt a sharp jolt as Arael bit down, sinking his teeth deep into Evan's throat. Aidan leaned forward and brought his face close to Evan's, licking Evan's lips. The sudden conflict of pain and pleasure ran through Evan like lightning, drawing a soft cry from him as he started trembling. The

touch of Aidan's tongue opened him to the mage, and Evan tried to draw Aidan into the kiss.

Aidan complied and thrust his tongue into Evan's mouth as his hand lowered to brush over Evan's pants. They fell open, and Aidan curled his fingers around Evan's cock. Evan's hips jerked toward the hand and his full attention pinpointed to his groin. The kiss deepened and Arael drank deeply, arousing Evan more than he ever thought possible. Arael released his throat then and licked the wounds to close them. Evan was barely aware when the demon left the room. Pleasure pulsed through Evan and he tried to get closer to Aidan. Drawing back for a breath, Evan groaned softly. He ran his fingers over Aidan's chest before continuing to the front of the wizard's pants, kneading the material.

Aidan stood and it took no more than a thought for their clothing to disappear. He knelt behind Evan and traced his fingers down Evan's spine, bending Evan over to lean on the throne. "So beautiful," he murmured. Errant kisses ghosted along Evan's skin, sensitizing it. He squirmed a little, wanting more, wanting whatever Aidan would give him. The wizard's other hand drifted over Evan's ass before two long fingers buried deep inside.

Another shiver raced though Evan and he leaned forward, resting his folded arms on the seat. He bore down, wanting the fingers deeper.

"Feel good?" Aidan purred. "Or do you want more?" He twisted his hand, brushing his fingers in slow circles inside Evan. His other hand circled Evan's cock, giving it a long, slow stroke.

"More, I want more." The words escaped Evan in a breathy whisper. The movement of Aidan's fingers drew another groan from him. "I need you, Aidan, please."

Aidan pulled out his fingers and released Evan's cock long enough to pull his robe over his head. Then he rubbed the head of his cock over Evan's hole. Evan chewed on his lower lip, unable to stop the whimper. *Please, Aidan...claim me again...* With a slow push of the mage's hips, Aidan filled Evan, hips flush with Evan's body. Aidan kissed Evan's shoulder and began sliding in and out of him, taking his time, moving in a slow, gentle rhythm that nearly undid Evan in more ways than one.

Evan straightened slightly and reached back to Aidan's hip. The slow tempo sent its magic coursing through his body before he stilled completely. Just for a moment, he wanted to feel Aidan inside him without the pressing need for release. He relaxed back

against the mage, feeling the solid length of Aidan's body against his own. "Sweet Cernunnos, you feel so perfect inside me, Aidan."

Aidan rained soft kisses over Evan's neck. Then he turned Evan's head just enough for a kiss so sweet, Evan felt it would break him in two. For Evan, everything felt as if he'd been made for Aidan, and Aidan for him. Each feeling and sensation indelibly branded itself into him as he returned his kiss. If he could have frozen them for eternity, it would be in this moment. His hips pressed back against Aidan, holding the mage within himself. Nothing—and no one—would touch his soul like this man did, and that knowledge broke Evan's heart, but there was no way around it. There was no star-struck second of clarity, no chorus or ringing bells. Evan just knew. He loved Aidan more than life itself.

"I can't think of anywhere else I'd rather be, *levier*."

"Keep me close, just for now, Aidan, then make love to me. Let me feel every part of you."

Aidan slid his hand around Evan's waist, holding him close. "Aye, anything you wish..." He pulled away from their kiss long enough to take a slow breath, then teased Evan's lips with his tongue.

He'd known the passionate side of the mage, now Evan wanted the gentle. He flexed his fingers over the wizard's hip and teased the tip of Aidan's tongue with his own. The mage swelled within him and Evan felt it as a slow wave of pleasure moving through his body. Aidan withdrew just a little, then pressed back in.

The tenderness stole Evan's breath more than their violent couplings ever had. Aidan brushed Evan's lower lip with his fingertip, and within the ruby depths of those eyes, something else shone. Evan reached for Aidan's hand and drew it to his own cock. Aidan's touch etched itself onto every thread of Evan's being. No matter what happened, no matter how long he lived, Evan knew he would never again find this. Closing his eyes, he let his attention dwell on each minute touch, wishing it could go on forever.

"Aidan..."

"Shh..." A kiss warmed Evan's cheek, the mage's breath sweet. "Just feel, Evan."

He did feel. Oh, gods, did he feel. Evan couldn't stop the ache, even though he tried. All he'd ever wanted, all he'd ever needed, was here—in this man's arms. And it broke Evan's heart to think he would have to walk away.

“In the language of my people, you are my *levier nor*,” Aidan whispered. “My lover.”

The quiet whisper soothed Evan, speaking to him with something more deeply than he could ever hope to understand. Yet the sensation of Aidan’s hand on his hard flesh took his attention from the inevitable and placed it where it needed to be now: right here, with the two of them. Aidan continued the teasing movement and after a moment of silence, he whispered, “*Sei levier deaett*.”

The words themselves carried a deep resonance, a soft lilting tone that settled into Evan’s mind. They sent a vibration through him, drawing an unexpected soft cry from Evan as his body began to tremble. The sound connected to his mind, a sense of something burrowing deeply inside him and finding its own answer. A feeling of being home and where he belonged descended over him before he lost that sense to the pleasure of the mage’s hand. A distinctly harder jerk of his hips arced upward before he ground back against Aidan.

The pressure of Aidan’s hand on Evan’s cock increased as the rhythm of his thrusts strengthened. He brushed his lips over Evan’s neck and rocked, grinding into Evan’s body. Evan’s movements were slow, back and forth against the hand that held him and the cock impaling him. The inexorable increase of pressure in him teased at his senses, drawing out one small gasp after another. The grind of Aidan’s hips added to the sensation, building inside. Evan needed to feel this, the unhurried movements that filled him and stroked over his cock felt almost loving.

“More, I want more, Aidan.”

In answer to Evan’s plea, Aidan pulled out slowly before pushing back in, maintaining a lilting rhythm. His hand set the same pace on Evan’s cock, gliding from the base to the tip in a tight curl of his fingers. He kissed Evan’s neck and licked a slow path up to his ear.

“Such sweet music, to hear my name on your lips.”

“Aidan,” the soft whisper of his name escaped Evan, almost like a prayer. The sensation burrowed inside him and brought a small shuddering reaction from his body, his muscles tightening with each one. They dragged him toward that edge he wanted to fall over, knowing Aidan had taken him there. Breath hissed between Evan’s teeth, and his fingers gripped more tightly to the mage’s hip.

“Come for me, Evan. Let me hear your cries. Call my name so that I may lose myself within you.”

“Give to me as I give to you, Aidan, I need that from you.” Evan’s whisper revealed the truth of his need, and he felt himself give into Aidan. The world beyond them faded and Evan welcomed the abyss, crying out as he gave Aidan what the mage asked for.

“Evan...” The name was carried on a soft cry as Aidan shuddered, burying himself deep inside Evan as he came. He rested his face against Evan’s neck, his body continuing to shiver. “*Sei levier deaett...*”

Leaning back against the trembling body behind him, Evan drank in the pleasure of Aidan losing himself. The sound of his name and the whispered words echoed in his mind sent another deeper pulse rocking through him, leaving him dazed and momentarily incoherent. It took a few minutes before he could calm enough to gather his scattered senses.

Aidan nuzzled Evan’s neck as the last of the tremors rippled through them. He placed a soft kiss to Evan’s skin and laughed quietly. “I can’t bring myself to let go of you.”

“Funny, I don’t want you to let me go yet.” Aidan turned Evan’s head to kiss him, but just as he neared Evan’s lips, the unmistakable sound of a cat meowing made him pause.

Evan looked down and saw Pers rubbing up against the side of his leg. “Then again, I think somebody else wants attention, too.”

“Hmm,” Aidan mumbled. “Remind me to lock the door next time.”

Pers glanced up at them and his feline features oddly resembled a smirk. “I heard that, sorcerer.”

Snickering, Evan eyed the cat then Aidan. “If you two are gonna exchange remarks, I’ll just go get a shower or something.”

Aidan pulled out of Evan and turned him around enough for a kiss. “He really can be a pain sometimes,” he whispered. “Ow! All right, all right...” He got up, rubbing his thigh with his hand. “And he’s persistent.”

Evan broke out laughing when Pers exacted his own form of revenge. Reaching down, he scooped the cat into his arms before Pers could nail Aidan again, literally. Taking the wizard’s hand, he stood. “As persistent as you, isn’t he?”

Aidan lifted an eyebrow, glanced down at the now-content cat and pursed his lips. “I think he’s worse.”

“If you ask me, I’ll argue that.” With a wicked wink, Evan released the mage’s hand and grabbed his clothes before sauntering with a bit of a wiggle out of the room.

“Keep that up, and I’ll show you how persistent I can be,” Aidan called after him.

Chapter Fourteen

A few hours later, Aidan retired to his workroom once more while Evan explored. He readied the herbs for divination and tossed a handful into the cauldron, watching as the image shimmered in the smoke spiraling out of it.

“How is Arcacia?” Atael said beside him.

Aidan watched his sister in the smoke before the image faded away. “She is well,” he said finally. He blew into the smoke, sending it all over the room. Then he faced Atael. “I know that look.”

“It’s been a long time,” Atael muttered, advancing on him slowly. His horns darkened the closer he got. Aidan could almost feel the slight breeze stirred by the demon’s wings. “Will you deny me that, sorcerer?”

“Never,” Aidan whispered.

Atael backed him up against one of the worktables. Aidan glanced behind him, taking care that nothing was in the way. He knew how this would go, just as it always did when Atael hungered for something other than his blood. A tight grip on his chin drew Aidan’s head back around and into a hard, hungry kiss. He gripped the table edge, fingers digging into the wood as he fought to keep his balance. Atael had a way of knocking the breath out of him with nothing more than a kiss. The demon cared about nothing but the need for release, and he would seek that release in whatever way he wished. As it were, he preferred to use Aidan’s body to that end.

Gripping Aidan’s hips, Atael jerked him forward and ground his body against the mage. Aidan groaned and leaned back, breaking away from their kiss.

“And who am I this evening?” Atael smirked knowingly, his cock hard.

“Evan...”

* * *

Evan walked down the hall toward the workroom. As he paused near the door, he heard both Atael and Aidan's voices, but the words confused him for a moment. Evan peered around the corner of the door frame, and shock bolted through him as he took in the tableau of the demon and the mage.

"Prepare yourself, sorcerer," the demon growled. "And think of me as Evan when I take what I want from you." Atael thrust inside, burying his thick cock deep inside Aidan's body.

Aidan gritted his teeth and his grip tightened on the table edge until his knuckles turned white. Evan's name slipped from the mage's lips with every ragged breath as Atael's cock repeatedly impaled him.

Evan's thoughts reeled and collided, half-pained and half-aroused by the sight of the demon fucking Aidan. Whatever place Evan had in this, he wasn't certain. It placed him as nothing more than a part of a collection, yet the words were enough to completely confuse him. Hearing Aidan calling his name had the power to bring him forward into the room, even though he probably shouldn't be there at all.

Aidan's back arched off the table and he came. Seconds later Atael followed suit, roaring as his body shook hard. With the demon's orgasm, Aidan's body pulsed with a steady red glow, setting the fires within his eyes alight. He opened them slowly, watching as Atael withdrew from him.

Evan listened to the sounds they made, and when Aidan turned those eyes on him, Evan started to back up. It wasn't really in fear, but he shouldn't be there, and he shouldn't have seen that.

"Leave us, Atael," Aidan ordered.

The demon disappeared in the blink of an eye. Aidan winced as he sat up, pulling his robe down and looking over at Evan. "What do you think you just witnessed?"

Evan stammered, "I...I d-don't know."

"Please, Evan. Don't leave." A touch of something resembling desperation tinged Aidan's words and he jumped off of the table. "Atael is a demon, Evan. To keep him with me, I must give something of myself. Sometimes it is blood. Sometimes it is energy, such as the exchange you just witnessed. I can only receive pleasure from it if I focus my mind on someone else. Atael wants only the energy of my release. In your world, it would be known as a form of sex magic."

Evan tried to understand that it was part of Aidan's life. He also started to semi-comprehend why Aidan had been saying his name. "I can understand that. Do you gain any magic from me?"

Confusion crossed Aidan's face. "I do, but I don't." Brows furrowing, he began to pace. "It's not magic you're thinking of, Evan. I do not use you, for anything. I make love to you because I greatly enjoy it. That, in and of itself, is a very strong magic."

Evan felt as confused as Aidan looked. "Atael wanted sex from you as a way to feed him?"

Aidan stilled his pacing. "Aye, that's exactly what he did. In essence, Atael is an incubus. He just happened to get summoned by a male sorcerer instead of a female. But then, he cares not. To him, feeding is feeding."

It was a lot for Evan to take in, and they both knew it.

When Evan spoke, it was an attempt at humor. "I guess it's part and parcel of the magic thing, huh?"

Aidan ran a hand through his disheveled red hair. "Unfortunately, yes."

"I got it, though, Aidan. It's cool." Turning around, Evan headed toward the door.

"Evan." Aidan caught Evan's arm before he could walk out. "What did I say to bother you?"

Evan stopped, half turning toward him. "You didn't say anything. I think I was shocked at first, but I understand now. And I'm not bothered."

Aidan released him and lowered his gaze. "I feared that you would not understand."

"I do, though. I understand. It's like the price you pay to have the magic. You have no choice."

"I would not if I didn't have to," Aidan muttered. He went to the back of the room and dropped into the throne. "It's a painful process. And it's draining to me."

"Then you wouldn't have the magic." Evan tried for practical, though he couldn't erase the image of seeing Aidan with anyone else from his mind. "And you should probably rest. You want me to help you to the bedroom?"

"You would do that?"

"I offered, didn't I?" He moved toward Aidan, holding out his hand.

Aidan smiled, albeit weakly, and slid his hand into Evan's. He stood slowly and had to reach out to the table to steady himself. "I much prefer him taking my blood," he grumbled. "At least that doesn't hurt. And it certainly doesn't leave me like this."

Evan encircled Aidan's waist with one arm to help support him. "Then lean against me. I'll get you safely to the bedroom." He started guiding Aidan toward the door.

"I would go myself, but I have nothing within me right now to open the necessary portal." He looked over at Evan as they started up the stairs. "Thank you, Evan."

"It's the least I can do."

Aidan stilled then. "Sleep with me," he said quietly. "If you don't want anything else, then I'll understand. But I..." He trailed off, looking up the last four steps to the hallway. "I'm sorry."

"I'm going to stay beside you." Evan was somewhat puzzled as he asked, "What are you sorry for?"

After opening the door, Aidan leaned against the frame. "For needing you," he whispered.

Unsure why Aidan would need him for anything, Evan went to the bed with him and helped him to lie down. After the mage got comfortable, Evan crawled onto the bed, stretching on his side next to Aidan. "I don't think you really need me." Chuckling, Evan realized he fell into that nice-to-have-around category, but figured it probably didn't go much deeper than that.

Snuggling into the bed, he closed his eyes, smiling a bit when Aidan kissed his forehead. "You'll need to regain your strength for me to go home in the morning." He sighed and let himself drift into his thoughts as sleep overtook him.

* * *

Aidan wasn't too far gone to miss Evan's comment, and he squeezed his eyes shut to stop the tears before they even had a chance to form. His hold tightened around Evan and he knew it would be the last. When his chaotic thoughts were back under his control, he finally managed to fall asleep as well.

Aidan woke up a few hours later. Evan had rolled over in his sleep and was now on his back. Aidan studied his face for what seemed like ages, wanting to burn the memories they'd made into his mind for eternity. He stroked a finger down Evan's cheek, not

bothering to swallow the tears this time. One after another, they fell to the crimson blanket until Aidan finally wiped them away. He hated to do things this way, but he knew he couldn't say goodbye, not with those lavender eyes staring back at him. Those lavender eyes he'd fallen in love with. He leaned over to press a soft kiss to Evan's lips before whispering a sleeping spell.

Feeling Evan's disturbed and restless movements next to him, Aidan laid his hand on Evan's shoulder. When Evan nestled against him, the mage could feel the young man momentarily struggle against the spell. Even asleep, Evan seemed to sense something was not right and he whimpered softly. The sound faded as he was pulled deeper into the spell.

"Sleep, *levier*... I will find you." Aidan closed his eyes and moved his hand slowly over Evan's body, chanting under his breath. When he sat back, Evan's form began to fade away. As Aidan watched, his heart faded away with the only man he'd ever truly loved.

Chapter Fifteen

When Evan woke, he found himself in his own bed. Aidan must have sent him back while he'd been sleeping. His emotions were mixed and defied his ability to sort through them. Sitting up, he glanced at the clock. It was seven o'clock. Since it was still light out, he wasn't sure if it was morning or evening. He hadn't wanted to leave Aurora. More, he hadn't wanted to leave Aidan, but being a temporary fixture in the mage's life wasn't for him, no matter how much they both wished he could stay.

He crawled out of bed and figured he had some explaining to do to his parents since he'd been gone for several days. After stripping out of his shirt and pants, he took a quick shower and put on fresh clothes before heading downstairs to talk to his mother. Following the smell of hamburgers, he assumed it was dinner time or about an hour or two past. His mother was at the sink, washing the dishes, and his plate was on the counter waiting for him.

"Hey, Mom." Evan went to the counter and grabbed his plate before going to the table.

"Hello, sleepy head. About time you got your butt out of bed. Don't forget your sister's recital is in an hour, so I need you to watch Elly for a couple of hours."

Confused, he looked over at the calendar on the wall. His mom always marked off the days to get keep track of everybody's schedules. When he saw it was Saturday, the confusion doubled.

"Evan, did you hear me?" When Evan looked over at his mom, he found she was watching him somewhat impatiently.

"Uh, yeah, Mom. I'll watch Elly."

With a quick smile in his direction, she said, "I've got to get ready or I'm going to be late. I should be back around nine-thirty. Ten at the latest. Oh, and Shelley called. She said she'd be over in a few minutes."

“Thanks, Mom.” Evan tried hard to hide his complete confusion as he watched her leave. He’d just taken the first bite when Shelley came into the kitchen.

“We going back to the Arbor tonight? I promised Kathy we’d meet her there, and I hope you didn’t forget.” She sat at table across from him and snagged one of the fries on his plate.

He blinked at her and frowned. “Shelley, something is going on. I’ve been gone for the last four days and Mom’s calendar says it’s Saturday.”

“What? We were just at the Arbor last night, silly.”

“That was several days ago.” What the hell was going on? He knew he’d spent at least three or four days with Aidan.

Shelley stared at him like she thought he’d gone off the deep end. “No, it wasn’t. It was yesterday, Evan.”

“Was I dreaming?”

He wasn’t even aware he’d said that out loud until Shelley asked, “Dreaming about what? What’s going on?”

“That book, the purple one. There was a portrait of a man in it, and his name is Aidan Lorie. I was with him for several days. I couldn’t have been dreaming it.” Forgetting about the food, he jumped from his seat to run to his bedroom. Shelley followed.

In his room, Evan searched for the book. It wasn’t on his bed or his desk. After several minutes of a fruitless search, he settled on the edge of the bed. “I can’t find it. I gave it back to Aidan, but if it was a dream, the book would still be here, right?”

“I remember the book. Last time I saw it was when you gave it to me. You were afraid that weird guy would try to take it. Maybe he did.” Shrugging, Shelley looked about as confused as he felt.

What if he had been dreaming? Evan didn’t want to believe it had only been a dream. He could still feel his own longing for the mage, and he remembered how it had felt every time Aidan had made love to him.

“Are you okay?” Concern filled her voice as Shelley sat beside him. “You look awful.”

“I fell in love with him, Shelley, and I don’t even know if he’s real. He was perfect, everything I’ve always dreamed of. And he was a dream? It can’t be. He made love to me, saved me from the king. He took me to see Port Valenta.”

“Slow down, Evan. I don’t know what happened to you. All I know is yesterday we went out to the Arbor.”

Evan lay back on the bed and curled up on his side, trying not to cry. “I don’t know either, Shelley. I don’t know what happened.”

She stretched out beside him, draping her arm around his waist. “Maybe it wasn’t a dream. I wish I could help you.”

He had absolutely no proof of any of it. Not even the purple book, and that wouldn’t have proven anything anyway. Closing his eyes, he saw Aidan hovering over him, looking down at him with the passionate intensity that had drowned him. Tears fell from Evan’s eyes. If it had been a dream, he wished he’d have never woken up from it, but it was too late now.

“Evan, I just put Elly to bed and we’re leaving now,” his mom called from downstairs.

“Okay, Mom,” he answered, wiping his tears away before he looked at Shelley. “You go ahead and go to the Arbor without me. I don’t think I’m much up for going out tonight.”

“Sure, no problem. You gonna be all right?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine,” Evan lied through his teeth. He wouldn’t be fine at all.

Shelley gave him one last worried look before she headed for the door.

Inside, the ache only grew sharper. Aidan was lost to him. Had the man even been real? Evan began to shake before painful sobs wracked his body. Nothing made sense. His body remembered everything that had happened, but his mind struggled with the reality around him. He wasn’t even sure how much time had passed before he fell asleep. When his mother finally returned, Evan remained blissfully unaware as she shut off his light and closed his door.

* * *

Three weeks later, Evan had settled into somewhat of a routine. After packing and heading for San Diego, he moved in with his cousin, Jeremy, and found a job. Every night Jeremy preferred to go out and party, but Evan stayed home. However, tonight the party was going full swing in Jeremy’s apartment. Wall-to-wall people crammed into the living room and kitchen.

Propping his elbow on the couch arm, Evan tucked his chin into his hand, gazing forlornly out the nearby window. Something tingled across his senses and Evan noticed somebody watching him. The guy was definitely cute. Pale blonde hair framed pale features, and dark green eyes met Evan's. The corners of the guy's eyes upturned with the smile curving his lips. He was more conservatively dressed than the others. The jeans and green short-sleeved shirt might be casual, but more of his body was covered than seemed to be the norm. When the man moved toward him and flopped on the couch, Evan gave him a bit of smile.

"Jeremy sure likes to throw loud parties, doesn't he? I'm Michael Stone."

"Evan Bartholomew," Evan said as he shook Michael's hand. "I'm Jeremy's cousin, and yeah, he does."

"You're starting college in the fall, aren't you? Jeremy told me about you."

Something about the gentle, patient smile hovering on Michael's lips reminded Evan of Aidan. He tried to ignore the painful constriction of his heart. Aidan wasn't real. He'd never been real. Evan had finally convinced himself he'd only been dreaming. Still, it didn't make things hurt any less.

"That's been my plan."

"You were looking like you're weren't enjoying the party much. I was thinking about bailing myself. Want to go get a cup of coffee or something?"

Evan opened his mouth to refuse, but something about the look in the depths of Michael's eyes made him pause. Instead of refusing, he ended up agreeing.

"I honestly didn't mean to make that sound like a come-on. I just thought you might enjoy getting out of here."

"I'm not one for my cousin's parties." Evan shrugged and stood with Michael. Near the door, he glanced back at his cousin, but Jeremy seemed too involved in the girl he was with to notice Evan was leaving.

The coffee shop was only a block from the apartment, and it was a hell of a lot quieter than the apartment had been. As Evan sank into the booth, Michael took the seat opposite him. When the waitress approached, Michael ordered two coffees then looked back at Evan.

"Jeremy told me he had a hard time dragging you out of the apartment."

"I haven't really felt like going anywhere. Jeremy is always out to some party or another. After I get home from work, all I want is some peace and quiet."

“Have you even been to the beach yet?” The waitress set their coffees in front of them and bustled off to serve the next customer.

“No, I haven’t, though I’ve been meaning to.” Evan didn’t bother to explain that most days he could hardly get himself to work.

“You haven’t lived, then. Maybe we can go to Coronado sometime.”

Evan leveled a slightly suspicious look on Michael. “Is Jeremy trying to set you up with me?”

His cousin knew he was gay. Evan had told Jeremy outright when he’d first moved in.

Michael frowned. “Not so far as I know. I saw you sitting on the couch and you looked kind of lost. I guess...” Michael trailed off with a shrug. “I thought you might need a friend or something.”

Evan relaxed a bit. “Sorry. I’ve gotten too used to friends trying to hook me up with somebody every time I turn around.”

“I know the feeling. My mother is always trying to arrange dates for me.” A rueful smile edged at Michael’s lips. “She refuses to accept her only son is gay.”

“If my mom knew, I’m sure she’d be the same.”

“You in the mood for a movie? I’ve got some passes for the Rialto. It’s just down the street, and it’d beat Jeremy’s party.” A hint of uncertainty showed in Michael’s eyes.

It must have been the vulnerable look that did it. Whatever it was, it tugged at Evan. “Sure.”

He pulled out his wallet, took out a five, and left it on the table. Then they left.

* * *

The movie proved to be the first of many outings with Michael. Yet even with their time spent together, Evan couldn’t stop thinking about the wizard he loved. Though Michael didn’t push for any serious intimacy, Evan felt the man deserved an explanation. After a few weeks, he decided to come clean and tell Michael the truth. Well, part of it. The rest Evan only talked about with Shel.

“Yeah, Shel. Michael is coming over in a few and I’m going to talk to him.” Evan sighed against the phone receiver.

“You should. It’s not really fair to him.”

“I just can’t seem to forget Aidan. I’m in love with a damn fantasy. I thought maybe with Michael, things might...” He trailed off, uncertain of exactly what he’d hoped for.

“Be normal?” Shel supplied the words for him.

“He’s a great guy. Sometimes he even reminds me of Aidan. But...” Again, Evan stopped. Nothing he said seemed to come out right.

“He’s not Aidan. I understand, really, I do. I don’t know what to say. You’ve got it bad, and I don’t think you’ve gotten any better since you left here.”

“And you’re worried. I can hear it. I’ll be fine. Maybe a bit more time. Something, I don’t know.”

When Michael walked into the apartment, Evan gave him a quick smile. “I’ll be done in a second.”

“No hurry.”

“Talk to ya later, Shel. Michael got here.”

“Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

After Evan hung up the phone, Michael leaned down to press a quick kiss to his lips.

“Jeremy’s hosting the party tonight. Are we going to be disappearing?”

“That’s a real good idea,” Evan murmured. “I’m not in the mood for a bunch of people tonight. We can head over to your place if you want.”

Michael tugged on Evan’s hand, drawing him from the couch. “Come on, then. Before everybody starts showing up.”

Evan followed him out the door and down the hall to Michael’s apartment. It’d be a lot easier to talk to Michael at his place than trying to find any privacy with a party in full swing. While Michael busied himself getting snacks in the kitchen, Evan plopped down on the couch. Trying to mentally rehearse what he wanted to say, he found it wasn’t easy at all. Where in the hell could he start? Admitting to being in love with a fantasy wasn’t an option. Frustrated, he grabbed the remote and turned on the TV.

Michael came back into the living room, bearing a bowl of chips and sodas.

“I wanted to talk to you, just don’t know where to start.”

Michael set everything on the coffee table before he met Evan’s gaze. “About?”

“I’m in love with somebody else, Michael.” Waving his hands helplessly in front of him, Evan gave Michael a pained look. Talking about how he felt was really difficult. “I’ve tried to forget. But...”

As he settled on the couch, Michael watched Evan, listening intently. The lack of surprise in his expression made it clear he wasn’t exactly unaware there might have been a problem. He reached over and covered Evan’s hand with his.

“Aidan didn’t want anything more than...”

This time Michael interrupted him. “I think I understand.”

Staring down at their hands, Evan knew Michael didn’t understand the full story, but then he couldn’t exactly tell everything.

“Thanks for being honest, Evan. Now it’s my turn. I enjoy going out with you. I’m not going to hang onto the chance that you’ll eventually forget, but I don’t want to stop dating either. If things always stay the same, it’s a chance I’m willing to take.” Michael’s gaze locked with Evan’s as he leaned closer. A soft brush of his lips silenced whatever Evan wanted to say. Opening to the gentle pressure, Evan returned the kiss.

Chapter Sixteen

“Evan...”

Aidan opened his eyes and drew his hands down his face. Yet another dream, and as usual, Aidan had awakened to find it was nothing but that. Nearly eight months had passed since he'd sent Evan back to Earth, and the ache within him was only getting worse. He groaned and flung back the covers, knowing damn well sleep was going to elude him as it had since he sent Evan away.

He pulled his robe on and headed downstairs to the kitchen. Escaping memories of Evan was impossible. His presence was etched everywhere: the workroom, the library, the bedroom. It was why Aidan had taken to sleeping in a spare room; he couldn't sleep alone anymore. But in truth, he didn't want to escape the memories. He simply wanted to drown himself in them.

“You are a wreck.”

Aidan scowled in Atael's general direction as he walked past him into the kitchen. The demon, retaining his human form even though they were alone, followed him. Aidan could sense the amused grin on his demon's face as he pulled a bottle of wine from the rack and popped it open with a nearby knife. He tipped it up, drinking a fourth of it in one breath. When he lowered it once more, he steadied himself against the counter with a rather lopsided grin. Atael rolled his eyes and shook his head, jerking the bottle and its cork from Aidan's hands. Aidan started to protest and reach for them, but instead found himself falling against Atael's chest with a hoarse laugh.

“You're drunk,” Atael said with a sigh.

“Nonsense,” Aidan mumbled. “I just woke up and got thirsty.”

“You're drunk, Aidan,” Atael repeated. He pushed the cork back into the bottle and set the wine on the counter, out of the mage's reach. “The others from the Guild will be here in three hours and you can't meet them like this.”

The use of his first name wasn't lost on Aidan and he nodded grudgingly. He knew

Atael wasn't happy with him, and he knew Atael was right. The other Guild Masters were already annoyed with him as it was, considering he'd all but ignored their messages over the past four months.

"Fine," he mumbled, pushing himself off of Atael's chest. "Help me to my room. I need to get cleaned up."

"I'll say," the demon muttered as he slid an arm around Aidan's waist. "You smell like a damned winery."

Aidan responded to that with a harsh—and slightly slurred—curse. Atael just shook his head as they left the kitchen and started up the stairs. When they reached Aidan's chambers, Aidan stilled in the doorway.

"I can't..." he said. He swallowed back the pain and whispered, "I just can't, Atael."

Atael grumbled and picked Aidan up before the mage could even begin to form a protest. "You can and you will," the demon growled as he carried Aidan into the bathroom and set him on his feet in a not-so-gentle manner.

Aidan stumbled backward and landed on the seat of the toilet. "What's wrong with me, Atael?"

"You're in love," Atael answered him without looking up from the bathtub. He started the water and turned around.

"You knew?"

The demon crouched down in front of Aidan. "A fool could see that. And only a man so deeply in love and in pain could deplete a year's worth of Dark Wine in four months." He stood and unceremoniously yanked Aidan's robe over his head. Then he pointed to the bathtub.

Aidan sighed. "You really are going to do this, aren't you?"

"Somebody has to," the demon muttered as he grabbed a bottle, a cup, and a washcloth. He turned to Aidan and pointed at the tub again.

Knowing he really had no choice, Aidan gave the bathtub a cursory glance before standing and finally easing himself down into the warm water. He sank down farther, leaning his head against the edge of the tub and closing his eyes. A few minutes later, warm water spilled over his head and face. Atael pulled his hair from behind him and began washing it, massaging his neck and shoulders as he worked.

"Did I do the right thing, Atael?" Aidan asked quietly.

"No one can answer that but yourself," he answered as he poured a cupful of water

over Aidan's hair to rinse it. "What does your heart tell you?"

Aidan opened his eyes and looked up at Atael. "That I should have told him before I sent him home." He closed his eyes again and sighed. "That I should have told Evan how much I love him."

"Then why don't you go to Earth when this is all over?"

Aidan shook his head as he stood to wash. "Not yet. I don't want to leave, not knowing what's going to happen with the Guild."

"They won't dismiss you, Aidan, you know that. You're one of the Elders."

Aidan began washing and said, "Yes, I know."

Atael stood and pulled a towel from a shelf. He held it open as Aidan rinsed off. "Or is that the real reason why you're putting it off?"

Aidan stepped out. Atael wrapped the towel around him. "I can't hide anything from you, can I?" Atael shook his head. "I'm terrified that he won't feel the same, Atael."

"A legitimate fear." He handed Aidan a brush and stepped back while the mage brushed his long red hair. "But you won't ever know if you don't try."

When Aidan was done, he set down the brush. "Please take the pain away," he whispered. "Just for now. I can't afford to let it eat at me when the others show up."

Atael took Aidan's hand without a word and pulled him into the bedroom. Aidan stretched out on the bed and Atael lay down beside him. The demon sank his teeth into his own wrist and pressed the wound to Aidan's lips. Aidan gripped his arm and began to drink. The demon's blood served to abate the pain by satisfying a well-hidden hunger. With the flow of the rich, dark blood, Aidan's mind cleared slowly. It was enough for now; it had to be.

Aidan didn't know how long he'd been in bed. He knew he was alone and rolled over. He stared unblinking at the pillow Evan had used while he had been here. It was the first time Aidan had even been in his own bedroom, much less slept in his own bed. At the sound of the door opening, Aidan rolled onto his back.

"They are here," Atael said from the doorway.

Aidan let out a long sigh and nodded. "Show them to the dining room. I'm on my way." Atael nodded and closed the door. Aidan closed his eyes and fought to slow the frantic beating of his heart. He didn't know which was worse, the pain of not having Evan, or the uncertainty of what to expect from the other two masters. Knowing he had no choice, Aidan slid out of bed and stood, stretching briefly before leaving the room.

Downstairs, the lights from the chandelier in the dining room spilled into the entryway. As Aidan stepped through the doorway and into the dining room, the other two masters, Master Alonis Kuruvar and Master Learis Bredth, both stood and bowed to him. He bowed to them as well and walked to the table to take his place in his chair.

“Good evening, Master Kuruvar, Master Bredth,” Aidan said with a nod to each wizard. They both nodded in return. “I do apologize for being...out of touch as of late.”

“Master Lorie, we know that your time is limited, what with the upkeep of Lorie Manor, so I will get to the point,” Master Kuruvar said. “Word has reached the Guild of your...activities as of late.”

Aidan forced his expression to remain neutral, even though he would much prefer to take those rumors and run with them. The mere mention of them brought back too many memories of Evan and the truth of the rumors themselves. Instead, he nodded slowly. “I am aware of such rumors, Master Kuruvar.”

“Is there any truth to them?”

Aidan cast a brief glance at Master Bredth, the Guild’s only nature wizard. He took a deep breath before leaning forward, locking his fingers together and eyeing first Master Bredth and then Master Kuruvar, the Guild’s elemental sorcerer. “And if I were to say yes?”

The two looked at each other, astonishment written on their wrinkled faces. It was Master Kuruvar who finally broke the rather awkward silence. “You realize this places you in serious jeopardy should these rumors spread, Aidan.”

Aidan nodded. “I do.”

“Yet you still acknowledge them as being true?” Master Bredth asked.

“Do you expect me to lie? You know me better than that, Learis.” Aidan looked from one wizard to the other. “His name is Evan, and he’s from Earth. Leland stole my personal journal. Apparently he ‘lost’ it when escaping to Earth to avoid detection for a time. In that time, it fell into the hands of a young man from Earth. This young man, Evan, has a strong interest in magic and he found my journal in a bookstore. He purchased it and read one of my spells. The protection charm transported him to my keep, book in hand.”

“And where is this young man now?”

Aidan closed his eyes. “I sent him home after several days here.”

“You do not sound pleased,” Master Bredth said quietly.

“I am not. Had I a choice, I would have kept him with me,” Aidan said.

Master Kuruvar sat back and laughed. Aidan opened his eyes. It was not like the old mage to find humor in much of anything anymore. Master Bredth simply eyed the older wizard like he had clearly lost his mind. The whole spectacle reminded Aidan of why he hated the Guild events so much to begin with.

“I daresay that our Master Lorie is in love!” Master Kuruvar exclaimed.

Aidan didn’t bother to say anything to the contrary and the laughter died out. “That I am. And I want nothing more than to have Evan back in my arms.”

“But it is against your own people’s laws to sleep with a man,” Master Bredth reminded him.

“No,” Aidan said bitterly. “It is against my *mother’s* laws. The majority of the dark fae population, at least those not loyal to the queen, do not care. And indeed, more people indulge in...*unnatural*...practices more often than most care to admit.”

“But was it not the practice of such activities that led to your banishment from the Sacarata?”

Aidan sat back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. He despised getting into these talks with the other two Elders. Yet they both insisted on prying into his personal affairs. “It was the pinnacle of the queen’s decision, I think, but it was not the underlying reason. Queen Pretore is simply jealous. It’s a wonder my own sister hasn’t been banished as well.”

“Perhaps,” Master Bredth said as he leaned forward on his arms. “Perhaps it would be best if you were to take some time away.”

“Time away?” Aidan looked from one master to another. “Why?”

Master Kuruvar shifted uneasily in his chair and cleared his throat. “Because there are others, lower members of the Guild, who would love nothing more than to have your position. If you were to take some time away, then we could install a steward here.” Obviously noting Aidan’s rather disagreeable look, he added, “It’s only for a few months, Aidan. Just long enough for the dust to settle, so to speak.”

Aidan sighed and let his head fall back against his chair. He knew they were right. And he knew exactly where he would go. He only prayed that the trip wouldn’t be in vain. He finally raised his head once more and nodded. “All right. I will do that. Who are you thinking of putting here? I want the people in my village to be well cared for. If I find out they were not, I will take it upon myself to make the person responsible wish he was

never born.”

“We know you care about the others here,” Master Kuruvar said quietly. “Either myself or Master Bredth will remain. Will that be sufficient?”

Aidan nodded, relieved. “Quite.”

“Where will you go?” Master Bredth asked him.

“Earth.” The other two masters looked at Aidan dubiously. Aidan paid them no mind. “I want Evan back. I’m going to look for him.”

“How do you know where to find him?”

“Because he has my blood within his veins now. He was curious and tasted it when Arael fed from me.”

“And you can find him that way?”

“I can,” Aidan said with a nod. “Everyone in my family can do that, although most have never tried.”

The clock in the hall outside the dining room began to chime midday and Masters Kuruvar and Bredth stood. Aidan stood as well and walked them to the front door.

“One week,” Master Bredth said. “Give it one week and one of us will be here to take over for some time.”

“I will, and hopefully I won’t be returning alone.” Once the door was closed, Aidan turned to see Arael watching him.

“That went more smoothly than I had expected,” the demon said.

Aidan made a sound of vague agreement as he walked by the demon and toward the library. He stopped in the middle of the room, unable to go any farther as he stared at the desk. Four months never seemed so long before, yet as he gazed at the lacquered desktop, memories of Evan stretched out on his back haunted him. Aidan had nearly let himself slip then. The need to possess Evan had been undeniably strong, and it had taken all Aidan had to *not* take more than Evan was willing to give.

Gods. Was he mad? Evan didn’t belong in Aurora. But...

“*He belongs with me,*” a voice in Aidan’s mind whispered.

“Aye,” he said aloud. “He belongs with me.”

* * *

A week had passed and Aidan had made all the arrangements. The peasants knew he would be gone and many were not entirely happy with the idea, but he'd reassured them all he would be back as soon as possible. He promised them nothing ill would come with the placement of a steward, and he prayed he was right in that assumption. By Saturday, he was a nervous wreck, poring over ledgers of the daily activities, hoping he had not missed anything.

He was working so frantically that he did not hear anyone open the library door until the person cleared his throat. Aidan looked up and saw Master Bredth standing to the side with a sympathetic smile. Out of all the wizards in the Guild, Learis was the one Aidan trusted implicitly. Aidan didn't bother to hide the smile and the sigh of relief.

"I am relieved to find you as my steward," Aidan said. He set his pen on the ledger and leaned back in his chair.

Learis nodded and approached the desk. "The other Elders found it amusing for a nature wizard to act as steward for a necromancer." His smile did not wane and the tone of his voice was teasing.

Aidan nodded, allowing a small chuckle to escape. "Yes, I imagine the announcement was met with interesting reactions."

"Indeed." Learis sat down in the chair nearest the desk. "Lady Ellis found it most interesting."

"Ah, yes," Aidan said with a nod.

Lady Ellis was the Guild's only female wizard, and the only one who worked only with demons and nothing more. Many times Aidan had mused that the human woman was more adept than many of the others within the Guild.

"Have you everything in place?"

Learis' question drew Aidan's attention back to the present. Aidan nodded. "Yes, unless I've overlooked something, which isn't likely. I feel as though I've gone through the daily ledgers a thousand times this morning alone."

"Everything will be fine, Aidan. Your people will be fine."

"I know, but I still worry about them."

"Do you really love this young man? Honestly?"

Aidan closed his eyes slowly and smiled. "Yes, I do. And I want him back. More than anything in this world, I want him back." He heard the sound of rustling silk and opened his eyes to see Learis standing before the desk.

“Then go to him, Aidan. I pray things work out for you both. You know that.”

“I do.”

* * *

As Evan browsed the books, Michael tapped his arm to get his attention. “I’m going to head over to the arcade while you’re here.”

“Sure, I’ll meet up with you when I’m done.”

Grinning, Michael just shook his head at Evan before retreating from the store to go to the arcade. They’d been together for over a month, and Evan knew Michael tolerated his penchant for all things magical as well as a few other things. Looking back over the selection, Evan lost himself in trying to find the one he probably never would.

“There are some interesting titles here, but I personally recommend this one.” A man’s hand reached around Evan and up to the shelf. The man pulled down a well-concealed book.

Evan’s heart nearly stopped. He knew that voice. He’d know it anywhere. For a moment, he wondered wildly if he was hallucinating. He took the book and the solid feel of it reassured him he wasn’t quite crazy yet. Evan knew who was behind him before he even whirled around. A mixture of disbelief and a desperate need to believe overwhelmed him in one fell swoop.

“Aidan!”

“It’s been much too long, love.” Aidan pulled Evan to him. “And I’ve missed you.”

“I thought you weren’t real. You were just a dream.” Evan drank in the unbelievable sight of Aidan’s face. He saw straight through the magic that hid Aidan’s true features. Then he flung himself into the mage’s arms. He’d firmly convinced himself Aidan had been nothing but a dream, a desperately longed for dream.

Aidan’s arms tightened around him. “I am very real.” He threaded his fingers through Evan’s hair, pushing him away just enough to look at him. For a brief moment, the glamour dropped and the ruby red of his eyes glittered. “I should have told you this before, but I knew you didn’t feel as if you belonged in Aurora.” He leaned down to brush a soft kiss to Evan’s lips as he whispered, “I love you.”

The shock that already held Evan doubled instantly. He never dreamed the mage loved him. “I love you, Aidan. Oh, gods, I love you so much. I didn’t want to leave you.”

“I didn’t want you to leave. It’s why I sent you home while you were asleep. I couldn’t bear the thought of having to say goodbye.” Aidan licked Evan’s lips, but didn’t take it any further than that. “I don’t know how your world takes to public displays.”

“We’re in California. It shocks some people and others simply don’t care. You can’t be executed here for kissing me.” Evan wrapped his fingers in that beloved red hair and drew Aidan toward him. “We just can’t do anything more than this.” Then he kissed Aidan with all the love he had in him.

Aidan tugged Evan harder against him, the kiss taking on a hungry, fierce edge. “*How I missed this...*”

Evan threw everything in his soul into the kiss, praying Aidan felt it all as strongly as he did. The feel of his body against his and the taste of the mage’s kiss filled Evan’s senses, turning his dreams once more into reality.

Aidan kissed a slow path across Evan’s cheek to his ear. “Please tell me you live nearby. I need you, Evan.”

Incapable of words, Evan tilted his face into the touch. When the thought of Michael waiting in the arcade hit him, however, he drew back and muttered, “Oh, shit. Michael.” He had to talk to him and at least tell Michael was going home. “I don’t live too far from here, but I need to talk to somebody first. Then we can head to my place.”

“That young man you were with a few moments ago, I assume?”

“Yeah, I need to tell him I’m going home early.” He also needed to explain a lot more than that, but he would do that later.

The look in the mage’s eyes revealed a hint of knowing. “It’s been a while, love. I’d not expected you to remain without someone. But I came on the hope that you might feel as I do.”

Lifting his gaze, Evan caught the look and thought Aidan misunderstood. “No, we never... I mean, we’re just dating. I couldn’t sleep with him.” His voice lowered on the last part. They’d tried not that long ago and he just couldn’t. Michael had understood and hadn’t held it against him.

“It’s all right,” Aidan said, tilting Evan’s face back up. “I know I would never be able to do so much as stand in the same room with you and not want to touch you. Any particular reason why you couldn’t?”

“He knows I’m in love with somebody else. He even knows your name. I just didn’t tell him everything. Even though I thought you were a dream, I knew nobody else could give me what you had, Aidan.”

“Whatever this old fae sorcerer has within him, is yours, Evan. Although it might be wise to keep some details between us. I’m not so sure anyone in your world would understand.”

That Aidan loved him still held Evan with an awed sort of shock. He’d wished for that hundreds of times, never believing it would be possible. “No, I’m not going to tell anybody at all. In this world, they would lock me up in a hospital. If they can’t see something, then it doesn’t exist.” He took Aidan’s hand in his and tugged gently as he started for the exit. The purple book was still clutched in his other arm.

“The only one I ever told about you was Shelley,” Evan said when they stepped out into the mall. He’d eventually opened up enough to tell his best friend everything that had happened, but he knew anybody else would have him committed. Near the arcade he paused, releasing Aidan’s hand. “Let me just talk to Michael for a minute. I’ll be right back.”

Aidan sat down on a nearby bench and Evan went into the arcade. It took a minute to find Michael among the crowd of bodies crammed into the place. When he found Michael at a pinball machine, he tapped the man’s shoulder.

“Michael, I’m gonna head home early, all right?”

Without looking up from his game, Michael asked, “You want me to go with you?”

“Nah, I’ll call you later tonight so we can talk.” He’d have to arrange to meet him at some other time so he could explain about Aidan, only not in full detail.

Michael bumped the pinball machine and the ball rolled down a side path and bounced on the flipper. “Okay. If I don’t answer, just leave a message. Gotta make a store run.” He stopped while the ball was in a countdown sort of thing and leaned over to give Evan a quick peck on the cheek.

“Gotcha.” Evan went back outside and for a moment just stood near the doorway, watching Aidan as the mage got his first chance to people-watch in a new world. When Aidan’s gaze met his, Evan joined him. “So, what do you think about our world?”

“Different, but not too unlike some of the larger cities in Aurora.” He rose and smoothed a hand down Evan’s arm. “I’m ready when you are.”

“It’s only a few minutes’ walk to my apartment, so it won’t take us long to get there.” Yeah, Evan had his priorities all right, and they started with getting Aidan alone. Now.

“Lead the way,” Aidan said with a sweep of his arm. A familiar spark lit within the depths of his now-emerald green eyes. Evan couldn’t wait to see their true red.

Evan laughed and linked his fingers with Aidan’s as he led the way out of the mall and onto the street. “In every gods’ name, I missed you too much, Aidan. I can hardly believe you’re here with me now.”

“That makes two of us, love.” Aidan walked evenly beside Evan, casting periodic glances at him. “A part of me was afraid maybe you did not feel the same as I do. But it was something I had to know. Time passes differently on Aurora, and for me, the past eight months have been hell, as the locals here would say.”

“Eight months? But it’s only been two.” Evan puzzled through that for a moment until he realized what had caused his own initial problem. “When I got home, I knew I’d spent several days with you, but it was only the next day when I returned. I thought I dreamed everything with you. I didn’t have any proof.”

“As I said, time passes differently. Two months on Earth equal eight on Aurora. I would have come sooner, but there were things that had to be dealt with first.” He looked over at Evan. “Oh, yes, Pers sends his love. He wasn’t entirely thrilled with me when he didn’t get to go with you. When I told him I would bring you back soon, however, he seemed to find that acceptable.”

“You want me to go back with you?” Turning down the street leading to his apartment, Evan eyed Aidan for a moment. “I’d been wondering how Atael and Pers were getting along. I also kept wishing I could’ve had Pers with me. He would have at least kept me company during the worst times.”

“Pers is well,” Aidan said as they climbed the stairs. “I dismissed Atael for the travel here. I can summon him whenever I wish.” When they reached the landing, he turned Evan around to face him. “Of course I want you to go back with me. You may come and go as you wish. I’ve brought something for you that will allow you to do just that, but it will only transport you. I can transport us both whenever you’re ready to visit Aurora once again.”

Evan let go of Aidan’s hand to fish his key out of his back pocket. “I think it would mean me giving up college. To be honest, after what I went through without you, I don’t think I’ll mind.”

“I would never ask you to leave what you have here permanently, Evan. I must stay out of Aurora for a short time to let things there settle. I can stay here for at least a week and then I must return. Another mage is acting as steward while I am away. I would love for you to join me, even if it’s for a short time.”

“The only free time I would have is on the weekends,” Evan said as he unlocked his door. “I’m scheduled for classes for the next nine months until summer break.”

His apartment, while clean, was furnished in thrift shop specials down to the rust-colored couch that looked like it was made in the sixties. The place was tiny, consisting of a small living room, a kitchen, a bathroom and two cramped bedrooms.

Aidan closed the door behind them and backed Evan against it. “Then I claim your weekends.”

“You can have every one you want.” A slow chill ran through Evan. It had been too long since he felt this. “Make love to me, please, Aidan.”

The glamour faded and Aidan’s ruby gaze focused sharply on Evan. The mage made quick work of removing both of their clothes, his hungry red gaze almost a caress. When it resettled on Evan’s face, Aidan attacked Evan’s mouth, forcing his tongue deep inside.

“Put your legs around my waist.”

Minimal action prepared Aidan to enter him. Evan wrapped his arms around the mage’s neck and his legs around Aidan’s waist, unquestioningly obedient to his lover.

Sliding his arms under Evan’s to grip his shoulders, Aidan crushed Evan against the door and impaled him in one motion. His kiss grew hungrier as he began thrusting in and out of Evan’s ass with hard, quick strokes.

Evan clung to Aidan as his mind cried out to the mage. He’d dreamed so much of this, every night, every waking moment. Using Aidan for support, Evan bore down on each motion as the mage drove hard into him. The pleasurable friction drove him out of his mind. Aidan pulled abruptly from their kiss, pinning a dark red gaze on Evan. His thrusts increased in strength and with every one, he pulled Evan down onto him, increasing the sheer force of every stroke.

“Don’t stop, please, Aidan!” Evan lost it. The unbearable sharpening tension wound tight before it released with a snap. He shook with his orgasm, and the mage’s name came out in a half sob as tears flowed down Evan’s cheeks. The exquisite sensations were almost too much for him to bear.

With several hard thrusts Aidan came, growling and calling out Evan's name. He ground his hips hard against Evan. When he finally stopped shaking, he kissed Evan's tears away.

"You are mine. And I am yours," the mage breathed into Evan's ear.

Evan couldn't let go, didn't ever want to. All the heartache, the endless dreams, faded with every tear. Burying his face against Aidan's throat, he simply held on.

"I love you, Evan. I refuse to live without you." Aidan stepped away from the door, supporting Evan's weight. He fell onto the couch, cradling Evan against him.

Evan nestled into the mage's embrace, unwilling to lose the contact between them. "Every night I longed for you, Aidan. I didn't know if you were real or not, but I needed you so badly. I tried to just go on with my life, but nothing makes me feel like you do."

"I needed you so much as well. My nights and days were much too long for my liking, and I ended up sleeping in a spare room because I couldn't sleep alone in my bed anymore."

In a way, it made Evan feel good to know Aidan needed him as much as he did the mage. It relaxed him, being in the mage's arms and listening to the soft cadence of his familiar voice. "I used to dream you loved me, and I was back with you. If I had known what was going to happen, I never would have left you, I swear."

"I'm here now," Aidan murmured. "And I'll be damned if I'm going to let you go again."

Evan would have begged him if he had to, but he knew Aidan had things in his world that he needed to take care of. Sighing, he said, "As long as you always come back to me. That's all I need."

Aidan remained quiet for several minutes before answering. "I do have to go back in a week, but when I am done, do you suppose there is room here for two?"

"You don't even have to ask." Lifting his head, Evan studied the mage's face. "I want you with me as often as I can have you."

"I don't think you understand, love. When I have taken care of things in Aurora, I'm coming back here. And I'm not leaving."

He gave the mage a surprised look. "But why?"

"Because in over two thousand years, I've never met anyone like you. Yes, I've been with other men, but I've never known love until you came into my life. I'm not about to

lose that. Aurora got along fine for several thousand years without me, it can do it again. My home is wherever you are.”

“This world isn’t magical, Aidan. Not like yours. I want to learn yours and maybe live there with you. It’s why I’m not so certain about college anymore. It was fine when I didn’t know about everything I could learn in your world, but now it doesn’t seem like enough.”

“Are you certain? If Aurora is where you wish to be, then that is where we will be. You will still have the ability to travel, when you wish to visit Earth. Which reminds me...” Aidan held up his right hand and opened it. A shimmering gold chain with a large ruby lay coiled in his palm. “I believe you left this. I enchanted it. Whenever you wish to move between the worlds, this stone will grant you that ability. It will open a portal, but only you can use it.”

Evan picked up the necklace and fastened it around his neck where it belonged. “I’m certain, Aidan. You have to remember that the plans for my life were made before I knew you and Aurora existed. In my world, I can’t study magic like I can in yours. Anything I study here in college would simply be something mundane so I could afford to live here.”

Aidan fingered the ruby nestled at the hollow of Evan’s throat. “The Tear of Lorie suits you,” he said quietly. “You would never want for anything in Aurora. That I can promise you. But there are things you must be aware of. I did not go into detail about them before, but if you are to live in Aurora and merely visit Earth, then you will need to know them.”

“As long as I have you, nothing else would matter, but I think we’d both be happier in Aurora.” Evan tilted his head. “What do I need to know?”

“Aurora has nine moons. Throughout the year, those moons show up in cycles. Once every three months, however, the moons do not rise for one week. During that week, all who value their lives remain within protective walls. Darkness rules. The dead walk the land, and it is from them I receive my powers.”

“You mean the dead literally walk? Like zombies or something?”

“Some of them, yes. Most of them are spirits, however. And those who were evil in life remain so in death. That’s why it’s not safe for anyone to venture out. Even I must remain in a protective circle when I call on them.”

“So when none of the moons show, I’d better keep my ass safely in the house, right?” Evan didn’t see a problem with that. He hadn’t forgotten the night he’d witnessed

Aidan working the ritual to increase his power. He snuggled close and rested his cheek on Aidan's chest, savoring the contact. "Then you'll teach me all I need to know."

Chapter Seventeen

Evan stirred before he started awake. His eyes flew open in a split second of panic. When his eyes adjusted and he focused on the mage, who lay there watching him, he relaxed. Part of him had been afraid he'd only been dreaming again. Nestling against Aidan, he murmured, "You're here."

Head propped in his hand, Aidan chuckled and kissed Evan softly. "Aye, *levier*. I am still here."

Evan returned the kiss as he listened to the quiet, reassuring words. Drawing back his head, he gazed into the ruby eyes that promised him so much. "I think this is the only place I could ever be, Aidan."

Aidan rolled onto his back and pulled Evan on top of him. "However much I adore being in bed with you, I must admit that I'm starving. I haven't eaten anything since Arael forced me to quit drinking and start eating before I left the keep."

That brought back images of the last time Evan had seen Aidan and the demon together, and in a way it was still as confusing as it was then. "We could get something at McDonald's if you want. It's only a couple of blocks away."

Aidan lifted Evan's head gently, a knowing look in his eyes. "It hasn't happened since that night. After seeing how it affected you, I refused to allow it. My blood is the only part of me he gets now."

Frowning, Evan knew Aidan had read his thoughts, but he couldn't bring himself to get upset by it. "That's not fair to him if it's what he wants."

"Arael is a demon and can live with it or go back to the abyss," Aidan said. "You, on the other hand, are the love of my life. I'll be damned if I'm going to allow something to occur that you aren't comfortable with." He raised his head to kiss the tip of Evan's nose. "And I don't make a habit of reading minds. I knew how uneasy that whole ordeal made you. I needed to reassure you that it has not, and will not, happen again."

That he wanted Aidan for himself was a strictly selfish emotion, but Evan didn't want to share the mage at all. Whether it was fair or not, it was the way he felt and his effort at controlling the emotion wasn't all that great. "You're too damn sexy for me to even want to let you out of this apartment, but I'll manage that."

"Were it not a need for food, I'd just as soon keep you right here and make love to you over and over again." Aidan's lips curled into a wry, devilish grin. "So, what about this McDonald's? It's not too weird, is it?"

Evan snorted. The man could play with dead people without flinching, but wouldn't eat something weird. One russet eyebrow rose and Evan bit hard on his bottom lip, knowing damn well the mage read his mind. He cleared his throat, counted to three so he wouldn't laugh, then said, "There can be a difference between homemade and fast food, but I like it anyway. I'll do my best to show you around a bit and then we can come back here. I promise you won't get out of this bed for a while."

Before Evan could move completely off the bed, Aidan gripped his arm, pulled him back and captured his mouth in a deep kiss. Unable and unwilling to escape, Evan whimpered and opened eagerly to Aidan. The man's kiss had the power to melt him into a puddle of need within seconds.

"Now you can get up."

Evan grumbled and rolled to the side. When Aidan stood, he offered Evan a hand. Not that he wanted to get up, but Evan took hold of the mage's hand and got out of the bed. His fingers tightened and quickly drew Aidan's body flush with his as his other hand rested on the mage's hip. Raising his face, he all but wrapped himself around the wizard and kissed Aidan so hard, it left them both breathless and dizzy.

"If we don't stop this, we are never getting out the door." Aidan chuckled. He let Evan go and they both dressed.

"I'm trying, but you're not helping," Evan protested. He tugged his shirt down over his chest. As his gaze lifted to meet Aidan's, Evan stilled completely. "And if you don't stop looking at me like that, you aren't going to eat anything but me."

Aidan's eyes darkened and before Evan had a chance to react, the closet door rattled behind him with the impact of their bodies. "Rest assured," Aidan whispered, "I will do just that when we get back here."

Evan struggled to shove down the immediate need Aidan's words and actions sent flaring in him. "Let's hurry up and eat because I can't wait that long."

“Aye, *levier*,” Aidan whispered. He licked Evan’s lips before stepping away to slide on his boots. When he straightened, he gave Evan a quick emerald-hued wink. “Red hair doesn’t seem to be such a big deal here, but I can’t fathom a human with red eyes.”

“No, red hair is nothing out of the ordinary, just red eyes. And yours definitely have the power to fascinate.”

Aidan cocked an eyebrow at him. “I like the sound of that.”

Evan grabbed his wallet and shoved it into his back pocket. “Out the door. Now.”

“Yes, sir.” After giving Evan’s ear a teasing flick of his tongue, Aidan walked out the bedroom door.

Evan grumbled before he finally moved from his spot to follow behind the wizard. His gaze fastened on the nice view of that ass, and he tightened his lips to prevent himself from saying anything. Clenching his hands at his sides kept him from touching as well.

Aidan, however, was far from good as they headed down the stairs. His fingers danced along the thin material covering Evan’s ass. “You know, that cloth is thin enough that I bet you could feel the heat of my breath if I were to lick you.”

A small shudder ran through Evan. He resisted the urge to press back into the touch and determinedly kept walking. “Either you eat fast or we’ll both be arrested.”

“Handcuffs have possibilities all their own, love.”

“Oh, gods.” The silk shorts did nothing to hide the erection Evan now had. As he walked down the sidewalk toward McDonalds, amused, surreptitious looks came his way from a few others who chanced to notice his state. *Yes, I would like a sausage biscuit, a Coke and a side order of sheer embarrassment, oh, and some sexual frustration, please.*

“Something wrong, levier?”

Several deep breaths finally helped Evan calm. He focused on a few of the most noxious images he could think of. His grandmother pinching and kissing his cheek was one of them. When he was able to, he met Aidan’s amused look. “No, why?”

Aidan opened his mouth, probably to further torment Evan, then seemed to think better of whatever he was going to say. “I’ll leave you alone...for now.” He gave Evan a quick wink, allowing the glamour to drop for only a second.

Unfortunately for Evan, all it took was the sight of those ruby eyes to melt him. He wanted to see them light again with the fire he knew he could bring to them. “That is not leaving me alone.” It figured the metal door handle would be warm when he opened it.

He was hoping for ice cold to temper the fire inside him. “All I want is to feel you fuck me, Aidan.”

“Personally, I want my tongue in your ass.”

Only sheer, determined will kept his body from reacting to that. Throwing a look at Aidan over his shoulder, Evan deliberately brushed an imaginary piece of dirt off his own ass.

Aidan’s gaze followed the movement. “Keep that up, and I’ll show you what I can do with magic...without the aid of handcuffs.”

Attempting to ignore the mage at this point, which was damn near impossible, Evan stepped up to the counter to place his order. “I’ll take two Sausage Egg McMuffins meals with Cokes, please.” Giving Aidan a bland look, he asked, “What do you want?”

Aidan cocked his head to the side and finally said, “Surprise me.” Evan knew what Aidan wanted to say. He looked at the clerk and said, “Make it four of the same.” Digging in his back pocket, he fished out a twenty and handed it to the girl. It took a moment for her to stop staring at Aidan before she hastily made change and handed it to Evan.

Aidan gave the young woman an entirely innocent smile before patting Evan’s ass, out of sight. After placing a red plastic tray on the counter, the clerk busied herself getting their food in between looks beneath her lashes at the mage. Evan didn’t miss any of it and stepped back against the wizard’s hand until it was caught between their bodies. Without a word, he made it crystal clear that Aidan was his. She seemed to understand the message since she flashed Evan a quick, apologetic smile and finished getting their meals.

Picking up the tray, he just nodded to her, fiercely trying to ignore the play of Aidan’s fingers. He walked away from the counter, found them a booth, and set the tray on the table. Then he went to get their drinks.

Aidan leaned back in the seat, draping his arms over the top and watching Evan with a clearly predatory gleam in his eyes.

After filling the cups with ice and Coke, all the while trying like hell to ignore that stare, Evan returned to the table and slid into the seat opposite from Aidan. No way could he handle sitting next to the man. He put the drink and Aidan’s food in front of him before grabbing his own.

“Eat up or you’re in trouble.”

Aidan started to eat, humming appreciatively. “Not bad at all. Very easy to make, I would imagine.”

Mouth full of food, Evan gave him a thumbs up and swallowed. “Yep. Not the best in the world, but I kind of like it.”

Aidan toyed with the straw in his cup for a few seconds. His expression was comical when he discovered that plastic on plastic made a weird sound. He started moving the straw up and down until it began resembling a song. Then he pulled the straw from the lid. He casually turned it sideways, curled his tongue under it, and proceeded to slide the plastic tube back and forth in the most obscene gesture Evan had ever seen. Evan hastily swallowed almost half of his sandwich, just about choking himself.

Aidan smirked and put the straw back in the cup. When he was done eating, he finished his drink, taking great care to roll his tongue around the straw before putting it back down again. “Now what?”

Evan locked his gaze firmly on the table before the mage could do anything else. Finally managing to calm himself enough to even look at Aidan, he said, “Oh, I thought we could go down to the park and take a stroll through the gardens. Then maybe after that, we could hang at the mall, and you could see what kind of things you can buy here.”

Aidan leaned forward, letting the illusion drop momentarily. “Or we can go back to your place, I can strip you down, flip you over and shove my tongue up your ass until you’re screaming my name.”

Evan’s insides tightened until he was squirming in his seat. He finished his drink as quickly as possible. “You sure you don’t want to go shopping instead? I do have a few bucks on me to spend.”

“We can do that.”

“Then let’s go.” Evan wasn’t sure if he was being masochistic here or what. Something about the way Aidan looked at him told Evan this was going to be a very memorable shopping trip. He gathered the trash and piled it onto the tray before he got up to dump it in the trash can.

Aidan held the door open for him and when Evan walked past, Aidan took care to let his fingers tickle discreetly across Evan’s crotch. Evan fisted his hands and cast a glance at Aidan.

“You might be surprised at the stuff you can buy here, Aidan. The mall’s a pretty decent size.” Score one for him being casual. Yeah, right.

“So is my cock,” Aidan muttered with a look of innocence.

Evan’s lips twitched in appreciation of Aidan’s efforts to keep his already one-track mind on a collision course with his common sense. “I think I remember how it felt sliding inside my ass. And I remember the look in your eyes every single second.”

As an elderly couple passed by them, Aidan lowered his voice. “Oh yes, that tight, hot, slick ass, enveloping my cock as I push it deeper inside your body. And the way your eyes glaze over as I wrap my fingers around your shaft and stroke it slowly.”

Evan swallowed as the purr of the soft words threaded through his mind. His steps were leading them home, not to the mall, because he knew damn well he wouldn’t last.

As the apartment building came into view, a slow, victorious smile crept across Aidan’s lips, and he tightened his grip on Evan’s hand and pulled him toward it. Evan said nothing. He only fished his keys from his back pocket so he could unlock the door.

Instead of going to the main door, though, Aidan pulled Evan around the side of the building. Giving a quick glance to ensure no one saw them, he jerked Evan against him and seconds later, they were in Evan’s apartment. Two months hadn’t completely let Evan forget the weird, slightly disorientating effect, but when Aidan shoved him against the door and licked his lips, every other thought fled from Evan’s mind.

The mage’s fingers closed over Evan’s cock through his shorts, sending hot ripples of need jolting through him. Evan nudged his hips forward for more, moaning into the kiss. The keys clattered as they hit the floor.

Aidan pressed his thumb over the head of Evan’s cock, each circular motion sending a current of pulsing heat through the shaft. His other hand drifted down the back of Evan’s shorts and along the crack of his ass. Aidan spread Evan’s cheeks apart and rubbed his fingertip over Evan’s hole, pressing it in a fraction of an inch. Evan sucked in a sharp breath, torn between the two sensations on either side of him. Skin. He needed skin.

“Need. You. Love you. Oh, gods, please, Aidan.”

“Yes...”

Evan hooked one leg around Aidan’s hip, every touch, every breath burning him alive. Need wasn’t a strong enough word anymore for this. Evan had no words to describe it. He only knew he had to feel Aidan as deeply as he could and the tease of the mage’s hands only increased the desire tenfold. Desperation crept into the kiss before Evan broke away, riding the finger pushing slowly inside him.

“Please, Aidan, I need you.”

Aidan released Evan’s cock, shoved Evan’s shorts to the floor and spun him around. He bent Evan forward and placed both of Evan’s palms on the door before dropping to his knees behind him.

“Now that is a mouthwatering sight,” Aidan purred.

Evan’s cock was painfully hard and throbbing with the need racing through him. Parting his legs to give the mage complete access to him, he rested his hands against the door. Aidan kneaded his ass cheeks before spreading them. It left Evan open and acutely aware of how vulnerable he was now. Then Aidan licked a slow path from Evan’s balls to his hole and plunged his tongue deep inside him. Evan threw his head back and cried out, his nails raking against the wood as he began to tremble.

Aidan kept a firm grip on Evan as he tongue-fucked Evan’s ass. Evan rode every thrust, panting and moaning, his self control shot to hell. When a finger joined Aidan’s tongue, Evan thought he was going to die.

“More. Oh, gods, more...”

“My mouth?” Aidan drew his tongue over Evan’s hole and Evan whimpered. “My fingers?” He added another finger, pushing both deep. Evan rose up, his breath leaving him. “Or my cock?”

Was everything an option? Evan took it upon himself to start fucking Aidan’s fingers, the rhythm quickening when the tips teased his gland. “Aidan. Fuck...”

Aidan dipped down and sucked one of Evan’s balls gently into his mouth. Lightning bolted up Evan’s spine and his back bowed. One hand dropped and he fisted his cock, breaths shallow and labored. Aidan’s hand quickly replaced his and blessed heat sucked Evan in. Evan tried to beg for more, but nothing came out except a pitiful mewl. Aidan’s fingers began making slow circles over Evan’s gland and, dear gods, the man could suck a cock. The need to come was so strong, so close. Evan started thrusting into Aidan’s mouth, thighs shaking. Just a little more...

Then Aidan stopped. Evan let out a strangled cry of protest, the urge strong enough to bring tears to his eyes. The mage released his cock and removed his fingers. Cruel man, cruel fucking man. Evan turned to face Aidan, and those strong arms reeled him in. Knowing Aidan would never drop him, Evan crawled up his body, arms and legs locking when Aidan started down the hall.

Aidan kicked the bedroom door shut and laid Evan on the bed. Whether it was for Evan's benefit or simply pure torture, Aidan took his own sweet time undressing. By the time he crawled between Evan's legs, Evan wasn't sure if he should kiss the man or kill him. Aidan kissed his way up one thigh before stretching his body over Evan's.

"You...are so fucking cruel."

Aidan reached between Evan's legs and rubbed the head of his slick cock over his hole. "I've yet to hear you complain." With an excruciatingly slow push of his hips, he buried himself completely inside.

"Never," Evan gasped. "Oh, gods, I'd never complain." One shudder after another rolled through him and he flexed his fingers, nails digging into Aidan's skin. "Don't stop. Fuck me. I want you hard."

Aidan stilled long enough to grip Evan's arms. He laced their fingers together and pinned Evan's hands to the pillow above his head. The illusion faded completely and the ruby red of his eyes blazed with an inner fire as he withdrew until just the head of his cock remained inside Evan. With a hard growl, Aidan thrust back inside. He locked onto Evan's gaze.

Evan knew exactly what Aidan was doing and he allowed it. His fingers curled around Aidan's hands and he held on tight. The rough rhythm, with its pain and pleasure, heightened the sensations running rampant in Evan. He started shaking and stared into the ruby eyes, lost in their depths and what Aidan was doing to him. As he came, his mind reeled under the onslaught exploding through him and sending him over that edge.

"Yes, Aidan! Yes!"

With a sound that was part scream, part growl, Aidan made several hard, deep strokes before he ground out Evan's name. He released Evan's fingers and gathered him close. "I love you so much," he whispered. "So much..."

"I love you with everything that I am, Aidan."

"There is no part of me left untouched by you, no part of me that does not belong to you." Aidan raised his head. His face was wet with tears, and he kissed Evan softly. "*Sei levier deaett...*"

Chapter Eighteen

In the end, talking to Michael had been easier than Evan expected. Grateful for Michael's casual attitude, Evan agreed to remain friends with him. With everything settled, Evan was able to fly out to visit his parents with a light heart. He knew he would be seeing Aidan over the weekend following his weeklong vacation.

Settled in his bedroom, Shel listened raptly to his tales about Aidan. He'd kept his best friend informed of everything that had been going on. "You and Kathy have got to come out to California to see him, Shel."

"I already told Kath we were going to California for spring break." She draped her arms around Evan and gave him a tight hug.

His mom yelled up at him from the bottom of the stairs. "Evan, can you come down here?"

"Yeah, I'm coming, Mom." Evan got up and headed out to the hall. Shel followed behind him. When he descended the stairs, he saw his mom standing with two men he didn't recognize.

"Evan, this is Dr. Neufelt." His mom looked at Evan nervously, folding her hands in front of her.

Evan gave the man a quick smile. "We're going out for a bit. We'll probably be back in about an hour or so."

"No, Evan. I want you to talk to Dr. Neufelt."

Confused, he glanced back at the doctor. "About what?"

"I would like you to tell him about a man named Aidan Lorie and this place called Aurora."

Both Evan and Shel stared at the man in shock.

His mother suddenly blurted out. "Your mother told me, Shel. She heard you talking to Evan and found some of his letters to you. I've been worried."

Stunned, Evan had to think fast. This was something he never expected. “God, Mom, it was just a joke.”

“I think you need to leave that to me to decide, Evan.” Dr. Neufelt’s tone was faintly patronizing. “I want you to come with me so that we can discuss everything in more depth.”

“Come with you?” Looking between the doctor and his mom, Evan noticed his mother seemed about to break down in tears.

“It’s all right, Evan. The doctor just wants to help you.”

“Mrs. Bartholomew, it wasn’t serious,” Shel said. “Evan was just writing me a story.”

When the man standing beside the doctor moved forward to take Evan’s arm, Evan made a mad dash down the back hall. Racing through the kitchen, he shoved the back door open and ran across the yard.

One of the men yelled at him, “Evan, stop!”

Evan sprinted to the alley to get away. He could hear his mother and several others yelling. Once he made it behind a row of the neighbor’s bushes, he touched the Tear of Lorie. His only thought was to get to Aurora, anywhere Aidan was.

He looked wildly around as another alley shimmered into sight. He had no clue where he was until he took a few steps and could see out into the street. Recognizing the towering white marble buildings, he realized he was in Port Valenta. If he’d stayed on Earth, Evan had a feeling he would have found himself locked up, so this was better, but not by much. He knew the damn king was probably still gunning for him. Only problem was, he wasn’t sure which way led to Aidan’s shop.

Given that he was dressed in tight black leather and a black fishnet shirt, he didn’t exactly fit in with the crowd. Silver chains wrapped around his waist dangled down to one hip. When he saw Arael, he darted out of the mouth of the alley.

Arael pushed through the crowd. “Master is in his store and sent me to find you. He said you were in the city, but I thought he was just imagining it.”

“Then lead the way, McDuff. It’s been a rough day, and I need to talk to Aidan.” With Shel’s mom having found his letters, Evan could understand how freaked out his mom had been. There’d been no way he could even try to prove anything, and he hadn’t wanted to anyway.

Atael started leading the way through the crowd, but he stopped short. “Something isn’t right. Evan, turn and run.”

Before Evan could even think to ask why, Atael hissed and clutched his head. Evan froze for a split second before he whirled around and sprinted down the street. He wasn’t sure what was wrong, but if something hurt Atael, then he sure as hell wasn’t going to stick around and find out. Running blindly, he collided with someone who stepped in his path. The shock sent him stumbling backward to fall on his ass.

“Well, aren’t you a nice sight?” The tall man glowered at Evan with disdain.

Evan recognized Aidan’s enemy, Felius, and tried to scramble back on his hands and butt to get farther away. Jumping to his feet, he tried to run in the other direction.

“I think not.” Felius raised his hand, stopping Evan in his tracks, paralyzing him with magic. The mage walked up and chuckled. “Yes, I think King Rakas would find you to be worth a pretty penny to my brother.” He unfastened the Tear of Lorie from Evan’s neck. The medallion shimmered in his hand and disappeared.

With a growl of frustration, Felius snapped his fingers and two burly human men came up behind him. Between them Atael walked slowly, anger burning in his eyes. Gold chains bound the demon’s hands and ankles. Staring in panic, Evan saw the demon was equally helpless. This wasn’t happening. Fear welled up inside him, threatening to spill over. *Please, Aidan, where are you?*

“Bring them,” Felius ordered. Before the mage turned away, the same chains that bound Atael appeared on Evan’s wrists and ankles. Evan tried to protest, but found he couldn’t speak. It seemed neither could Atael.

“I will free your voice once we are out of the city.” Felius led them into another alleyway, to four horses. Swinging up on one, Felius lifted Evan to sit sideways in front of him. The others put Atael onto another horse, sitting him sideways as well, before getting on their own. They followed Felius out of the alley and before long, they left the walls of Port Valenta.

Evan tried to hold back his tears as they moved away from the city. Finally he looked away from the disappearing gates in the distance. Helpless and bound, there wasn’t a damn thing he could do. Aware of Felius behind him, Evan wanted to fucking hurt the man.

True to his word, Felius released Evan’s voice nearly three miles from the city. “We must cross the Garocha Sea. We should reach the shores by nightfall.” He set his horse into a full gallop, an arm tight around Evan’s waist to hold him on the horse.

“You have no right to do this. Take me back!”

“I think not,” Felius said with unfathomable calm. “You are the perfect impetus to get my brother to Sunderlind. When we arrive there, a note will be dispatched to Aidan. If he ever wants to see you again, he will be forced to come to us.”

“I hate to tell you this, but Aidan isn’t going to care that you have me. Why would you even think he would?”

“It is a noble gesture on your part, but I know my brother. He will come for you. That I guarantee.”

Evan fell silent for the rest of the ride. Each minute that passed took him farther from Aidan. The only consolation was that Atael was with him, and he occasionally looked back at the demon as they rode. Evan wasn’t sure how much of a consolation it would be.

As they rode, the sun began to set, dropping the land into darkness. By the time they reached the shore, the three moons above reflected off the water and the sands glittered in the pale light. Farther down the shore, the sweep of white sand lined the sea. Tall trees, remarkably resembling palm trees, grew in patches of grass. Everything was bathed in a silvery glow and reminded Evan of pictures he’d seen of Jamaica.

Felius slowed his horse when they neared a dock. Stopping beside one of the ships, he jumped off and pulled Evan down, setting him on his feet. The other two dismounted, but left Atael where he sat. Gripping Evan’s arm, Felius pulled him along and they made their way to the ship. The glow of lamplights lit the slick wooden hull and Evan heard men moving about the deck. After talking to the guards quietly, Felius led Evan up a gang plank.

Several men carried wooden kegs banded by metal and placed them on the deck along the side of the ship. A set of short stairs led up to the wheel and another set to above-deck cabins. Even with just the moonlight, Evan saw the rich detail in the gleaming wood. In the distance, across an expanse of water, he could just make out an island and the line of several mountaintops.

A few minutes later, the other two arrived with Atael. The demon glared at Felius but didn’t speak. Evan yanked against the painful grasp on his arm, growling out, “I can walk by myself.” Realizing the demon was still under the no-talking spell, Evan grabbed hold of Felius’ arm. “Give him back his voice.”

“Aidan’s demon can summon my brother with a single word or thought if he has his power.” Felius walked over to the demon and smirked. “Isn’t that right, Atael?”

The demon's lips curled up into a silent, vicious snarl, baring his teeth. Whatever spell Felius had over the demon also kept Atael in human form. Of course, it made sense. Atael used his magic to transform at will.

Felius pulled Evan toward a small door and down a set of stairs leading below the deck. After walking a short distance down a dank, gloomy hall, Felius opened a door and shoved Evan inside. When the door slammed shut behind him, Evan looked around the tiny compartment meant to be his prison. The only things in the room were a blanket and a chamber pot.

When the chains disappeared from his body, Evan went over to the small porthole in the wall, but he couldn't see anything other than water and the island in the distance. The seal cracked and the metal groaned, but Evan finally got the porthole open. Water slapped against the side of the ship and a salty breeze blew across the window. Evan peered down, but there was no way his entire body would fit through the small opening.

* * *

Evan didn't prove to be as seaworthy as a sailor and spent the entire two days huddled on the blanket laid out on the floor in between bouts of seasickness. When he finally found his sea legs, the ship was already near the shore. The pounding of feet above him as the sailors rigged the lines to shore did a number on his still-achy head.

Evan heard the door open seconds before someone jerked his blanket from him. The man towering overhead spoke gruffly. "Get up. Master says it's time to go."

When the man walked away, Felius stood waiting in the doorway.

Evan glared at the mage. "Kiss my lily white ass. Where's Atael?"

The man muttered a crude curse, something about lily white asses getting fucked by mages, before climbing the steps. Felius glared at him before looking to Evan. "Believe me, young Evan, I am much more companionable than sailors. They have been at sea for some time, without a warm body to take comfort in."

"And they don't get executed for that?" It took a moment for Evan to get to his feet. When he regained some sort of balance, he made his way toward Felius, smirking.

"How can one be executed for something that cannot be proven? Do you really think you would survive an entire crew?"

“I never said I wanted the entire crew to fuck me, now did I? That would be why the hell I’m standing near you, wouldn’t it?”

Felius sighed with annoyance. “I honestly don’t see how my brother can stand you. He’s much too stoic and serious for such foolishness.”

He pivoted on his heel and went up the steps. Evan would have run had it not been for the sailor he didn’t see before standing in the shadows. The man didn’t look like the helpful type. Disgruntled, Evan followed.

When they reached the dock, their horses were waiting for them. Atael was already astride one, still bound and glaring at Felius. Felius mounted his horse and Evan had no choice but to join him.

“We have a two-hour ride to Sunderlind. Relax and enjoy the scenery.”

“Only if I can fuck you at the end.” Glancing over at Atael, Evan was relieved to see the demon at least looked all right.

Felius’ arm around Evan’s waist tightened enough to bruise his ribs. “Unlike my brother, I do not commit such hideous crimes.”

Grimacing, Evan muttered, “Ooo...you like it rough, huh?” Thinking he’d pushed his luck enough, he fell silent for the rest of the ride. Every once in a while, though, he’d smirk at Felius and make a kissy face at him just to pass the time.

The sparse underbrush and expanse of sand surrounding the path they followed slowly gave way to grasslands. As they traveled, cultivated fields replaced the wilder, untamed aspects of the land. Small wooden fences lined the road, protecting row after row of crops. The plants were about two feet tall and their branches were drooping with baseball-sized, yellowish-green round fruit or vegetable. Evan wasn’t sure which. Farther along the road, the plants were taller and filled with reddish-blue berries.

When they stopped for camp at nightfall, Felius lifted Evan off of the horse and dropped him unceremoniously to the ground.

Evan snickered. “Damn, you’re easy to get to. Thanks for the lovely ride. Ya gave me a hard on, man.”

Felius scowled at him and dismounted. A few minutes later, Atael was shoved to his knees beside Evan. The demon’s eyes held a touch of worry and he put his hands to his lips to signify that he still had no voice.

“Oh, and by the way,” Evan called out to Felius as the mage walked away, “Your dick is smaller than Aidan’s.” When he didn’t get a reaction, he gave up taunting the man and looked helplessly at Atael. “Shit, I don’t know how to get us out of this.”

Atael shook his head. He pointed to the forest edging one side of the road and held up his hands, showing Evan the shimmering chains.

Leaning back against the stone wall behind him, Evan sighed. He got the message loud and clear. “No running, huh? That bastard wants to force Aidan to come to Sunderlind. You know Aidan will come barreling in. Can he handle it, Atael?”

Atael nodded slowly, but pointed to the woods again. He drew a house with his fingertip in the dirt. Beside it, he drew a very crude representation of Aidan.

“This is where Aidan was banished from?”

Although the woods were beautiful, they really didn’t seem anything out of the ordinary. The other side of the road was hilly and covered in lush green grass. Short stone walls lined the road on both sides. Not too far off, a pair of wooden doors were set in a hill. White marble stairs led up to a flat grass area landscaped with a riot of purple, red and blue flowers and scrubs trailing straight up to the door.

Atael drew a crown in the dirt above Aidan’s head.

Evan stared in surprise. “Holy shit,” he whispered. “Aidan was supposed to rule this place? He’s a prince?” That was something the mage had never told him. Atael nodded. “Then Felius is a prince, too. Oh, now there’s a damn lovely thought.”

Atael grimaced and rolled his eyes. He made a crude gesture with his hand.

“He’s easy to get to, you know it? And his dick *is* smaller than Aidan’s.”

Felius walked up to them and dropped a small cloth pack and a flask on the ground. “Try not to choke on it.”

Evan knew damn well Felius had heard him again, though this time he hadn’t actually intended the man to. He started laughing and flashed the mage a smirk, then blew him a kiss.

“Watch it,” Felius growled. “Or I’ll take personal pleasure in putting you and my brother to death.” He turned and stormed off, huffing indignantly.

“Awww, you know you want me, baby. Don’t go away mad.” His growling stomach put Evan’s attention to the pack. He untied it and handed a piece of bread to Atael. He didn’t know if the demon ate food, but he offered it anyway.

Atael picked up a small, sharp rock and cut his finger on it. A small bead of blood pooled before the wound closed on its own. Atael pointed to himself and licked the blood away.

Evan started munching on the bread, eyeing the demon thoughtfully. Evan twisted the top off the flash and took a swig of what turned out to be water. “I wasn’t sure if you could eat regular food or not. Do you want me to feed you?”

Atael nodded. After finishing up the small amount of food and water he’d been given, Evan moved closer to the demon. “It’s cool, Atael. I know you won’t hurt me.”

Atael smiled gratefully. Kneeling in front of the demon, Evan tilted his head and slipped his hand behind Atael’s head, drawing him to his throat. Evan sort of understood he was the one who had to make the gestures. Atael moved Evan’s hair away before he sank his fangs into Evan’s skin. Evan remained absolutely still, letting the demon take what he needed, though the sensations outside the initial pain really didn’t help his body much at all. The demon drank as much as he could before licking the wound to close it.

“You’ve been with Aidan for a long time, haven’t you, Atael?”

In answer, Atael picked up a stick and three stones. He lined them up with the stick first, then the stones after it.

Evan hadn’t expected that many years. “I screwed up your relationship with him, I think.” Frowning, he settled back, drawing up his legs and wrapping his arms around them.

Atael cocked his head to the side in confusion.

“You’ve been with him a really long time, and then I come along. I love him, though, you know, and I don’t want to share him.” Evan looked up into sky, missing Aidan so bad it hurt.

A tap on his shoulder drew his attention back to Atael. Atael pointed to the drawing of Aidan, then touched Evan’s chest over his heart.

Evan followed the gesture. “Yeah, he loves me, too, I know. When I went home, I thought I’d only dreamed him. And when he returned to me, he told me how he felt. You understand then, Atael, don’t you?”

Atael nodded. He pointed at himself, held up his hand and finally pointed to the drawing of Aidan. He put his hand over where a heart would normally beat in his chest and shook his head.

The demon went a lot further toward reassuring him than anything Aidan could have said or done. Evan couldn't imagine the demon not having some form of feeling for the mage. He reached for the demon's hand and curled his fingers over it. "Thanks, Arael."

A quick glance over at the others showed they were all asleep around a dying fire. Arael's brow furrowed and he looked back to Evan. He shook his head slowly, then deliberately shivered. The woods around them were quiet... Almost too quiet.

Evan caught the warning and fell silent, moving closer to the demon. His gaze swept warily over the camp and he tried to peer deeper into the woods. Arael froze beside him, but before Evan could do or say anything, the demon fell back into a dead sleep.

Panic surged through Evan the second he found himself struggling against the sudden need for sleep as well. He opened his mouth to yell, scream, anything, but nothing came out as darkness enveloped him.

Chapter Nineteen

Stiffness throughout Evan's body woke him and he stretched, hoping to work out the kinks from the horseback ride the day before. The luxurious softness of fur beneath his hands and cheek drew out a small murmur of appreciation. Wait. Fur? He sat up and spotted Atael not too far away. Then he saw the other man. Evan figured out real fast from the red eyes staring curiously at him from a face not belonging to Aidan or Felius that he was in the company of yet another dark fae.

"What is your name?" the man asked. "And why would Felius Loriel be interested in you?"

"Uh, I'm Evan. The jackass thinks I have some kind of magic he doesn't. Who are you?"

"Felius is always after some sort of magic. He thinks he possesses it, but he does not. His brother and sister are the ones who know true magic." The man held out his hand. "I am Leare, one of Queen Pretore's huntsmen." He looked around, then knelt. "Although, had I a choice, there would be a king on that throne and not her. Not all of us are fond of our queen."

"Yeah, I sort of gathered that, and if she's anything like Felius, I can see why." Evan gave Leare's hand a firm shake.

"She is more powerful than Felius, but her son, Prince Aidan, holds much more power. But look at me, I'm rambling and you must be hungry." Leare stood and exited the tent, then came back in carrying a small tray of breads and meat. "I am sorry if this isn't to your liking, but we are two days from the capital and this is all the variety we have for the moment." He set down the tray in front of Evan. "I know what that one is, but whose servant is he?"

"He's my friend."

"You're a mage, too?"

“No, not like you think. I don’t have much power at all. I need to get back to Port Valenta. My other friend is there as well.”

Leare sighed. “I see. I had hoped you might have heard of Aidan Lorie. It’s been over eight-hundred years since we’ve seen him, and I can’t help but wonder how he is. I wish I could help you, really I do. But I am at the mercy of the queen. And within this camp alone, I am the only one who is not loyal to her. If I were to help you, we both would die before we ever got out of Veralaan. As it is, the plan is to take you directly to Queen Pretore. She will then decide what to do with you.”

“That’s not really good.” Evan ate until he’d had enough. He didn’t know whether or not to trust this guy, and even if he did, it probably wouldn’t do either of them much good. “Uh, how good is the queen at mind reading?”

“It depends on the strength of a person’s mind. Some she can read easily, like Felius’. Some, she cannot, like Prince Aidan’s.”

“I’m fucked.” Wincing, Evan set down the tray and flopped back again against the furs. He had two days to live. Once the queen set her sights on him, she’d figure out who he was and kill him.

Several minutes after Leare left, Arael rolled over. “Aidan must be told where you are.”

Evan jerked up, mouth falling open. “You can talk!”

“Shh...not so loud. Yes, I can. We are not in Felius’ camp. His magic is weak and faded without him around.”

Relieved, Evan lay down again. “Makes sense. And I hadn’t said a word about Aidan.”

“Not even to Leare? No, I suppose you wouldn’t have realized... Leare and Aidan were close friends before Aidan was banished. If you put your trust in anyone, put it in him.”

“I didn’t know, but he can’t help us. I don’t want to get the man killed.”

“No, but he can help me. If I can get out, I can call Aidan.” Before he could call Leare, however, one of the others stuck his head inside the tent.

“It’s time to break camp,” the man said. “On your feet.”

Arael growled and narrowed his gaze at the man. Evan had the feeling these guys would much rather kill them and be done with it. At least with Felius, there’d been a

reason to keep them alive. The man gave Evan a thorough once-over, but Atael stepped in front of Evan, a low warning growl rumbling in the demon's throat.

"Well, that's interesting," the guard said. "You must be someone of importance if one of his kind is willing to protect you. Perhaps the queen can find some...use for you."

Once the man was out of hearing range, Evan muttered, "That's what I would be afraid of."

The first thing he noticed when they left the tent was the small creek running through the lush greenery of the bushes and trees. The next things he saw were the elves. The dark fae elves were an abnormally beautiful lot with their ruby eyes and pointed ears. Surprisingly, their waist-length hair ranged from black to blond and silver, but none were red-headed like Aidan. Of muscular stature, these men obviously worked out or something, and the close-fitting tunics and pants they wore showed off every little detail of their bodies. If Evan weren't already in love with Aidan, he would have thought he'd died and gone to Heaven. One in particular standing near Leare reminded Evan of Legolas from *The Lord of the Rings*. Now there was a sight he never expected to see in real life.

"Stay with them, Evan," Atael said. "Do not do or say anything to anger them. When night falls once more, I'm going to try to get out of here. If I can, I'll get out and call Aidan. Trust in Leare, but no one else."

If Atael could get out of this alive, he'd be grateful somebody did. "I wasn't sure I could trust him, so I figured the less I said, the better."

"I have a distinct feeling the queen will not kill you. Aidan's blood flows in your veins. No one else would be able to detect that...except his mother."

"Yeah, that's real reassuring."

"I'm only telling you the truth." Atael leaned against the tree and sighed as Leare came back to them.

"Well, I managed to land myself guard duty over you both," Leare said. He narrowed his gaze at Atael. "Whose servant are you?"

"Only the Reget Moireairis could tell you."

Leare's eyes widened. "You are Aidan's servant?"

"Let's not get him into trouble, shall we?" Evan snapped at Atael. "Sorry I didn't tell you before, Leare."

“No, no. I understand the need for secrecy. Aidan is an old friend. I will do what I can, although I don’t know how much help I can be. We have to leave now.”

“He’s not going to be any help at all. Else he gets killed,” Evan said under his breath to Atael.

“Do not worry, Leare is cautious. Just remember to behave yourself.”

“You mean I can’t play? It gets kind of boring with nobody to pick on. I miss Felius, don’t you?”

“Gods, no,” Atael grumbled. “At least the queen’s men let me talk. However much use that is. And no, you cannot play. If you must pick on someone, do it to me. At least you don’t have to worry about angering me.”

“I think I already figured out not to play with these guys. And I am picking on you, teasing you about it. Shame on me.”

Atael rolled his eyes. “You’re as hopeless as he is. Did he tell you he drank a year’s worth of Dark Wine in four months? He was a wreck.”

“No, he didn’t. I didn’t think he would have had that bad of a time. I almost went crazy myself, but then I actually was afraid of going insane.”

“He was devastated, Evan. I’ve never seen him like that. He even stopped sleeping in his bedroom. And he would get up at odd hours of the night to go get another drink. It was very hard on him. He loves you more deeply than I think you really know.”

“I know he loves me, Atael, but between you and me, I’ve never been in love before, never been in a relationship, and at the rate I’m going, I’m not going to be in one for long.”

“Neither has Aidan. You are his first. And I will tell you this: Aidan is a passionate man. He will die for those he loves, and there are only two people in this world who warrant such devotion: you and his sister Arcacia.”

“It scares me, Atael. Every time I come here, I get into trouble. I don’t seem to belong here, no matter how badly I want to. Aidan said he would stay on Earth with me, but I didn’t want to stay there. I wanted to come back to Aurora.”

Atael grabbed his arm and stopped him. “Aidan Lorie is one of the most powerful mages in all of Aurora. He has been through more battles than most of the human population put together. He needs you, Evan. I’ve seen him without you, and believe me, it isn’t pretty. He would leave Aurora in a heartbeat if it meant being with you. Compared

to most others in this world, you are an angel. So do not think you have caused Aidan any trouble. In truth, you have given him a reason to live again.”

“I know he needs me, and I need him. I don’t do so well without him, you know. Thanks for the reassurance, though. I sometimes worry that maybe I’m not worth the trouble I keep dragging him into.”

“Bah,” Arael said as they started walking again. “Aidan gets into enough hot water without help. You simply make life more interesting.”

“If it gets any more interesting, just shoot me.” Evan followed the demon’s gaze to Leare. “I don’t want him to get into trouble, Arael.”

“You worry too much.” With a slight gesture, Arael motioned for Leare. Leare fell into step alongside them. “Let me go, Leare. Evan does not know the way, and I can get out much quicker alone. I’ll go for Aidan.”

“Hurry,” Leare whispered as he unlocked the bonds on Arael’s wrists. “They will think you’ve been dismissed, which will make them believe you belong to Evan.”

“Be safe and obey them, Evan. I promise, Aidan will come get you.” Without waiting for a response, Arael disappeared under the nearest clump of thorn bushes, into the thickness of the forest in the blink of an eye.

Evan wasn’t all that pleased, but mostly because the only friend he had was now gone. In an attempt to forget that he was marching to his death, Evan studied the land around him. A small waterfall was visible through a break in the trees. Vines hung from the limbs decorated with purple, red and orange flowers. The brilliant colors echoed in the feathers of the small birds resting on the vines. Evan couldn’t help wishing Aidan were here with him to tell him about these things.

Chapter Twenty

Leare rested a hand on Evan's shoulder. "Stay close to me," he said. "Because of who you are, you will not be harmed."

"Where is the tall one?" one of the others asked Leare.

"He was dismissed. But he isn't important. The queen will want to see this one."

"Yeah, she'll be really happy to see me," Evan muttered under his breath. From the few things Aidan had said about his mother, it was doubtful the woman would welcome Evan with open arms.

The forest surrounding them seemed to grow tighter, closing them in as they moved deeper into it. The thickness of the woods was palpable, and the sun barely pierced through the canopy of branches overhead. Magical blobs of light lit their way, courtesy of the elves' magic. The woods were eerily silent, with only the faint, occasional snap of a branch somewhere in the distance. As the snaps grew louder, Leare began to keep a close watch on the woods around them. He plucked a red globe out of a group dangling from one of the trees and offered it to Evan. Occasionally a light would dance near one of the trees and oddly some of the trees appeared to have faces carved into them.

The fruit's flavor surprised Evan. It was like nothing he'd ever tasted and it was deliciously sweet. He nibbled as they walked, wondering if Atael was on his way to Aidan. Occasionally, Evan caught glimpses of odd flashes within the brush, and it wasn't hard to notice Leare's sudden attentiveness to their surroundings. They approached a small pool of water where the trees thinned out. Evan continued moving closer to it, drawn by the unusual flickers of silver light that rose from the watery depths and straight into the air. A twenty-foot cascade of water fell from an outcropping of rock above. Brightly hued plants and flowers filled the pool. Lights circled in the air above the water, growing in brightness and density until they took on a vaguely human shape. Crystal blue eyes stared at Evan from under a head full of golden curls. "And who would venture into my domain?" The tone of the man's voice held no animosity, only curiosity.

“Oh, wow.” Blinking, Evan moved closer. “I’m Evan. Who are you?”

“I am Lien, one of the guardians of these woods.” The man floated over the water until he came to stand before Evan. “You look...odd for one of those who have taken over this forest.”

“Nice to meet you, Lien. I’m not like them because I’m not one of them.” Forming from water was a hell of a trick in Evan’s book, and fascinating. He heard the movement from the others behind him, continuing along the path. Looking back, he saw only Leare waiting for him.

“So you are not dark fae,” Lien said. “Interesting. You are not from this world at all, are you?”

Evan turned his attention back to Lien. “No, I’m not from this world. I’m not dark fae. I’ve never seen anything quite like you either. We certainly don’t have people like you running around Earth.”

“Ah, yes. The dark fae. There are only two dark fae whom I trust in this world, and you are closely known to one of them. Are you not? I can see it in your eyes. You have the prince wrapped all around you. Why are you here?”

“If so many people have some psychic sense that I know Aidan, it means I’m in deep shit. I’m here because these guys kidnapped me from Aidan’s brother who kidnapped me from Aidan. We’re all on a happy little journey to meet Aidan’s mother, who will know in an instant who I am, too.”

“Aidan Lorie’s magic is strong, my friend. By tasting his blood, you’ve bound yourself to him in ways that not even the queen of the dark fae can undo. He’s stronger than her, you know. It’s the true reason why he was banished. I fear the queen may take an interest in you for that reason.”

A hand touched Evan’s shoulder. “We must be going,” Leare said.

Lien drifted back over the water. “Take great care, my friend. The prince is a good man.” Sparkles of light swirled around him and then settled back down into the water.

Listening to Lien gave a small rise to Evan’s spirits. “If I live long enough, I really would like to explore this place, you know.”

“If Aidan takes over, the queen’s magic will be lifted and Veralaan Woods will no longer be so forbidding.” Leare patted Evan’s shoulder as they went back toward the road. “It was her magic that made it this way. Most would think Aidan would be worse than his mother, if only due to his chosen path.”

“How much do you know about Aidan?”

“A good deal,” Leare said. “He’s always been quiet, content to keep to himself. He has always held a preference for men as well, but...” His words trailed off for a moment before he continued. “He has never bonded himself to anyone before, which is why I do not fear so much for your life. You have a hold on him I cannot fathom. It must be strong to prompt him to bind you in such a way.”

“Right now, you’d be the only one not fearing, Leare. That woman is going to know right off the bat that I’m associated with her son. And it’s not going to be a hard guess as to how well I’m associated with him.”

“I’ll give you that. It would take a fool to not know how well you are acquainted with the prince. You’re an attractive young man. It is not surprising the prince of the dark fae could not resist you. As for the queen, yes, she will know. However, the second Aidan finds out what has happened, he will come for you, banishment or not. Prince Lorie in love. Now there is something I never expected to happen.”

“I love him as well, but Aidan coming after me is part of what I’m afraid of.”

“Then you couldn’t have picked a better man,” Leare said. “Aidan is fiercely protective. He always was with his sister, so I don’t doubt he would be with you.”

The forest grew darker as time passed and the small lights from the others in front of them slowly disappeared. The sounds of the forest began to echo softly, as if the woods came alive with nightfall. Somewhere in the distance, leaves rustled and a low growl rumbled in response. Leare slid his bow from his shoulder and had an arrow at the ready.

The growl got Evan’s attention before he could say anything to Leare. He hastened his steps in an attempt to catch up with the others. He didn’t want to say anything and attract more attention from whatever was out there.

“Stop,” Leare called out calmly to Evan. “Do not run. Running gives it the notion of a chase, a challenge. If you walk normally, it will keep its distance.”

Evan slowed his step. “And what is it?”

“A vexid. It’s a very small animal, but its size is deceptive. It only preys on the weaker creatures of the forest, but it has been known to attack travelers along the road. It loves to chase its prey. If you run, you will not escape it.”

Evan slowed down and they continued along in silence. Not used to walking great distances, Evan’s muscles began to protest the exercise. As the forest became less dense, he trudged wearily beside Leare, praying they would stop soon. He’d eaten several pieces

of the fruit Leare had given him earlier, but he was hungry again. Thankfully, when they rounded a bend in the road, the other elves were busy setting up camp. When Leare led Evan to his tent, Evan fell into the pile of furs and blacked out.

* * *

Sunlight through the open flap of the tent woke Evan. He crawled out from beneath the furs and stretched before leaving the tent. Leare approached him and gave him a small loaf of bread and a piece of fruit for breakfast.

“You can bathe in the lake if you want and wash your clothes as well. I’ll make sure your clothing is dried before we continue.”

“Thank you. I need a bath.” While Evan ate, Leare moved off then returned a short time later with a small bag and towel.

“The yellow jar has washing dust and you can wash your hair with it, too. The green bottle is for your clothes.”

Giving Leare a grateful smile, Evan took the bag from him then finished his fruit as he followed the others. Between the break in two trees, he saw a placid lake. The strange pinkish tinge to the water caught his attention. Massive trees ringed the other side, and beyond the tree line, Evan saw a gray castle atop a mountain nearly shrouded in pink mist. Its towers rose starkly dark against the blue sky. At the far edge of the lake, white pillars formed an arch, and the two trees on either side of Evan appeared like sentinels to the whole scene.

One of the elves was already in the lake, bathing. A bottle hovered just over the water near the elf. Setting the bag on a rock near him, Evan stripped quickly. After taking out the two jars, he waded into the warm water.

So much he’d never seen in his life before and he really only wanted to know more and see more of this world. The jar and bottle hovered just above the water near him, waiting for him to use them, and Evan wished he could make things float like that.

Evan washed with the powder in the jar and when he was done, he waded back to shore to get his clothes. Since he’d never washed his clothes by hand, it was a bit more of a tedious task. By the time he finished, several others had already taken their baths and were nearly ready to continue their journey.

Stepping out of the lake, Evan handed his wet clothes to Leare, and a moment later, the elf handed them back, completely dry. Evan had seen no display of magic, yet obviously it had to be magic.

“How’d you do that?”

“Get dressed and I will tell you as we go.”

Evan put his clothes back on, and he and Leare joined the group. “So, tell.”

“Aidan told you about thought and will when it comes to magic, yes?”

“Yeah, but...isn’t there more to it?”

Leare seemed to think on it for a minute. “Not really. It does help to be born to it, as all dark fae are, but magic in our world can be learned. What about your world? Is there no magic on Earth?”

“Define magic. If you mean floating bottles and demons and only the gods know what else, then no, there isn’t. But if you mean energy manipulation and stuff like that, then yeah.”

“Not much difference then. It just takes some time to learn.”

“Well, I can only hope I’ll have that time,” Evan muttered.

A wall skirted the road and a trailing veil of pastel lavender and pink flowers draped in a graceful line over several spots on the whitish-beige stone. Tall, pale blue flowers ran along the other side of the path, and groups of trees dotted the areas away from the road. Small black animals frolicked across the ground, chasing each other.

The scent of the air carried sweet fragrances on the gentle breeze, and only the sound of the local wildlife and movements of the elves disturbed the peace.

Then the peacefulness gave way to something darker. High atop a mountain, Evan saw the massive black stone castle surrounded in a half circle by strangely deformed mountains. The mountaintops seemed to curve toward the structure, and high arches supported the road that spiraled around the mountain, leading to the castle itself. Even the range of more distant mountains seemed to have tops that curved in this direction. A sea of green treetops covered the entire area, concealing most of the ground, and only a few expanses thinned enough for Evan to see the towering arches beneath the road. The arches had to be higher than a twenty story building.

“That was once Prince Aidan’s retreat. It became his sister’s when he left, but the Queen is threatening to tear it down now.”

The building loomed above everything, its central spire jutting high into the air, and the blue sky above it had a circling spiral of white clouds, moving outward. Something about it fit Aidan better than anything Evan ever imagined.

“I’ve never seen anything like it. Not even in a fantasy book.”

The sun slowly climbed to its zenith as Evan continued walking behind the others. Everything he’d seen so far only awoke a deeper thirst in him to learn more about this land and its inhabitants. He realized it must have caused Aidan a great deal of pain to have been banished from his home. Anger simmered in Evan as he reflected on everything the mage had told him. The sharp longing to have Aidan beside him brought tears to Evan’s eyes. Exhausted, he could do nothing but plod behind the elves, focusing on putting one foot forward with each step.

Slowly the landscape changed once more. Several hills jutted into a lake and the body of water followed the shoreline then disappeared into the distance. On one of the hills stood a towering gate that seemed to lead to nothing. To the other side of the lake, several rolling green hills ran as far as the eye could see, and a line of jagged mountains rose high into the sky.

“Liette, the capitol of Veralaan.”

“There’s nothing there but a gate.”

“None but the dark fae can see the city. Once we enter, you will see it.”

With the others leading the way, Evan could only pray Atael had reached Aidan and this wouldn’t be the end of the line for him.

Chapter Twenty-one

“You will bring her to me,” Queen Pretore announced, as if she was asking for the weather.

Aidan gritted his teeth. How had this happened? How could he have been so blind as to think she’d stay out of things? “Where is Evan?”

“Your Evan is safe, but that is neither here nor there,” Pretore said. “You will find your sister with the vampires in Dark Vail. It seems my precious Arcacia has taken up with their leader.”

“Teris,” Aidan whispered.

“Ah, you know him, do you? Vile creature. Most unbecoming of a dark fae princess to fall into favor with the likes of him.”

Aidan snorted. A very long time ago, he had been in his sister’s place. He remembered the pleasure he shared with Teris. He also remembered the heartache he’d seen when he couldn’t return the man’s love. That was the past, however. Now, he had what he needed. “I will get her,” he said finally.

“Very good. I expect you to be quick about it. Now off with you.” Pretore waved an impatient hand, dismissing him.

* * *

The journey to Dark Vail took no more than a simple spell. Aidan knew the way to the keep high on Dark Vail’s tallest peak better than he should. Now he was here, watching the servants move around just inside the window-lined hallway. Then she appeared—the little minx who was his sister. Gods, how she’d grown. Her dark red curls were longer now, almost to her slim waist, but just as unruly as they’d been when she was a child.

Keeping himself hidden, Aidan moved with blinding speed, one arm going around her waist and the other hand over her mouth before she could scream. With only a simple chant, she went limp in his arms. Taking a last glance around, he picked her up and transported them both back to his camp, just on the border between Dark Vail and the dark fae woods.

When he gently laid her on one of the furs, the sleeping spell broke and Arcacia jerked, ready to come out swinging. She looked around wildly before her gaze fell on him.

“I was beginning to think you were going to sleep the night away,” Aidan remarked as he tossed another log onto the pile. With a flash, the fire roared to life. Aidan reclined against a rock.

“That *deu’ar* sent you, didn’t she?” Arcacia scrambled to her feet. Red eyes scanned the area, her gaze darting everywhere before it finally settled on Aidan.

“Where do you think you’re going, sprite?”

“Well over eight hundred years and you’re still as defiant as ever.”

She froze and her eyes narrowed on him before a ripple of recognition dawned on her beautiful face. “Aidan?”

“I haven’t seen you since you were a small child.”

She approached him and dropped to her knees before wrapping him in a hug. “I didn’t think I would ever see you again.”

Aidan laughed and returned her hug. “Aye, *senara*. I haven’t forgotten you. Only some of our people.”

Drawing back her head to look at him, she didn’t relinquish her hold. “How did she drag you into this, Aidan?”

“She holds someone very dear to me. In order to have him released, I was forced to come get you from the clutches of the vile Lord Teris Sariette.” Aidan rolled his eyes. He knew the vampire lord well enough to know that Teris wasn’t the evil creature Pretore made him out to be.

“She knows very well Teris won’t harm me, and that I love him. I don’t care how degrading she thinks it is for me to remain with him. It was probably her fault in the first place I ended up in Dark Vail. If Felius hadn’t stolen my diadem, I would have never been sold to Teris.” A flash of anger lit her eyes and her hands clenched into fists.

Aidan wasn't the least bit surprised. "Small coincidence, then, that the two children with the most to hold over her head would be the ones to mysteriously vanish. Wouldn't you say?"

"It wouldn't surprise me at all to find out she was behind everything. Teris bought me before the trader could deliver me to the vampire I was supposedly sold to. I think it's about time she gets a taste of us."

"She will," Aidan said dryly. "But I will not allow you to become involved. If she falls, you will be the next in line for rule."

Jaw set stubbornly, Arcacia growled at him. "I am going with you, Aidan Loriel. You hear me?"

"Tell me, has Teris any hair left? Or has your stubbornness driven him to rip it all out already?"

She gave him a haughty glare then threw him an impish grin. "He has...moments."

"Then my sympathies go out to him, because you certainly haven't changed." He stood and stretched. "Do you really want to spend the rest of your existence with him, Arcacia?"

"He loves me, and I love him. No, I am not supposed to love a vampire, and at first, I came close to hating him. But he's so different from everybody else. I can't help my feelings, Aidan, and I'd kill Mother before I let her get away with trying to take me from him."

Aidan turned and whistled, calling Destrier from wherever he'd gone off to. "Teris has always been unusual for a vampire," he said. "But if there's anyone in all of Aurora I would trust with you, believe it or not, it would be him."

"I know, Aidan. He told me about the two of you." Laying her hand on his arm, she gave him a gentle squeeze. "We need to return to him and let him know we're going to take care of Mother. He's probably already out of his mind with worry, knowing I'm gone."

Aidan sighed. "I'm not going to win this one, am I?"

"Not a chance in the thousand levels of Derth. Did you think you would?"

Aidan grumbled and looked up as Destrier ran across the field toward them. "No," he said as the unicorn came trotting up to them. "Do you remember Destrier?"

"I remember bit and pieces. I never forgot you, Aidan."

Aidan helped her onto the unicorn's back, then he jumped up behind her and put an arm around her waist. "Hold on tight."

Aidan wrapped his other hand in Destrier's mane and the unicorn took off with lightning speed, heading back toward Dark Vail. "Several months ago, I wouldn't have understood your love for him. But finding love for myself has changed my outlook considerably."

"Is your love the one Mother holds over you?"

"Yes. And I will do anything in this world to get him back into my arms."

"Then we shall get him. Mother has done enough damage to both of us and it's time she stopped."

As they neared the border of Dark Vail, Aidan slowed Destrier. When they came to a halt, he dismounted and helped Arcacia down. "I trust him, but I do not trust anyone else here." He pulled her closer as the disorientating shift sent them straight into Teris' bedchambers. "Call him. I know you can do it with thought."

"I trust Jaek, one of the servants, since he tried to save me once."

The door banged into the wall when it opened and Teris Sariette, the Lord of Dark Vail, burst into the room. Upon seeing Aidan, the vampire stopped in his tracks. The play of emotions on his face was unmistakable. Without a word, Aidan released Arcacia.

"My mother sent him to retrieve me," Arcacia said. "I told him about us, and I'm going to go with him to face Mother."

Teris reached out for her, his expression softening. "I know better than to argue with you. But I also know him just as well." He stepped toward them, his gaze moving back to Aidan.

Aidan remained silent for a moment before speaking. "Take care of her, Teris. Or you will have me to answer to."

Arcacia took Teris' hand and squeezed it. "Thank you for understanding, Teris." At Aidan's comment, she added, "Shouldn't you say a few prayers for his sanity as well?" She smirked at her brother.

Aidan kissed the top of her head. "I don't think prayers would be enough," he teased. He looked back up at Teris and sighed. "I am sorry, Teris," he said, although whether it was for taking Arcacia, or something that occurred long ago, he no longer knew.

Teris wrapped his arms around Arcacia. "Why did you take her? It is not like you to do anything at another's bidding."

“Pretore is holding the man I love at ransom. In order to gain his freedom, I had to take Arcacia back to her.”

“We will get him back, Aidan,” Arcacia said.

Aidan closed his eyes and nodded. “I know.”

Teris released Arcacia and walked over to Aidan, placing a hand on Aidan’s shoulder. “You know you have my help.”

Aidan looked over Teris’ shoulder at his sister, who seemed lost in thought. “You are needed,” he said. He went to her and cupped her chin. “You have no need to worry,” he whispered. “Teris’ love for you is true, as mine is for Evan.”

“What if we gave Mother what she wanted? Long enough for you to get your love safely away and to gather our strength to deal with her?”

“Absolutely not,” Teris growled.

“Teris is right. It won’t be enough. Do you really think Pretore will release Evan, knowing how I feel about him?”

Frowning more heavily, she wrapped her fingers around the bedpost, her nails drumming against the wood. “I had thought to buy us time to strengthen ourselves, Aidan. But a little insurance that she would release Evan wouldn’t be amiss. I wonder where that little *ferra* of a brother of ours is.”

Aidan stiffened as a thought came to him. “Felius,” he muttered. “That’s it. Felius is the key to all of this.”

The smile on her lips had an unpleasant edge to it. “It’d give me great pleasure to turn his ass inside out. And I would, too. It’s why he ran from me after I found out he took my diadem.”

“Why do you think Pretore’s effectively rid herself of us? Do you really think the theft of your diadem was Felius’ idea?”

“Are you saying it was the queen’s idea to have Arcacia caught in my lands?” Teris interrupted.

“Who was I supposed to go to, Teris? I said once she would have paid to have me sent here. I just didn’t realize it was the truth. But things changed when you bought me.”

Teris looked from her to Aidan. “Lord Villis Fareth,” he said bitterly. “He had been trying for my throne for ages. But that doesn’t make sense. Fareth murders dark fae in cold blood. Why would he have anything to do with your mother?”

Aidan began pacing, muttering to himself, trying to sort things out. Then he stopped abruptly. “They wanted to merge the bloodlines once more. Although why she chose Fareth and not you, I have no idea.”

“If you saw Lord Fareth, you’d understand,” Arcacia said. “Do you really believe Mother wants me happy at all? No, I would have been out of her way, enslaved in this place to a vampire lord and she’d never have to see me again. And I really doubt she told Fareth everything.”

“Pretore cares for nothing but power and her hold of it over others,” Aidan said. “It’s why she banished me and set up your abduction. Felius would bow down and lick her feet if she asked. He’s the perfect dark fae male in her eyes.”

Teris glanced from brother to sister. “So what do we do?”

“I suggest we hunt down Felius and take me to Mother. Get Aidan’s lover safely away and then take care of her.”

Teris growled, not appearing entirely pleased with the plan.

“I know where Felius is now,” Aidan said as he finally stopped pacing. “He’s the court mage to King Rakas, in Sunderlind. Leave him to me.”

“Save a piece of him for me, brother.”

“I won’t make any promises,” Aidan said dryly. “For now, stay here and do not venture out of this keep, Arcacia. I will return when I’ve dealt with Felius.”

Chapter Twenty-two

Arcacia lay across the unicorn in front of Aidan, her hands and feet bound by magical strands. They were near Liette. Its familiar spires rose in the distance.

“Are you all right?” Aidan didn’t like this idea, and both he and Teris had argued with her over it until they were blue in the face. But as was her wont when she was a child, she got what she wanted. Aidan couldn’t help but chuckle. As her big brother, there wasn’t anything he could deny her.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Let’s get this over.”

“Yes, your Highness,” Aidan muttered as they rode into the capital of Veralaan and seat of the Sacarata. As soon as he drew Destrier to a stop, Aidan jumped down. For several moments, all he could do was look around at the home he hadn’t seen in over eight hundred years.

“Either I’ve lost my mind, or you’re as light as you were when you rode on my back when you were younger,” he said as he laid Arcacia over his shoulder.

She thumped him across his back with her fists. “I think your memory is faulty.” Compressing her features into an appropriate display of anger, Arcacia smacked him again for good measure.

Aidan made a point to abruptly shift her, and a slight laugh almost escaped him. At the gates leading up to the House of the Sacarata, two guards stood at attention, but when Aidan ascended the stairs, their faces paled. Without a word, the gates were opened for him. He searched for Evan, following the energy of his own blood. “*Are you all right, love?*”

When Aidan strode past them, Arcacia saluted the guards with an obscene gesture, causing one of them to break out in laughter.

“*Aidan, where are you?*”

“Coming to take you home. I don’t know how much you’ve heard, but I’ll explain later. Sei levier deaett.” Aidan hid his own amusement at the guards’ reactions to his sister. Some things never changed. At the landing of the wide alabaster staircase, he was greeted by one of Queen Pretore’s aides.

“I demand you take me back to Teris!” Arcacia’s screech echoed through the vast hall. The curses that followed made the aide hastily try to shush her, and Arcacia wiggled against Aidan, biting at the hand that tried to quiet her.

An almost panicked sense rippled over Aidan from Evan.

“Calm down, love. This will be over soon enough.” Aidan set Arcacia on her feet. With a wave of his hand, he rendered her voice useless. He fought to suppress a grin and steered her toward the throne room, a path he knew all too well. Her kick connected to his shin as he pushed her down the hall.

Aidan hissed in pain as they entered the throne room. His gaze shifted to Evan, standing in a cage created by fae magic. He took in Evan’s form, reassuring himself that Evan was unharmed. Then his gaze slid to the queen seated proudly on her gilded throne. The sight made his stomach turn and twist into knots.

His sister’s glare became malevolent as Arcacia fixed her attention on her mother. “Ah, so you have decided to take me up on my offer of exchange,” Pretore said coolly. “That pleases me very much.”

“I do nothing for your pleasure,” Aidan said through gritted teeth. “Release him.”

The queen waved her hand nonchalantly. “In time. Have a seat and join us for a bit. It is not every day a banished prince is allowed to return home.” She held out a hand. “Come, my daughter. Sit. You must be exhausted after your ordeal.”

Arcacia stubbornly refused to budge from her spot until her mother casually motioned to one of the guards. Then she was unceremoniously hauled in a bruising grip toward the queen.

Evan gave Aidan a terrified look and gripped the bars, but still said nothing.

“Prince Aidan,” the queen said. “Please remove your bonds from your sister.”

Aidan nodded and the bonds dissolved from Arcacia’s wrists. Aidan glanced over at Evan, his expression showing nothing that went on in his mind. *“I know she has no intention of releasing you. I am not alone, love. Trust me.”*

With a rough shove, Arcacia was pushed into one of the chairs near her mother. “Now, come and sit, my son.” Pretore waved to the chair on the other side of her throne.

“I’m happy to stand,” Aidan said, crossing his arms over his chest.

Pretore let out a pained sigh. “Must you always be difficult, Aidan?” A sphere formed around Aidan.

He remained motionless. “Is that all you can do?”

“Let him go, Mother, you have what you want,” Arcacia protested. “Or are you going to break your bargain?”

“Silence!” The queen’s furious shout echoed loudly in the room and she turned a dark glare on Arcacia. “How dare you speak to me in such a way!”

“I only speak the truth, Mother,” she answered the queen calmly. “I always have.”

White-faced, Evan tried to push the bars, though the effort was futile. Aidan winked, which seemed to relax Evan somewhat. Aidan took one last look at Evan before his image shimmered into nothingness.

“You have deceived me!” When Aidan disappeared, Pretore screamed at Arcacia. “Take her away from my sight!” Several guards rushed forward and jerked Arcacia from her chair.

“*Evan, don’t make a sound.*” Aidan’s arm circled Evan’s waist. Evan didn’t do so much as move.

Laughing as she was dragged away, Arcacia shouted, “I learned from you, *deu’ar!*”

Pretore twisted in her chair and shrieked at her guards. Just as they made it to the cage, Aidan and Evan vanished.

* * *

Aidan returned to the throne room with his brother in tow, his hand wrapped tight around Felius’ arm. Pretore jumped up from her throne. Hatred and rage vied for dominance on her face.

“Release Arcacia,” Aidan said with a calm he hardly felt.

Pretore laughed at him. “Have you finally lost your mind?”

Aidan drew a knife from his belt and pressed the blade to Felius’ throat. “Have I?”

“She’s already dead. Now release your brother.”

“Then he dies as well,” Aidan growled. He drew the knife slowly across Felius’ throat. Felius stiffened.

A coldly calculating gaze held Aidan's. "What is it you want for your brother, Aidan? Obviously, I can't give you Arcacia."

"Then bring me her body." To accentuate his point Aidan made a second shallow cut across Felius' neck, just below the first.

The queen motioned for one of her guards, but before he could move, a scream of outrage came from the corridor, followed by the hard thud of something hitting the other side of the throne room doors. A split second later the doors flew open. Arcacia stalked in and lifted her hand, pointing straight at her mother. A bolt of *Ke'* shot from her fingers, hitting the Queen squarely in the chest. The blue energy froze Pretore in place.

Felius tried to jerk out of Aidan's arms and Aidan's knife sliced deeper into his throat. Felius choked and reached out toward Pretore before collapsing in a growing pool of his own blood. Joining his sister, Aidan raised his hand and a thin tendril of gray mist snaked from his palm to curl around Pretore's body. Captured by Arcacia's magic, the queen could only stare in terror at her children as the life seeped out of her. The doors near the back burst open and vampires flooded the room. The remaining contingents of Pretore's guards died in short order and Teris stood motionless, his mouth hanging open, watching the queen die a painfully slow death.

Once done, Arcacia reached for her brother. "Welcome home."

Aidan's fingers curled around hers and he pulled her into a tight embrace. When he finally released her, he brushed her hair from her face. "I'm still not sure if I'm happy to be home, but hearing a welcome from you is enough." He smiled and kissed her forehead before turning to Teris.

"The rest of the guards have been taken care of," Teris said. "Now get back to your young man. I think he's beyond terrified at this point. We'll clean up here."

When she let her brother go, Arcacia took her place beside Teris, slipping her arm around his waist to hug tightly to his side. "It's your kingdom now, Aidan. Our mother's rule and laws have ended."

"This has always been a matriarchal society," Aidan said. "That would make you queen, Arcacia."

"I think it's time for a shake up in the society, don't you? It doesn't matter who does the job as long as it's done wisely."

Aidan lifted an eyebrow at that. "And where would you go?" he asked her. Then he glanced at Teris. "Or should I bother asking?"

“I go where my heart leads me, and in either case, a king will rule here. Whether that king is dark fae or vampire matters little. But there will be a king.”

“Don’t ever change, Arcacia.” Aidan laughed. “No matter what happens, don’t ever change.” He opened a portal and hesitated for a minute. “Perhaps it should be both,” he said. “Perhaps it’s time we stop running from our heritage.”

“An even better idea than mine, brother dearest.”

Chapter Twenty-three

Evan huddled in the tent Aidan had left him in, his arms wrapped around his legs and his head buried against his knees. Through all of this strange adventure, he'd never been sure he would see Aidan again. To see him for only a few brief moments before he disappeared had been agonizing, especially knowing that the mage had returned to that evil woman. All he could do was sit there, numb and scared.

A hand cupped his chin and lifted his head. The moment he saw Aidan, Evan scrambled into the mage's arms, knocking Aidan flat on his back.

Aidan laughed. "I told you I would be back."

"I was afraid she'd kill you. She was insane, Aidan." Evan clung to the mage and buried his face in Aidan's hair. "She hated you."

"She was hungry for a power that she herself didn't possess. But there is no longer any need for anyone to fear her." Aidan kissed Evan's head. "There is only one catch..."

"What's the catch?"

"Arcacia thinks a king should sit on the throne, and Teris will not leave his kingdom." A wry grin twisted Aidan's lips, leaving the rest unspoken but clear.

It took Evan a second to take it in. "You get to be king?"

"I will not do it if that is not what you wish as well. What do you want?"

"I don't have anything to do with you being king, Aidan. That's your decision."

"It has everything to do with you. If you want to stay at the keep, then we will do so. But if you wish to stay here, then that is what we will do. Dark fae mate for life, Evan. You are my partner and my equal. Your wish matters greatly to me."

"I'm going to be happy wherever you're happiest, Aidan."

"My sister would love you," Aidan said with a chuckle. He fell silent for a moment. "Then a kingdom for us it is," he said finally. "Pretore's laws died with her. We will form

our own now. I know you got an earful from her. Did she tell you anything about the Lorie family line?"

"At first she wanted to kill me, but then decided against it. The whole time she ranted, telling me most of her family was a total disgrace to their name. I think she exaggerated most of your line because to hear her tell it, it seemed decidedly slanted in her favor."

"Then she did not tell you how the dark fae came to be," Aidan said. "Thousands of years ago, there were two primary races: the fae and the vampires. While the two races remained at a constant level of tension, the king of the vampires took the queen of the fae as his consort. The result of that mating became known as the dark fae. The original fae line became known as the light fae. The vampire king's family name was Lorie."

"Wait. You're part vampire?"

"Yes, but most vampires hate us. They feel our blood isn't pure. My mother wanted to kill you because she sensed my blood in you. But I suppose she changed her mind and used you as leverage to lure me here with the idea to get me out of her way for good." Aidan smiled and held Evan's gaze as two long fangs slowly descended.

Whatever Evan had been about to say was forgotten when he saw the two wickedly sharp fangs. The sight alone brought an odd shiver to his body and he squirmed against Aidan. "Holy shit."

"I am half vampire," Aidan explained. "Dark fae can walk in sunlight and do not need blood to survive. But we retain the immortality. Aside from unnatural causes such as burning or beheading, I cannot die."

"That must piss off the vampires. It'd probably tick me off if I were a vampire."

"Yes, it does. Yet another bone of contention between the races. The only way Arcacia and I were able to kill Pretore was by sheer magic, a combination of my sister freezing her in place and me draining the life from her. Then again, I suppose you probably didn't want to hear the details."

Evan's eyes remained riveted on Aidan's fangs, though he gave Aidan an "ewww" look and wrinkled his nose. "I could have lived the rest of my life without knowing that."

"Sorry, love. I hope it doesn't bother you now that I've shown you this side of me. As I said, I do not need blood to survive."

“I meant about killing your mom, Aidan, not about you being half vampire.” Evan touched a fingertip to one of the fang tips. “The vampire part doesn’t bother me at all. I always liked Dracula movies.”

A shudder slid through Aidan and he gripped Evan’s wrist. The ruby red of his eyes darkened and he growled. Startled by the reaction, Evan tried to pull his hand away, but Aidan held his wrist.

“I don’t need blood to survive,” Aidan said quietly. “But I cannot control the urge to bite when they are touched. And I’d be lying if I said I don’t like the taste of blood.”

“I drank from you before, didn’t I? Why couldn’t you drink from me? Now there would be a lifelong dream among the Goth set.”

“There have been many times while making love to you that I’ve had to quell that very urge.”

“Then make love to me, Aidan, and take my blood.”

“I want you naked, *levier*.” Aidan lifted Evan and unfastened his own pants, shoving them down and kicking them off along with his boots.

Evan undressed quickly and resettled on Aidan, fingers wrapping around the wizard’s cock.

Aidan rolled them, putting Evan on the bottom. He gripped Evan’s hips, grinding against him. Aidan took a few seconds to prepare himself then rubbed his cock along the crack of Evan’s ass.

Evan gripped his legs, pulling up and apart, opening himself completely to the mage. Slowly, Aidan pushed, cock filling and stretching, taking Evan’s breath away. Gods, how he missed this.

“Aidan...”

Evan’s hands fell from his legs as he planted his feet firmly on the ground, arching when the mage thrust inside him again. Evan clutched the thin rug beneath him and his hips lifted to Aidan. “Gods, yes...” he breathed.

Evan rocked his hips hard, meeting every thrust with one of his own. Groans mingled with the wizard’s name rose from Evan’s throat, and he opened his eyes, locking to a dark crimson gaze. The pounding of Evan’s heart echoed through him, mirroring the hard rhythm of the mage’s body. When the muscles in his stomach began to tighten, he gripped the back of Aidan’s neck and jerked him down.

His teeth latched to the mage's lower lip and Evan bit him. The hard force of Aidan's hips slammed against him several times before Evan lost control. He shouted as he came, hips bucking wildly, impaling himself. Aidan growled and the strike was swift as his fangs sank into Evan's throat. The pleasure overrode the pain and Evan screamed, clawing Aidan's back as the mage shook above him.

"*Sei levier deaett, sei levier deaett...*" Aidan licked the wounds on Evan's neck to close them. "Don't move," he whispered. "Please don't move..."

The quiet chant relaxed him as Evan started coming down from the high of his own orgasm. He didn't want to move. He never wanted to move again so long as he lived. "I'm not going anywhere, Aidan."

"Did I ever tell you what that means? *Sei levier deaett*?"

"No."

"*Sei levier deaett*," Aidan murmured as he brushed his lips over Evan's. He slid his fingers through Evan's hair, pulling his head back to look at him. "It's dark fae. It means 'I love you'."

It took a moment for a few memories to surface in Evan's mind. "You've said that to me several times before. Even once when we went to Port Valenta." As he spoke, the revelation dawned on him. "Oh gods, you loved me back then, before I left you."

"I did. Eight months without you left me a wreck. Atael could tell you all about it."

"I didn't know, I really didn't."

"I all but cured our overstock of Dark Wine. Does that tell you anything?"

"It tells me a lot, Aidan."

Chapter Twenty-four

Evan wandered toward the throne room. The aura surrounding the castle had lightened with the queen's death, and plenty of the kingdom's inhabitants had been in and out of the castle. Aidan was still Aidan, but now he was also the ruler of a large kingdom. As Evan paused near the throne room doors, he didn't hear the usual rise and fall of voices. He opened the door and went inside.

Aidan sat on the throne, head back and eyes closed. He didn't open his eyes right away. Evan hurried toward the throne and without even thinking about it, slid onto Aidan's lap.

"I'm thinking you need a break or ten from all of this."

"I am fine," Aidan said, opening his eyes. He held Evan close, hands on Evan's hips. "I'm used to being a lord, but not a king. Having you with me helps more than I think you realize." Aidan looked too damned tired to be fine, and Evan wasn't that easy to fool.

"And you're worried, too, aren't you? What is it this time?"

"Am I that transparent now?" He tugged Evan closer and rested his head on Evan's chest. "I'm worried that I won't be the kind of king I need to be. I'm a necromancer, Evan. I deal with the dead, get my powers from them. Yes, I lord over others at the keep. But this?" He waved a hand around. "This is much more than I ever expected. I suppose you could call it a bout of inadequacy."

Evan ran his fingers through Aidan's hair and felt the mage start to relax against him. "I've never run a kingdom, either, but I think everything will take a bit of getting used to. Maybe it gets easier as you go on, and I'm going to bet that what I just said isn't really much help."

Aidan's breath warmed Evan's chest when the mage laughed. "I'm not asking you to make the decision for me. Although...I do wonder what you want. Ultimately."

"What do I want? I want to explore this world with you. There's so much I haven't seen yet. But I'm not sure we can do that."

“You wish to learn more about my world?” Aidan smiled slowly. “Provided we are cautious, there would be no problem. There is no longer a war between the dark fae and the vampires. Teris and I will see to that. As for others, we still must be careful how we express things in public. However, we can speak without talking aloud, which is a point in our favor.” Aidan idly played with Evan’s hair and brought him down for a soft kiss. “There are many places I would like to show you.”

“Even in my short adventure on the way here I saw a lot of wondrous things, and I have the feeling there’s a hell of a lot more out there. I want to know it all, but it can wait. I doubt you have the time for me to drag you all over Aurora.”

Fingers tightening in Evan’s hair, Aidan pulled him close for a real kiss, tongue slipping into Evan’s mouth to taste and tease. When he pulled away, he winked. “Kings do not sit idly on gilded thrones. There are allies to be met, land to explore and dole out, cities to build. You have not seen the entire dark fae kingdom.”

“If you think we can get away with it, I’m all for it.”

“We are kings. We will do it all.”

“You’re the king. I’m the king’s...” Trailing off, Evan wasn’t quite sure what he was. “What am I anyway?”

“Oh, no.” Aidan laughed. “A king must have his queen, and since I have no interest in women, then one would deduce that I would have a king to rule with me. And I have him right here.”

“I’m a king?” Evan’s eyes widened. *No fucking way...* “I thought I’d be like the king’s consort.” He blinked. “Damn. I’m a king.”

“You are. Besides, there is much to do in Aurora. Many lands, with many interesting...artifacts and practices.” Aidan grinned and traced a finger down Evan’s spine.

“Practices? As in?”

“Do you think Earth is the only world with...alternative sexual activities?”

“You can always teach me everything you know.”

“Perhaps you might want to know what I know how to do before I take you at your word?” He trailed a fingertip down the hollow of Evan’s throat.

“I don’t think I need to know at all, Aidan. You’d never hurt me, you’d more want me begging for you.” Giving the mage a sly look, Evan tipped his head back to encourage a further exploration from the fingers.

Aidan leaned forward and his tongue followed the route his fingertip had taken. “No one has ever read me like you can,” he breathed over Evan’s skin. “I want so much to drive you to the edge, only to back away, leaving you pleading, begging me for release...”

“I’m waiting for the day I can return the favor,” Evan murmured. He squirmed on the mage’s lap, cock hardening in anticipation.

“Do you honestly think you are without that power?” Aidan’s mouth moved lower until he closed his lips around Evan’s nipple, rolling it between his teeth through Evan’s shirt. Both hands locked onto Evan’s hips and Aidan rocked upward, pushing their bodies together.

“I can never think when you do that.” Aidan grinding beneath him wreaked havoc on Evan’s self control. Sensations centered in his cock and ass, and all he wanted was to feel Aidan fill him.

“Should I stop then?” Aidan asked, even as a hand slid around to pop the button on Evan’s pants. He pushed Evan’s shirt up with the other and his mouth closed around Evan’s nipple, tongue flicking across the tiny bit of hardening flesh, teeth grazing it.

“Oh fuck no.” The words came from between gritted teeth and Evan hissed softly. “You can’t stop.”

He rocked harder against Aidan, strengthening the need building inside him. Aidan sank his fangs into the skin above Evan’s nipple. As he sipped and lapped up the drops of blood, he slipped his hand into Evan’s pants, taking hold of Evan’s cock. A soft cry escaped Evan, and before he could stop, he came hard in Aidan’s hand. Thick, warm ribbons coated the mage’s fingers and Evan shook uncontrollably. “Aidan.”

After healing the bite marks, Aidan licked his hand clean. His cock strained against his pants, pressing hard against Evan. “You’ve got two choices. I can take you to bed, or I can bend you over the throne. Either way, I want inside you. Now.”

Never one to deny a man of magic anything, Evan scrambled from Aidan’s lap and undressed. A chill ran down his back as the mage’s gaze swept over him. Aidan’s dark, possessive expression was clouded by intense desire, and Evan reveled in it.

“Turn around.”

Slowly Evan turned and spread his legs apart. He let his head fall back and he reached behind him, parting the cheeks of his ass. Two could play at this game. He

wasn't entirely surprised when he heard wood scraping on stone. He looked down as one of the small plush couches glided across the floor and stopped in front of him.

"Bend over it and open yourself more."

Evan knelt and leaned over the couch. He spread his cheeks wider, giving Aidan an excellent view of what he knew the mage wanted to see. Resting his head on the soft, velvety cushion, Evan inched his fingers closer to his hole. He moaned and rubbed, imagining it was Aidan's finger. His thoughts were completely open to Aidan and images of his own desire weaved between them.

"Yes," Aidan hissed. "Push it inside, fuck yourself. Show me how much you want it."

With excruciating slowness, Evan teased both of them, though he had to wonder who was closer to coming at this point. His cock ached, throbbing when he slid a fingertip inside his ass. A slow shudder ran through him and he finally pushed deeper.

"Oh, gods..." The urge to come was strong, but he fought to hold back, if only to drive Aidan insane. Adding another finger, he pushed them in farther.

It wasn't enough, and it was too much. He wanted Aidan, and the slow pressure only strengthened the need. "Please, Aidan. I need you." He shoved his fingers as deep into himself as he could and cried out. "Oh fuck, please!"

Within seconds, Aidan's cock stretched Evan open, the mage's hips slamming into his ass. Evan shouted and grabbed his cock, fist pumping the length to match Aidan's thrusts. Aidan wrapped a hand in Evan's hair and tugged Evan up and back, driving his cock as deep inside as it would go.

"Sweet fuck, you feel good," the mage ground out, moments before his fangs pierced the soft flesh just below Evan's ear.

"Aidan!"

Pulling away from his throat, Aidan shoved Evan over the back of the couch and slammed into him. The mage's fingernails broke the skin over Evan's hips and Evan basked in the overreach and every brutal thrust until nothing existed but the exquisite feel of his cock pumping deep inside him.

Aidan's possessive control overwhelmed Evan and his mind and body opened completely to the mage, the incoherent need washing over both of them. Aidan's name became a chant, the tone rising with the strength of desire threatening to swallow Evan whole. Without any warning, Aidan slammed hard inside Evan, his roar so loud that it

vibrated them both. His fingers dug into Evan's hips hard enough to bruise while he pumped Evan full of his release. The pain as well as the pleasure sent Evan straight over the edge. His release hit him at the same time Aidan came. Inner muscles milked the mage's cock and Evan shuddered repeatedly, sobbing through his own orgasm.

Aidan slumped over Evan, peppering his spine with kisses. "*Sei levier deaett*," he whispered. "I love you so much, Evan."

Drawing in several deep breaths in an effort to calm himself, Evan kept hold of the couch, relying on touch alone to ground him once more. "I need you to hold me, Aidan. I love you and need you to hold me."

"Anything." Aidan withdrew slowly before he transported them to their chambers. After pulling back the covers, he eased Evan onto the bed and lay beside him. He covered them both with the thick blankets and held Evan close, arms around him protectively, lovingly, as he kissed Evan's forehead.

After feeling the harder strength of Aidan's passion, Evan wanted the quieter, loving side of the mage. He was deliciously sore, and he sighed in quiet contentment. "In the long run, it really doesn't matter what you want to do, Aidan, as long as you always let me stay with you. I'll follow you anywhere."

Aidan kissed him softly, hand cupping Evan's cheek. "Do you honestly think I could ever let you go? I need you, Evan. I am nothing without you."

"No, I don't think you would, but an occasional reassurance never comes amiss." Evan studied Aidan's face. Tiny lines under the mage's eyes bore testament to Aidan's age. While he didn't appear nearly as old as Evan knew he was, Aidan Loriel had more worldly experience than Evan could ever hope to have. As incredibly handsome as Aidan was, Evan sometimes had a hard time believing he really had the wizard to call his own. The thought was sobering.

"Gods, you are so incredible. Sometimes I can't believe you're mine."

"Aye," Aidan whispered. "I never thought I would find this, what I share with you."

"I'm so ordinary, sometimes I don't understand."

"You're not ordinary to me. It's what's in here," Aidan said, placing a hand over Evan's heart, "that makes you so special, Evan. Your heart, your soul—they echo mine."

"They belong to you, Aidan. There isn't a part of me that doesn't." Aidan had claimed his heart, body and soul, and there was no other who could ever give Evan anything near what he had with Aidan.

A Glossary of Aurora

Human-ruled Kingdoms:

Sercenia: cap. Port Valenta. Ruled by King Tordis. Militaristic savanna kingdom—
noted for its theological freedom.

Proteria: cap. Light City. Ruled by Queen Saria. Benevolent woodland kingdom—
noted for its art and history. It is also the home of many ruins and relics of Aurora's
ancient past.

Lavalre: cap. Havery. Ruled by King Ascan. Unfriendly desert kingdom was noted
for its geology and the abundance of minerals and magical ingredients.

Sunderlind: cap. Leerull. Ruled by King Rakis. Peaceful plains kingdom—
noted for its universities and halls of knowledge.

Tiberle: cap. Liv Sans. Ruled by Aran (male twin to Aras). Militant mountain
kingdom—
noted for its military strategy and weapons. It is also the home of many nature
spirits in its outlying areas, with several deeply religious cults.

Tir Et: cap. Stone Towers. Ruled by Aras (female twin to Aran). Spiritual woodland
kingdom—
noted for its advanced astrology, magical arts and astronomy.

Qur: cap. Varnis. Ruled by Queen Adl Re. Violent arctic country—
noted for its
paintings and monuments, divination and magnificent temples and monuments.

Andulus: cap. Port Illis. Ruled by Queen Sorei. Wilderness kingdom—
noted for its
forbidden areas, lands where the old gods once lived.

Vampire-ruled Kingdom:

Dark Vail: cap. Diete Nachis. Ruled by Teris Sariette. A dark, forbidding kingdom where night reigns—noted for its dark magic studies. Its nobles are noted for their great generosity in welcoming allies and their ruthless torture of their enemies.

Dark Lands/Dark World (Nach Eir):

Sycos: Ruled by One Who Shall Remain Nameless (OWSRN). Desolate wasteland kingdom on the dark side of Aurora—noted for its outlaw territory and the creatures who roam it.

Fae-ruled Kingdoms:

Veralaan-court: Sacarata. Ruled by Queen Pretore Lorie. Unfriendly forest kingdom—noted for its connection to the energy of Aurora itself. Its woods are enchanted, and unless you are a welcome guest, you're not likely to get out alive.

Aolin-court: Solaer. Ruled by Queen Sedaris. Island kingdom—noted for its illustrious forms of magic and exceptionally fine architecture

Wild Kingdoms:

Plains of Dar: home of wild varat—vast plains in the South lands—noted for its infinite forms of wildlife and unexplored territory.

Aurora Creatures:

Oblivion Beings: a being that is the incarnation of a living person's sadism. It vaguely resembles a wolverine. Its fur is extremely shaggy. These creatures are used by the OWSRN as sentinels. They are extremely ruthless and hard to control.

Setpar: bizarre being that is the incarnation of living people's fear. It vaguely resembles a tiger-sized cat. Its body is skeletal, yet it has functioning organs and viscera in its bony frame.

Dernalore: this strange entity is a servant of the goddesses of the stars, and it is single-minded in its duties. It has a transparent form and resembles a human with black translucent skin and glowing white eyes.

Yrlbar: this being formed from the souls of people who died feeling despair. It looks like a huge bat-like creature. Instead of flesh, it appears to be composed of black energy. It haunts places of burial.

Water Dreamer From The Deadly Sphere: a monster that comes from an elemental plane. It looks like a giant spider. Its form seems to be composed of a kind of solid smoke instead of flesh. Their habitat is always near larger bodies of water and they prey on travelers.

Aurora Vocabulary:

NOTES: To form the genitive of a word (of...), add 'is' to the end.

Vocabulary, including Phrases and Words:

Dark Fae:

“Sei levier deaett”—“I love you” as said to a man

“Sei lavier deaett”—“I love you” as said to a woman

levier—love; endearment as said to a man

lavier—love; endearment as said to a woman

levier nor—male lover.

lavier nor—female lover.

Common Aurora words and phrases:

varnis—harbor

qur—life

varat—wild dog

varat cu—tame house pet

varat se—devil hound

cu—tame

se—killer

Nach Vernal—Dark Month

Sol Vernal—Light Month

Nach Eir—Dark World

eir—world

nach—dark

sol—light

vernal—month

reget—prince

moireair—dead; the Dead

Reget Moireairis—Prince of the Dead. (Aidan Lorie's title)

cerfen—(insult) one who lies with pigs

diete—city

deu'ar—bitch

ferra—weasel

About the Author

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Look for these titles

Talk about a compromising situation!

My Fair Captain

© 2007 J.L. Langley

A storm of political intrigue, murderous mayhem and sexual hungers is brewing on planet Regelence.

Swarthy Intergalactic Navy Captain Nathaniel Hawkins ran from a past he had no intention of ever reliving. But when his Admiral asks him to use his peerage, as an earl and the heir to a dukedom, to investigate a missing weapons stash, he's forced to do just that. As if being undercover on a Regency planet where the young men are supposed to remain pure until marriage isn't bad enough, Nate finds himself attracted to the king's unmarried son.

All Prince Aiden Townsend has ever wanted was to be an artist. He has no interest in a marriage of political fortune or becoming a societal paragon. Until he lands in the arms of the mysterious Earl of Deverell. One look at Nate's handsome face has Aiden reconsidering his future. Not only does Nate make a virile subject for Aiden's art, but the great war hero awakens feelings in Aiden he has never felt, feelings he can't ignore.

After a momentous dance at a season ball, Aiden and Nate find themselves exchanging important information and working closely together. They have to fight their growing attraction long enough to find out who stole the weapons and keep themselves from a compromising situation and certain scandal.

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, graphic language, violence, hot nekkid man-love.

Enjoy the following excerpt for My Fair Captain:

The window to Nate's left shattered.

Shit. Nate hit the ground, landing flat on his stomach. A white polo ball rolled across the wood floor and onto the rug, coming to a stop inches in front of Nate's face. *What the...* He picked up the ball, got to his feet and crossed to the broken window.

“Hello there.” A young man with wide shoulders and a friendly smile waved from atop a sorrel horse. “Sorry about that. I didn’t hit you, did I?”

Nate shook his head. “No, you didn’t hit me.” He held up the ball. “Would you like this back?”

“Yes, please. Are you the earl?” the horseman asked.

“Yes, and who might you be?” Nate tossed the ball out.

“I’m Prince Colton. Pleasure to meet you, milord.” He tipped his head and heeled his mount off toward the ball.

Colton? The second to youngest prince. Judging from the looks of him and the similarity to the other two gentlemen Nate had seen since his arrival, he realized they were probably siblings. Good Galaxy, the royal family was a handful. He was starting to get a suspicion as to why Jeffers was shut down.

Stepping away from the window, a rustling sound made Nate stop mid-stride. Leaves rained down and a grunt came from above. “Bloody black hole and imploding stars,” a soft masculine voice hissed.

Way up in the tree closest to the window, a boy balanced precariously on a thin tree limb. He reached toward a flat computer screen of some sort that had snagged on an adjacent branch. At his unbalanced angle a fall seemed imminent. Likely a shout to be careful would bring the teen plummeting to the ground, so Nate raced to a set of French doors on his left. Hurrying outside, he got to the base of the tree just as the branch the kid balanced on snapped.

“Whoa.” The boy wobbled and fell against the limb holding the computer, knocking the device loose. “Dust!”

The flat screen clipped only one bough before falling free. Nate caught it before it hit the ground.

The young man gasped, his gaze meeting Nate’s.

Nate started. The boy—no, that wasn’t right, he was young, yes, but not a lad—was absolutely gorgeous. Nate stared into the big gray eyes, mesmerized. The man was simply beautiful. He had a small frame that had, at first, deluded Nate into thinking him a child. A mass of ebony curls surrounded a handsome face, and a full bottom lip was caught between even white teeth.

“Uh, thanks. I, uh— Whoa.” The man’s booted feet slid off the tree, leaving him dangling from his hands ten feet in the air.

Nate set the computer screen down and held his arms out. “I’ve got you. Drop.”

“Uh…”

“Drop.”

“Okay. Please don’t miss.” The man let go with a reluctant whimper.

The negligible weight landed in Nate’s outstretched arms. He bent his knee slightly to keep from jarring the young man. Nate glanced at the handsome face and his gut clenched. Up close the man’s eyes were the color of molten steel. He had flawless ivory skin and full lips. The heat of his body pressed against Nate’s chest made his cock stir. The man was slim and not very tall, but he had broad shoulders that spoke of nice muscles under the well-tailored clothes. What he wouldn’t give to see this slim body completely bare of clothing and those pretty lips wrapped around his hard cock. Closing his eyes, Nate concentrated on getting his pulse back to normal. He was here on a mission, not to get involved. Besides, this was most likely his hosts’ offspring.

He opened his eyes in time to see a pink tongue dart out and wet the beguiling lips. Nate’s cock—fully erect now—strained against the placket of his pantaloons.

The man’s gaze roamed over Nate’s face as long, elegant fingers came up to trace his beard. “Who are you?” he asked in a seductive whisper.

Nate hadn’t even realized he’d leaned forward until the smaller man jerked, nearly spilling himself out of Nate’s arms. Setting the man on his feet, Nate watched him straighten his waistcoat. When he brushed off his trousers, he seemed to realize he had a problem.

Good, the young lord wasn’t unaffected, just surprised. Not, of course, that it mattered. Nate wasn’t interested. *Yeah, right.* He bowed. “Nathaniel Hawkins, Earl of Deverell.”

The younger man’s gray eyes shot wide and he hastily tried to hide his obvious erection. He squirmed before spotting his computer. Picking up the screen, he held it in front of his groin and met Nate’s gaze. His enticing mouth formed an “O”, followed by an inhalation of air, then the man blinked and shook his head as if to clear it. “Thank you for rescuing me, milord. I, uh, got my screen caught on the way up.”

Nate was about to ask the man’s name and why he was in the tree in the first place when an older version of the young man appeared in the window. “What in stars happened to the window? Aiden?”

The younger man, Aiden, frowned. He darted his gaze to Nate and gave a barely perceptible shake of his head. "I didn't do it, Cony. I was trying to get a different perspective on the garden." Aiden glanced back at Nate, his eyes pleading, and bowed. "Thank you again, milord."

Before Nate could respond the vision bounded off toward the back of the castle. How odd. Apparently the imp didn't want Nate to mention his fall from the tree. Or did he not want Nate to mention who broke the window?

"Lord Deverell?"

Nate dragged his attention from Aiden's retreating backside and turned toward the window. "Lord Raleigh?"

Raleigh smiled. "Yes, please come inside. You wouldn't happen to know what became of the window, would you?"

Two men bonded by love. A long forgotten secret neither knew they shared in common.

Sins of the Past

© 2007 Amanda Young

Andrew Vought is a wealthy single parent who's all but given up on love. Ryan Ward is an up-and-coming landscape architect, who's never believed true love exists.

In each other's arms, they find the love they've sought. But can a budding new love survive the secrets both men harbor?

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, graphic language and some hot nekkid manlove.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Sins of the Past:

Andrew weaved around bodies left and right. He spotted Ryan and Nick slightly ahead of him and off to the right. Ryan had his head thrown back, laughing uproariously at something Nick was busy whispering in his ear. Breathing a sigh of relief at having finally found them, he shuffled forward. Then he noticed the way Nick shifted closer to Ryan, his hands falling to cradle Ryan's hips as they moved to the music, and molten anger shimmered through his veins.

How dare he? How dare Nick rub all up against Ryan, like some bitch in heat? And why was Ryan just standing there, letting him do it? *The bastard.*

Andrew took a wobbly step forward, his hands balling up into fists at his sides. A man the size of a small mountain stepped into his path, blocking his view of Ryan. He stopped, ready to tell the guy to move the hell out of his way, and looked up, and then up some more. *Damn*, the guy was tall.

"How about a dance, pretty?" The man's voice was gruff and scratchy, like maybe he'd smoked one too many cigarettes. His words didn't sound like a question, more like an order. Normally that would've ticked Andrew off. He didn't like being bossed around. Tonight, however, it sent a little tingle of excitement shivering down his spine.

Andrew leaned to the side—almost tipped over, before he could catch his balance—and glanced around the goliath. Ryan was still absorbed in Nick's sparkling wit, or whatever the hell it was he found so entertaining.

He turned to the goliath. “Sure.” What the hell. It wasn’t as if his date would mind. The bastard was too busy letting Nick hang all over him to pay any attention to what he was doing.

“Bud,” the man said, holding out his hand.

Andrew accepted the shake and watched his hand disappear inside the larger man’s paw. “Andrew.”

He started to pull back his hand, but found it trapped in the vise-like grip of Bud’s closed fist. Bud smiled, the upward tilt of his thin lips taking away some of the severity from the chiseled planes of his face, and gave Andrew’s hand a sharp tug. Pulled off balance, Andrew stumbled forward, his face smacking into the middle of the behemoth’s sternum.

Bud’s gigantic forearms closed around his back and pulled him up tight against him. Andrew held himself stiffly, not aiding but not exactly resisting either, as Bud began to sway to the beat of the music. Against his cheek, he could feel the steady thumpedy-thump of the man’s heart beating. Every granite muscle in Bud’s torso flexed and rippled as he shimmied them back and forth.

The song seemed to last forever before it finally began to slow to its end. Andrew let out a breath of relief, glad the dance was over. The arms around him loosened and he sucked in a deep breath, inhaling the pungent scent of sweat and cheap cologne.

It wasn’t a bad smell, just not the one he wanted. Not like Ryan. Ryan always smelled of woody cologne with a hint of the underlying musky testosterone that exuded from his pores.

He mumbled a hushed thanks to Bud for the dance and spun around, intent on finding Ryan. He didn’t have to look far. Ryan stood a couple of feet behind him, his hip propped against the wall, a glower on his handsome face and fire in his eyes. With his arms across his broad chest and his jaw clenched tight enough to grind nails, Ryan did not look happy. He looked mad as a wet cat, and that put a spring in Andrew’s step as he strutted over to him.

“Who was that?” Ryan barked out as soon as Andrew got close enough to hear him over the music.

For spite, he glanced back at Bud and waved. “Oh, that’s just Bud,” he answered as nonchalantly as he could. A smile tugged at the corners of his lips, trying to pop out, but he restrained it.

Ryan humphed and came up off the wall. He moved in close, so close Andrew could count the individual black eyelashes framing his eyes. "If you can dance with Bud," he said, spitting out the other man's name as if it left a vile taste in his mouth, "then you can dance with me."

Andrew shrugged. "I guess so."

Ryan must not have liked the response because his eyes flashed a deeper shade of brown and the grinding of his teeth started up again. The smile Andrew had been fighting broke free and spread across his face. He couldn't help it, seeing Ryan jealous was so sweet. It more than made up for the brief bout of insecurity he'd felt upon viewing Ryan and Nick dancing together.

"You little shit," Ryan muttered, hauling Andrew into his arms and up against the lean contours of his body. "You're getting a kick out of this, aren't you?"

Andrew rested his arms on Ryan's shoulders and sank his fingers into the soft hair at the base of Ryan's neck, kneading the taut muscles. With a contented sigh, he shifted himself a bit deeper into Ryan's embrace, resting his cheek against Ryan's stubbled one. "So what if I am? It's what you deserve."

Ryan's arms tightened around the small of Andrew's back and he began to move, swaying his hips, taking Andrew's body along for the ride. Their groins brushed together with every pass, allowing Andrew to feel how hard Ryan was for him. He swallowed back a groan, feeling his own cock stir at the contact.

Fingertips grazed the rise of his bottom. Andrew shivered, clenching his ass cheeks to stop the needy ache he felt inside.

Ryan must have felt the tremor pass through his body, must have felt their pricks rubbing together as Andrew did, because the riled expression in his eyes wavered and was replaced by something that looked a hell of a lot like more like hunger than aggravation.

Ryan's breath was warm and moist as it wafted over his ear. "I don't think I've done anything to deserve seeing you all cuddled up with that dumb-ass lumberjack. Not when you hadn't even agreed to dance with me yet."

Andrew rotated his hips, pressing in a little harder against Ryan, dragging their pricks together and teasing them both in the process. "I'm dancing with you, aren't I?"

A growl rumbled through Ryan's chest. Andrew felt the vibrations more than heard it, and damned if it wasn't the hottest thing he'd ever experienced.

“You know what I mean,” Ryan grumbled.

“Yes, I know what you mean. Just like I know while you were *supposed* to be in the bathroom, you were actually dancing with Nick.”

“I went to the bathroom, Andrew. Nick caught me as I was coming out. That’s all.”

Andrew felt an irrational surge of the same anger he’d experienced earlier at seeing Nick latched onto his man. “He was hanging all over you.”

Wait. Had he just thought of Ryan as *his* man?

“He was only talking to me, baby.” Ryan paused, his lips feathering over Andrew’s cheek. “I do think it’s cute that you’re so jealous though.”

“You’re one to talk,” Andrew replied.

Ryan sighed, blowing hot air over Andrew’s ear. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Andrew shivered, goose bumps of arousal popping up all over his skin. He let go of Ryan’s neck, ran his hand between their bodies and gave Ryan’s nipple a sharp twist.

Ryan jerked his head back. “Hey! That hurt.”

Andrew smiled and snuggled back into place. “It wasn’t supposed to feel good.”

“Then why the hell did you do it?”

“You were asking for it.”

“I didn’t ask you to twist my damn nipple off.”

“I was hoping it would refresh your memory. Do you still not know what I meant?”

“About what?”

Andrew pinched Ryan’s nipple between his thumb and forefinger and cocked an eyebrow.

“All right, all right, I might have been a tiny bit jealous when I saw you dancing with the marshmallow man over there.”

Andrew grinned. “Marshmallow man?” That’s not how he would’ve described Bud.

“Yeah, marshmallow man.” The petulant look on his face warned Andrew not to contradict Ryan’s description, though Bud’s body was anything but soft.

He snorted and leaned in to rub his cheek on Ryan’s shoulder. Who would have thought he would actually like a touch of possessiveness in a lover? He never had before, but then again, none of the few men he’d been with were Ryan. The man could make anything, even jealousy, look good.

“What? You have a thing for big, brainless meatheads now? You know his balls are probably the size of small acorns because of all the steroids he’s taken, right?”

“No, I have a thing for tall, cute landscape architects, who ride motorcycles and get jealous at the drop of a hat.”

“Oh really?”

“Mmm—hmm.” He leaned up and pressed his lips against Ryan’s, oblivious to the party going on around them. For once in his life, he didn’t care if he was putting on a show. All he knew was Ryan and the chemistry and warmth sparking between them like static electricity, the delicious press of their chests and the desire he saw mirrored back to him through Ryan’s eyes. “Know where I can find someone like that?”

“Oh I might be able to think of someone,” Ryan murmured against the corner of Andrew’s mouth.

Ryan’s lips covered his, not with pressure but with a gentle coaxing sensation that melted Andrew’s knees and forced him to incline against Ryan’s chest for support as their lips, teeth and tongues dueled, heedless of the spectators around them. The roof could have caught fire and he wouldn’t have cared. All he wanted was more. More of Ryan, more of that one single moment when everything began to slide into place and he realized what he felt for Ryan was growing in leaps and bounds. Steadily spinning away from like and well on its way to another four letter word that should have scared the shit out of him, but surprisingly didn’t.

Love.

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