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The Legacy

By

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THE LEGACY

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"I love you. I AM you."

THE LEGACY

"And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him." Revelations 12:9

At the dawn of time, when the earth and the heavens were formed, when the seas lashed upon the shores with naught but the greenery of nature to keep their waters at bay, angels sang the songs of Heaven. Heavenly hosts with magnificent countenance and love so pure, the angels were. They praised God in all His glory, and their voices carried across the universe and down to the tiny point of life called Earth.

Yet not all of the angels were content with singing the praises of God. Power corrupted some of them and God cast them out of Heaven in all His wrath. Lucifer, the Prince of the Corrupt Ones, was beyond any reason. He fled below the Earth, his fires lighting the frightful halls of Hell itself. Yet for all the power afforded to his minions, some began to see the truth—the Light of God.

One of these angels begged for God's forgiveness at the gates of Heaven, but God refused him entry and instead ordered a task to be done if redemption was to be had. The angel agreed and was sent to Earth to stop a dreadful act from occurring. He became a pawn in a prophecy he could not escape—one that would either condemn him eternally to Hell or redeem him once more to Heaven. He set forth on his journey, survived through ages upon ages, and endured many trials and heartaches. He became mortal to survive in the world of men. There he lived as a man beyond salvation, doomed to an unholy end. He beseeched God in all His Glory for guidance and received only one answer:

"Thou shalt protect. Thou shalt love. Thou shalt sacrifice thyself to save another. Thou shalt be redeemed."

In the deepest, darkest corners of his heart, the angel knew it to be true. In order to save himself from eternal damnation, he would have to endure the fires of Hell itself.

PART ONE : DIVINE REBIRTH

CHAPTER ONE

1564 (Cymru (Wales))

From the darkened doorway of a lone tower, William stood watching the night sky closely. Lightning tore the heavens apart, setting the horizon ablaze with blue-white flashes. Thunder crashed all around the countryside and he knew, in the village down below, the peasants were terrified. This was no ordinary storm. He looked back up at the sky as another bolt of lightning shot through the clouds above the tower.

In the distance, to the south of the tower and opposite from the village, another man stood with his arms raised in supplication. In his right hand, he held a staff of white oak. His white robe fluttered behind him, stirred about by the wind that was building up around the cliff on which he stood. Stark white hair, shot through with silver, whipped wildly around his head. For a brief moment, William mused that the man on the cliff resembled a celestial being of light, but he knew better than that. The man on the cliff's edge was his own brother.

Mychael was simply a sorcerer—as simple as a sorcerer could be, that is. Everyone knew his nature and many avoided him. Yet for all the fear he stirred up, he roused an equal amount of passion. No woman, no matter her fright, could scarce breathe his name without a shudder; many men felt the same. Despite the magic that flowed through his veins, however, the sorcerer loved trickery—to tease the senses, the mind, the body with whatever he had at his disposal, all the while slipping a coin purse into his pocket with naught but a sweet kiss to replace the memory of it.

Just as quickly as the storm had begun, it stopped. William watched Mychael as he walked slowly back to the tower. A wry grin creased the sorcerer's sinfully full lips. William knew that look. His brother was ready to get out of the tower and inevitably into trouble. When Mychael reached the tower door, he leaned to the side, using his staff for support. His grin widened.

"You look like a cat that has swallowed the lord's prized bird," William remarked.

"I've swallowed many wondrous things belonging to lords and their sons, but never a bird."

William clapped his hands over his ears and shook his head with a groan. "I did not want to know that, Mychael."

The sorcerer grinned. "But I do have an itch to go out tonight," he said, pulling one of his brother's hands down. "I'm in the mood for some sport."

"Mychael," William sighed, "is it not enough to scare the life out of the peasants in the village with your tampering of the weather?"

Mychael cocked his head slightly to one side as if he were actually contemplating the question. Then he grinned again. "No." The clouds above parted and the light from the moon filtered down to the two brothers, setting the silver in Mychael's hair ablaze. "'Tis true, the weather is such fun, but I seek tamer game tonight."

William knew his twin well enough to know 'tamer' never meant the fairer sex. Mychael had an unholy penchant for men. The mere fact had been enough to send William to his knees to pray for his brother's soul many times, but no amount of begging could deter Mychael from the sinful pleasures he loved. William groaned and sank down to the ground outside the door.

"Dear, dear brother," Mychael cooed. "You keep yourself cloistered in this tower for such lengths of time that I fear you will become part of the structure itself. You need to get out as much as I do."

William glanced up at Mychael and pursed his lips in frustration. No wonder Mychael had taken up life as a rogue, the man could talk the Sun into leaving the heavens if he wished it. William sighed and extended his hand for his brother to help him up. Mychael's grin was nothing short of blatantly triumphant. He patted William on the back as they went into the tower.

As they stepped into the solar where Mychael slept, William wondered if they would need money. He then felt utterly foolish for thinking such a thing as the sorcerer's robe slipped to the floor, leaving Mychael bare as a newborn babe. Mychael had a way of getting whatever he damn well pleased, whether it was by seduction or thievery.

Mychael knelt down to put out the fire in the hearth as William watched. The sorcerer moved his hand over it and the flames licked his fingers without leaving so much as a single mark upon them. When Mychael drew his hand back slowly, a small flame lingered in his palm. He rolled his hand in the air, twisting his wrist this way and that, playing with the flame as it slid over his hand and between his slender fingers. A few seconds later, the flame snuffed itself out.

Mychael went to the chest at the foot of his bed and opened the heavy lid with a gentleness that belied his true strength. With a simple donning of clothes, the sorcerer gave way to the thief. He stepped into a pair of black breeches and laced them tightly around his middle. Over his head, he slipped on a black tunic. For a brief moment, he looked as if he were not quite human as his white hair brushed along his waist, contrasting sharply with the darkness of his clothes. William shook his head; Mychael needed only to step out their door for trouble to find him.

"Has it ever occurred to you that you're digging a deeper grave by the things you do?"

Mychael turned and lifted a pale eyebrow. "I might as well enjoy myself while I'm alive."

William laughed nervously. Mychael's nonchalant regard for his soul was truly baffling. "Have you found anything more on the book?"

Mychael shook his head and buckled a black leather belt around his waist. A small dagger was sheathed on his right and a long sword hung on his left hip. "No," he said quietly. "It seems I am on my own."

"You have me."

Mychael looked up and met William's pale blue gaze. "Aye," he said with a soft smile, "and I thank you for it with every breath I take."

William grasped Mychael's shoulder and smiled. "I wouldn't leave your side if my life depended on it. Although with you," he added with a grin, "sometimes my sense of self-preservation pummels me to a pulp. Now let's get out of here, and please try not to get into too much trouble." Mychael nodded, but William knew damn well it was too much to ask of his twin to stay out of trouble.

At the north side of the tower, a path wound through the forest surrounding the tower's hill. 'The perfect defense,' Mychael always said, and William couldn't disagree. A myriad of wild animals roamed the forest, keeping intruders away from the tower. The denizens of the forest, strangely enough, paid no attention to the two brothers. Oftentimes, William wondered if perhaps Mychael's magic had something to do with it. There had been many times in which they met a lone wolf or a bear, but a wave of Mychael's hand would send the animal off, giving the two of them leave to pass untouched.

After their parents had passed on, Mychael confided in William a terrifying secret. While he would not say why he searched, Mychael did say what he searched for: a book, a book written long ago which held a prophecy within its pages, a prophecy Mychael played a major part in. William had thought him crazy at first, but then Mychael found mention of the manuscript in an abbey outside Cardiff and had

shown it to him.

The prophecy did indeed exist and frighteningly enough, made mention of the twin-born sorcerer as one of its catalysts. Seeing the reference to his brother, 'the twin-born sorcerer,' was enough to convince William that Mychael was serious. He swore then to help Mychael find anything they could on the prophecy, but the book itself still eluded them.

The air was crisp and clear with the much-anticipated arrival of spring. Fresh buds were beginning to form on the trees, and when the time was right, they would open into the sweetest bouquets of white and purple. Despite the beauty of the forest, however, it was the village below that drew the brothers out of the tower. Mychael loved the outdoors and was quite fond of standing on the cliff under the blazing sun or during a lightning storm, but William knew his brother's mind was set on something more tangible this evening.

As they neared the town, which sat at the foot of the tower's hill, William watched as Mychael caught sight of his quarry. A young man was stacking empty ale barrels behind a tavern. He looked up, brushed a swath of wavy blonde hair from his eyes, and flashed Mychael a smile. William simply groaned as they walked to the front door.

Once inside the small tavern, William found a table and waited. He looked around; taking note of how close the front door was should Mychael get in over his head. It was a rare occurrence, true, but it was possible.

Mychael stood at the bar with one foot up on a crate and his arms folded over his thigh. He was chatting merrily with the barkeep, but his attention seemed to be elsewhere.

William followed his brother's gaze to an open doorway, which led most likely back to the kitchen area. From his chair at their table near the door, William could see a young man—much younger than Mychael's twenty-three—bustling about. William looked back to his brother and noted the slight curve of Mychael's mouth into a smile, the smallest trace of a sparkle in his eye: he had already found his 'tamer' game.

The barkeep handed two mugs to Mychael and waved over the young man from the kitchen. William couldn't hear what was being said, but the barkeep slipped his arm around the young cook and gave a proud grin only a father could give.

Dear God Almighty, Mychael is treading on dangerous ground with this one.

Mychael bowed his head briefly, gave the young cook a quick, discreet wink, and started back to the table where William waited with a narrowed gaze and a scowl.

"What?" Mychael asked as he slid a mug across the wooden table to William.

"Have you no sense?" William whispered angrily.

Mychael looked to the bar and then back to William. "Yes," he countered. "But it was not what it looked like."

"Oh? Are you trying to convince me that you were not making eyes at the barkeep's son?"

Mychael grinned—a most unsettling curve of his lips, which truly set William on the edge of his chair. "Actually," he whispered as he leaned closer, "they both want me."

William's jaw dropped open. "*Crist*," he muttered. "Dear God Almighty. Mychael..."

"Aye," Mychael said as he leaned back in his chair and threw one leg up onto the corner of the table. "God is very mighty, but this is my affair."

William shook his head, not wanting to hear anymore. "Don't tell me," he said, raising his hand to stop Mychael just as the sorcerer opened his mouth to explain. "Sometimes ignorance is preferable. If you don't tell me, then I can't lie later on when you're in hot water up to your damned neck."

Mychael lifted an eyebrow at him, but said nothing more. William was happy in his blissful ignorance and perhaps it was for the best. He was ignorant of a lot of things concerning his brother and for that, he couldn't help but be grateful. He watched with wariness as Mychael glanced back to the kitchen door where the young cook appeared briefly. One eyelid fluttered down over a pale blue eye in the faintest hint of a wink to the sorcerer. A coy smile crossed over Mychael's lips in return. William saw his brother's pale eyes darken and he knew there would be no talking Mychael out of it.

Mychael took another swallow of his ale. "I'll be back," he said as he set his emptied mug on the table. William looked up at him, but made no move to stop him. Mychael made no attempt at explanations.

* * * *

Mychael slipped out the front door of the tavern and around to the back of the building. There, waiting for him with his arms crossed over his chest and his cook's apron hung over a barrel, was Rene, the barkeep's son. As Mychael stepped up to him, Rene pushed off from his perch on the wall. Mychael gathered Rene into his arms, covering the young man's mouth with his own.

"Mychael," Rene whispered as Mychael's lips left his mouth and trailed down his neck. "We must be quick. If my father finds me out here with you, he'll have both our heads."

Mychael murmured on the cook's throat and pulled Rene's shirt over his head. Rene threaded his fingers through Mychael's hair as Mychael layered kiss after soft kiss down his chest.

"Mychael, please," he whispered impatiently. "I don't have much time and I want you."

Mychael stood and covered the cook's mouth once more. While his lips and tongue were busy above, his hands were busy below. With a rogue's deftness, he unlaced Rene's pants and shoved them to the ground.

"Turn around," he growled softly into Rene's mouth.

Without a word, the young man obeyed.

Mychael unlaced his own pants just enough to free himself and reached for the small jar of olive oil Rene had set aside. He coated his length with the slippery, golden liquid and in one fluid motion, slid inside the cook.

"Oh, Mychael," Rene moaned as he gripped the edge of an ale barrel for support.

Mychael pressed the cook's body down onto the barrel as he stroked in and out slowly. Rene's moans filled his ears with such sweet music that he simply couldn't hold back any longer. He gripped the cook's hips and with a final thrust, he erupted inside him. Rene moaned and Mychael felt his body tighten. When he pulled out and the cook turned around, his stomach and the barrel were both covered in his own release. Mychael smiled and stroked Rene's cheek.

"When will I see you again?" Rene asked as he dressed.

"As soon as possible," Mychael answered. He leaned forward to kiss Rene once more, then disappeared around the corner.

William set his mug down when Mychael walked through the tavern door. "You didn't."

Mychael sat down in his chair and gave his brother a roguish grin. "Oh, I certainly did. Although it was much quicker than I would have liked."

William groaned. "I need another drink."

"Personally," Mychael mused as he waved over the barkeep, "I think you could really use a good woman."

As the barkeep sauntered over with two more mugs, William leaned over and whispered under his breath. "How would you know a good woman? You've never even bothered to lay a finger on one."

Mychael shot him a retorting look as the barkeep arrived at their table. "Thank you," Mychael said to the older man.

"Will there be anything else, m'lord?"

William cocked an eyebrow at his brother. Mychael simply shrugged.

"Later," Mychael told the man with a wink. The older man blushed before bowing his head and turning to leave.

"M'lord?"

"Aye," Mychael said as he took a swallow of his ale. "It goes with the territory, I suppose. Now, as for me not knowing a good woman..."

"Ah yes, that," William said with a nod as he leaned back and locked his fingers behind his head. "As I was saying, you wouldn't know a good woman if one fell into your lap."

Mychael smiled demurely and snapped his fingers in the air. A young barmaid bustled over to the sorcerer. Within seconds, Mychael had her in his lap, his mouth on hers, and his tongue down her throat. When he released her, a trace of pink stole over her cheeks. She straightened her dress and returned to her work without a single word. Mychael looked back at William with a smirk.

"You did that just to spite me."

"Always," Mychael said. "But she does kiss quite well. You should try it."

William groaned and glanced briefly at the young woman. "You know her, don't you?"

Mychael nodded. "She's the cook's sister."

"And the barkeep's daughter," William added.

"That, too. But the barkeep knows me, therefore he knows you. He will not mind if his daughter is caught in your arms. Hell, William, I think he'd be angrier to find out I was fucking his son."

William dropped his head into his hands, the blonde waves of his hair falling through his fingers and spilling onto the wooden tabletop. When a shadow crossed over the table, he raised his head slowly. Her face was framed in luxuriant golden curls and her skin was smooth and creamy. Without a word, she slipped a slender hand under his chin and tilted his head up to meet her lips. Mychael sat back and grinned, knowing every thought as it ran like mad through his brother's mind. When their lips parted, she smiled softly at William. Then as quietly as she had come, she was gone again. William looked to Mychael, who simply sat with one foot on the table and his arms crossed over his chest.

"Her name is Annette," Mychael said, answering William's question before he could voice it. "She has no one but her brother and her father. She's seventeen. Oh, and she's a wonderful kisser; although, I think you've already discovered that much for yourself."

"Aye," William whispered breathlessly. "And she's a virgin, I would assume."

Mychael nodded. "And she's wanted you from the first moment she saw you."

William turned and stared at him. "What?"

"Annette told me she wanted nothing more than to find someone like you."

"Why me?"

Mychael smiled wistfully. "Because you're strong, handsome, and care more about the welfare of others than you do your own."

William looked back to Annette. Her golden curls bounced around her head as she wiped down the empty tables. He sighed and took another swallow of his ale.

Mychael watched in quiet amusement as William steeled his nerves and went to Annette. They made such a pretty pair and Mychael smiled, knowing it was another point in his ultimate favor. He was never a matchmaker and never professed to be, but he knew William and he knew Annette. They were made for each other. When William left with the young woman on his arm without so much as a glance back to his brother, Mychael knew he would have the time he needed to be alone at the tower. William would be safe; he wasn't the type to get into any sort of trouble on his own.

Mychael finished off his ale and managed to slip out of the tavern while the barkeep had his back turned. He enjoyed the man's son, but he honestly had no inclination towards the older man himself. As he made his way to the path which would lead him into the forest and eventually to home, he ran over the possible locations of the book in his mind. He knew it was in the tower, that much he had been told, but its exact location had been kept from him.

'Work for it,' they had said.

Mychael's pale eyebrows knitted together in frustration. Heaven above, if his task had been any more difficult, he would've chosen the alternative. As it was, he had undertaken the task and it started with finding the damned book which had his name written upon its pages. It also had another name, one he simply couldn't fathom to be correct. Yet he allowed himself to trust those above him, and so he searched tirelessly for the one thing that would begin the transformation and ultimately save him from himself.

Upon entering the solar, Mychael waved his hand over the hearth. From the mound of gray ashes, an orange-red flame flared to life. He turned away from it and started to cross the floor to his workshop door when he stopped abruptly. Out of the corner of his eye, the flames danced sensually, dragging his gaze back to them. He turned slowly and in an instant, felt his blood run cold.

Within the flames themselves, a man's form appeared. As the fire flickered about, the image became clearer until Mychael was staring at himself in the brilliant emerald depths of the man's eyes. Just as quickly as it appeared, the image faded, leaving naught but the bright orange flames to stare back at the bewildered sorcerer.

Mychael shook his head in an attempt to erase the image he had seen. Even though the man's features had faded away, his eyes remained clear and bright in Mychael's mind. Verdant pools as deep and infinite as time itself. Mychael shivered and turned away once more. He threw open the door to his workshop gruffly. He needed answers and he needed them now.

The moment he stepped into the blackness of his workshop, Mychael knew he was not alone. He could see no one, but he felt the all-too-familiar presence nevertheless.

"You have seen him."

Mychael swallowed hard and turned around towards the stone table behind him. A man stood leaning up against the stone, his arms crossed over his chest, his eyes fierce and boring through to what was left of Mychael's soul.

"Aye," Mychael whispered, "I think I have. Who is he?"

The man shifted and Mychael heard the familiar rustle of feathers through the silence. The sound was almost painful to his ears.

"He is the one you have been sent to protect, but he does not exist in this time."

"Then how do you expect me to find him if he does not live yet? It was you who made me what I am now," Mychael retorted.

"Things will happen in your life which will rectify that problem," the man said coolly. "You were told this would not be pleasant, but it was your arrogance that put you where you are now."

Mychael bowed his head respectfully and nodded. "Aye, that it was. What is it that I face?"

"I cannot tell you," the man said. "But I will tell you this: when you find this man, let your heart lead you to the right path."

Mychael opened his mouth to ask another question, but with a brief flash of an emerald feather, the man was gone.

"Tell me I didn't see what I think I saw."

Mychael spun around and stared open-mouthed at his brother. William was sitting quietly on the stone steps. Mychael always knew the time would come when he would have to tell William the truth, but he still was never truly prepared for it. He sat down on the floor and leaned back against the wooden shelves across from the steps.

"How much did you see?"

"I've seen enough to know you have some explaining to do," William said quietly.

Mychael sighed. "William, I'm sorry. I knew the time would come when I would have to explain things, but I never expected it to be so soon ... nor did I ever expect you would see anything like that."

"Go on."

"My true name is Kaliel. When Lucifer was cast out of Heaven, several others followed him. I was one of them."

"Are you telling me you're an angel?" William asked. His eyes widened more than Mychael ever thought possible.

"Was. Like the others, I was corrupted by greed and power. Because of that, I lost my standing in Heaven. Then several of us began to see the light, so to speak, but when we went back to beg for forgiveness, we were denied entry into Heaven. Each of us was given a task to complete, a way to prove our hearts were pure once more."

"And finding the book is your task?"

Mychael shook his head. "The book is the first step. Within its pages is a prophecy which concerns me and another. I have to stop the descendant of Cain from becoming immortal."

"What's the catch?"

"The descendant does not live in this time. All I've been told is that he will live and when I find him, I must follow my heart."

William looked skeptical. "But if he does not live now, how are you to find him?"

"The man you just saw, or rather the being, was Michael. He did not tell me what I will face, but he made it very clear it won't be pleasant. Coming from an Archangel, I would tend to believe it. It was Michael who ordered me to be reborn as a mortal man. I don't dare question his judgment."

William nodded. "I would have to agree. If you're an angel, where are your wings?"

A wistful, regretful smile crossed Mychael's lips. "They were stripped from me when I left Heaven. I will only get them back once my task is done."

"So you are not immortal anymore?"

"No," Mychael said. "I was reborn as a mortal with all the damned vices and pitfalls, including the possibility of death."

"Well," William chuckled, "that explains the vices you have now."

"Aye. I figured if I'm stuck in this body, I might as well enjoy myself. It's not like I can really damn my soul any further than it already has been. In fact, for every good thing I do, it's another point in my favor."

William laughed and shook his head. "I always knew there was something odd about you. Speaking of which, is the magic part of your past too?"

"More or less," Mychael said with a shrug. "I was a solar angel, an angel of fire, hence the reason why fire is my element as a sorcerer. It's also the reason why fire cannot hurt me. I can be shot, drawn and quartered, run through with a sword, hung—any manner of death and torture a human would expire under—but I cannot be burned in any way. I'm not invulnerable, William. I have weaknesses just like a human."

William sighed and Mychael noted the sad smile on his brother's lips. He stood and knelt before William, smoothing his blonde hair from his face to reveal blue eyes heavy with sadness.

"Do not cry for me, *gefell*," Mychael whispered. "From the moment I was born into this world, you've been by my side. I will always remain by yours until the end of your days on this earth." William smiled and Mychael brushed a single tear from his cheek. "Now, off to bed with the both of us. I plan on stepping up my search tomorrow. Thanks to Michael's visit, I have the feeling something may happen soon which will bring my search to a halt, and I want to at least know the name of the man I seek."

"I heard you tell Michael you saw him," William said as Mychael sat back on the rush-strewn floor. "What does he look like?"

A shudder stole up Mychael's spine as he remembered the image of the man in the fire. "His exact features were not very clear, but his eyes were. They were a bright green. He had black hair, too, but his eyes were what really caught my attention. When I do find him, I will know right then he is the one."

William nodded and stood, then offered Mychael a hand up. They ascended the stairs and Mychael collapsed onto his bed, weary for the first time in several days. He rolled over once William had gone upstairs, remembering them growing up as young boys. Yet even then, he had always been the odd one, the one who never quite fit in with the others, the one who stared off into space, longing for something no one else had any knowledge of. He let out a ragged sigh. Tomorrow, they would resume their search for the book and hopefully more would become clear about the man he sought. As he slowly drifted off to sleep, a voice came to him. He felt himself slip further into his dream, yet the voice was as clear as if he heard it in wakefulness. A sweet voice it was, thick and masculine, with just a hint of sensuality. It called to Mychael, called him by yet another name.

"Ashley."

CHAPTER TWO

William wiped a swath of sweat-slick hair from his face as he sat down on the stone steps to take a break. They had been working all day to clear away the clutter in Mychael's workshop, and still they saw no sign of the book. He lifted a cup to his lips to drink and then stilled. Mychael looked back at him and followed his gaze to a single flagstone in one corner. The edges were smoother than that of the other stones, and the crack between it and the others was enough to see a bit of black beneath.

They looked at each other for only a moment before they rushed to lift the enormous stone up from the floor. It crashed over on its top, heaving up a cloud of dust. Mychael waved his hand through the air and the cloud dispersed. Below them, nestled in the niche the stone had covered, was a rectangular object wrapped in dirt-coated linen. With shaking hands, Mychael lifted the object out and sat back on the floor to open it. Once the linen was spread across his lap, he simply sat in stunned silence. It was not a book, it was a stone tablet. Mychael ran his fingertips over it slowly as if he were deciphering the cryptic symbols on the surface by touch alone. William moved closer.

"Is it—"

"Aye," Mychael interrupted him, "it is. I had not expected a tablet, but the prophecy is here."

"And?" William prodded. "What is the man's name? The descendant of Cain?"

"It's not written," Mychael said with a frustrated sigh. "It's not here. I need Michael. He can at least tell me how I'll know the man when I find him."

William's shoulders dropped instantly. He felt Mychael's frustration like it was his own. All this time Mychael had searched and he knew nothing more than what he had known to begin with. Perhaps the Archangel would take pity on him and help him. Although judging by the look on Mychael's face, William doubted the Archangel would do even that. It was obvious Mychael had to face this task without heavenly guidance.

Mychael set the tablet to the side and leaned his head back. "I need to get out of here. I need a drink."

William nodded. "Aye, as do I, to be honest. Where to this time?"

"Merydd."

"Merydd? What about your cook?"

"It's not him I'm avoiding—it's his father," Mychael said with a wry grin. "Let's go. Perhaps I can find something there to entertain me."

He stood and helped William up, then went up the stairs. William set the stone on the floor and followed him. Before he even reached the top, Mychael was standing by the door, dressed and ready to go.

"How do you do that?" William asked in exasperation.

Mychael shrugged. "Michael was kind enough to leave me with a few abilities, speed being one of them."

William shook his head and went up to his chambers. A few minutes later, the two of them left for the small town of Merydd, an hour's walk from the tower.

* * * *

Mychael sat down at a table and threw William his coin purse. "You get them this time," he muttered with agitation.

William said nothing and went to get their ale.

Mychael looked around the room lazily, not paying much attention to anyone or anything. Then the door opened and he felt his heart flutter briefly. A young man, who couldn't have been more than twenty years, stepped in with two others. They were all dressed richly, and Mychael watched them with feigned indifference as they sat down two tables in front of him, the two men with their backs to him, the young man facing him. When the young man raised his head, he locked onto Mychael's gaze immediately. A faint curl of his soft, full lips and a flutter of his dark lashes over one eye was all it took to gain Mychael's full attention.

"Here you—" William stopped mid-sentence and turned. His face blanched. "No," he said as he sat down quickly, blocking Mychael's view. "Absolutely not, Mychael. That is John Stockton, Lord Stockton's youngest son. If you do so much as touch him, his father would have both our heads."

Mychael looked to his brother, but barely heard a word he said. He returned his gaze to the young man, but John stood and turned to leave the tavern. As he started to walk out, he stopped and gave Mychael a quick little wink before ducking out of the door. Without a word, Mychael stood to follow him as William dropped his head to the table with a pained groan.

Mychael stepped out into the chilly night air and caught a flash of John's sword as he slipped around the corner of a storehouse. Giving his surroundings a brief but thorough scanning, Mychael followed him. When he rounded the same corner, he found the young man sitting against a stack of grain sacks, one leg propped up and his elbow on his knee. He crooked a finger and beckoned Mychael to him silently. Mychael couldn't have resisted even if he had wanted to.

"I've seen you before," John said with a smile as he leaned his head back against the grain sacks.

Mychael dared to let his gaze slip from the man's face to the enticing curve of his throat. Beneath the ruffles of his shirt, a tiny patch of hair showed. Mychael shifted as his pants tightened uncomfortably. John lowered his head once more and levered a gaze on Mychael that nearly cost the sorcerer his pride.

"I have only been here once before," Mychael managed to choke out. Every inch of his body was screaming at being so near to something as beautiful as this young man. "I understand you are John Stockton," he said.

John nodded.

Mychael offered his hand in greeting. "I'm Mychael Potter. 'Tis a pleasure, my lord."

John took his hand and Mychael's heart skipped several beats. Slender fingers smoothed over the top of his hand, caressing his skin with slow, languid strokes.

"Aye," John whispered. His voice took on an unmistakable tone, one rich with desire and a bit of fear. "I know who you are. Your name is whispered on every maiden's lips ... and the lips of a few others."

His pause was enough to spark a fire in Mychael's brain that the sorcerer knew damn well wouldn't go out any time soon.

"I've wanted to meet you, Mychael," John whispered softly as he moved closer to Mychael.

"Why would you want to meet me?" Mychael managed to ask him, which was a feat when he scarce could breathe at all.

A sensuous smile crossed John's lips moments before they touched Mychael's. Mychael didn't know how much this young man knew of sex, especially between men, but he couldn't have stopped himself no matter how hard he tried. With a speed that left the young man a bit breathless, Mychael had John on his back, his body stretched over the young lord's as their tongues danced together.

"Have you..." Mychael drew in a breath, unable to finish his question as John's hand slid between their bodies to grip him through the thin cloth of his pants. *Aye, this young man knew damn well what he was doing.* Mychael sighed into his mouth as John began to stroke him through the fabric, each pull, each tightening of his hand dragging a groan from deep within Mychael's chest.

"I've never been with anyone, but I know enough," John murmured as Mychael's lips moved from his mouth to his neck.

At the revelation that John was a virgin, Mychael groaned low and thrust against him.

"But I would gladly change that if you were the one to do it."

Mychael raised his head and kissed John's lips softly. "Aye," he whispered as he moved his own hand down the young man's side. "I would be delighted."

When Mychael slipped his hand between them and curled his fingers around the hardness pressing into him, John's back arched and a startled moan escaped his lips. Mychael felt the unmistakable pulsing of an orgasm radiate into his palm and up through his arm. He kissed John then, taking the embarrassment of his early release and turning it into promises of what was to come. Within minutes John was hard again, straining against Mychael's expert hand. How he loved young men.

"Please," John purred quietly. "I want to know what it's like to have a man inside me."

Mychael smiled and unlaced John's pants without moving the rest of his body. John raised his hips so Mychael could push his trousers down. When his strong hand closed around John's naked flesh, the young lord drew in a sharp breath. This time, however, he did not come. He bit his lower lip and thrust slowly into Mychael's hand. Mychael breathlessly watched John's face as the young man slid in and out of his palm, the movement causing him to grow painfully hard as well. With a final kiss on John's lips, Mychael sat up and settled himself between John's legs. The young lord's pale blue eyes were clouded with lust as he watched Mychael untie his pants. When they fell to Mychael's knees, John's eyes grew wide with hunger and perhaps a twinge of apprehension.

"Will it hurt?" he asked, not taking his eyes off of Mychael.

"Just a little," Mychael reassured him as he spit into his palm. He would have much preferred olive oil, but when he took a cursory glance around, nothing suitable could be found. He watched as John's gaze followed his hand as it closed around his length. He grinned inwardly and began a slow stroke, knowing the young man was beyond entranced. He slid two fingers into his mouth, wetting them in the most enticing way he could conjure. Then, he pressed them to John's entrance and smiled.

"Relax," he said.

John nodded and Mychael pushed the barest tips of his fingers inside the young lord's body.

The tightness was heavenly—almost too heavenly, as Mychael had to close his eyes to fight back the urge to come right then. He spread his fingers apart, causing John's hips to leave the ground and a whimper to escape his throat. When he was satisfied with the slickness, Mychael slid his hands up the backs of John's thighs and settled himself so the tip of his cock pressed against John's entrance.

"Deep breath," he whispered. When John drew in a breath, Mychael pushed inside him. John's eyes widened and his moan settled itself all the way into Mychael's heart.

"Mychael," John breathed. "Oh Mychael, it feels so tight."

"Aye," Mychael whispered hoarsely, desperately trying to take things slow and easy this time. He watched John's face as he withdrew and slid back inside him. The young man was beyond pain now and he began to move with Mychael, matching his gentle thrusts and chewing on his lower lip.

When Mychael felt John's body tighten, he knew he was close to coming. Within seconds, John let out a throaty moan and his body tightened around Mychael, sucking him in deeper. Mychael steadied himself to be gentle and with a deep-seated groan, his own body shuddered due to his release. John panted beneath him, his brow covered in sweat even though they had not exerted much energy. Mychael withdrew from him slowly and leaned down to kiss him.

"I've waited for that since the first time I saw you," John whispered on Mychael's lips. "I fear I've loved you for just as long."

Mychael felt his heart tighten considerably. He kissed John again, and with a moan of sheer and utter contentment, he felt an echo in his own heart for the young man beneath him. Perhaps this was what the Archangel had meant: 'thou shalt love.'

Mychael gave John another soft kiss before standing. He watched the young lord dress as he did the same. He knew this happened; he knew angels fell in love with mortals, but he had never thought of the possibility of it happening to him. Once they were both dressed, John stood on his tiptoes and pressed a kiss to Mychael's lips.

"Please," the young lord whispered. "Say you will come back."

Mychael slid his arms around John's waist and pulled him close. He slid his other hand through John's hair, letting the silky raven strands slip between his fingers. "Aye," he said with a smile. "I will promise you that."

John smiled and pulled Mychael down into another kiss before stepping away. "I suppose we both must return."

Mychael watched as John turned and walked back around the corner and felt a bit of his heart go as well. He shook his head and smiled before walking back around to the tavern door himself. As he stepped inside, he saw the wary look on William's face. William shifted in his chair as Mychael sat down.

"What did you do?"

"I lost my heart," Mychael said.

William nearly choked on a swallow of ale. "You what?"

"I'm in love," Mychael said quietly.

"Angels can fall in love?" William whispered as he leaned over the table.

"Oh, yes," Mychael said with a nod. "And it happens more often than anyone truly realizes, though I never thought it would happen to me."

William sat back in his chair, visibly stunned. "Does he know you're a thief and a sorcerer?"

"Aye, he does. In fact, he said that's why he wanted me to begin with. Apparently my reputation extends well beyond the tower village."

"Why does that not surprise me?" William asked him with the slightest touch of sarcasm.

"We need to make more trips to Merydd," Mychael mused quietly as he glanced around William's shoulder.

John stopped at the door before leaving and gave the sorcerer a discreet smile before quickly disappearing out into the night.

* * * *

Once they were back home in the tower, Mychael settled into his chair by the table in the solar. William puttered about, chopping here, peeling there, throwing bits of various foods into the cauldron over the fire. He was insistent on cooking and Mychael was more than content to let him. His mind was wandering in a thousand directions at once: thoughts of John, thoughts of the prophecy, memories of a life before. He shifted in the chair. At times, his back itched where his wings had once been. He watched the flames dance in the hearth, darting around and under William's cauldron. Soon his mind eased and his gaze softened.

Then, he appeared again.

Mychael watched, utterly entranced, as the image in the fire moved. The man turned around and Mychael could see the traces of coal black hair as they fell halfway down the man's back. His body was firm and strong and he looked to be quite young—perhaps twenty-five in his years. He turned once more and their gazes locked. Even through the fire, even through the centuries between his time and the future time of the man's, Mychael could feel the heat of his stare. It pierced into his soul like nothing he had ever known. Then the man's lips curled into a smile and Mychael heard the name he had heard last night:

"Ashley."

He watched the man's lips as he said the name. He was calling to Mychael, that much was certain, but not by his name. *Why the name Ashley?* he wondered silently.

"Mychael?"

Mychael shook his head and the image disappeared. He looked up at William. "Did you see him?"

"See who?" William asked as he set a bowl of stew in front of him.

"I saw him, Will," Mychael said, glancing back to the fire. "I saw him as clear as I see you."

William narrowed his gaze at him. "Perhaps the Archangel has answers?"

Mychael sat silently for a few moments. "Maybe," he said at last as he sat up and blew on a spoonful of stew.

Mychael glanced periodically at the fire as they ate. After they finished, he stood and went over to it. When he crouched down and waved his fingers through the flames, a small one appeared in his upturned palm. He blew gently on the flame and it grew taller. With another exhale, he set it down on the floor. William made a move to stop him, but Mychael waved him away. Mychael stepped back and watched as the flame grew taller until it nearly reached his own height of six feet. Then it began to change form.

"Ashley."

Mychael reached out and slipped his fingers through the flame. For the first time in all of his existence, he felt the true heat of fire. It was painful not to his skin, but to his very soul. The man smiled and Mychael watched breathlessly as a hand surrounded in flames rose to touch his face. He lowered his head as the ache in his soul grew, and the feather-light, fiery touch brought his head back up to meet the verdant intensity of the man's gaze. With a final smile, the flame flickered out, leaving the sorcerer breathless and thoroughly disconcerted.

"Did you do that?" William asked, breaking the awkward silence.

Mychael shook his head. "I was merely playing with the fire when I felt the urge to set it on the floor. What you just saw was not my doing."

"I heard a voice. I heard it say, 'Ashley,' and it was calling to you."

"Aye," Mychael whispered, "it was. I heard it last night, right before I fell asleep."

"But your name isn't Ashley," William said.

"No, but perhaps it will be in the future, when this man lives." He glanced to William, who nodded his head.

"Aye, that would make sense, I suppose. I'm just glad you didn't set the damned floor on fire."

Mychael chuckled. "I'm more cautious than you give me credit for, Will. Believe me, the fire I control will only cause destruction if I bid it to. Otherwise, it's perfectly harmless so long as it's felt my touch."

"That explains how you can have a lightning bolt shoot through your body without leaving so much as a singed hair," William mused.

"Aye, that would be another one of my abilities: dancing with lightning," Mychael said with a roguish grin.

"Well, I'm to bed," William yawned as he stood. "I assume you are not?"

"No, not yet," Mychael said, staring once more into the fire. William nodded and gripped his shoulder before disappearing up his steps.

"Who are you?" Mychael whispered under his breath.

"Your time here is growing short."

Mychael closed his eyes and turned slowly. "Am I to leave then?"

The Archangel shook his head. "No, you will not leave this world. But you will soon leave the life of a mortal behind, Kaliel."

Mychael winced at hearing his true name. It was not one he was proud of any longer. The Archangel moved and the tips of his wings brushed over the rushes strewn on the floor.

"What am I to become if not a mortal?"

The Archangel smiled, a seemingly gentle move that, as the sorcerer well knew, belied his true strength.

"You will meet someone soon who will change your life. The choices you make from here on out will affect your petition. The time will pass quickly for you, although it may not seem as such." The Archangel walked up to stand before Mychael. "You will experience pain like you have never known. For you to be granted entrance to the Kingdom of God once more, you must walk through the fires of Hell itself. You will be reborn once again."

"How will I know this man if I do not even know his name?"

"You will know," Michael said. "And when such time comes, you will experience things as a mortal man would. You wanted power, Kaliel; you have been given the power to feel pain. Use it well."

Mychael watched silently as the Archangel faded away, his words still lingering in the empty air.

CHAPTER THREE

Mychael stood on the wall-walk, well out of sight of the captain and his men. He drew his sword and held it aloft, letting the lightning strike shoot through the steel and then his body. He threw his head back as the fire flamed to life within him, surging through his veins like quicksilver. He pointed his sword to the balcony where a single face could be seen through the darkness of the room beyond. The pale grey of his eyes burned brightly through the night; the silver in his hair sparkled with the flashes of the lightning around him. He crooked his finger and beckoned to the man on the balcony.

He jumped down from the wall-walk as the captain and his men grumbled and disappeared into the barracks. He had outwitted them once again, although the cut on his thigh showed they were certainly getting better. William would have his head on a platter for that one. A few moments later, John entered the stables, soaked to the bone but no less beautiful. Mychael gathered him into his arms and kissed him softly.

"Mychael," John whispered, "you risk your life to stay here."

"I will have no such talk at this moment," Mychael murmured against the younger man's neck. "I cannot stay, John. William awaits me and your father's captain is already planning on scouring nearly every building in the bailey. But I couldn't leave without kissing you once more."

John moaned softly and Mychael pressed him gently to a support beam in the stable. Somewhere behind them, a horse rustled in his stall, yet made no other sound. With his sword in one hand, Mychael lashed a rope gently around John's body, holding him fast to the post. John's eyes were clouded with desire as Mychael stepped back from him.

"I love you," Mychael whispered.

Mychael raised his sword to him. He drew it down John's chest, opening his robe with nothing more than the tip. With a quickness that startled John, the sword slipped down and Mychael made a small cut on his right wrist.

"Let no other who sees that take what is mine," Mychael said. He sheathed his sword and untied John, gathering him once more into his arms. "Get back to your room before you are found missing as well." He kissed the young lord once more and watched as he disappeared into the night.

* * * *

"Do not stop until the rogue is found!"

The captain's shout reached Mychael even through the storm. Mychael watched from the shadows of the stables as the captain stormed back into the barracks, his pudgy face an odd shade of brilliant red. Mychael had eluded him for ten days now, but the captain knew he was still in the city. The clouds opened and the rain poured down in steady, stinging sheets of iciness. Mychael looked back to the barracks. He could see the captain pacing inside. When a raucous noise rose up from the street outside, the captain stopped his pacing and looked out of the window. Several men were gathered in a circle, hunched over an object. The captain threw open the door and sauntered outside. His men then parted, revealing the form below.

Mychael watched as the captain's rage flared anew as he gazed down at the head in the street. Mychael hated killing the poor sod, but the man had nearly relieved him of his own head. As it was, the guard managed to catch Mychael's leg with his knife just before he hit the ground. With a furious roar that sent his men backing away, the captain sent the guard's head rolling down the liquefied street with the toe of his plated boot.

"Mychael Potter!" he roared over the din of the falling rain.

"It seems I have once again outwitted the glorious captain of Merydd."

The captain spun around. Then one of his men tapped his arm and pointed up. The captain's face paled. Mychael stood poised on the rooftop, a wry grin gracing his lips. "Mychael Potter," the captain announced with annoyance.

Mychael's grin widened and he bowed. It was a mocking, exaggerated motion which simply served to anger the captain even more.

"'Tis a pleasure, sir," Mychael laughed as he righted himself. He leaned on the pommel of his sword, its tip shoved down into the roof of the barracks. "But I really must be going," he continued. "My brother awaits me. I will return, of course, as I have promised my dear, dear John I would." He pulled his sword out and slid it back into its scabbard. "Tell me, captain," he said, levering a pale grey gaze on the man below him. "Have you ever tasted the sweetness of a man's kiss? 'Tis delicious and the lord's son is the sweetest in the land."

"How dare you speak thus about him!"

"How dare I? Why, I dare whatever I wish, captain. But I have dallied much too long. I will be back. I can promise you that much, as well as I promised John."

With another mocking bow, Mychael jumped off of the rooftop and slipped into the dark of the forest beyond.

* * * *

"Mychael Potter, Heaven help me! No matter what you are, you're going to get yourself killed one of these days."

Mychael remained silent as William pressed the cloth to his leg in an effort to stop the bleeding. The cut was deeper than Mychael had originally thought, but it would heal. With a slight wave of his hand, the bleeding stopped almost immediately.

"I'm cautious," he said finally. The declaration was hollow and William's look was enough to tell Mychael he didn't believe a word of it. Mychael sighed. "Will, I know you don't agree with my activities."

His twin lifted a blonde eyebrow at him. "Which ones? The ones concerning men? Or the thievery?"

Mychael allowed a faint grin to crease his lips. "Both."

He stood once more and let his robe drop to the floor at his feet. The fire was blessedly warm, but the flames held his gaze painfully. He watched their orange and red bodies sway and dance as they crackled and hissed at him, reminding him of promises made long ago. How ironic it was that he had the gift of mastery over fire when its face held his damnation with such intensity. His fingers tightened around the oak staff in his right hand. He turned from the fire and met his twin's gaze.

"Are you to bed then?" William asked him as he soaked the bloodied cloth in a cauldron of steaming water.

Mychael looked briefly to the wooden door across the room and then back to William. "Not yet," he said quietly.

William sighed and Mychael walked down into the blackness of his workshop. He picked up a candle from a slab of stone and exhaled softly on the wick. A small orange flame flickered to life and he set the candle down on one of the stone steps. He turned back to the stone table and brushed his hand over it, skimming the smooth surface and watching the candlelight flicker across it, lighting the gold of the cross set into the stone. A twinge of longing, of pain, stirred within him. He set his staff aside and knelt

before the stone, pressing his lips to the cross as he lowered his gaze. He wanted guidance, help, but he knew he was on his own now. No amount of praying could help him. The Archangel had not come to him in over a week.

He stood and blew out the candle before ascending the steps once again.

William was sitting at the wooden table, waiting for him, unable to sleep. Mychael knew then they both could easily use some time away. He smiled, reclaiming his roguish demeanor once more.

William's gaze narrowed. "*Crist*," he muttered. "Now what?"

"Cardiff," Mychael said matter-of-factly.

William's eyebrows furrowed with apprehension. "What's in Cardiff?"

Mychael shrugged. "We haven't been there since our parents died."

"Fine," William conceded with a sigh. "But only for a few days. I don't want to stay there long enough for you to find the wrong end of a hangman's rope."

* * * *

In the darkness of the night, in a small room of Merydd Keep, the youngest son of the castle's lord awoke with a start.

"Mychael?" John sat up in his bed, sleepily scanning the darkened room for any sign of his love. "Mychael, is that you?"

No answer came and he laid down once more, willing himself to drift back into the sweet dream of Mychael's lips on his. Then he felt them and smiled. He opened his mouth, but not his eyes, taking his love's tongue in and stroking it with his own. Then his smile faded, only to be replaced with a sudden awareness: this was not Mychael.

He opened his eyes at the realization and backed away from the figure above him. The man's eyes were beautiful, not hauntingly beautiful like Mychael's, but intense nonetheless. He swallowed hard as the man leaned down and smiled. Two razor sharp teeth flashed in the dark.

"Wh-who are you?" John stammered, his fear rising with every passing second.

"Don't worry about who I am, John," the man whispered. A more erotic blend of menace and seduction John had never heard.

"Then why are you here?" he asked, even as his mind screamed for him to run as quickly as possible.

"You know Mychael Potter, do you not?" the man asked. His eyes sparkled with a dark coldness.

John could only nod.

"Good, then where does he live?"

"I-I do not know," John whispered. "He comes to me through the window."

"Mm," the man said, nodding his head in contemplation. "Very well then. I have a proposition for you, my young friend."

"What?" John asked, even as he tried to think of ways to get away from this ... creature.

"I have a tale to tell you," the man continued, "a prophecy of sorts, concerning your dear Mychael. You see, John, Mychael's destiny was written long ago by unknown hands. He is the key to unlocking a powerful weapon, one that could forever change the world if the right person were to possess it."

"What weapon?" John asked, unable to hide his sudden interest.

The man grinned.

"My friend, have you heard the tales of Cain?"

John nodded.

"Very good. When Cain was driven away, he took refuge in the Red Sea with Lilith, the demoness. She taught him of blood and sinful pleasures. With that knowledge, Cain became the first *sugnwr gwaed*—the first vampire."

John's eyes widened. "What does that have to do with Mychael?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Cain's powers, and such strong powers they were, were carried down the line of children he had with Lilith, but they only ran on the side of his sons. I have the gift of sight, my friend, and I know there is a descendant of Cain who will prove to be the ultimate of what his ancestor once was. I do not know where he is or if he even exists yet, but he does live or will, and with the blood of the twin-born sorcerer, he will become the most powerful being on earth."

"What do you want of me?" John asked.

The man smiled and the flash of his teeth was frightening. "You know the sorcerer better than anyone, John. If you join me, together we can find him and turn him to our will."

John couldn't stifle the laugh as it escaped his lips. "Turn Mychael Potter to your will? Are you mad?"

The man's grin widened. "Perhaps, but with your help, it is possible."

"What exactly is it you want to do? What do you mean by 'join you?'" John bunched the covers over his body in a ridiculous attempt at protection from the creature above him.

Without a sound, the man leaned down and brushed his lips over John's, coaxing a shocked gasp from them. As his tongue slid into John's mouth, the gasp turned to a throaty sigh and John gingerly wrapped his arms around the man's neck, pulling him closer. The man moved his lips over John's throat and after drawing in a deep breath, he closed his mouth over John's neck, sinking sharp teeth into tender flesh.

John clawed at the man's neck in panic, a scream lodged in his throat. He felt his life drain away slowly, flowing into the man's mouth in a steady stream of thick, red blood. When the man withdrew, John dropped to the bed, gasping for breath and praying for a quick death.

"I have not killed you, John," the man said.

John rolled his head to the side, his mind drugged by the pain and the loss of blood. He watched as the man put his own wrist to his lips. John's eyes widened as the man bit down, and when he lowered his punctured wrist to John's lips, John moved across the bed as best he could.

"Drink, John," the man instructed. "You will die if you do not."

John swallowed hard and with the weight of his sin for the immoral love of a man resting on his mind and his heart, he put his lips gently to the vampire's wrist and began to drink.

* * * *

Mychael left the bar and carried their mugs to their table. "All is well," he announced as he slid a mug of ale to William. He gave William a sly grin before raising his own mug to his lips. William craned his head to the side to inquire the results of Mychael's talk with the innkeeper. Mychael simply shrugged.

"You have no morals."

The pronouncement on the state of his soul broadened Mychael's grin. "Aye, so you've told me."

As Mychael took another swallow of ale, he noted the look on William's face. He turned around and

met a blue gaze the likes of which he had never seen before.

"Good evening," the man said, bowing his head to them. "Might I have the pleasure of addressing Mychael Potter?"

"Aye, that you have," Mychael said with a grin. "How may I help you?"

The stranger smiled, a blatantly seductive move that did not go unnoticed by Mychael. "My name is Loren Matthews," he said, extending a slender hand.

"'Tis a pleasure," Mychael said softly. As he shook Loren's hand, Mychael ran his thumb over the man's knuckles, marveling at the softness of the skin, softness which begged for a kiss ... and so much more.

"Your reputation precedes you, Master Potter," Loren said. "Words of your exploits have reached me even in London. I wanted to meet the man who has been made quite famous throughout the villages and towns ... and the darker side of the world." He lifted a graceful, dark eyebrow at Mychael.

"Master Matthews," Mychael said, "this is my brother, William Potter."

I do not like this, Mychael.

Mychael's only response to William's silent thought was a smile.

"Tell me, Master Potter," Loren said, turning back to Mychael, "are you in the market for a job this evening? Or do you come to Cardiff simply for the atmosphere?"

"We are here on retreat," Mychael replied, giving Loren a coy smile. "And yourself?"

"I came here on retreat as well." Loren slid his hand along the top of Mychael's chair and slipped his fingers softly below his hair, letting the silver and white strands slip through them. His lips arched slightly with a faint smile when Mychael shuddered beneath his touch.

Every nerve in Mychael's body was honed to a razor-sharp edge, with Loren Matthews dancing on each one in light and bewitching steps. He knew the dangers of seduction—he practiced the art like no other—but never had he met another who could unnerve him with such ease and grace. His mind clouded in a deadly haze of lust as the man's hand tunneled through his hair, his fingertips brushing along his neck, inciting a volatile storm of desire with the slightest touch. Mychael wanted this man at whatever costs. When Loren lowered his face to Mychael's, his gaze steady and horribly enchanting, all time seemed to stop in the breath of a second. Mychael's breath caught in his throat and his heart pounded in his chest, rattling his ribcage with its thunderous rhythm. Just as Loren's lips brushed across his, chaos took hold in the tavern.

"There he is!" a man shouted from the doorway.

Mychael spun around in his seat to see none other than the captain of the guard from Merydd. His eyes grew wide with surprise, but before he could even begin to think quickly enough to escape, several men grabbed him and William, holding them at bay as the captain sauntered up to them.

"Well, well," the rotund captain sneered. "I never thought I'd truly see the day when Mychael Potter was in chains." As he spoke, his men lashed chains around the twins, binding their arms to their sides. "Bring them to Merydd," he ordered. "There they will answer for the kidnapping and murder of John Stockton."

* * * *

In the dungeons below Merydd Castle, Mychael hung from a whipping post. His wrists were slick with blood and sweat. His legs had given out on him several hours ago. He kept his eyes closed, not wanting

to see the pained look on William's face.

"Confess, you whoreson," the captain snarled. He jerked Mychael's head back by a fistful of hair, yet Mychael remained silent as the grave.

The captain growled and threw his head forward, causing it to connect painfully with the wooden post to which he was tethered. The captain drew his arm back and snapped the whip. The crack of leather on flesh was deafening and Mychael drew in a sharp breath, wincing from the sheer pain but refusing to give in.

"Hang him," the lord pronounced. "Hang him like the thief and murderer he is."

The captain unhooked Mychael and hung him from the wall across from William. Mychael looked up then and met William's gaze. Tears created trails through the dirt on William's cheeks and Mychael could feel his twin's sadness like it was his own.

"Don't fear for me," he whispered hoarsely. "I have had my fun in this world. My love is gone."

When the door opened once more, Mychael knew his time had come. When he looked up, however, a rather unexpected sight greeted him, yet he wasn't sure if it was a prayer answered or the beginning of something infinitely more dangerous than either one of them could possibly imagine. Loren shut the door quietly and walked over to him. He smoothed his hand over Mychael's cheek.

Loren smiled. "Mychael, I can get you out of here, but we must do it quickly. Unfortunately, it will be painful and terrifying for you."

"Nothing can be as painful as hearing that my love is dead."

Loren nodded. Before Mychael could say another word, Loren's lips were upon his neck, Loren's teeth sinking into his tender flesh. Mychael drew in a sharp, pained breath.

When Loren withdrew from Mychael's neck, he looked into his paling eyes. "You are not dead, Mychael," he said. "But if you do not do as I say, you will be." Mychael nodded. Loren pushed up the sleeve of his shirt and sank his teeth into his wrist. Then he pressed the wound to Mychael's lips. "Drink, Mychael," he whispered. "Drink and be reborn."

Mychael knew not what possessed him to do such a rash and sinful act, but as soon as his lips touched Loren's wrist, all reason left him. *Please Lord, forgive me for what I am about to do.* Then he began to drink.

With a start, Loren pulled his wrist free and stepped back, the wound closing after a few moments.

As the vampire backed away, Mychael felt his heart seize and spasm painfully. He screamed at the pain as his breath came in ragged bursts in a failing effort to draw life-giving air into his lungs. The room spun wildly around him, setting everything askew. Then the world began to slow down and everything darkened. He heard his brother scream.

You are reborn, Mychael.

Mychael felt consciousness begin to take hold once more when he heard Loren's voice in his mind. He felt calmer, yet not completely at peace. And the hunger—Sweet Lord, the hunger was almost painful. His insides twisted within him, drawing a deep, harsh growl. As if in answer, Loren's wrist returned to his lips, the wound reopened. Mychael grabbed Loren's arm and bit down with a growl, drinking deeply. The sharp, fiery hunger began to ebb as Loren's blood flowed over Mychael's tongue, bringing an end to the pain.

"Now you have the power to free yourself and your brother."

Mychael looked to William, who stood staring with wide, fearful eyes. *It's the only way, Will.*

I will not let him touch me, Mychael.

Then I will do it.

No sooner had the words slipped from his mind to William's, Mychael closed his eyes and grit his teeth. With a hard growl, he broke the chains holding him to the wall. William's terrified gaze widened as Mychael walked over to him. When Mychael reached up, William flinched from his touch.

"I would never hurt you," Mychael said quietly. "But I will not leave you. William, please. Let me."

Tears shimmered in William's eyes, but he nodded slowly. Mychael reached up and jerked the chains from the wall, freeing William. Then he stepped closer. He watched as William's eyes closed, then he brushed the golden hair from his twin's neck. He moved quickly, sinking his fangs into William's throat. William's fingers dug into his back, clawing Mychael as he fed. When the movements of William's body ceased, when he felt William's pulse slow, Mychael pulled away. He brought his wrist to his lips and sank his teeth in, then pressed the wounds to William's lips.

"Drink."

William swallowed weakly, then closed his mouth over Mychael's wrist. Mychael hissed with the sharp pull and after a few moments, he removed his hand and caught William as he fell. Mychael squeezed his eyes shut, praying with everything he had that William would survive this. William's body began to shudder in Mychael's arms and Mychael forced himself to keep his eyes closed to the sight. He couldn't bear to see his beloved twin die.

When the movements ceased, Mychael finally opened his eyes and caressed William's cheek softly. "William."

William opened his eyes slowly and Mychael felt relief wash over him as William stared up at him. Mychael smiled and smoothed his hand over William's hair.

"You must change your names. Those in London have not seen you, but they know of you both."

Mychael looked to Loren, who stood watch at the door. "Aye," he agreed as he helped William to his feet.

"What names?" William asked.

Mychael thought on it for a moment and grinned. "Ashley Porter."

"Porter?" William asked, raising a curious eyebrow.

"Why not? It's close enough to Potter, but doesn't completely give us away."

"Very well," William said. "Then I'll be David, after our grandfather."

"Then it is so," Loren said as he walked over to them. "From this moment on, Mychael and William Potter no longer exist. You are Ashley and David Porter. Now let's get out of here before the time of your execution nears."

Loren opened the door slowly and peered around the corner for any sign of movement. The dead guard—the poor sod who had been stuck guarding the door when Loren entered the hallway—was slumped on the floor, his neck still oozing bright red blood. The twins followed along behind him, their bodies pressed tightly to the wall. All three of them remained alert for any disturbance.

"Now," Loren said, "when I give the signal, you both get to the door on the far right. It leads to an underground passage which runs under the hill and into the woods beyond." The twins nodded and

Loren stood near the main door leading down from the ground floor of the castle. Then he nodded to them.

Without a moment to spare, Ashley and David ran to the door, threw it open, and slipped soundlessly into the blackness of the tunnel. Halfway down the tunnel, Loren moved to the front to guide them to the safety of the woods.

As the end of the tunnel came into view, Ashley sighed with relief. The night was full upon the land and with it came freedom. Sweet, blessed freedom. Perhaps not all was lost. The Archangel had told him he would be reborn and reborn he had been.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Saying goodbye to the sunlight?"

John sighed, but didn't turn to face the man behind him. The man didn't understand, couldn't understand. Mychael always seemed to know when John needed him, yet he was nowhere to be found. John remained still as he watched the sun's last rays slip beneath the horizon. The world outside dropped into a darkness which tugged at his mind, reminding him of what he had done. He didn't know why he had done it—other than to save his own life when the vampire would have drained it from him. A strong hand on his shoulder reminded John he was not alone.

"You seem troubled," the vampire said.

John gave a short, sardonic laugh and turned to face the vampire who now stood beside him. The man was lovely, of that there was no doubt, but he wasn't Mychael. Yet John was attracted nonetheless, and he smiled despite his sullen mood. The vampire's russet hair was quite disheveled after their period of rest during the day, and from the faintest hint of a sparkle in his golden eyes, John knew the attraction was mutual.

"You have not told me your name," John said quietly.

The vampire smiled and slid his hand under John's hair to pull him close. "Then allow me to introduce myself," he whispered on John's lips. "I am Lian."

John's breath caught as Lian's lips brushed softly over his own. The man had a way about him and it intrigued John greatly. He offered no resistance when Lian drew him close and slid his silky tongue into his mouth. He tasted of blood and pure lust. His kiss was gentle, yet insistent. It was nothing like kissing Mychael, whose kisses could be rough and demanding or gentle and loving depending on his mood, who tasted nothing of blood and more of the clove he used to burn in John's bedroom. Such a sweet, thick taste it was; blood tasted more metallic and was not as delightful. John suddenly felt a sense of revulsion at the mere taste of the man's kiss and pulled away. Lian didn't seem to be offended and only smiled.

"Do you not find me desirable?" Lian asked.

"It's not that," John said as he turned to look out the window once more.

Lian slid his arms around John's waist. John stiffened, but did not pull away. He shuddered when Lian brushed his hair from his neck and bit down lightly on the tender flesh. John reached back and pulled his head closer with a groan. Lian held him tightly and drank only the smallest amount.

John bit his lower lip as Lian's mouth and arms held him captive. Lian pressed up against him and John felt the vampire's hardened cock through the thin cloth of his pants. The knowledge of the man's arousal was enough. He moaned softly as Lian's hand dropped down to squeeze his cock tightly. No, he was not Mychael, but he would do. Mychael had deserted him and for that, John would never forgive the sorcerer. When Lian pulled away from his neck, John turned around in his arms and met him in another kiss.

"Tell me," Lian whispered. "What was the sorcerer like?"

John stilled for the briefest moment and grinned. As angry as he was with Mychael, he couldn't resist the chance to talk about him. He lowered his hand and began stroking Lian's cock as he leaned into him.

"What do you want to know?"

Lian smiled. "How did he love you? Did he take your breath away slowly with every kiss? Or did he

steal your resistance with the intensity of his magic?"

Ah yes, Mychael's magic. John couldn't help but smile. "Mychael was always one to surprise. Sometimes he was in a daft mood, when nothing but the strangest things would please him. Other times, he was wild and demanded nothing less than complete submission on my part. Then there were the few times he was gentle and wanted to simply love me as any lover would."

"What strange things?"

John lowered his gaze, the slightest twinge of shame creeping up on him for even thinking about those nights. "He enjoyed pain," he whispered without looking up.

"Pain?" Lian asked. "He enjoyed giving pain?"

"Aye," John nodded, "and receiving it."

"Oh, really..." Lian mused quietly.

"Aye, he often wanted me to pull his hair or draw a knife over his flesh. He could do it without leaving a single mark on me, but I always broke the skin. He also liked to be choked when he climaxed."

"Tell me, John, did you also enjoy Mychael's little games?"

John felt himself grow flush. His silence gave him away.

"Ah, yes," Lian whispered as he slid his hand across John's buttocks. "You did enjoy them."

John couldn't bring himself to deny what Lian had guessed. Yet it was not the feel of pain which truly excited him; it was the delivery of it. As Lian unlaced his pants, John closed his eyes and imagined it was Mychael's hand deftly undoing the laces. He slid his hands up Lian's arms to his shoulders and pushed him to his knees. Lian ran his tongue from the base of John's cock to the tip. John groaned and slid his hands through his hair, pulling his head closer. Lian opened his mouth and took half of John's length into his throat.

John gasped as the vampire's mouth enveloped him in slick heat. This was always one of Mychael's favored acts, but only he could spark an inferno by simply swallowing a man's cock. Lian quickly proved to be quite good, however, and John thrust into his waiting mouth with a hearty groan. Aye, this man would do for now.

Lian slid his lips up and down John's length, getting it wet and slick. John groaned as Lian slid his mouth off of his cock. As soon as Lian stood, John spun him around without a word, pulled the vampire's pants down, and pushed him to his hands and knees onto the floor. Lian groaned as John pressed into him.

John was nearly delirious as he eased himself into the vampire's body. He took it slow, not so much for Lian's comfort as much as his own; there was no oil to be had. Mychael never let him do this much, although John often wondered why. Mychael had been quite the instigator in nearly every aspect of his life, which John supposed could account for his aversion to receiving such a wonderful thing. No matter. John was now buried to the hilt in this man's body and the feeling surged through his own until it reached his brain. He pulled out to the tip and slid back in as his thought processes began to shut down. No wonder Mychael loved doing this. The feeling of tightness, of heat, was nearly overwhelming. He had to stop for a moment, even though he hadn't really fallen into a nice, steady rhythm. Lian wiggled and pushed back against him.

John gripped Lian's hips then and thrust into him with a low growl. The vampire shuddered in his hands and John knew those tremors well. He grinned, pulled out, and thrust back inside. He was getting close, so close. When Lian groaned and his body tightened considerably around John's cock, all hope

was lost. John thrust into him one last time before spilling his seed deep inside the vampire's body. He twisted his hand in Lian's hair and jerked him up. As his cock convulsed, filling the vampire with his release, John bit down on his neck. Lian jerked wildly in his arms and John pulled his hair tighter. He thrust into him again and refused to release his neck.

Only when Lian went limp did John realize what he had done. With a shocked gasp, he released the vampire's body and backed away. Lian collapsed to the floor as his blood continued to pour from the nasty tear in his throat. The blood rushed forth too quickly and the tear in the artery was too deep and ragged for any sort of repair. John struggled to catch his breath; he had not meant to kill him.

As he watched the last of Lian's blood seep between the cracks in the wood, John realized he was going to have to hone his technique lest he kill everyone he fucked. He didn't know what had made him do it, but the urge to sink his teeth into Lian's flesh had been overwhelming. He glanced at the window as the moon rose over the horizon. He would have to leave, but he had no idea where he would go now. He looked back to Lian's lifeless body and felt a twinge of anger spark to life. If Mychael had taken him when he had left like John had begged him to do so many times, this would have never happened. Life as he had known it was over and John had only one man to blame: Mychael Potter.

* * * *

Rene draped his apron over one of the ale barrels and sat down on a log to rest. He had been carrying sacks and such into the kitchen for nearly three hours. The kitchen was small enough as it was, and with the extra provisions, there was hardly any room for him to move at all. He wondered for the hundredth time why his father insisted on moving so much into the building. The coldest weather was long gone. No, there must be another reason for this work.

Rene stood and hefted another sack of flour onto his shoulder. He pushed the back door open with his foot and dropped the sack into the corner atop the others. As he started to walk out the door once more, however, the conversation from the bar drew him back in. He slipped quietly through the kitchen and stood near the doorway to listen to the men who were talking. His father was one of them, but the other man Rene had never seen nor heard before.

"Are you sure it's the same man, Captain?" the innkeeper asked.

"Aye, it was him a'right and I was set to hang the damned rogue when he up and escaped out of my dungeon, he and his brother both."

Rene's brow furrowed. *Rogue? Brother? Surely not!* He turned back to listen more closely, hoping the captain wasn't talking about who Rene was thinking of.

"Perhaps you've seen him?" the captain asked the innkeeper. "He's about this tall," the captain said, levering his hand over his head to make his point clear. "And his hair is virgin white, although I know he's no damned virgin."

Rene felt the blood drain from his face. *Dear God, they were talking about Mychael Potter. Mychael escaped from a dungeon? Where? When?*

"Can't say I have, Captain, but if I do, I'll send word straight away to Merydd. What's the charge against him?"

The captain sneered. "Kidnappin' and murder. The buggerin' bastard made off with the lord's youngest son, John. If you see him, I want word immediately."

The innkeeper nodded and watched the captain leave the tavern. Rene flattened himself against the wall, breathless and not completely believing what all he had heard. *Mychael? A murderer? Perhaps in defense, but never in cold blood. The man had always been well-armed, but he much preferred*

seduction and charm to steel. Rene ran back outside when he heard his father bustling around at the bar once more. Annette would be devastated to hear this news; she had fallen quite in love with Mychael's brother. Now there was a man who never deserved to fall into any sort of trouble. William Potter was not the kind to do anything despicable; he merely tried to keep Mychael out of trouble.

Once outside, Rene groaned and slid down the side of the building. If Mychael and William were on the run, perhaps they would come here. He looked around then, wondering if perhaps the rogue was out there right now, watching him to see if maybe he would be true or turn him in for the bounty which was surely on his head. When no one came from the shadows, Rene sighed. He stood up once more to continue his work, then stopped cold when a voice came from the darkness.

"You catered to the rogue as well, did you not?"

Rene swallowed hard, wondering whether he should lie to the man or brag that he had indeed taken the infamous rogue into him many times. He wondered what the captain, for that was who he was sure it was, would do should he tell him the truth. When the owner of the voice stepped out of the shadows, however, it was not the captain.

"Who are you?" Rene asked the young man before him. He was quite attractive, to say the least, but something about him was odd. Rene backed up a bit when the man started towards him.

The man fingered a puddle of water that covered the top of a barrel from last night's rain. "If I tell you, I expect full cooperation. If you run, you die. If you do not, I'll let you live."

Rene nodded, although he fully intended to run either way. He had already started back to the door.

"My name is John Stockton," the man said. He smiled when Rene's eyes widened considerably. "Yes, they think me dead, but I am not. Well, not entirely, I suppose. And you are?"

"R-Rene." He backed away from John even more. Something was definitely not right with the lord's young son.

"Rene," John echoed quietly. He stepped up to Rene before Rene could run. He gripped his hair tightly and pushed him to his knees. "Don't think to run from me. Mychael Potter did as much, and in so doing, he made one of the worst enemies he could ever dream of making. Yet I must find him. I have knowledge regarding him which could make me, and any who follow me, very powerful indeed."

"Powerful? How?" Rene cared for Mychael, but this man was intriguing in his own dark way. He watched the man's mouth as he spoke. His lips were full and quite inviting. Rene suddenly realized he wanted, more than anything at that moment, to kiss the man standing over him.

John slid his hand through Rene's hair and smiled again. "Join me," he whispered, "and you will be powerful. I assure you, I do not disappoint. Everything I know, Mychael Potter taught me."

Rene couldn't help but grin at such an admission. When John leaned down and placed his lips on Rene's, Rene slid his fingers through John's hair and pulled him down. Rene moaned as John's firm, lithe body stretched over his, forming to every curve, every muscle.

"Will you join me then?" John asked as he moved his mouth from Rene's lips to the nape of his neck.

"Aye," Rene whispered. He threaded his fingers through John's hair, marveling at the silkiness of it. He drew in a breath when John's mouth brushed over his neck. When John opened his mouth over him, Rene gripped his head, waiting for the soft, gentle bite of a lover. When the bite came, however, Rene panicked and tried to push the young man off of him.

Pain unlike anything he had ever known shot through Rene's body as John sank his sharp teeth into his throat. Rene struggled and clawed at the man's shoulders, but nothing he did seemed to make much of a

difference. As the world beyond them began to fade away in a haze, Rene knew his life was at an end. John released him and smiled. Traces of red blood remained on his lips and John drew his own wrist to his mouth. With renewed horror, Rene watched as he bit down. When John placed the wound to Rene's lips, Rene turned his head in revulsion.

"You will die if you do not drink," John said calmly.

Rene turned to look at him once more and winced as a drop of blood fell to his lips. John smiled as Rene slid his tongue out to take the smallest taste. The taste itself was not as bad as he had first thought, but he wondered if he could really stomach a mouthful of it. He closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath. When he opened them once again, he pulled John's arm down to his mouth and began to drink.

"Yes," John purred. "Drink deeply, my love. You will be reborn into a new world of darkness. But do not fear; I will be with you."

CHAPTER FIVE

"Sweet Ashley, 'tis time to wake. It's night and you both must feed."

Loren drew his fingers down Ashley's cheek. Ashley turned his head into Loren's palm and brushed his lips across it. His pale lashes lifted slowly, revealing the limpid pools of his gray eyes. He smiled and tunneled his hand through Loren's hair, bringing him down for a kiss. When their lips parted from one another, Ashley groaned.

"You didn't tell me the hunger was this bad," he mumbled as he rolled over and rocked back onto his hands and knees.

"Aye," Loren muttered absently. He reached out and smoothed Ashley's hair down his back, tracing the curve of the sorcerer's spine with his fingertips.

Ashley turned his head to glance at him. The look in Loren's eyes was one of pure desire. Ashley felt every inch of his body echo with a similar need. He stood slowly and braced himself against the wall of the small, one-room cabin they had taken shelter in as the day had passed. He stretched his arms over his head and noted Loren's stare. At that moment, David sat up with a start.

"Sorry," David muttered after a moment. "I wasn't ready for such a need for blood to hit me."

"Until we get to London, it is not safe for either one of you to be seen," Loren warned as he stood. "Stay here and I'll go find someone for you both."

The twins watched him leave.

David turned to Ashley. "I don't like him."

"You've never been one to agree with my choices."

"No," David admitted, "you're quite right, but something about Loren sets my nerves on full alert. Be careful with him."

"Aye," Ashley said, "always." He closed his eyes and his breath stilled with the remembrance of Loren's touch. He had received no more than a kiss from the vampire, but a kiss was enough to rouse every nerve in his body in anticipation of something more.

Moments later, Loren returned with a young man in tow. Ashley paled when he realized it was one of the young locals, one he had been with once before. Loren pushed the young man to his knees and took his hand from his mouth.

"Mychael," the young man stammered, "what's going on?"

Ashley shot a look up at Loren, who simply stood over the young man, grasping his shoulders tight enough to cause visible pain.

"Take him, Ashley," Loren said.

A spark of anger flickered to life in Ashley's mind at the tone of Loren's voice.

Loren was ordering him to kill the man. Yet when he met Loren's gaze, he couldn't find the steel within himself to utter a single protest.

"Mychael?" the young man whispered.

Ashley let his gaze drop to the man. With lightning speed, he was on the man and sinking his teeth into his throat. *Crist*. The man's blood was like a calm in a storm, an end to the painful hunger. He drank deeply and much to his horror, he enjoyed it. He enjoyed the feel of the man's body beneath him, the thumping of the man's pulse as his heart pumped blood through his veins. When Ashley felt the heart's

rhythm slow, he released the young man's body. He sat up and slid his tongue over his lips. A shudder ran through him at the taste and feel of the man's blood.

Loren returned a few moments later with another one of the locals, a young woman. He pushed the young woman to her knees before David. Ashley could feel David's anger.

"Please, sir," the woman begged. "Don't kill me." Tears streamed down her cheeks in unending rivers.

You must feed.

I'll kill the son of bitch for this, Mychael.

* * * *

Ashley and David looked around at the expansive mansion Loren called home. Several others walked about and some craned their necks to see the new arrivals. Before long, word got around about exactly whom Loren had managed to find. Before they could get down the hallway to where the twins would be staying, several other vampires crowded in doorways to see the infamous rogue sorcerer walking down their hallway.

Ashley suddenly felt self-conscious, unused to stares the likes of which he was getting. Passionate stares, glares of hate—those he could handle, but these were different. The others looked quite jealous, the myriad of colors in their eyes gleaming with malice. Perhaps it was because he was a sorcerer ... or perhaps it was because Loren's arm wrapped tightly around his waist, holding him close. When they stopped at the last two doors at the end of the hall, Loren released him.

"These are your rooms," Loren said, pointing first to one and then across the hall to the other. "My room," he said with a grin to Ashley, "is at the other end of the hall."

Ashley watched David step into his room with a groan. He promptly shut the door, obviously not wanting to know what Loren and Ashley did.

Exerting no significant strength, Loren pulled Ashley to him. "Tell me," Loren whispered as he brushed his lips over Ashley's ear. "Have you ever made love with a vampire?"

Ashley's breath stilled as Loren's tongue slid over the curve of his ear. "No," he whispered.

"Then let me introduce you to the pleasures, sorcerer." Loren covered Ashley's mouth with his own and pulled Ashley's arms around his neck. He backed Ashley into the wall and pressed against him. "Come."

Ashley didn't protest, couldn't protest. He let Loren take his hand and lead him down the hall to his room. Once inside, Loren closed the door and pinned him roughly against it.

"You have magic, sorcerer," Loren growled. "Use it on me. I've heard stories about you, Ashley. I've heard you can make a man come without touching him."

Ashley groaned. John had been talking more than he should have. "Aye," he said, "I can."

He pushed Loren away and onto the bed. With a wave of his hand, Loren's pants fell open, revealing a delectable sight. He was hard and Ashley licked his lips, wanting nothing more than to take him in his mouth. However, Loren wanted his magic—his *magic*—when his body was much more enjoyable.

As Loren watched, Ashley picked up a candle and exhaled on the wick. A small orange flame sprang to life and Ashley cupped his hand over it. When he opened it once more, the flame was burning in his palm. Loren's eyes grew wide as Ashley lowered his hand and the flame to him. He poised himself level with Loren's cock and blew on the flame. Loren's back arched off the bed as the heat enveloped him, surrounding his length in velvet heat. He gripped the coverlet on the bed and groaned as the heat

began to stroke him, caressing him with its fiery fingers. Ashley moved his hands up and down, not touching him directly, but directing the fire's movements.

"Dear God," Loren breathed. "Ashley, don't stop."

Ashley coaxed the fire to pick up its pace as it stroked the rigid length of Loren's cock in its flaming grip. Within seconds, Loren's thighs tightened and he climaxed, coating his stomach and Ashley's lips. Ashley slid his tongue over them, savoring the taste. Unable to resist, he leaned down and brushed his lips over the tip. Loren gripped his head and thrust into his mouth with no warning.

"I want you," Loren growled as he pulled out of Ashley's mouth.

Ashley licked his lips, then looked down. He encircled Loren's shaft with his hand and gave it the slow, fluid stroke of a sorcerer. "Aye," he whispered.

Loren pulled him up and kissed him deeply. He gripped Ashley's arms and rolled him over, pressing him onto the bed. Ashley's cock pressed hard into Loren's thigh as he ground himself against him. Loren slid his hand between them to unlace Ashley's pants. Ashley arched his back and Loren slid the thin pants down his legs. A low, rumbling groan escaped Ashley's throat as Loren stretched his body over his. The feel of flesh on flesh was truly exquisite and Ashley gripped Loren's buttocks, pulling him down hard as he thrust his hips up.

"Anxious, aren't you?" Loren purred in his ear softly.

Ashley moaned and ground himself up against Loren's body. With the slightest movement of Loren's hands on his thighs, his legs parted and Loren settled between them. He moved down and the tip of his newly-awakened cock pressed against Ashley's entrance.

"What do you want, sorcerer?"

"I want you," Ashley growled. "I want you inside me."

Loren grinned and pushed with his hips. Ashley spread his legs further and raised his hips, meeting Loren's thrust with one of his own. Loren's mouth descended on his and his tongue darted down Ashley's throat. With every slow thrust, Loren's cock pushed deeper inside him.

Then Ashley stilled as another feeling began to surface within him, a less savory feeling. With every thrust, he felt his defenses slip a bit further away. Loren was taking hold of him—of his soul. He tried to push Loren off, but the vampire had worn his defenses to nothing. Ashley had no strength left to fight him.

"You're fucking mine," Loren hissed. He grabbed Ashley's arms and pinned them over his head. "Give it up, sorcerer. You can't fight me now."

Ashley bucked his hips, which only caused Loren to thrust harder into him. Tears began to stream down his face when Loren refused to stop. With a final shudder, Loren's body convulsed with his release. With Loren's energy drained by his orgasm, Ashley shoved him off, grabbed his pants, and ran out of the door. Once he was in his own room, he slammed the door and locked it. He leaned against it, unable to breathe, unable to think clearly.

* * * *

"I told you that you would experience pain as a mortal."

Ashley knew the voice like he knew his own. "I'm dreaming—I must be."

"Yes, you are dreaming. I cannot come to you now, Kaliel. You must listen for me in your dreams while you are in that house."

"Why?" Ashley asked. "Why would you have me experience that?"

"I do not dictate the behaviors of others, Kaliel," the Archangel said. "I told you that you would be reborn."

"But be reborn as something as vile as a vampire? Why?"

"Because in order to find the one you seek, you must be immortal, and to do that, you had to become one. I will be here, Kaliel. I may not come when you call, but I am always here." Ashley felt Michael slip away from his mind, leaving him to sleep once more.

* * * *

A knock on his bedroom door woke Ashley with a start, causing him to bump his head painfully on the lid of the coffin he slept in. The coffin would have to go; he simply couldn't abide sleeping in something so damned confining. He pushed up the lid and met a pair of familiar blue eyes.

"I thought I locked the door."

David grinned. "You did, but when one lives with a rogue, one learns a few tricks of the trade. You look like hell. What's wrong?"

Ashley knew damn well all hell would break loose if David were to find out what had happened in Loren's bedroom, so he simply shook his head. "Nothing. I just didn't sleep well in this thing." He patted the side of the coffin for emphasis. David seemed to buy the lie well enough.

"It's time to wake," David said as he helped Ashley out of the coffin. "I've never felt anything so fierce as this hunger."

"Aye, I know the feeling," Ashley mumbled. "Where to?"

David shrugged. "I don't remember much about London. Do you?"

Ashley shook his head. "Not really. I guess we can simply find something to tide us over for the time being, though. I'm not quite used to the idea of killing for survival."

As the two of them started down the hallway, Ashley stopped near Loren's bedroom door for a brief moment. He winced and felt like he was going to be sick. David gripped his shoulders tightly.

"What, Ashley?" he demanded. "What the hell is wrong?"

Ashley raised his head and the hold on his anger slipped. He felt it burst out of him and into David before he could stop it. David stumbled backward into the wall.

"What the hell?" David whispered.

Ashley shook his head, freeing it of the memory of last night. He looked at David and lowered his gaze. "I'm sorry," he muttered.

David remained plastered to the wall. "Ashley, what the hell did you just do?"

"I was angry and I let it slip. You felt it because you were touching me when it hit."

"Why were you angry?"

Ashley glanced at Loren's door. "I can't tell you here. Come, I'll explain later." He knew it was a bad idea to tell David what had happened, but he had to tell him the truth, at the least to explain why he let such an explosion of anger and hate bubble to the surface. He was just glad his brother hadn't been burned in the process. David followed him out of the house and down the darkened road.

Once they were out of sight of the mansion, his twin grabbed his arm and spun him around.

"All right, now tell me what the hell is going on."

Ashley motioned for him to sit down. David sat on the ground on the side of the road and Ashley sat down beside him.

"Last night," he said, "Loren and I were in his room. Everything was going quite well until I felt him drain my defenses to nothing. When I tried to push him off, he wouldn't move. It was as if he had drained my strength as well. I couldn't fight him."

"What!" David shouted as he jumped to his feet. "Are you telling me the bastard raped you?"

Ashley stood and grabbed David's shoulders, giving them a good shake. "David, don't do anything. I won't let it happen again, that I can assure you." David looked unconvinced and Ashley cupped his brother's face gently. "I'll be fine, Will."

David lowered his gaze and sighed. "If he ever fucking touches you again, I'll kill him myself," he hissed under his breath.

"I know you would. That's why I'm asking you to not worry. It won't happen again now that I know what he's after."

"And that would be?"

"My magic," Ashley said, straightening himself. "He wants me for my magic."

David groaned. "Ashley, this will only get worse, I fear."

"Not if we keep our guard up. Now come on, let's go. This damned hunger is driving me crazy."

Ashley forced the memories of the night before from his mind. Living with Loren would be a burden, but his tower was no longer safe. He knew deep within his soul that Loren would find him should he run. No, there would be no running this time. Their lives had been changed by one single moment, one single lapse of hope. He prayed his faith would keep him sane as he searched for the man he had sworn to protect.

PART TWO: UNHOLY FIRE

CHAPTER SIX

2003

England

Rain cascaded down the window in steady rivulets, accenting the already obvious: this was London. Inside an overly plush office, a computer monitor flickered every few seconds as the model it was rendering slowly took form. The sight was as dismal as the rain outside, but at least the sound of the rain had a calming effect, unlike the monotonous hum coming from the computer's casing. Morgan sat in a stuffed leather chair, his arms crossed over his chest and his gaze steady as he looked out at the city eleven stories below him. He was so lost in his reverie that he didn't hear his office door open, nor did he hear it shut.

"Bore da," a voice from behind him said.

Morgan closed his eyes and shook his head, the corners of his mouth turning up into a playfully annoyed grin. "You know I don't know Welsh," he said, turning to his cousin.

"Yes, but knowing when I'm speaking it is the first step in learning the language," Alec told him with a boyish grin.

A raised eyebrow was the only forthcoming answer.

"You want to go out for lunch today?"

"I don't know. It looks pretty bleak out there," Morgan said, turning back to the window.

Alec chuckled. "Welcome to London, Morgan. Believe me, it doesn't get much better than this."

"So I've noticed," Morgan said with a grimace. "What did you have in mind?"

Alec shrugged. "Didn't. Was going to ask you the same thing."

Morgan sighed. "I have no idea. Stonewall?"

Alec turned his head then and gave Morgan an amused grin.

Without a word, Morgan knew exactly what the man was thinking. "Don't get any notions in your damn head," he said defensively. "I haven't jumped the fence."

"You know, Todd will be quite disappointed to hear that," Alec said with a chuckle.

"He's not after me," Morgan replied. He returned his gaze to the city outside. "He's been after you for a while, or at least since I've been here." He looked out across the city, noting the enormous clock tower in the distance. "Damn. Have I really been here three months already?"

"Yep, and it's about time you got out of your apartment. You live like a hermit."

"I happen to like my life, thank you," Morgan retorted. "Besides, I'm not interested in getting involved with another woman just yet."

"Jesus," Alec said, looking down at him. "You're still hung up over Jess? That was two years ago."

Morgan sighed and leaned back in his chair, folding his arms across his chest once more. "Yeah, well, let's see how well you forget when you find your fiancé sucking another guy's dick in your living room," he said with a scowl.

Alec patted his shoulder. "Come on, man, let's go get some lunch. Maybe that'll break you out of your shell."

"Fine. Did we decide where?"

"Stonewall," Alec said with a grin.

Morgan glanced up at him and laughed. "You finally going to grow the balls to ask Todd out?"

Alec's gaze narrowed. "I might."

Morgan grinned. "Okay, let's go. At the very least, you two will provide plenty of entertainment."

"Gee, thanks," Alec muttered.

The two of them stopped by Alec's office so he could get his coat, then took the elevator the eleven floors down to the lobby. The lobby itself was rather vacant save for one client and Morgan nodded his head to the man as they stepped up to the front desk.

"Pat, would you please forward any calls to my voicemail? We should be back in roughly an hour," he said to the young woman behind the desk.

"Certainly, Mr. Adamson," she said with a shy smile.

She was pretty, that much Morgan couldn't deny, but he was a sworn bachelor and had no inclination for anything this soon after the nasty breakup with Jess. He returned her smile, however, which brought a flush of light pink to her skin.

Outside, the rain was just as bad as it had looked from his office window. Morgan pulled his leather jacket tighter around himself and zipped it up. The two of them ran to his car and got in just as another deluge poured down on top of them.

"Shit!" He puffed as he fumbled with his keys, his fingers numb. "It's gotten colder since this morning."

"It's November, Morgan. It's supposed to be cold."

He glanced at Alec and muttered "smartass" as he started up the car. Chilly air blew out of the vents and he quickly shut them. "Sorry," he said with a sheepish grin. "I actually needed the air conditioner this morning." Alec didn't say a word; he simply shivered and glared at him.

The traffic was hell once they got onto the main thoroughfare and Morgan began to wonder once more why he even bothered driving through London. He still wasn't completely used to being on the other side of the road, but he was getting better. Alec, however, was obviously not convinced. He held onto the dashboard, his knuckles turning white. Morgan chuckled as they pulled into the parking lot for Stonewall Eatery fifteen minutes later.

A group of men stood huddled under the red, white, and blue awning, which covered the stone steps leading down to the door of the pub. Their cigarettes made little whirls of smoke that quickly died out under the wind as a gust blew up. Morgan nodded to them as he and Alec walked down the steps. Several of them nodded back, a few adding sly smiles.

Inside, the restaurant was blessedly warm. A large fire roared in the stone fireplace in the back of the dining room, giving off a soft orange glow across the wooden floor and paneled walls. Pictures and paintings celebrating the gay community of London hung in various spots throughout. Morgan noticed Alec shaking his head as they sat down in one of the booths.

"Okay, damn it, come clean," Alec said, giving Morgan a dubious look. "Why do you come here if you don't like guys?"

"Because I like the atmosphere."

Alec looked around, then back at Morgan. "Dude, women don't come here. If you haven't noticed, this has become one of the prime pick-up joints in all of Soho for gay men."

Morgan opened his mouth to defend himself, but shut it quickly when the waiter stepped up.

"Morgan!" the waiter said with a surprised grin.

"Hi, Todd." Morgan took a menu and gave Alec a wink and a discreet nod in Todd's direction.

"Hello, Todd," Alec said.

Morgan fought miserably to stifle the chuckle. He jumped slightly as the toe of Alec's shoe caught him on the shin. Todd smiled and blushed.

"What can I get for you two gentlemen today?" Todd asked. He took his pencil out of his pocket and flipped open his server's book.

"I'll have the barbecued brisket with steamed vegetables and a pint of Guinness," Morgan said.

"I'll have the same," Alec added, still glaring at Morgan.

"Great, I'll have those out to you as soon as possible," Todd said.

Once their server was out of earshot, Alec leaned over the table. "You are a son of a bitch."

"I know," Morgan said triumphantly, "but it's well worth it when I can watch you squirm."

A few minutes later, Todd returned with their pints and Morgan watched with a grin as a flash of white paper passed discreetly between the young waiter and his cousin. "Like 'em young, don't you?" he teased as he took a sip of the thick beer.

"Hey, he's legal," Alec defended. "In fact, he's twenty-three."

"Yeah," Morgan said with a nod and a grin, "and you're thirty."

"Shut up."

Morgan chuckled.

A few moments later, Todd brought their lunches out to them, his gaze lingering over Alec before another customer flagged him down. Morgan watched Alec watching Todd. He had to admit: Todd was a good looking guy. The admission to himself wasn't as startling as he had expected it to be, but he still felt no desire for a man. As they ate, Morgan wondered if maybe he really just needed to get laid. The notion of being with another man wasn't a turn-on and Morgan figured he was simply that hard up.

After lunch, they returned to the office, even though Morgan would have been content to go home and take a nap; lunch had simply served to make him sleepy.

"Mr. Adamson," Pat said as they started toward the elevators. "There was one phone call for you. I sent the gentleman to your voicemail."

Morgan nodded. "Thank you, Pat." Once inside his office, Morgan threw his jacket over the back of his chair and hit the "play" button on his phone.

"Morgan, it's your father. Just wanted to check in and see how you were doing. We haven't heard from you in a few weeks and your mother was getting worried. I'll put her on."

"Hello? Morgan?"

"Mary, it's his voicemail; he's gone. Just talk to it."

"Morgan, it's Mom. How is everything there? How's the weather? Are you seeing anyone? You know, son, you're getting older and so are we. I'd love to have a grandchild. Anyway, we love you and call us tonight, baby."

Morgan groaned and rubbed his temples with his fingertips.

"Your mother has never been to London, has she?"

"No," Morgan grumbled.

"You know, you could always buy a dog and tell her the kid is simply hirsute."

"Shut up." Morgan turned and flicked a pen at Alec as he closed the door.

He sighed and turned his monitor back on. The program had shut down upon completion and now a text box blinked on the screen, alerting him he had email. He opened his email program and began deleting the messages one by one, not bothering to read them. He knew they were nothing but office junk. Only one was left when he got to the end of the office spam. He sat up for a minute, confusion setting in. He never got email at his work address other than the typical office stuff. Curious, he opened the email and read the message.

It was an invitation. A new club was opening two blocks from his loft and he was cordially invited to attend the opening. He read the name written in a dark red font: *Beacon Inn*. How did anyone know his work email address and why would anyone send him an invitation like this to begin with? If he were still living in the States, it wouldn't have been a surprise. He had been known in most of the goth clubs in DC. Here, he knew no one but Alec and his coworkers, none of whom were the type to even step foot in such a place. Still, the idea intrigued him and he forwarded the message to his private email. The opening was scheduled for that evening, which gave him something interesting to do instead of sitting around the house watching television all night.

* * * *

At fifteen after six, Morgan stood before the closed door of his loft, completely dumbfounded. A white flyer was taped to his door, "Beacon Inn" written across the top in dark red letters. He pulled the paper down and unlocked the door, somewhat shaken. Once inside, he crumpled the paper and threw it into the trash, then set his coat and briefcase down. He hit "play" on his answering machine and turned the television on to the news, only half-listening to the drone of his mother's voice once again. He went into the kitchen to get a beer when the next message started.

"Mr. Adamson, I would like to invite you to the grand opening of my club, Beacon Inn, this evening. The festivities begin at seven and last until sunrise. I look forward to meeting you."

Morgan caught the beer bottle before it hit the floor. He licked the beer off his hand and deleted the message quickly. He glanced at the clock over the stove and groaned. It was nearly twenty after six. He took another swallow of beer and picked up the phone, dialing his parents' number as he walked into the bedroom.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Mom," he said as he switched on the light. "I got your message this afternoon."

"Hi sweety! How is everything?"

"Raining, what else is new? How are you two?" He opened his closet door and gave the contents a cursory going-over.

"Oh, we're fine, honey. Your dad has a stress test for his heart next week."

"Again? I thought he had one two months ago?" Morgan asked her as he pushed clothes along the bar, looking for something interesting to wear.

"Yes, but the doctor assured us it's just a precautionary measure. But enough about us. How have you been?"

Upon finding the outfit he wanted, Morgan tossed it on the bed and turned on the bathroom light. "I'm fine. I've just been bus—"

He stopped, unable to finish the word, his heart caught in his throat. A mist formed in the mirror, and for a glimmer of a moment, Morgan saw a man—a haunting visage with brilliant white hair and the palest eyes—staring back at him.

"Morgan?"

Morgan shook his head and the image was gone. "Yeah," he muttered. "I'm fine. Look, Mom, I need to get off the phone. I have work I need to do this evening. I'll call you later. Love you."

"Okay, sweetie, love you, too."

He set the phone down and looked at the mirror again. The image had been brief, very brief, but the man's face was one he could never forget. He loosened his tie and suit, slipped them off, and tossed them onto the bed. He leaned over and started his bath water, then glanced back at the mirror. Nothing. As he stepped into the tub, he loosened his ponytail and the ebony waves fell halfway down his back as he settled into the hot water. After giving the mirror another glance and seeing nothing, he chalked it up to a long day at work and closed his eyes. The haunting image soon turned to nothing but a vague memory.

* * * *

Ashley sat bolt upright in his bed, sweat beading on his forehead. The faint remnants of his dream lingered in his mind. A man with jet black hair and eyes as green as emeralds stood before him, casting a gaze on him which pierced through Ashley's flesh and straight into his cursed soul. It had been the same gaze Ashley had seen so many times before through the dance of flames. The dream, though, was quite disconcerting. The man's image had never come to him in such a way. Ashley looked around his room, suddenly very wary of the empty darkness.

Go to him.

Ashley's breath stilled as Michael's voice echoed in his mind.

He is in danger. He will need you before the night is out, Kaliel.

"Where?" Ashley whispered. "How do I know where to find him?"

A tavern; a light in the storm.

Ashley grimaced at the Archangel's riddle, then the answer became clear to him. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and cursed at the cold of the wooden floor. He slipped on his black jeans and a black t-shirt, then sat down to lace his boots. It was a style of dress that came as close to what he once wore as one could get in this day and age. He combed his fingers through his hair, grabbed his trench coat, and left his room. He slipped silently into the room across the hall and shut the door.

In the middle of the room, a large casket sat on the floor, its dark gray surface lined with chrome hardware. He threw the lid open unceremoniously, revealing crimson satin lining and the sleeping occupant within.

"David," he said, shaking the vampire's shoulders. "Get up."

"Why?" David didn't open his eyes.

"Because we need to go to London." A single eye opened then and Ashley stared into its pale blue depths.

"You're certifiably insane, Ash."

"So I've been told," Ashley said with a scowl at his brother. "Now get up."

David sighed, then turned fully over onto his back. He brushed Ashley's hair back and looked into his eyes. "Why are we going to London?"

"Trust me, David."

"You've seen him again, haven't you?"

Ashley nodded. "In a dream."

"Where do you think he's going to be?"

"Beacon Inn."

David raised a blonde eyebrow. "You know that's Mordell's territory, Ash. Loren will have a fucking fit if he finds out."

Ashley's gaze narrowed and his lips tightened into a thin line. "I couldn't care less what Loren thinks."

David sighed. "How do you know he's going to be there?"

"Michael."

David's eyes widened. "The Archangel came to you here?"

"Sort of; he came to me in my mind and told me where the man would be," Ashley said.

"Fine, let me get dressed. When is the opening?"

"Seven."

"Jesus Christ, Ash," David muttered as he ran his fingers through his cropped blonde hair. "Don't give a man time to think things through, do you?"

Ashley shrugged. "You know me."

"Yea, I do." David got out of his coffin and stretched, the muscles of his lean body tensing and releasing. He pulled on his jeans and a shirt, then grabbed his boots and coat. Once he was dressed, Ashley led the way out of the room.

The hallway was as dark as always and several doors stood open. Most of the rooms were already empty. With nightfall, the mansion became a deserted shell. Only one door stood closed, but as they passed by it, a sliver of light appeared between the door and the doorframe. Ashley came to a sudden halt.

"Well, well," an obscenely sensual voice crooned from the doorway. "Where might you be going this evening, my dangerous beauty?"

Ashley clenched his teeth tightly together. Loren stepped out into the hallway in nothing but a silk robe. Behind him, Ashley could see the vampire lord's companion, Elissa, lying on the bed with a decidedly sinister smirk on her face. The vampiress felt threatened by Ashley's presence. She wanted every ounce of Loren to herself, but Loren still wanted him.

"We're going out," Ashley said, glaring at the inhuman master before him. Despite his hatred for his

maker, Ashley still felt the flutter of longing and desire in the vampire's presence. He cursed himself for allowing the man to get through his defenses once more.

"Mm," Loren murmured, taking a step closer to the younger of the twins.

Ashley's eyes darkened.

Not now, Ash. Please.

Ashley's gaze shifted to David upon hearing his thought. Loren slid his slender fingers through Ashley's hair, brushing stray strands of silver and white from his face. Ashley's body tensed as the lord's lips descended upon his own, stealing his breath and shutting down his defenses one by one. He closed his eyes as Loren's tongue slid across his lips, coaxing them open. With a soft gasp, he yielded.

Ashley.

The thought, the mention of his name, resounded in Ashley's brain. With a final strengthening of his will, he broke free from Loren's kiss and pushed the vampire lord away.

Loren grinned. "Be safe out there, Ashley."

The twins watched him disappear back into the bedroom, shutting the door behind him. David grabbed Ashley's arm and pulled him down the hall and out of the mansion's front door.

Once outside, he spun his brother around to face him. "You've got to find a way to fight him, Ashley," he said. "I've never seen you succumb so quickly to anyone like you to do him."

"I know," Ashley admitted. "But it's not the easiest thing to do, even for me. I still dream about him, David. My body still longs for his touch."

David sighed. "I know, but you've got to try. Come on, let's get to London."

* * * *

Morgan stood outside in the rain while the doorman looked through the list for his name. Upon finding it, the man nodded and the door to Beacon Inn opened for him. Morgan stepped inside, grateful to be out of the chilling rain. His leather jacket and pants were slick with water and his hair hung down his back, utterly soaked and curling as it dried.

The entry room was lavishly decorated with plush velvets in varying shades of red and the lamps were covered in red shades, throwing a soft, seductive glow upon everything in the room. At the far end of the room, a door opened and Morgan walked into the club proper. Black and chrome accented the entire room, a sharp contrast to the decadent softness of the entry. A DJ booth stood at the far end, raised on a platform above the dance floor. A bar ran the entire length of one wall, several bartenders working furiously behind it to keep up with the growing crowd.

The patrons themselves were just as dark as the club with their black fishnet, leather, and vinyl. Every once in a while, someone walked by Morgan with a touch of red, silver, or white somewhere on their body. Morgan, however, preferred a more subdued look, one that allowed him to blend in seamlessly with the rest of the décor.

Upon ordering a Hurricane at the bar, he looked around the room, taking a survey of the strangeness of the clientele. It had been quite a long time since he had even so much as stepped foot inside a gothic club. From what he could tell, the general age looked to be somewhere around twenty-two, which left him feeling rather old at twenty-eight. As he scanned the crowd, it soon occurred to him that he was looking for someone in particular. He didn't know why, but he felt compelled to look for the man he had seen in his mirror. Yet no matter where he looked, no one even remotely resembled him. With a frustrated sigh, he took another sip of his drink ... and froze.

He couldn't move; he could barely breathe. The man on the other side of the room was no mere image, and Morgan was startled to find him hauntingly beautiful. As he took another drink, the man moved closer. With another drink, the room became a fuzzy mass of bodies. Then a low voice whispered into his ear.

"Come."

The voice was oddly commanding and Morgan felt a tug in his mind to leave with this new stranger. With considerable effort, Morgan tore his gaze from the man across the room to meet the icy-blue gaze of the man behind him. He could feel control slip from him, but he was powerless to stop it.

He looked back to the white-haired man and then turned to follow the second stranger out of the club. A warning sounded in his mind, but went unheeded. The alcohol rushed through his veins at lightning speed, sweeping away every bit of doubt and caution he would have normally had. He wondered briefly about the man from his mirror, but upon reaching the alleyway beside the club, all thoughts left his mind in a matter of seconds.

Morgan groaned as the stranger pushed him against the brick wall of the building. The warning sounded again in his mind, but was overridden by the stranger's mouth on his own. With a swipe of the man's tongue, all coherence left Morgan's mind. He opened his mouth to the stranger, reeling in the heat of the man's breath as they kissed. The stranger's body held him pinned to the wall, unable to move. The moon dipped behind a bank of dark clouds and the stranger's hand slipped to the zipper of Morgan's pants.

"Wait," he said, breaking the kiss and catching the stranger's hand. "I've never done this."

"Shh," the man whispered as he kissed Morgan's lips again.

Morgan's head reeled from the alcohol and from something else he couldn't place. He was unable to speak when the man broke the kiss once more, and instead he watched the moon emerge from the clouds. Then the stranger lifted his head and smiled. Morgan's heart froze.

With the moon's pale glow, the glimmer of impossibly sharp teeth graced the stranger's smile. Finding his senses once more, Morgan shoved the surprised vampire away and ran. From behind him, he could hear the creature curse and growl as he slashed away at the back of Morgan's coat. Morgan hissed through gritted teeth as the creature's nails sliced through the leather jacket. They felt like razors as they tore his silk shirt to shreds and ripped into his flesh. As the end of the alley drew closer, Morgan prayed he could make it to the light. When he stumbled out into the empty street, he skidded to a halt, running headlong into the man from his mirror.

"Help."

CHAPTER SEVEN

In the clearing below, the topmost spires of the mansion rose up through the trees, giving it the illusion of a cathedral nestled in the woods. This place, however, was no house of God—it was one of the most unholy places in all of Wales—nor was it a traditional castle, having no fortifications save for the occupants themselves. In the dead of night, however, it looked as imposing as any castle might and the shroud of darkness served only to cement in one's mind the heresy within. Despite the local rumors and superstitions, the fear came not from the general populace of the place, but from one: a sorcerer who could conjure up demons from the pits of Hell—or so the rumors said.

David descended behind Ashley, landing on the soft grass in front of the house. Rain began falling through the trees once more and Ashley hugged the unconscious man to his chest, shielding him from the chilling rain. On the bottom floor of the three story mansion, a single window glowed from within—Elissa's room.

A slender female figure stood watching, then turned back into the room. Ashley heard David groan, but paid him no mind. No doubt the vampiress was now telling Loren what she had seen.

When they reached the front door, Ashley kicked it open with his booted foot. He carried the man into the parlor and laid him on the divan near the fireplace. With an absent wave of his hand, he started a fire from the cold ashes.

"I want him."

"Absolutely not," David argued. "Ashley, if this is indeed the man you've been sent for, then he isn't for you to claim as your own."

"Don't remind me of my weakness," Ashley muttered as he brushed a stray lock of sable hair, now dry and curly, away from the man's face. He was beautiful, devastatingly beautiful. Ashley ran one fingertip over the man's lips. They were closed and full: the perfect lips for a kiss. Indeed it took all his will to keep from doing just that. David was right; this man was not for him.

"What have we here?" Loren asked as he strode into the room.

"He's been hurt," Ashley said curtly without looking up.

"It wasn't one of ours, Loren," David explained. *Calm, Ashley.*

Ashley's stomach turned as Loren leaned over with a predatory grin and brushed the man's hair from his face. He knew that look well: it was the one Loren had given him too many times to count. Loren stroked the man's cheek gently and Ashley tensed. David gripped his forearm tightly, reminding him to keep his anger in check.

"Get him out of here," Loren commanded, releasing a lock of hair from his fingers. "I don't need one of Mordell's minions in Cardiff looking for a lost meal, no matter how pretty he is."

Ashley made a sound of protest, but David's grip on his arm tightened. They watched Loren leave the room without another word. Then Ashley stood.

"Ashley, please don't do anything rash," David pleaded.

"One night," Ashley said, not taking his eyes off the man. "That's all I ask, David. One night."

David sighed. "Fine. If anyone asks, you took him home and went hunting."

"Thank you," Ashley said, turning to him finally. He hugged David and picked the man up once more. He slipped out of the mansion's front door, struggling with feelings best left untouched.

The rain had thankfully stopped, and once he was far enough away from the mansion to be out of sight,

Ashley set the man down on the lush grass. He smoothed his fingers across the man's cheek, letting himself drink in the delicious warmth of his skin. His face was strong but finely built, with graceful lines forming his brows and cheekbones. Even though the man's eyes were closed, Ashley could feel the intensity of him. It was a drugging feeling and it reached deep into his soul.

Ashley remembered the image from the flames, the fierceness in the man's eyes. His lips were truly a work of art and Ashley could no longer ignore the temptation. He bent down and placed his lips over the man's for only a brief moment, yet a brief moment was long enough to thoroughly unnerve Ashley. He sat up quickly, suddenly wary of the energy he felt from a single touch. This man was dangerous and most certainly not meant for him.

With respect for someone's privacy being one of his lowest virtues, Ashley slid his hands into the pockets of the man's pants until he found what he was looking for. He pulled the wallet out and opened it, looking for something with a name and address on it. He noted a small stack of business cards, all with the same name: Morgan Adamson. He replaced them, then found a donor's card issued in the United States, a picture of an elderly couple, and finally a driver's license.

Ashley pulled the small card out and looked at the address. The man lived in London and his name was indeed Morgan Adamson. With a smile and a glance at the man's serene face, Ashley slipped Morgan's wallet back into his pants and picked him up once more. His scent roused Ashley's desires more than he knew was safe. He couldn't do anything with this man, despite the ache, which crept into his soul for the first time since he had conjured the man's image from a flame so many centuries ago.

* * * *

Morgan groaned and gripped his head in an attempt to make the room stop spinning. When he opened his eyes, he saw the moonlight trickling in through the window beside him. Everything else was a haze, a painful, throbbing haze, and he groaned again. From the lingering smell of clove incense, he knew he was in his own room. But how? Last he remembered he had been kissing another man outside of Beacon Inn. He opened his eyes as he suddenly remembered the man's teeth ... and the white-haired man. A shudder ran through him at the memory. He then realized he was only wearing his boxers and sat up quickly, only to collapse once more onto the bed, the room spinning anew.

"I don't know what he gave you, but the effects should wear off soon."

Morgan froze. His heart froze.

"Who are you? What are you doing in my house?" he demanded of the darkness, suddenly wishing he possessed some sort of weapon.

"You were injured," the voice said calmly. "I brought you home."

Morgan's gut twisted as his pulse began to race. Despite the overwhelming fear he felt, the voice held him entranced. It was a man's voice—low, steady, and overwhelmingly sensual. The mere sound of it sent a chill creeping up his spine.

"Who are you?" he asked again.

After a moment of silence, the voice said, "Ashley."

"Can you tell me why I'm undressed?"

"You had blood on you and I cleaned you up as best I could. I apologize for not dressing you, but I don't know where your clothes are. I had to look in your wallet to find your address. You're Morgan, are you not?"

"Yes," Morgan said. The sound of his name whispered by the stranger in the shadows made Morgan's

skin tingle and his heart to skip a beat, much like the image in his mirror did. Then the realization hit him. "It's you," he whispered.

"What?"

"You're the one I saw in my mirror."

"When did this happen?"

"This afternoon, after I got home from work," Morgan said. "I was just getting into the shower when an image of a man formed in the mist on my bathroom mirror."

"I have to go."

"Wait," Morgan said as he stood up. He looked into the darkness, searching desperately for the face that refused to leave his mind.

"What?"

"Can I see you?"

"Later. Meet me at Beacon Inn tomorrow night at eight."

Morgan didn't see Ashley leave, but he knew he had gone. He knew from the sudden emptiness which filled his room and strangely enough, his heart. He shook his head then, not believing what he was thinking. Never in his life had another man caught his eye. He settled back into bed, determined to try to get some sleep, despite the thoughts—and the voice—that invaded his mind. When that didn't work, he sighed and got up.

He went into the living room and sat down in the recliner. He turned on the television, flipping through channels aimlessly. Before he realized it, it was nearly three in the morning and he simply could not sleep. Every time he started to doze off, Ashley's voice came back to haunt him once more. A part of him was grateful he hadn't been able to see him in the bedroom; he simply didn't trust himself anymore. The notion of touching Ashley caused Morgan's blood to heat in his veins. Alec would have a field day with this one for sure ... if Morgan decided to tell him.

He sighed as he let his mind finally wander, giving himself over to his thoughts for once. He remembered Ashley's face from across the club. He remembered his voice as it carried through the darkness of his bedroom. Most of all, he remembered the pale eyes that haunted him relentlessly. His heart fluttered in his chest and a burning ache flared to life for the first time in over a month. Underneath his robe, he was hard, harder than he ever thought possible. With a tentative, nervous breath, he opened the terrycloth robe, exposing his naked flesh to the warm air of the apartment.

He stretched his legs out and ran his hand over his chest, his eyes closed and his mind in a state of turmoil. His heart pounded beneath his ribcage as he slid his hand down over his stomach, gently caressing the rippled lines of his muscles. His cock throbbed painfully, aching for a touch ... aching for Ashley's touch. Morgan groaned as the truth of it washed over him and he wrapped his hand around his length, wishing from the deepest part of his being it was Ashley's hand and not his own.

With a slow, firm stroke, he arched his back, his mind telling him Ashley's lips were around him. He imagined the man's touch as being soft, yet sure. He had no idea what Ashley was like in bed, nor did he know if Ashley even liked men, but as he imagined Ashley's lips closing around the head of his cock, Morgan's grip tightened and the speed of his stroke increased. With a particularly strong stroke, his breath caught in his throat. He could almost feel Ashley's mouth, the heat of his breath, the silky touch of his tongue. Morgan's thighs tightened and he grit his teeth. With a final stroke, he came in his hand. Panting, he looked down at the sticky mess coating his palm and his belly. Coming to a fantasy of another man wasn't nearly as unsettling as the fact that the man wasn't there with him. His chest

ached. His heart ached. He squeezed his eyes shut in an attempt to rid himself of Ashley's face, but no amount of will could erase the man completely from his mind.

* * * *

"Where is your damned brother?" Loren paced the floor furiously.

"I'm here."

Loren wheeled around, his blue eyes blazing with anger. In two long strides, he reached Ashley and gripped his shirt, bunching it into his fist. "Where the hell have you been?" Loren said through clenched teeth. "Do you have any fucking idea how long I've been waiting for you?"

Ashley's eyes darkened and he ripped away from Loren's hold. "I am not yours to control," he growled. He felt the heat building up within him and the temperature slowly changed in the room, growing colder as his anger grew, his body absorbing all the heat. The fire in the stone fireplace flickered briefly, then died out in the breath of a second.

Loren stepped up to him, twisted his hand in his silver hair, and jerked his head into a painful angle. "Oh," the vampire lord whispered near Ashley's tightly closed lips, "I believe you are."

He pressed his lips to Ashley's. A small trickle of blood appeared at the corner of Ashley's mouth from the small bite that Loren gave him on his lower lip. Ashley balled his hands into fists and the bulb in the lamp behind him burst with a loud pop. Loren tightened his grip in his hair, the silver strands shining like quicksilver in the light from the only remaining lamp in the parlor. Ashley fought for control within himself, Loren's hold on him growing stronger and bringing his defenses down slowly. Then Loren's tongue slid across his lips and Ashley felt the crushing weight of defeat as his lips parted at the lord's bidding.

The heat in his body reached a fevered pitch, boiling like liquid fire in his veins as Loren's tongue slithered along his own, further coaxing his defenses to shut down one after another. With his master's touch, his body tingled. With Loren's kiss, he was hopelessly lost. Loren's free hand slid across the small of his back, pulling him closer. His hand slid over his ass, then around the front to grip Ashley tightly through his jeans. Ashley felt Loren grin on his mouth as he grew hard under the lord's touch. Then the silent warning came.

Ashley, stop!

Ashley froze. The simple warning from David brought him once more to his senses. With renewed strength, he shoved Loren away, breaking the kiss abruptly. Loren grinned, then turned to leave. David stepped away from the door as Loren shoved past him. Ashley crumpled to the floor, his energy and defenses in tatters.

"You haven't fed, have you?" David asked as he knelt beside him. He brushed a lock of silver from Ashley's face. Ashley shook his head. "Ashley, you must feed. Come on, let's find you someone quickly."

* * * *

JD watched nervously as the cloud-bank rolled in, covering the silver moon in a thick blanket of dark gray. Within a span of seconds, the shadows of the alleyway crept into the street, leaving only a pale circle of golden light cast by the street lamp down the road. JD's heart skipped a beat. He looked at his watch: it was fifteen after three in the morning. He should have taken a cab from the club, and as the edge of the shadow crawled closer to him, he wondered again why he had not done just that.

The lamp down the street flickered once, causing his breath to catch. It had never done that before. The trees to his left rustled in a breeze and he shivered, pulling his coat tighter about himself. In the six

years since moving to Cardiff, JD had never been afraid of the night, but something about this night was different. Something was out there.

He shivered again, but not from the chill. The cloud-bank drifted by and the moon came out of hiding, bathing the street in a pale, silvery light. JD began walking again, a feeling of desperation stealing through him. Every hair on his body, every nerve within him, was on edge. Something was not right. A shadow, darker than the shadows of the alleyway, flitted across the street in front of him. He stopped cold. His heart began to race in his chest and a voice in his mind said "go." He didn't hesitate. He picked up his pace, not stopping to see what might be behind him. The lamp was still half a block away, too far for his liking. If he could just make it to the lamp...

With a sound like the rustling of leaves, a single hand slipped around JD's throat, stopping him in his tracks and rendering his voice useless. It was a man; he knew by the overwhelming strength of the grip. The rustle of leaves turned out to be the rustle of a leather coat, a long one which reached to the ground. JD saw the hem of it out of the corner of his eye. The hand was strong, preventing him from moving even so much as a single inch. Despite the fear welling up inside him, however, JD's heart raced from the nearness of such a man. It had been so long since he had been with anyone. The tip of the man's tongue snaked out and traced the curve of JD's left ear, causing a shudder to steal up his spine.

"I can either make this long and pleasurable," the man whispered, "or short and painful."

JD's breath caught in his chest. The voice was definitely masculine. His groin ached, even as his mind screamed with one word: "run!"

"What will it be?" the man asked. His breath caressed JD's neck in soft, delicious waves.

JD swallowed, then his fear won out. As soon as the hand relaxed a bit, he slipped from the stranger's grip and ran. The lamp was getting closer and JD thought he might actually get to it. Then the hand closed around his throat again. Another arm slipped behind his arms, wrenching them both painfully behind his back. He winced and struggled to get free.

"Mm," the man purred in his ear. "I had hoped you would have chosen my first offer."

The stranger tightened his grip on JD's throat, cutting off the scream that had barely broken the surface. Then the stranger released his arms and turned him around. A sinking feeling began in the pit of JD's stomach and soon stole into the rest of his body when he saw the stranger behind him. His brain fought desperately with itself, battling over the instinct for survival and the instinct of a man's desire.

A black leather trench coat covered the entire length of the man's body, but a thin line down the middle was visible, revealing the faintest hint of black jeans and a black shirt. JD's gaze traveled up the stranger's body slowly, taking in every inch of him. He was much taller than JD, and from the hand that was curled around his throat, holding him motionless with little effort, JD surmised the stranger was stronger than most men. He followed the lines of the man's broad shoulders up to his neck, then to his face. The stranger's face looked more like an angel's than a man's.

JD's heart skipped another beat and began to race in his chest as he drank in the sight of him. The man's pale, full lips were curled into a predatory grin. His hair shimmered with sparkles of silver and white as it draped over his shoulders and down his back, stretching to his waist in silky waves. But his eyes, dear God, his eyes. They were the color of the moonlight—pale, almost iridescent silver, with darker points of gray and limned in startling white. They darkened to the color of molten lead as he met JD's gaze.

"My God, what are you?" JD breathed.

The stranger's eyes narrowed as his lips curled up into a fiendish grin. "Marwolaeth." *Death.*

"But why?" JD watched the stranger's eyes, unable to break away from their terrifying spell.

"Death has no answers," the man whispered.

JD opened his mouth to ask another question, but his voice caught as the stranger's mouth descended on his own. A scream welled up inside him as the stranger's tongue slid along his, the kiss laced with the promise of pleasure beyond imagining and death beyond control. Unable to resist any longer, he dared to touch the stranger. He slid his hands gingerly up the man's arms. They were corded in muscles, which could be felt even through the thick leather of the man's trench coat. He marveled at them as they flexed and relaxed when the stranger pulled him closer, pressing their bodies together. With a slow, strong grind of the stranger's hips, JD felt what awaited him should he give in. He gasped into the stranger's mouth and felt another grin cross over the man's lips.

The stranger withdrew from the kiss and drew a line from JD's mouth to his throat with the tip of his tongue. He moved his lips to the nape of JD's neck and bit. JD pulled at the stranger's hair in a desperate attempt to pull him away as a scream lodged in his throat. It was all for naught. The stranger drank deeply as JD's blood pumped into his mouth in a steady stream. When JD's heart slowed to a fatal crawl, the stranger placed him on the street.

"Who are you?" he asked. His chest barely moved with his breath and his eyes began to glaze over in the mask of death.

The stranger slid his hand over JD's eyes and whispered, "Ashley."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ivan grumbled as he strode cautiously into the main hall of his lord's castle. What were once beautiful stained glass windows were now only patches of red brick and mortar, leaving only the candles to provide illumination. The flickering flames cast disfigured shadows upon the stone walls and floor, but it was the only good they did. Heat was scarce in this part of the castle, and even one such as Ivan, who hailed from the frigid north, was not beyond shivers in the hall. Cobwebs clung to nearly every surface, giving the room an abandoned feel, which was just what his lord wanted. Some whispered it was the lord's way of reflecting the anger which seethed in the black hole that was once his heart, anger caused by the abandonment from the one person he had ever truly loved.

As Ivan neared the end of the hall—which was entirely too expansive for his tastes—a dark form came into focus. It was seated in what could have only been described as a throne, a symbolic representation of the lord's usurping of the castle's previous owner. The figure's arms were folded across his chest and his pale blue eyes glared at Ivan with annoyance and, worse still, disappointment. Ivan swallowed hard as he knelt at his lord's feet.

"I send you to procure one man, one fucking mortal man, and you come back in incoherent hysterics. I dare say a dog could do better," the lord growled at Ivan. His voice was coarse and dry, like a ball of crumpled paper rubbed over a rock, causing Ivan to cringe. "I have a mind to chain you up in the dungeon where you can rot the rest of your days away."

Ivan's face went paler than it normally was and he feared his blood would drain from his body. His lord was not above torture, and indeed he often partook in the enjoyment of watching a prisoner—mortal or vampire—being subjected to all manner of horrendous treatments. Anyone with a sense of self-preservation would fear Mordell and his unusual hobbies.

"P-please, m'lord," Ivan stuttered. His voice quavered from both cold and sheer terror. "Give me another chance. I swear I will not let him escape me again."

"What of these other two? Loren's, are they not?"

Ivan nodded nervously. The thought of dealing with Ashley Porter, and inevitably his twin, was more than he cared to think about. "Aye, they are, m'lord. Twins, they are. But if I could just get the mortal away from them, we would have him. I do not fear the sorcerer," he lied.

Mordell's face went pale. "Sorcerer?" he asked, leaning closer to the fearful vampire below him. "What sorcerer?"

"A-Ashley Porter and his twin brother. They're from Cardiff, I believe."

Mordell's brows knitted together in agitation. "What does this Ashley Porter look like?"

Ivan began to shake even more. "H-he has white hair, as white as the purest snow, shot through with silver. His eyes are so gray and pale, they look to be transparent. His brother looks much the same, but with blue eyes and blonde hair."

Mordell cursed under his breath and his jaw clenched tightly. "He's one of the most feared sorcerers in all of Wales," he growled.

Ivan blanched and backed away.

"Very well," Mordell said, "you have one more chance to do this. Bring the mortal to me, but be wary of Ashley and his brother. I don't need the two of them here, especially together. If you fail me this time, it will be your last."

"Yes, m'lord. Thank you, m'lord," Ivan muttered quickly as he backed away from the throne. He feared

his lord enough to not turn his back on him while within reach, especially after his failure. When he was content with the distance between himself and Mordell, Ivan turned and fled the hall.

He hurried along the corridor, skirting the partially opened doors and scowling glances from the others. Not many liked him to begin with and his standing with Mordell didn't help matters. Many coveted the position he held, and on more than one occasion, a few even tried to 'relieve' him of the burdens. Those few, of course, became Mordell's play toys—stars in his myriad of macabre situations he so enjoyed playing out in the musty, stinking dungeons below.

However, another issue entirely weighed on Ivan's mind as he rushed through the maze of halls to his own chambers. How could Mordell, the only vampire in England who could possibly rival Loren Matthews, be afraid of a pair of brothers? True, two were worse than one, but Mordell would have them both groveling for mercy at his feet if he were to unleash his entire horde on them. Why was Ashley so important? Ivan knew the vampire was one of the more powerful ones below the lords, but there was something more—something in Mordell's voice—which the vampire lord wasn't revealing.

Whispers pervaded the still air of yet another corridor, and Ivan picked up his pace. At the end of the hallway, he turned left, then right, then right again. He ran down the darkened hall, certain the others were massing behind him. He could feel the thick breath of the ages brush the back of his bare neck and across his hairless head.

At the end of the impossibly long hall was the door that opened into his chambers—the only safe haven from Mordell's other minions. He reached the door and triggered the latch. The heavy wooden door swung open and he wasted no time in slipping inside, slamming the door shut on the enclosing whispers in the empty air. Outside, the sounds of the whispers faded away, but Ivan didn't dare open the door. The room was relatively barren, save for a table, a chair, a stone fireplace, and a coffin resting in the far corner. He had long since discarded the crucifix which hung for so long over the corner where a bed once sat, back when the castle was but a humble abbey and he held a love for a now-forsaken god. He eyed the coffin longingly and went to it. The wood, cracked and faded with the centuries past, brought an odd sort of peace to his tortured mind as he ran his fingers over its knots and creases. He slowly lifted the lid and climbed inside. As the top closed over him, he slipped into a quiet, restful slumber. Night would be here soon enough and with it, redemption in the eyes of his lord.

* * * *

"Dude, you look like hell."

Morgan grumbled and buried himself lower in the recliner's plush cushions.

Alec raised an eyebrow at him quizzically. "You didn't sleep much, did you?" he asked, taking a sip of his coffee.

"No."

Alec sighed. "Morgan, what's wrong?"

"If I tell you, you've got to promise me that you won't say a fucking word to my parents." When Alec set his cup down on the coffee table slowly, Morgan knew he had his cousin's attention. "I think I met someone," he said quietly as he stared into his own mug, the black coffee cold and untouched.

"And?" Alec prodded. "Who is she?"

Morgan sighed again. "That's the catch, Alec—it's not 'she.'" Alec's eyes grew wide as saucers and Morgan couldn't help but laugh. "I know, I know. I've sat up all night anticipating some smartass remark from you."

Alec sat in stunned silence.

"No comment?" Morgan asked with a sheepish grin.

"W-well," Alec stammered, "I honestly don't know what to say. How did you meet him?"

Morgan knew he couldn't even begin to explain that one truthfully. "I met him at the new nightclub down the street."

"Does he feel the same?"

"Well," Morgan said, remembering the gaze which had held him so mesmerized the night before, "he doesn't know how I feel. To be honest, Alec, I don't even know how I feel." He looked up and met his cousin's hazel gaze.

"Well, how do you feel when you're around him? Or have you really been near enough to him?"

"Not exactly. I saw him at the club, from the other side of the room," Morgan explained, telling only half the truth. "But he hasn't left my thoughts since. I see his face everywhere. I hear his voice when I'm awake, when I'm asleep. My God, Alec, I'm obsessed with another man and I've never even been with one."

Alec nodded. "I know. Look, Morgan, I honestly don't know what to tell you. Do you know anything about him?"

Morgan looked back down into his coffee. "His name is Ashley."

"Do you think you love him?"

"How can I love someone without even knowing them?"

Alec grinned. "Love at first sight?"

Morgan groaned and closed his eyes.

"What does he look like?"

Now there was a question he could answer truthfully. Morgan smiled and without opening his eyes, he said, "he's the most beautiful person I've ever seen. He's taller than me and slender. He has white hair down to his waist. He's young, maybe my age or a little younger. But his eyes, Alec; my God, his eyes are mesmerizing. They're the color of the clouds, the palest gray."

"Hm," Alec mused. "Sounds to me like someone has fallen in love."

Morgan opened his eyes and narrowed his gaze. "I don't know what it is," he said, "but it's driving me crazy. I can't get him out of my head and I don't know how to find him."

"What do you want, Morgan? What do you really want?"

Morgan looked his cousin in the eye. "I want Ashley."

Alec drank the last of his coffee, then set the cup down on the table. "Man, I've got to go. Todd's waiting for me to pick him up from work."

"You two getting serious?"

Alec shrugged. "Maybe. We'll see."

Morgan stood and walked him to the door. "Take it easy, man. I'll see you Monday." He watched Alec walk down the hallway, then closed the door.

He turned back to the quiet of the apartment and took a deep breath. The scent of the incense he kept burning in the dining room filled him with a peace he desperately needed. Yet no matter the calm, one face, one voice came to him once more. He leaned against the door and closed his eyes. It had been two

years since the breakup with Jess and he had shunned away many advances from beautiful women, but the first man to come into his life stole his heart without any conscious effort.

With a steadying sigh, Morgan walked back into the living room and looked out the window. More rain, no surprise. He gazed out across the city, which stretched out three stories below and wondered where Ashley was. He didn't know where to find Ashley, but as he gazed out at the full clouds, watching them grow dark with night, a thought came to him. Ashley knew where *he* was. He smiled at the thought and turned from the window once more. Ashley knew how to find him, and something told Morgan the man would eventually do just that.

* * * *

From the darkest shadows, a silent figure watched and waited. People trickled in and out of the club below, oblivious to the danger perched above their heads. Ashley watched a young man walk into De la Morte with a group of four others. His skater haircut lent a touch of boyish appeal to his overall appearance. His charcoal-circled eyes were deep, brown pools. His hairless chest beckoned to Ashley from beneath the fishnet of his shirt, begging him to touch, taste, and devour. Ashley jumped off of the roof and into the alleyway. Then, he slid through the door of the club unseen, a rapacious gleam sparkling in his pale eyes.

The interior of the club was as dark as Beacon Inn, but Ashley knew its layout much better. He had been here many times in the past, but only to watch, never to hunt. It was Morgan; the damned mortal was eating away at his senses with a voraciousness that left him feeling drained and empty. The moment Morgan stumbled into his life in the flesh everything went to hell. Loren had become worse; surprising even Ashley, but it was to be expected. Ashley had found a new interest and Loren knew his influence was slowly slipping, no matter what he tried, no matter how hard he pushed.

As he moved through the crowd, Ashley felt hands brush him through the leather of his trench coat. Most of them were women, entranced by the mere presence of him. He grinned inwardly. Even after four centuries, he had not lost his touch. Yet as was his wont back then, he had his sights set on more masculine prey. As he neared the bar, a small hole appeared in the crowd and a sweet, tender morsel stood waiting with wide eyes and delicious lips.

"Noswaith dda," Ashley whispered as he came to stand close enough to the young man to hear his heartbeat.

"Good evening to you as well," the young man said coolly.

Ashley grinned. It wasn't often he found someone who knew Welsh, and even less often he found a young one who did. "What's your name?" he asked the young man as he slid up to lean against the bar.

"Kurt. And you?"

"Mychael," Ashley said with a grin, reverting to a name he had not used in over four hundred years. "What would you like?" he asked, nodding to the bar behind him.

Kurt smiled. "I was thinking of something a bit more ... exotic." His pause brought a grin to Ashley's lips, revealing the slightest hint of teeth. Kurt didn't seem to miss it, and Ashley smelled the sudden emergence of the young man's fear. It was a scent as intoxicating as lust itself, a scent as drugging as ... *Morgan*.

With the whisper of the mortal's name in his mind, Ashley knew, beyond all doubt, no one else would ever satisfy him completely. Without giving it a second thought, he gripped Kurt's hand and pulled the young man up against him. A gasp escaped Kurt's lips, rousing Ashley's hunger—and anger—even more. The scent of the man's fear was palpable and the press of his body caused Ashley's blood to heat,

bringing everything in his mind to a grinding halt. He descended on Kurt's lips, forcing the young man's mouth open with his tongue, driving his body harder into Kurt's. Kurt's kiss was laced with fear and desire.

Damn Morgan Adamson. Damn the fucking mortal for ever being born.

Ashley broke the kiss, unable to wait any longer. "Come," he ordered. Without giving Kurt a chance to utter a single word, Ashley pulled him out of the club.

As soon as they got to the alley, Ashley shoved Kurt hard against the brick wall and assaulted the man's mouth. He ground his body against Kurt's, pressing him into the wall, letting him feel what awaited him. Kurt's heart pounded in his chest, the rhythm inciting Ashley's rage to a new level. He ripped the fishnet from Kurt's body as the man's hands tangled in his hair. He felt Kurt push him to his knees and he kissed his way down the man's chest and stomach. He could feel Kurt's cock, hard and ready, pressing against his collarbone. He moved his lips further down, leaving feather light kisses in his wake, a technique meant to seduce and torment someone beyond reason. The effect was just as Ashley had anticipated. Kurt's hands twisted in his hair, pushing him lower. Ashley trailed his tongue along the bulge in Kurt's pants. Then in one swift motion, Ashley tugged Kurt's pants and underwear down to his ankles. He wrapped one hand around the cock in front of him and layered kiss after soft kiss along its length, stopping to nibble and nip near the tip.

"Suck it," Kurt whispered breathlessly as he gripped Ashley's head.

Not one to argue with such a request, Ashley flicked his tongue across the tip of Kurt's cock and swallowed half of it. Kurt drew in a deep breath and moaned. He rocked his hips forward and thrust into Ashley's mouth. Within seconds, Kurt's thighs tightened and with a final thrust, he came. Ashley drank every drop, swallowing it like a ravening madman. When Kurt was spent, Ashley stood and licked his lips.

"My turn," he growled. He spun Kurt around and bent him over. Kurt braced himself against the wall with his palms. Ashley leaned over his back, pressing himself against the young man, and left a soft trail of kisses down his spine. Kurt wiggled impatiently under him.

"Fuck me," he pleaded. Ashley grew harder against him.

With a slight motion from his hand, Ashley's pants were undone and dropped to his knees. He spread Kurt's ass, revealing a tiny puckered hole that begged to be ravaged. He placed the head of his cock against it and with a deep growl, he shoved his entire length inside Kurt's body in one thrust. Kurt jumped and screamed as Ashley's cock mercilessly impaled him. Ashley threw his head back and grit his teeth. The lack of any lubrication left his flesh painfully dry, but he simply didn't care anymore. If pain would ease his mind, then he was more than happy to feel it.

He gripped Kurt's shoulders, pulled out, and thrust back in again. *Damn Morgan*, he cursed silently. He thrust again, harder, rougher. Kurt's ass felt exquisite as it tightened around him, sucking him further in with every thrust. Thoughts of Morgan clouded Ashley's brain, taking away every shred of sense and turning it into a torrent of unwanted emotions. He thrust again, growling with a rage he had not felt in a long time. Kurt's moans of pleasure quickly turned to sounds of pain and panic, but Ashley no longer cared. His anger was too strong to manage this time. He slammed himself into Kurt's body, forcing a scream from the young man's mouth.

When Ashley felt himself grow close to orgasm, he wrapped his hand in Kurt's hair and jerked him up, remaining deeply imbedded inside the man's body. As his thighs tightened and his stomach twisted into a knot, Ashley lowered his lips to Kurt's neck, brushing them along the smooth ridge near his shoulder. With a final, forceful thrust, he came deep inside Kurt's ass and his teeth sank deep into his neck. Kurt's

body shook from his own orgasm even as his blood flowed into Ashley's mouth.

Ashley drank deeply and with another thrust, he came again, groaning into the man's neck. When he heard Kurt's heartbeat slow to a faint whisper, he withdrew from him. He laid Kurt down on the ground of the alley and slid his hand over Kurt's eyes to close them. Then he pulled his pants back up, licked his lips, and jumped up to the rooftop above, disappearing into the black of the night, back to the castle.

* * * *

"Sweet Ashley—so beautiful, so deadly."

Loren caressed Ashley's cheek softly. With every stroke of his fingertips, Ashley slipped deeper into a peaceful sleep, calm and subdued. Loren sat up and nodded. Karl, his second-in-command, appeared, picked up the enchanted sorcerer, and carried him to Loren's room. He laid Ashley down on the bed, gave him a scowling look, and left. A moment later, another door opened and Elissa walked in. She shut the door softly and went to Loren's bed.

"How did you ever get him without him putting up a fight?" she asked, keeping a wary distance from the sleeping sorcerer. Loren smiled as he stroked Ashley's face gently. The vampiress bristled at the sight.

"When he's asleep, Ashley is more susceptible. It's when he's awake that I'm challenged, and such a wonderful challenge he is," he whispered. Elissa grit her teeth and crossed her arms over her chest in anger. Loren sensed her tension and looked up.

"You have me, yet you still yearn for him."

Loren stood slowly and went to her. He ran his hands up her arms and over her shoulders. "My dear Elissa," he said softly. "It is true; I crave Ashley. But he is no threat to you. I want his magic. I'm addicted to it. Believe me, if you could experience the sorcerer the way I have, you would understand."

Elissa glanced around Loren's shoulder. "He's moving," she said coldly.

Loren turned around and went to the bed. He leaned over and kissed Ashley softly, drawing out the sorcerer's will before he could wake fully. After a few moments, Ashley's arms encircled Loren's neck, pulling him down and deepening the kiss.

* * * *

Ashley felt the crushing weight of his defenses failing. He wanted Loren. Every ounce of his being wanted the vampire lord with a hunger that ate away at him incessantly. Loren's tongue slithered across his, leaving Ashley wanting more, despite the danger of the situation. He felt his arms being trussed, but he simply did not have the will to resist. By the time Loren moved away, Ashley was chained to the bed, his arms and legs spread, leaving him painfully vulnerable.

"Loren," he whispered as his energy waned, "what are you doing?"

Loren smiled and stroked Ashley's cheek. "I want someone to experience you, sorcerer."

Ashley barely heard what the vampire lord said as he watched Elissa emerge from a darkened corner of the room. His face paled and his eyes turned the color of obsidian as she neared the bed, completely nude and carrying a whip. He pulled on the chains holding him down, but they had no give. He felt panic well up inside him, panic he had not felt since the first night he had been with Loren. At the memory of the rape, he doubled his efforts. Elissa stopped at the end of the bed between his feet. Ashley stilled as she crawled onto the bed and straddled him.

"Loren says you have power, sorcerer," she purred. "Prove it."

"Fuck you," Ashley growled. He tried to twist to the side to throw her off, but it only caused her to settle on top of him. When he didn't grow hard beneath her, she gripped his throat tightly. As her nails dug into his flesh, his horror increased as he grew erect from the pain.

"It looks like we've found a little weakness of the sorcerer's. It seems the indomitable Ashley Porter enjoys pain," she said with a sneer. "Well, I can work with that. If it's pain you want, sorcerer, it's pain you'll get."

She gripped Ashley's hair with one hand and slid the tail of her whip under his neck with the other. He growled and bucked his hips, but the vampiress only laughed at him. She released his hair, took each side of the whip, and crossed them over his throat. Ashley's hands balled into fists and he bucked his hips wildly in desperation, but Elissa refused to let him go. She grinned, shifted, and with a particularly hard thrust, she slid onto him.

Elissa threw her head back and held the whip around Ashley's throat with one hand. Her other hand kneaded her breasts and pulled on her nipples. She ground down on Ashley as hard as she could, inciting his anger with every stroke. When he refused to give in with his magic, she jerked the whip away and threw it on the floor. She snapped her fingers and Loren placed a shorter whip in her outstretched hand. With no warning, she snapped the whip's tail across Ashley's chest and face. He grit his teeth and bucked under her, driving himself deeper. His nails dug into his palms and lines of blood began to run down his arms.

Then Ashley heard him. *Ashley, fight her.*

The voice was not David's, nor was it Michael's. Beyond a doubt, Ashley knew the voice like he knew his own. It was Morgan's. He steeled himself, uttered a pray under his breath, and glared at the vampiress above him.

"You want magic, bitch? Then you'll get magic."

With a final thrust, Ashley allowed himself to slip over the edge—a dangerous edge no one else dared to tread. She wanted his magic, then she would have it. She would know what it was like to fuck an angel of fire.

Elissa threw her head back and moaned loudly as Ashley came inside her. Then her eyes widened. The heat began to burn on the inside, searing every inch of her body until she screamed in pain. She leapt off of him and crumpled to the floor. Loren dropped to his knees beside her, cradling her in his arms. He looked up at Ashley. Ashley's black gaze was narrowed in hate. Loren called for Karl and several others to take him away before he could do more damage.

CHAPTER NINE

Drifting once more into the nightmare that had become consciousness, Alec looked around wearily at the empty cell. His arms ached with a fierceness he had never known and he prayed once more for death to be delivered quickly as the pain of being shackled and left to hang was more than he could continue to bear. His wrists bled from the rusting metal of the manacles as they dug into his flesh. His entire body weight was centered on them as his legs had given out many hours before. His throat was dry and scratchy, but he knew it would be too much to hope for a drink from the ladle of dirty water which had been brought to him nearly six hours ago. Someone wanted him alive.

With a sickening crack of wood on stone, the door of the cell opened slowly. Having grown used to the dark of his cell, Alec's eyes burned from the bright light of the room beyond his cell door. He cringed and pressed his body tighter against the stone wall he was chained to as the doorway darkened. A figure of alluring beauty swept inside and Alec wondered for a brief moment if he had indeed been delivered into death by the Angel himself. When his eyes adjusted to the light as it fell into the cell's dark enclosure, however, Alec watched his angel take on a more sinister form.

Black leathery wings faded into the soft folds of a black cloak. Pale blue eyes of unusual cruelty looked down on his ragged form. Sensuous lips pressed tightly together in a vicious grin. Alec's heart raced in his chest as the figure stood in front of him, bringing that intense gaze level with his own terrified eyes.

"Who are you?" he asked in a ragged voice. The man—if that was what one could call him—brought his hand up and ran soft, supple fingers over Alec's dirt-streaked cheek. Alec trembled with fear from the contact.

"I am your worst nightmare and your darkest fantasy," the man said. "I am Mordell."

Before Alec could react, Mordell closed the distance between their faces and kissed him. It wasn't a short, sweet peck of closed lips, but a forceful, crushing kiss of seduction. Within the man's mouth, Alec could literally taste pleasure and pain. When those tastes changed to something more malevolent, however, his fear won out and he struggled to free himself from his captor's kiss. Mordell gripped his head with both hands and pressed his mouth harder against Alec's. A trickle of blood ran from the corner of Alec's mouth and his heart nearly stopped as Mordell slowly licked the trail away. Alec struggled against the man's hold.

Mordell leaned back up and smoothed a wisp of brown hair back from Alec's face. "You are so pretty," he said. "But I have need of you now. Tell me, Alec Landon, where is your friend?"

Alec remained silent, partly from fear, partly from rage.

Mordell sighed. "Very well, then."

He turned and snapped his fingers. Two others came into the cell and lifted Alec up, unhooking his chains from the wall. He fainted dead away in their arms.

When he opened his eyes once more, Alec looked around the terrifying room. The bright light pierced his eyes with such blazing intensity it made his skull hurt. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to move, but with a sickening feeling, realized he still could not. He strained his arms weakly against the chains which held him, but the metal was not the rusty metal that had been his manacles. No, these chains were a brilliant silver—solid steel. He quickly discovered his feet were also held by the same chains, leaving his entire body in a grotesquely spread position. A movement out of the corner of his right eye startled him and he turned to look, immediately wishing he had not.

His captor walked over and ran a hand over his smooth, naked flesh, stretched taut by the rack on which he lay. A bestial grin creased Mordell's mouth and he turned a knob on the side of the table. The

chains on Alec's arms and legs pulled farther apart, sending a bolt of white-hot pain through his body. He screamed and the chains mercifully stopped. Tears ran down his cheeks and face in unending streams.

"Tell me," Mordell said as he lightly brushed a tear from Alec's cheekbone. "Where is your friend?"

"What the hell do you want my cousin for?" Alec snarled.

Mordell's hand froze. "Cousin?" he asked. "How are you related to Morgan Adamson?" When Alec didn't answer, Mordell turned the knob again.

Alec's back arched as the joints in his shoulders and hips began to stretch beyond their limits. "His mother is my aunt!"

Mordell's grin faded. "Then you are of no use to me. Morgan's heritage resides in his father's bloodline, not his mother's."

He left Alec's side and stood by a table covered in an odd array of surgical devices. Alec watched as he picked up one particular stainless steel contraption and turned back to him. When he saw the instrument Mordell held, Alec's eyes widened into a new state of horror, bringing a dark smile to Mordell's lips.

"This," Mordell explained, turning the obscene instrument around so Alec could see it on all sides, "is a bone spreader. It's used to spread the bones of a person's body apart, usually the ribs, in order to get into the chest for surgery." Alec's face went pale. "Oh, don't you worry, my friend," Mordell said with a sneer. "I don't plan on using it to spread your bones apart."

Alec felt all the heat drain from his blood as it ran cold in his veins. With the realization of Mordell's sadistic intentions with the spreader, Alec's world went black once more.

* * * *

The press of soft lips on his startled Ashley awake. He quickly moved to the other side of the bed, slipping away from Loren and glaring at him in hatred. The vampire lord simply grinned.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"I'm taking what's mine," Loren growled. He gripped Ashley's hair and pulled him back across the bed. Ashley raised a hand in defense, but Loren caught it in a firm grip. "Don't try your magic on me, sorcerer."

Ashley struggled, which seemed only to heighten Loren's fierce desire for him. Loren pulled Ashley under him and pinned him down, pressing him into the mattress. Ashley strained against him, his eyes narrowing to coal black slivers. Loren pressed his lips to Ashley's, forcing them open with his tongue. Ashley growled into his mouth, but with every slide of the lord's tongue, another part of his resistance slipped away. Soon his struggles died out and his growls of rage turned to moans of longing.

"Now that I have your attention," Loren whispered on his lips, "I think it's time to remind you of your place."

Loren snapped his fingers and Ashley turned his head quickly. A chill ran through his body as he watched the crowd at his door part with Elissa's arrival. The vampiress glared at him, her hatred thick enough to taste. A commotion dragged Ashley's attention back to the doorway. David stood watching, helpless as Karl and several others held him back. Elissa stopped at the end of the bed as Loren wrapped his hand in Ashley's hair and pulled him to the floor.

"It's time you learn your proper place here, Ashley Porter. Kneel!"

"Fuck you," Ashley said through gritted teeth.

"Very well," Loren said. He nodded to Elissa.

With a sinister smile playing on her lips, Elissa drew a whip from beneath her cloak. Ashley paled. This had never happened before.

"No!" David struggled against those who held him.

Elissa ignored him and drew her arm back. Quick as lightning, the whip's slender tail cracked across Ashley's bare back, the metal barbs along the end raking through his flesh like razors. He screamed in rage and pain and dropped to the floor.

"Do you submit, Ashley?" Loren demanded. He twisted his hand tighter in Ashley's hair and jerked his head up.

"Hell no," Ashley muttered. He winced in pain from the stinging and agonizingly familiar torment lingering on his back.

Loren nodded and the whip snapped across Ashley's back again. He growled with rage as the barbs ripped through his skin once more, leaving fresh trails of bright red blood in their wake. David threw the others off with such force as to send several of them to the floor. He shoved Loren out of the way and caught Ashley's limp, naked body in his arms.

Loren waved Elissa away, then turned to the crowd at the door. "He is forbidden to leave this house. Bring him someone when he needs to feed. If anyone helps him to escape," he snarled, giving David a hateful glare, "I will make sure the person responsible dies a most painful death."

As he left, the crowd dispersed slowly. David laid Ashley down on the floor carefully and went to close the door. He went to the basin in the corner and poured it full of cool water from the jug. With a towel over his arm, he returned to Ashley's side and set the basin on the floor. He dipped the towel in the water and wiped it gently across Ashley's back, clearing away the blood.

"Fuck!" Ashley hissed into the depths of his Persian rug. He heard David rinsing the towel out and when he wiped it across his back again, Ashley balled his hands into tight fists.

"Sorry," David said. "You're clean."

Ashley sat up and reached for the robe on his bed. With David's help, he slipped it on, cringing as the terrycloth brushed across his back. "It's starting to heal," he said finally.

"What the hell sparked that anyway?" David asked him.

"I don't know. I was dreaming of Morgan when I felt someone kiss me."

"Ashley, Morgan isn't yours. You were sent to keep him from becoming immortal."

"I know," Ashley groaned. He looked up at David then. "But no matter what I do, his face and his voice stay with me. He haunts me, David."

"Ashley, there's something you need to know."

"Perhaps it has something to do with why Loren doesn't want me to leave?"

"Yes." David looked at everything in the room but Ashley.

Ashley grabbed David's chin and turned his head to face him. "What?"

David pulled free from his grip. "Loren's apparently afraid you're going to have a run-in with Mordell. I think he actually fears you'll join him."

"What?" Ashley asked in exasperation. "Why the hell would I give a damn about Mordell? Hell, I've never even seen him."

"Ash," David said, lowering his gaze, "I overheard Loren talking with Elissa and Karl earlier. Mordell turned around the same time we did. Loren doesn't know who his sire was, but he does know Mordell's former name."

Ashley cocked a pale eyebrow at him. "And that would be?"

David sighed, drew a deep breath, and said, "John Stockton."

A chill stole over Ashley, beginning in his chest where his heart had long since ceased its beating. His throat constricted, causing his head to spin with memories long forgotten—and best left that way.

"Ashley, I'm sorry."

Ashley simply shook his head. "I always wondered what really happened to him," he whispered as he stared at the wall across the room.

"According to a few of Loren's spies, Mordell now knows who you are, Ash. He's determined to get both you and Morgan."

"Morgan? Why does he want Morgan?"

"I think he knows about Morgan's heritage. He's sent his right-hand man to get him."

Ashley snapped his gaze back to David. "I have to warn him, David. Morgan doesn't know anyone else but me."

"Yes, he is in danger, Ashley, but so are you. Loren has most likely posted guards all over the damn mansion to keep you from leaving. How are we going to get by them?"

"We? David, you can't be involved. If Loren catches me, I know he won't kill me. But if he catches you, he won't hesitate."

"Do you honestly think I'm going to let you go alone?" David asked as he stood. He reached out his hand and helped Ashley up from the floor.

"I would hope so, but you've always been stubborn," Ashley said with a smirk.

"Not as much as some people I know."

Ashley's gaze narrowed. "Fine," he conceded, slipping his robe off and pulling his jeans on. "How are we going to do this then?"

"I'll go back to my room. You leave first; I'll follow a bit later. If anyone asks, I'll tell them I'm going hunting for both of us."

"It's been a long time since I've played that role."

"Ash," David said as he placed a hand on Ashley's shoulder, "you were one of the greatest thieves England and Wales have ever known. I don't think you've lost your touch."

Ashley's lips curled into a sly grin. "No, you're right. Once a thief, always a thief."

David stood in front of him and kissed his forehead. "Be careful," he whispered.

"Aye, always, *gefell*."

Ashley walked David to the door and closed it behind him. He would wait for half an hour, then he would slip away. Playing the role of the thief was something he hadn't done in ages it seemed, but as he finished dressing, he knew it was a skill that stayed with him regardless of the passing of time.

At half past ten, a door opened at the end of the hallway. All was dark and the shadows crept to the ceiling and out into the hall itself. No movement came from anywhere; no sound could be heard. Ashley slid through the shadows, cloaked in darkness. When a single sliver of light appeared from a room to the left, he halted, becoming naught but a shadow himself. When the light faded and all signs of movement ceased, he began to move again. His breath came in slow, steady inhalations, rendering him as silent as Death itself.

He passed by door after door, moving slowly and deliberately, no step taken out of turn. When the front door came into view, he slid along the wall towards it, his footsteps steady and sure. With a final breath of relief, he slipped out of the front door and into the dark of night. As soon as he was safely away from the mansion, he took to the air. London awaited him.

* * * *

Ivan grinned. Alec had certainly proven his worth; it was a shame he had to die. However, the deed had been done, and while Morgan still eluded Mordell, the lord figured the death of his cousin would bring him out of hiding. Ivan, however, was not as patient as Mordell and he watched the apartment building carefully, wary of any movement which might give him trouble.

Ashley Porter was a rogue by nature. The damned vampire could get in and out of just about anywhere without so much as a whisper of cloth to give him away, but no movement or sound came. With a satisfied smirk, Ivan jumped from his tree and crept through the shadows. When he was satisfied with his position on the ground, he began to climb the wall, his fingers grasping the tiny holes afforded by the brick and mortar of the old building. When he reached the window on the third floor, he peered inside and grinned.

Morgan was asleep, utterly oblivious to any danger that might lurk in the night. Ivan pushed up on the window and was pleasantly surprised to find it unlocked. *Silly mortal*, he thought as he slipped into the darkened room and closed the window silently. Morgan still didn't move. Ivan walked over to him and admired the delicate curve of his jaw, the fine features of his face. He was masculine, no doubt, but his features were nearly angelic. Aye, he was beautiful.

With his back to the door, Ivan didn't hear anything until a knife was pressed against his throat. The razor sharp edge of the blade grazed a thin line on his flesh. He dared not even swallow.

"Who are you?" a voice whispered in his ear.

"What's it to you?" Ivan growled under his breath. He watched as Morgan turned over in his sleep.

"It's everything to me," the voice whispered.

"I've simply come to collect something my master wants. Who are you?"

"Why does Mordell want Morgan Adamson?"

"I know not. He doesn't tell me everything." The blade pressed harder on his throat. "Something about the mortal's blood, something about his heritage," he said quietly. "Who the hell are you?"

"I'm your worst fucking nightmare."

Ivan's breath caught as Morgan opened his eyes.

* * * *

Morgan slid across his bed to the wall and his eyes widened with fear. A bald man with a knife to his throat stood over his bed. He was the same man who had attacked him at Beacon Inn. From behind the man's head, the glow of the moonlight fell upon white hair, lighting the silver within it.

"Ashley," Morgan whispered. The bald man's eyes grew impossibly wide.

"I suggest you go back and tell your master the man he seeks is unavailable," Ashley said. With a slow slide of his blade, a thin red line appeared on the bald man's neck. "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's possessions."

The man jerked free of Ashley's hold, threw open the window, and jumped. Morgan was too shocked to move, yet he looked up and met a pale, sharp gaze.

"Thank you," he said breathlessly, still not moving from the corner of his bed.

"You're in danger, Morgan," Ashley told him.

"What?" Morgan was too stunned to say much else.

"That was Mordell's second-in-command. His master wants you, but for what purpose, I have no idea."

"Who the hell is Mordell?" Morgan demanded, regaining his composure, which was a difficult task with Ashley so near.

The man's body was beyond perfection. His chest looked hard beneath his black shirt, and his biceps were thick and corded in muscle. Morgan let his gaze travel discreetly down Ashley's body. When he reached Ashley's jeans, he shifted slightly, trying to discourage the erection beginning to form in his boxers. Never had another man excited him, but Ashley did so with damnable ease.

Ashley wiped his blade nonchalantly on his jeans and sheathed it in his belt. "Mordell is a vampire. He's after you and we have to get you out."

"We?" Morgan asked. He looked around the darkened room cautiously.

"My brother will be here soon. For now, you'll have to rely on me."

Morgan swallowed hard as Ashley sat down on the edge of his bed. He was getting too close and Morgan's self control was slowly slipping away with every passing second.

"Did he hurt you?" Ashley asked him.

Morgan shook his head, unable to speak with Ashley so damned close.

"Look, Morgan, I know it's hard to trust me when you don't even know me, but I must ask you to. Your life is in danger," Ashley said. He lowered his head and cradled it in his hands, burying his fingers in his hair.

"Are you okay?" Morgan whispered. He touched Ashley's shoulder tentatively.

"I'm fine," Ashley muttered.

"Why don't I believe you?"

Ashley lifted his head and stared at the bedroom door.

"I had a dream about you," Morgan continued. "I don't know why I did."

Ashley groaned and lowered his head once more.

"Ashley, what is it?"

"Don't, Morgan," he said when Morgan began to rub his shoulder. "Don't dream of me. Forget you ever did."

Morgan pulled his hand away suddenly. "Why?"

"Because you'd do well to," Ashley replied.

Morgan pulled Ashley's hands off of his face, slid a hand under his chin, and turned his head. "Why? Ashley, since I met you, I haven't been able to get you out of my mind."

Ashley pulled away from Morgan's hold and stood abruptly. "Do as I say, Morgan: Don't dream of me."

Morgan knew Ashley felt something. What it was, he didn't know, but something was there. Yet for reasons that evaded Morgan's understanding, Ashley was refusing to show what it was he truly felt. He watched Ashley pace frantically in front of him, his eyes first on the closet door, then on the window when he turned the other way. Ashley seemed agitated, nervous. In a momentary lapse of reason, Morgan stood and shoved him against the wall. Ashley's eyes narrowed as their color darkened to a near black and his body tensed against Morgan's.

"I want you, Ashley," he whispered as he brushed his lips over Ashley's.

"Morgan, stop," Ashley protested.

"Tell me you don't want me, Ashley, and I will," Morgan murmured as he moved his lips across Ashley's cheekbone, his breath grazing Ashley's ear.

"Morgan, stop!" Ashley growled. He shoved Morgan away from him and cursed through gritted teeth as he leaned over.

Morgan stood dumbfounded. "So you don't want me."

Ashley looked up at him then. Morgan knew he had hit a wall within Ashley, but for the life of him, he couldn't figure out why. He felt defeated and forced himself to ignore the emotions which were creeping up on him with every passing second.

"Morgan—"

"No," Morgan interrupted him. "I understand, Ashley. You don't feel the same."

"Morgan," Ashley said again, "you don't understand."

Morgan tensed in anger and he stood back, crossing his arms over his chest. "What do I not understand? That I have fallen for a man who doesn't feel a damn thing for me? Tell me, Ashley, have you ever met someone and wanted them so badly that every moment without them was nothing short of painful?"

With lightning speed, Ashley shoved Morgan onto the bed, knocking his breath from his body and pinning him down tightly.

"You have no fucking idea what I feel," Ashley said through his teeth, anger spilling into his words. "You've haunted my every fucking step—longer than you can possibly imagine—and I've had no peace. Since you stepped into my life, my entire world has gone to shit. I can't breathe without feeling you in the air. I can't sleep without dreams of you invading my mind."

Morgan's eyes grew wide. Ashley's eyes were black as the darkest midnight, reflecting him within their depths, and his body was rigid against Morgan's. Morgan couldn't have stopped his next action even if he had wanted to. With a force of strength he never realized he possessed, he pulled his arms free of Ashley's iron grip, grabbed Ashley's face, and pulled him down into a kiss. The effects were immediate—as intense as they were frightening.

The moment his lips touched Ashley's, Morgan arched under him as every inch of his body blazed with a searing heat. His blood felt like liquid fire as it raced through his veins. He felt his very soul rend and shred, only to reform itself around the man in his hands. Tears spilled from his eyes, unbidden and scarcely heeded. An ache washed through him, drowning him in a fierce passion which defied

everything he had ever known and believed.

Ashley broke the kiss abruptly and gripped Morgan's arms once more, pinning them over his head. "You have no fucking idea what you're getting yourself into," he growled. He ground his body against Morgan's roughly and Morgan rose in response.

"Then fucking show me," Morgan snapped back at him. He struggled against Ashley's hold, but the man didn't budge. The taste of Ashley's kiss was still in his mouth and the heat still warmed his body. He wanted another kiss, another chance to taste him, to drink Ashley in as deeply as he could.

When Ashley angled his head down and flicked one of Morgan's nipples with his tongue, Morgan sucked in a deep breath and pulled his hands free from Ashley's grip. He entwined his fingers in the silvery depths of his hair and pulled Ashley's face nearer to him. His head swam with the lightest touch from Ashley's lips. Ashley's breath warmed his skin and sent blissful ripples of need through his body. When Ashley's tongue caressed his nipple, he felt the result all the way to the tips of his fingers and toes.

Ashley's body was hard and strong, and with the slightest shift, Ashley settled between his legs. A deep growl sounded as he pressed harder against Morgan. Morgan's heart leapt into his throat. From what he could feel, Ashley wasn't exactly of average size. Nervousness welled up inside Morgan, but when Ashley's mouth covered his nipple entirely, every coherent thought fled from his brain.

Ashley rolled his tongue over Morgan's nipple, sucking gently and nibbling with the lightest roll of it in his teeth. Morgan groaned and tightened his grip in his hair, pulling his face tighter against the hardness of his chest. Ashley moved his arms down and stroked his fingertips down Morgan's sides. Morgan's hips rose up and he ground harder against Ashley's groin, needing more, needing to feel Ashley. Without releasing Morgan's nipple from his mouth, Ashley raised up the slightest bit and slipped his hand between their bodies. Morgan's breath stilled immediately.

"Breathe," Ashley whispered as he moved his lips to Morgan's ear. "No matter what happens, Morgan, always breathe." Then he closed his fingers over the bulge in Morgan's silk boxers and Morgan's breath came out in a deep, throaty groan.

Morgan arched into Ashley's hand, a whimper caught in his throat. "Jesus," he swore quietly as Ashley's hand gripped him tightly.

The heat from Ashley's touch nearly caused him to lose it and only his stalwart ability to bite back his orgasm saved him from an ungodly embarrassment. Ashley layered kiss after soft kiss over his throat and his hand continued its languid, delicious strokes through the silk. Morgan's heart pounded furiously in his chest and his body ached for Ashley's touch without any barriers between them.

"We're wearing too many damned clothes," he panted breathlessly. With every kiss from Ashley's lips, he grew more desperate. A low rumble vibrated his throat and snaked its way into his chest when Ashley groaned.

"Aye," Ashley murmured as he began to kiss his way slowly down Morgan's chest. He released Morgan's cock and gripped the waistband of his boxers.

With every agonizing kiss downward over Morgan's chest and stomach, Ashley pulled the boxers down just a little bit more. Morgan tangled his hands in Ashley's hair and shuddered as Ashley's lips grazed over his navel. His cock was hard against Ashley's chest, begging for a touch, a lick, a kiss, anything.

With a quick flick of Ashley's tongue over his prick, Morgan groaned and gripped Ashley's hair tighter. Then Ashley exhaled down the length of Morgan's shaft as he slid his mouth completely over it. He gripped Morgan's hips tightly as they rose off the bed.

"Jesus fucking Christ!"

Morgan's chest heaved and he fought to regain his breath. In the same second Ashley's mouth covered him, a searing, blinding heat washed down his length and up through the rest of his body. He gripped Ashley's hair so tightly that for a brief moment, he thought he might hurt him. Then the heat died down and the only sensation left was the velvet softness of Ashley's mouth and tongue. Morgan's thought processes shut down one by one.

Ashley began a slow, rhythmic slide of his mouth up and down his cock, rolling his tongue around the head with every stroke. Morgan groaned and moved his hips in time with Ashley, thrusting deep into his waiting mouth and slowing careening down a mad slide to the point of no return. His breathing became ragged and his heart pounded in his chest with wild abandon. Ashley slid his hand up and down in time with the slide of his lips, simulating a tight, slippery glove which enveloped every inch of Morgan in delicious heat.

"Dear God," he breathed. "Don't stop, Ashley. Please, don't stop."

Morgan's thrusts sped up, becoming more desperate, and Ashley increased the pressure of his hand around his cock. Morgan didn't know if Ashley planned on swallowing, but when Ashley slid his tongue into the slit at the tip, it was too late to ask. Morgan slipped over the edge with a forceful thrust and a sudden exhale. His body, his heart, his soul, collided as he erupted into Ashley's mouth. Ashley coaxed every last drop from him, sucking on the tip and driving him to a near-hysterical point of oversensitivity. He panted and his chest ached as he tried to control his breath. *Breathe*, Ashley had said. *Like a man could fucking breathe after that*, Morgan thought.

Once Morgan was spent, Ashley raised his head and licked his lips. He looked up at Morgan and grinned.

"What the hell did you do?" Morgan asked him as he sat up on his elbows.

Ashley was still kneeling in the floor between his legs, his arms folded over Morgan's thighs and his chin resting on his folded hands. His eyes were dark, incredibly dark, and Morgan wondered how someone's eyes could change so drastically.

"You want me to be honest? Or give you a round-about explanation?" Ashley asked him.

"Honest."

Ashley grinned. "I'm a sorcerer, Morgan."

Morgan raised a dark eyebrow at him. "A sorcerer?"

Ashley nodded. "Aye. Fire is my element, the one I'm most attuned to, but I can work with all four well."

Morgan's brows knitted together in thought. "You're not joking, are you?" he asked with a shake of his head. Waves of ebony cascaded down over his chest.

"Not in the least."

"Do I want to know what else you can do?"

Ashley's lips curled into a rather impish grin. "Don't tempt me, Morgan," he whispered as he slid up Morgan's body to his mouth, taking him in a deep, soulful kiss.

Morgan wrapped his arms around Ashley's shoulders, holding him tight, afraid to let him go. This man was truly enchanting in everything he did and everything he said. If it were possible, he would pull the stars from the sky if Ashley asked him to, and he didn't even really know why. Ashley's lips moved

across his softly and he murmured something Morgan didn't recognize. Sleep began to seem like a really good idea then and Morgan smiled as he felt Ashley slide a pillow under his head.

CHAPTER TEN

Ashley slid off of Morgan and stood, watching him fall into a peaceful sleep. He had wondered before about Morgan's susceptibility to magic, but the heat trick proved he was highly vulnerable. He sat down on the bed beside Morgan and slid his boxers back up, knowing the sleep was one which such a light movement would not break. He took the chance to admire Morgan once more—the hardness of his chest and stomach, the tautness of his arms, the strength of his thighs and calves. It was Morgan's face, however, which kept dragging his gaze back again and again. Morgan had the soft features of an angel. The curve of his jaw was graceful yet strong, and his face was perfectly framed by the luxuriant length of his black hair.

Ashley reached over and stroked his face, tracing Morgan's cheekbone with his fingertips. He had done better than he expected he would. Morgan's hold on him was undeniable. He managed to avoid taking Morgan the way he really wanted, opting for the safer route of a simple blowjob. He was just thankful Morgan had not bothered to touch the left side of his chest. His task would have become quite difficult had Morgan realized he had no heartbeat. He looked back to Morgan's face and was reminded of the last vision in the fire, so many centuries ago.

Ashley's blood had flamed to life in his veins the moment Morgan's lips touched his. Morgan's touch had been like fire, like lightning, with the power to destroy him like a forest in a wildfire or resurrect him like the phoenix rising from the ashes. This man was both salvation and damnation all rolled into one body, one soul. Within the man's kiss, Ashley tasted fear and desire, and something darker, infinitely darker, than anything he himself had ever known. Dear God Almighty, how was he going to keep this man mortal when he could not even protect him from himself?

Just then, the window opened and David slipped quietly into the room. "You didn't."

Ashley gave him a roguish grin. "No," he said with a laugh. "I only gave him a blowjob."

David raised his hand. "Too much information, Ash. I take it you put him under?"

"Aye, it's the only way we can get him out without him protesting. He's a hell of a lot stronger than he looks. Any news?"

David sat down on the edge of Morgan's bed. He looked quite weary. "Apparently Mordell's henchman found his way here via Morgan's cousin."

"What?" Ashley sat down on the other side of Morgan and absently ran his hand up the sleeping man's thigh.

"I don't have all the details, but according to one of Loren's spies running amok in Mordell's castle, the lord persuaded an outside informant to gain Alec's attention. Once that was done, it was only a matter of drugging the poor man and ransacking his apartment to find Morgan's address. Apparently Mordell finished Alec off himself."

Ashley blanched. "Damn," he muttered. "What the hell happened to John to drive him to do such things?" It was more of a rhetorical question and Ashley certainly didn't expect the answer David gave him.

"You did."

"What? How did I cause him to become what he is?"

"No one knows who his sire was, although rumors are rampant that he killed the one who made him," David said, "but his love and ultimately his hatred for you are what drive him. He still wants you, Ash."

Ashley glanced at Morgan, who was still sleeping peacefully, blissfully unaware of the coming trip. He

knew Morgan cared for him and somewhere, in some dark recess of his soul, Ashley wondered if he dared to put the same idea to his own feelings for the mortal.

"Ash, you're treading on dangerous ground."

"I know," Ashley said quietly, not taking his eyes off of Morgan. The man stirred briefly and Ashley leaned over and brushed his lips across Morgan's. With the whisper of a few choice words from Ashley's lips, Morgan slipped fully back into sleep. Ashley caressed his cheek with the backs of his fingers. "I can't help it, David. How can I possibly protect this man when I can't even protect him from myself?"

"I don't know, but we have to get the both of you out of here, Ash. Mordell has probably already killed his henchman for his failure to get Morgan. He won't tolerate failure again. He may very well come after the both of you himself."

"Aye," Ashley said with a nod. "Where are we going?"

David smiled. "There's one place I know of. I didn't think it was still standing, but it is."

Ashley looked back at him. "My tower still stands?"

"It's extremely overgrown now, but no one ever knew where it was before. Perhaps no one knows now."

Ashley's brow furrowed. "What about Loren? There were several nights when I was so out of it he might have coaxed it out of me."

David shook his head. "I doubt it. He's never said a word before about it."

Ashley allowed himself a brief memory of the first night in Cardiff. The two of them had sat down for a moment of relaxation when a dark beauty came to their table. Ashley remembered the strength of Loren's hold on him even then. He shook his head suddenly, not wanting to remember anything more beyond that moment. The memories of whippings and rape were best left untouched.

"Ash?"

"Yeah, yeah," Ashley muttered as he stood. "I'm fine. I've got to find some clothes for Morgan before we go." David nodded and glanced at the clock. It was nearly two in the morning. "I'll hurry," Ashley reassured him.

As David waited on the bed, Ashley rummaged through Morgan's dresser and closet, gathering an assortment of clothes for their trip. He knew David was uneasy about Morgan, perhaps even more than he had been with Loren so long ago.

"Okay," he said, handing David a canvas duffel bag. "That should do him for a bit. Once we get into the tower and I can get a fire started, it won't be so cold."

David nodded and looked to Morgan. "This should be interesting," he said. "You sure your sleep will hold?"

Ashley glanced down at Morgan and thought for a moment. He leaned over and drew his right index finger across Morgan's forehead, then down the left side of his face. Finally, he pressed his lips to Morgan's. Morgan's eyes fluttered briefly and his chest slowed its steady rise and fall rhythm. Ashley straightened back up with a satisfied smile.

"What did you do?"

"Put him deeper," Ashley answered. "It's kind of like a suspended animation."

"You can get him out of that, right?"

"Aye, but it'll take a little work. I haven't done that in quite a long time."

Ashley picked Morgan up as David opened the window. He had not dared to try to dress Morgan; he simply didn't trust himself. He let David tuck Morgan's bedspread around him and held him close, letting his own body heat warm Morgan. The closeness was somewhat unnerving, and the sooner they could get to his tower, the better. David went out the window first and Ashley followed behind him, landing lightly on his feet. Morgan didn't move. They were nearly two and a half hours from the tower and dawn would come soon. Without a moment to spare, they took to the sky, Morgan's body held close to Ashley's chest.

* * * *

Loren groaned and drew his hands down over his face. His anger was spent; Ashley and David were gone. When he had first discovered it, he tore apart both of their rooms, smashing David's medieval sculptures and shredding Ashley's books. The canopy of Ashley's bed now hung in tatters and David's casket was broken into thousands of splinters. Yet it had all been for naught, as he had no idea where they were. As if things could not get any worse, Karl was now standing by the hearth in Loren's room, relaying the latest news from their spies in Mordell's keep.

"My lord," the gruff vampire said, "Mordell needs both Ashley Porter and the mortal, of this we are certain."

"But why?" Loren asked him with a sigh. His head was beginning to ache; he needed Elissa.

Like an answer to a silent prayer, the vampiress appeared at his door. "My lord," she said coolly, "I believe I might have an idea as to where Ashley might be."

Loren looked up at her from between his fingers as they spread out across his face. "Oh?"

"Yes," she said with a nod and a deliciously cruel grin. She nodded to Karl, who left without a word. Once she shut the door behind him, she went to kneel before Loren's feet. "My lord," she said quietly, "do you remember a time when we had Ashley in here with us, almost twenty years ago? We had him drugged."

Loren did indeed remember that night. It was the night Ashley had nearly broken to them—without the aid of a whip. In his beautifully delirious state, he divulged much about his past, including information about a tower. Loren looked up at the vampiress and realized her intent as it shone in the darkness of her eyes. It was that night her hatred for Ashley nearly had both her and Loren killed by the very damned sorcerer they were trying to control.

"Aye," he muttered, not taking his gaze from hers, "I remember well. Do you think they went to his tower?"

"It still stands. Why would they not?"

Loren gave her a dubious look. "But why would Ashley go there? Will he not suspect that we'll follow him?"

Elissa slid her right palm over Loren's thigh and he moaned softly. "My lord," she whispered, "a man says much he does not remember when he is properly subdued. Ashley Porter is no exception."

"Ashley Porter has never been a man," Loren mused. "He's something entirely different. Sometimes I wonder if he was ever fucking human to begin with."

"A just observation, my lord, as I have often wondered the same. But no matter what Ashley truly is, I believe his tower is our best hope of finding them."

Loren sighed and Elissa pulled his hands down from his face. He was almost too weary for what she wanted, but as he found it difficult to resist Ashley Porter, he found it difficult to resist her. The fullness of her red-tinted lips, the deep blue of her eyes, the curves of her body. It was all a temptation he never could resist. It was why he had wanted her from the beginning. For all that she was, however, Elissa had not the wiles, the deadly charm, of Ashley.

Where her face revealed her thoughts, Ashley's did not. Where her body was soft and pliant, Ashley's was firm and strong. Yet the biggest difference was in the way they kissed. A kiss from Elissa was soft, gentle, and enchanting; a kiss from Ashley was deep, soulful, and dangerous. It was the stark difference between kissing a vampire and kissing a sorcerer. Where one used her feminine charms, the other used the magic which coursed through his veins.

A knock on the door snapped both of them from their mutual trance.

"Come in," Loren muttered.

Elissa frowned in frustration.

"My lord," Karl said. "We have just received word from our sentries. Ashley, Morgan, and David were spotted outside Cardiff, heading for the sorcerer's old tower."

Loren looked to Elissa, who merely sat on her heels with the look of a cat who cornered a mouse. A grin played at her lips, a grin wrought in triumph and steeped in hate.

Loren turned to look at Karl. "Find me four others," he instructed. "And make yourselves ready. We're going to pay the sorcerer a little house call."

"Anyone in particular you want?" Karl asked him.

"Just find me some people who aren't afraid of Ashley Porter," Loren said with a smirk. Karl's brow knotted together, but he bowed and left the room to follow through with his orders. Finding four others besides Karl, himself, and Elissa who did not fear Ashley would be a feat in and of itself, but it could be done. Ashley had a reputation, as did his temper, and most others had learned to avoid him at all costs.

* * * *

David locked the door to the solar as Ashley laid Morgan down on his old bed. Dust covered nearly everything in the tower and the bed was no exception. The moment Morgan's body touched it a cloud of golden brown soot flew up around the bed. With a wave of his hand, Ashley whisked the dust away. David set Morgan's pack down and started to pile the wood in the stone fireplace. As Ashley walked past it to check on the state of the rest of the tower, he waved his hand over the hearth and the cold wood sparked to life with a brilliant orange-red glow. David shook his head and Ashley grinned. It was good to be back home.

Ashley grimaced at the condition of the door, which led down to his workshop. Despite the magic that was supposed to preserve the tower, the iron had long since rusted and the wood had been eaten away by time and a myriad of tiny bugs. He pulled on the latch, only to have the metal handle break off in his hand. He slid his fingers into the crack between the door and the wooden frame and pulled.

With an overwhelming heave of cracking wood and centuries of dust and grime, the door opened. Ashley breathed deep as he stood on the threshold, a tiny twinge of memory pulling at his mind. It had been too long. He descended the stone steps slowly, wary of any loose or broken ones which could prove to be treacherous. Once he was safely at the bottom, he looked around for a candle. He found one, surprisingly enough, on a great slab of stone and picked it up. With a gentle exhale from his lips, a small flame flickered up from the wick.

As he turned, realigning himself with his surroundings, the light from the candle fell upon his stone altar. He smoothed his hand over it, brushing away a thick layer of dust to reveal a rather painful sight. Despite the ages that had passed, the image was still clear to him: a cross of golden brilliance. An unpleasant feeling stirred within his chest as he ran his fingers over the arms of the cross. He never truly realized how much he really missed home until now.

A shuffle from behind him brought his attention back to the present.

"You okay?" David was sitting upon one of the stone steps, his hands locked together and his elbows on his knees. He looked just as happy to be home as Ashley was.

"Aye," Ashley answered him, waving the candle lightly around to take a survey of the room. Bottles and jars, rotten boxes, ancient tufts of herbs—barring the inevitability of decay, everything was as he had left it over four hundred years ago.

"Morgan is still asleep," David said, answering Ashley's question before he could even voice it.

Ashley nodded. "I need to be with him when he wakes, otherwise he might completely freak out on us."

"Did you tell him anything?"

Ashley turned back to David and nodded. "He knows I'm a sorcerer."

"Well, at least that won't be a surprise to him then," David said with a grin.

At the sound of rustling bedclothes, Ashley and David went back up the stone steps, shutting the door behind them.

In the massive, carved oak bed, Morgan stirred, although his eyes remained closed. Maybe waking him would not be as involved as Ashley had thought. He went to the bed and sat beside Morgan, stroking his fingers over the man's brow and brushing away a length of jet black hair. *Crist*, he was so beautiful.

"Morgan," Ashley whispered as he leaned close to Morgan's face.

His intention was only to make sure Morgan's breath was steady, but before he knew what was happening, Morgan's hands were tunneling through his hair and he was pulling him down to meet his lips. Warmth washed through Ashley as his lips touched Morgan's and he moaned softly into the man's mouth, despite the voice in his mind warning him not to go too far with him. He was only supposed to protect him from becoming immortal. When their lips parted, Morgan's eyes were open.

"I know I'm not in my own bed," Morgan said quietly, "so I'm not going to look around just yet. But tell me, how did we go from you sucking my cock to us ending up ... wherever we are?"

"You remember me telling you I'm a sorcerer?"

Morgan nodded slowly.

"We are in what was once our home, mine and David's. We haven't been here for some time, so the place is in desperate need of cleaning, but it's safe."

Morgan looked around. "How old is this place?" he asked, his gaze moving back to Ashley, who sat quietly beside him with his hand precariously splayed over Morgan's right thigh.

It was a question Ashley had been dreading and he honestly didn't have a decent answer for it. Instead, he lied. "It belonged to an ancestor. Everything within was his and through magic, it has remained preserved, more or less."

Morgan seemed to take the lie well enough and smiled. Ashley fought the urge to reach up and stroke

his face. His hand on Morgan's thigh was bad enough, but he didn't have the will to move it. He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned his head.

"Ash, I'm going to bed. I take it you're staying awake?"

Ashley looked to Morgan, who had moved back a bit to sit up against the carved headboard of the bed. His hair fell over his shoulders and chest, and his eyes were a brilliant emerald green. He sat quietly with his arms up, his fingers locked together behind his head. An impish smile, which could put Ashley's best to shame, graced his lips. Ashley turned back to David.

"Aye," he said. "I think I'll be up for a bit."

When David disappeared through the hatch in the ceiling, Ashley turned back to Morgan. The silence between them was awkward and for the first time in his life, he felt a twinge of nervousness. He was finally alone with the most beautiful man he had ever seen and he had no clue what to say or do. When they had been alone in Morgan's bedroom, adrenaline had fueled their actions, but now they were both more relaxed and Ashley wondered if he should just make the first move.

Morgan settled back down onto the bed, a move not entirely innocent as it caused Ashley's hand to slide further up his thigh until it was only two inches from Morgan's crotch. Ashley gave up his internal battle with one thought: *take him*. With a suddenness that left Morgan bewildered and a bit out of breath, Ashley pulled him up and into a kiss.

The effect was dizzying and Ashley's head began to spin. Morgan's tongue was like a brand, marking him with every touch, every taste. Within Morgan's kiss, Ashley tasted fear and desire ... and the touch of something darker, stronger. Morgan was no man. He was a drug, and Ashley was hopelessly addicted. When the kiss ended, Ashley pulled back slowly.

"Are you a sorcerer tonight?" Morgan asked him as he slipped his fingers through Ashley's hair. Ashley closed his eyes slowly, a shiver betraying his otherwise outward appearance of calm.

"No, *cariad*," he whispered. "I'm only a man tonight."

Ashley knew it was probably his most insane act yet, but he no longer cared. Morgan was here and wanted him with equal fervor. This time Ashley simply did not have the willpower to deny the man. Keeping a firm hold on his self-control and reminding himself of his task to protect Morgan and not fall for him, Ashley pressed Morgan into the bed as he opened his mouth on Morgan's once more. With a sigh from Morgan's lips, Ashley knew there was no turning back. It was too late: he had already fallen. Morgan slid his hands through Ashley's hair and held his head as they kissed, their tongues sliding over each other in a slow, enthralling dance. Only when Morgan stilled did Ashley pull away. He stared down at Morgan and brushed his fingertips over Morgan's cheek. It seemed as if Morgan was searching for something within his eyes.

"Morgan?" Ashley asked. "Morgan, what is it?"

"I don't know how to say it," Morgan whispered.

"Try," Ashley said as he traced a slow line down the left side of Morgan's face.

Morgan drew a deep breath. "Ashley," he began, "I know last night was a bit awkward, especially after I told you how I felt..."

Ashley didn't move and he didn't speak; he simply listened.

"But I can't deny what I feel any more than I can deny I'm a man," Morgan continued.

"What do you feel, Morgan?" Ashley asked, lowering his lips to Morgan's despite the man's hold on his head. "What do you want to tell me?"

"I've fallen in love with you."

Ashley stopped, his lips barely touching Morgan's. A slow smile settled over them and he felt Morgan's breath still. "Breathe," he whispered on Morgan's lips. "*Rwy'n dy garu di.*"

Morgan frowned. "That's not fair," he muttered. "I don't know Welsh."

Ashley's smile widened and he pulled away just enough to see Morgan's eyes. Then he repeated the words in English. "I love you."

Morgan's eyes widened and Ashley laughed. "Are you serious?"

Ashley lowered his lips to Morgan's. "Aye." He slid one arm under Morgan's neck and the other he slid down Morgan's side as their kiss deepened. Morgan moaned into his mouth and arched his back as Ashley moved his hand over his stomach, brushing the waistband of the silk boxers with his fingertips.

"Ashley, please," Morgan whispered as Ashley brushed his lips softly over Morgan's chin, his throat, his chest. "Don't tease me this time. Just do it."

Ashley raised his head then, his hand poised on Morgan's leg where his thigh met his hip, his wrist resting lightly on Morgan's cock. "Do what?"

Morgan's gaze narrowed at the roguish grin as it crossed Ashley's lips. "Make love to me, fuck me, anything but tease me." He slid his hands under Ashley's arms and dragged him back up his body. "I want you inside me, Ashley. As deep inside me as you can possibly go."

Ashley groaned and covered Morgan's mouth with his. He started to slide Morgan's boxers off, but stopped when Morgan gripped his hand.

"No," Morgan said. "Let me start this time."

He rolled Ashley onto his back and swirled his tongue around Ashley's. Kissing Morgan was something Ashley could never tire of. He could feel the heat begin to build up within him, but it remained subdued, like a slow-smoldering fire. Morgan pushed Ashley's shirt up and moved his lips over Ashley's chin and down his throat. As Morgan's mouth covered his right nipple, Ashley sucked in a quick breath. Here was the first lesson for a lover: finding those places which incited the most pleasure, those places which could turn a smoldering fire into a roaring flame with a well-placed touch. Morgan flicked Ashley's nipple with the tip of his tongue and Ashley's hands entangled in his hair.

"Crist."

Morgan moved his lips down Ashley's stomach, kissing and licking every inch of his flesh with the slow, gentle moves of an old lover. He released Ashley's shirt as he moved farther down. The denim of Ashley's jeans was but a temporary barrier. Morgan unzipped them slowly and with every inch of the zipper's descent, Ashley felt another bit of control slip away. When the zipper stopped, nothing stood between Ashley and Morgan's lips but the heated air between them. Morgan looked up then, a glimmer of nervousness clear in the verdant depths of his eyes.

"Tongue tied?" Ashley teased him with a sly grin.

Morgan scowled at him, then slid his lips over the head of Ashley's cock. Sweet Jesus, the man would be the death of him. Ashley shuddered as a flash of heat simmered to the surface within him, licking just beneath his skin. Morgan's mouth was a slick glove of pure fire, and Ashley's hips rose, sliding his cock even further into Morgan's mouth. When Morgan slid his lips up and down the shaft, rolling his tongue around the head and the length, Ashley's fingers entangled in Morgan's hair, holding him close.

"Crist, I want you."

"Then take me, Ashley," Morgan said as he slid his lips from Ashley's cock. "I give myself to you."

Ashley crooked his finger and motioned for Morgan to come back up. With a fluid motion, Ashley rolled him over and knelt between his legs. "We're both wearing too many damned clothes."

Morgan nodded. Without another word, they both hurriedly removed every piece of clothing. Then they stopped and looked each other over, taking in what was before them. Ashley could hear Morgan's heartbeat. He could *feel* it, just as strongly as if it were his own. He could smell the blood as it rushed through Morgan's veins, a life-giving stream promising an end to a hunger no one else had ever satisfied. When his gaze met Morgan's, Ashley forced himself to take only what Morgan offered. Nothing more.

"Ashley," Morgan said as Ashley crawled over him, pushing him onto his back.

"Shh, *cariad*," Ashley murmured. "I'll go slow. I promise." He sat up and pushed Morgan's legs up. "Put your hands behind your knees." Morgan did as he was told and Ashley lowered his head.

"Jesus." Morgan gasped as Ashley slid his tongue inside him.

Ashley had not done this in so long that he had almost forgotten how much he enjoyed it. A man's taste was addictive, and Morgan was no exception. Ashley moaned softly as he pushed his tongue inside Morgan. He felt Morgan tremble and he smiled. He flicked his tongue over Morgan's hole once more and sat up.

"Don't move," he whispered. He got up and opened up the battered chest at the foot of the bed, smiling when he found the jar of golden oil. Perhaps his magic had preserved some things after all. As he uncapped the jar, he crawled back onto the bed. He rubbed two fingers in the oil and then stroked them along his length. He leaned forward and set the jar on the table, then he sat back and pressed the tip of his cock against Morgan's entrance. Morgan tensed immediately.

"Relax," Ashley whispered.

When he felt Morgan begin to relax, Ashley pressed in. Morgan tensed again and Ashley stopped. He forced himself to take things slow, despite the nearly overwhelming urge to bury his cock deep inside Morgan's body in one swift motion. When Morgan nodded, Ashley pushed in another inch. Morgan's breath was deep and ragged as he tried to relax his body, and Ashley waited for a moment, then pushed in again. Poised halfway inside, Ashley leaned down and placed soft kisses over Morgan's chest.

"Relax," he said. "You're halfway there." Morgan's eyes widened and Ashley chuckled. Then he pushed again.

Morgan groaned. "Fuck me." Ashley looked up at him, a pale eyebrow raised in disbelief. "I can handle a little pain, Ashley," Morgan said. "Just please fuck me."

"Deep breath," Ashley said, and when Morgan drew in a breath, Ashley buried the rest of his cock inside him. His head tipped back as Morgan's body closed tightly around him, enveloping him in heat until he no longer knew if it was from Morgan's body or his own. *Nothing could compare to this*, Ashley thought. Then the thundering of Morgan's heart reached him, echoing a driving rhythm within Ashley's soul. Hunger washed through him then, and with a harsh growl, Ashley pulled out and thrust back inside, impaling Morgan on his cock. Morgan's body arched and his head tipped back, exposing the smooth line of his throat to Ashley's hungry gaze.

"More," Morgan pleaded breathlessly. "I want you to consume me in fire. Please, Ashley."

Morgan encircled his cock with his hand and began matching Ashley's thrusts, stroke for stroke. Ashley could feel Morgan's body tighten around him, drawing him deeper inside. The deafening rhythm of Morgan's pulse reverberated through Ashley's mind, dragging a harsh growl from his throat. He was so

close, so close to coming, so close to losing all control. Every thrust was met by a lift and grind of Morgan's hips, his pleas piercing through to Ashley's soul until there was nothing left within but Morgan.

"Oh, sweet *Jesu*, not now."

The moment the words slipped from Ashley's lips, the fire erupted around them. Morgan cried out. His body arched as he came, and all semblance of control left Ashley in the span of mere seconds. He struck swiftly, relying on the effects of Morgan's orgasm and his own magic to mask any pain as his fangs sank deeply into Morgan's throat. A sweeter oblivion could not have existed.

Morgan's blood flowed swiftly over Ashley's tongue, setting his own veins on fire as it rushed through him, matching the inferno as it blazed around them. Power resided in Morgan's blood, mingling with passion and fear. Each taste settled deep within Ashley's mind, enveloping him. Morgan shook beneath him as Ashley's name became a desperate prayer. It drew Ashley deeper until he knew there was no escape from this man. With the final tremors of Morgan's orgasm, Ashley's began, dragging him under with it. The fire flared and enclosed them. Morgan cried out again as his fingers dug into Ashley's back, leaving their own fiery trails across Ashley's skin.

Only when Ashley ceased shaking could his mind process what had happened. He had never lost control before. It took several minutes before he could even begin to move.

"What are you?" he asked as he finally rolled off of Morgan and drew him close.

"I'm yours," Morgan answered without hesitation.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Morgan woke with a start at the sound of someone breaking a door open. He jumped up from the bed, startling Ashley awake.

"What the hell?"

"Shh..." Ashley motioned for Morgan to be quiet.

Morgan shut his mouth, his heart thundering in his chest. Ashley slid off of the bed and threw a duffel bag at him. Then he slipped on his jeans and went to another chest near the hearth. As Morgan quickly pulled clothes out of the bag and put them on, Ashley landed a swift kick to the chest, busting the lock. He threw it open and Morgan watched as he buckled a belt around his waist. When he turned to get his shirt, Morgan saw a sword hanging from Ashley's belt. Ashley moved around the room with lightning speed, then he stopped cold. Seconds later, the door to the room burst open, raining wooden splinters on him.

"Jesus Christ!" Morgan shouted as he slid across the bed.

A group of four men ran into the room. Ashley started for the bed, but didn't get far when two of the men came from behind and grabbed his arms. They wrenched them behind his back and shoved him to his knees. Through the doorway, a woman emerged. She was dressed all in black with raven curls trailing down her back. Ashley snarled as he renewed his struggle against his captors. One of the other men skirted around Ashley and made his way to the bed.

With a strength that shocked Morgan to the bone, the man reached across the bed, grabbed his hair, and pulled him to the floor. He jerked Morgan's arms behind his back and held him despite Morgan's fighting. The woman walked up to Morgan and slid her palm across his face, cupping the curve of his jaw. Her full, red lips curled into a sinister grin.

"My, but you are beautiful," she said, stroking Morgan's cheek softly. "Ashley really does have a good taste in men."

"Get away from him, you fucking bitch!" Ashley yelled from the other side of the room.

The woman turned to him. "You simply haven't learned your place, have you?"

Morgan's eyes widened in horror as the woman pulled a leather bullwhip from her belt. Three metal barbs lined the end of the tail, ready to slice through the toughest of flesh. She walked to Ashley and with a nod from her, the men holding him stepped away, pulling his arms outward. Morgan's blood ran cold.

"No!" he screamed as the woman's whip cracked down across Ashley's back.

Ashley crumpled to the floor, growling through gritted teeth.

"You never learn, Ashley." She drew the whip back again.

Morgan's cheeks were wet with tears as the whip cracked across Ashley's back once more. Ashley coughed violently and when he looked up, blood ran from the corners of his mouth.

"That's enough, my dear."

Morgan tore his gaze from Ashley to see a tall man in black step inside. The man walked across the room and stood before Morgan.

"You have caused enough trouble in my house," the man whispered. Then he turned to Ashley. "You, my dangerous beauty, have also caused me enough trouble."

Ashley glared at him, the hatred in his eyes clearly visible, even to Morgan. Then the man leaned forward and kissed Ashley. When he stepped away, Ashley's body went limp with an enchanted sleep. Then the man turned to Morgan.

"We have much to talk about, my friend, but it can wait."

He leaned forward and whispered a flurry of words Morgan didn't understand. As he stepped away, Morgan felt his head grow heavy. Then everything disappeared in a growing haze of darkness.

* * * *

Morgan groaned and tried to move, but the chains which held him shackled to the stone wall had no give in them. Two hours had passed without anyone coming in to see them and Ashley was looking worse with every minute. His skin was pale and his eyes were nearly translucent. He looked like Death itself. One of the men who had held Ashley before brought Morgan water once, but no one ever gave Ashley a drop. Morgan knew it was only a matter of time. Yet he held out hope, what little there was. Ashley's brother was nowhere to be seen, and with Ashley as silent as the grave, Morgan prayed his twin would find them quickly. He dragged his attention from Ashley's limp form to the other side of the room as a bolt gave way on the wooden door.

"Well, it's nice to see one of you coming around finally."

"Who the hell are you?"

"Oh, forgive me, Morgan, for my lapse in manners," the man said. "I'm Loren Matthews, lord of this house. I see you've met my favorite possession," he said with a nod toward Ashley.

"What do you want with us?" Morgan demanded.

"You know, Mr. Adamson, you have proven yourself to be quite a troublemaker," Loren said, ignoring Morgan's question.

"Leave him alone, Loren."

Loren turned to face Ashley. "Well, well," he sneered. He looked from Ashley to Morgan. "Don't you two make an odd couple." He walked to Ashley, then turned to face Morgan once more. "Tell me, Morgan," he said, drawing a knife from his own belt, "how has a mortal managed to stay alive this long with Ashley Porter?"

A deathly chill stole up Morgan's spine. "What?"

Ashley's pale eyes widened. "Loren, please," he pleaded weakly.

Loren turned a sinister grin to him. "Well, it's about time I heard you beg for me, sorcerer, but you are no longer in a position to ask for anything." He walked to Morgan, carrying the knife in his right hand.

"Loren!" Ashley begged.

"Has he tasted you yet?" Loren pressed the tip of the six-inch blade to the inside of Morgan's forearm at the bend of his elbow, and with steady precision, drew it up to Morgan's wrist.

Morgan sucked in a sharp breath through his teeth, and Ashley's face paled. Blood ran down Morgan's arm in a steady stream and Loren coated the blade in it. Then he returned to Ashley once more. Morgan's heartbeat slowed to a crawl as he watched Loren slide the blade across Ashley's lips. A sickening feeling began in the pit of Morgan's stomach and surged through his body as Ashley's head fell back, blood trailing down his chin.

"Yes," Loren whispered near Ashley's ear, "the sweetest taste in the world. Feel it course through your veins, bringing an end to the pain of hunger. It's Morgan's blood, Ashley, sweeter than the finest wine

and deadlier than the strongest poison."

Morgan felt weak and sick. Tears began to roll down his cheeks as he watched Ashley's eyes open and his tongue slide across his lips, tasting the blood on them. When Ashley's gaze met his, Morgan's heart froze.

"Hm," Loren mused, seemingly satisfied with his work. "It looks like there is an explanation to be given, don't you think, Morgan?" Morgan was silent and Loren grinned. He sheathed the knife back in his belt and left the room, leaving the predator with the prey.

"Morgan." The whisper came from above.

Morgan looked up and relief washed over him. "What happened to you?" he asked as he choked back the tears.

David lifted the grate from the hole and jumped down into the room between Morgan and Ashley. "I stayed quiet enough to not be seen. I knew I'd have to get you two out of here. Ashley's always getting into some kind of predicament." Then David looked at Ashley. "Oh, Christ."

Morgan was silent.

"Morgan, I know this is a shock. Please believe me when I tell you that Ashley would never knowingly hurt you, but the hunger has blinded him and he cannot tell the difference between friend and prey. I have to get him someone before I can release him, otherwise I cannot guarantee your safety."

"Release him? How can you have a key to these?" Morgan asked, rattling the manacles on his wrists.

David grabbed the chains connecting Morgan's shackles, and with a force that made Morgan flinch and his heart to leap into his chest, David ripped the chains from the wall.

"Why can't Ashley do that?" Morgan asked, rubbing his wrists once David pried the manacles apart.

"Loren has refused him the chance to feed in order to weaken him," David explained. "I have to find him someone. I'll be back as soon as..." He stopped as Morgan walked over to Ashley. "Morgan," David warned, "the hunger has blinded him to everything but the need for survival. He's like a wild animal. He will kill you if you get too close."

Morgan didn't pay any attention to him and approached Ashley cautiously. "Ashley," he whispered. Ashley's translucent gaze was horrifying to behold and Morgan resisted the urge to touch him. Despite the anger he felt, he could not deny the love. He looked down at his forearm, then back to Ashley. David caught his arm just as he raised it.

"Morgan, he has the strength to kill one of the most powerful vampires in England. What makes you think he won't kill you?"

Morgan looked back to Ashley, desperately searching his pale eyes for a hint of remembrance. A faint glimmer, a single spark was all he needed. Ashley remembered. He pulled his arm from David's grip and with a deep breath he pressed the cut to Ashley's lips. When Morgan began to grow weak, Ashley pulled away abruptly.

"Morgan," he whispered. Ashley lowered his gaze and kissed Morgan's palm. "I'm sorry."

Morgan smiled through the tears and gently cupped Ashley's face. "There will be time enough for explanations later, but right now we have to get out of here."

Ashley nodded and David stepped up to break the chains. Once Ashley was free, David jumped up through the hole in the ceiling. He helped Morgan out and Ashley followed behind them, pulling the grate back over the hole. As Morgan looked out over the landscape, his heart sank. They were on the

top of a tower—six stories above the ground.

"How do we get down?" he asked, turning to the twins.

Ashley took Morgan's arms and put them around his waist. "Hold on tight and don't let go."

Morgan squeezed his eyes shut and his heart leapt into his throat as Ashley jumped off of the rooftop. When the ground did not come, he opened his eyes to a new shock: they were flying over the treetops. He gripped Ashley's waist tighter and watched the land below pass by in a blur of dark colors. It was night, but he wasn't about to try to look at his watch. He remained silent, too stunned with the events and the flight to even try to ask questions. As soon as they touched the ground, he released Ashley and backed away, bumping into the side of a deserted house.

"Morgan," Ashley said. He knelt down at a small stream to cup some water in his hands. "I'm sorry. I was afraid to tell you." He stood and carried the handful of water to Morgan and pressed it to his lips.

Morgan swallowed the water then pushed Ashley's hand down. "I won't lie to you; I'm angry you didn't tell me. But I'm still here, am I not? If I didn't love you, I would have run the moment we touched ground."

Ashley lowered his gaze, but Morgan slipped his hand under Ashley's chin and lifted his head. "Tell me, Ashley. Tell me again that you love me. If you don't, then kill me now. Without you, there is nothing left for me."

Ashley turned to him then and shoved him full against the house, pinning his arms above his head. "I love you, Morgan," he whispered. "I need you."

Ashley released Morgan's arms and moved to kiss him, but Morgan stopped him. He ran his fingers over Ashley's chest where a heart should have been beating, but it was still. He looked back up at Ashley.

"You're still pale," he said. "What little you took from me served only to give you the strength to get here." Ashley nodded. "Then take more."

Ashley's eyes widened. "What?"

"Take more," Morgan repeated. "I know you won't kill me, Ashley. I trust you. But I also know you need your strength."

"Morgan, I don't think that's a good idea."

Morgan put his fingertip to Ashley's lips. "Please."

With a tentative hand, Ashley brushed away the ebony locks of hair from Morgan's neck. He pulled Morgan to him, and with a deep breath, he sank his teeth into Morgan's throat. Morgan sucked in a sharp breath and grabbed Ashley's head, pulling him closer. His other hand tightened on Ashley's neck as a strangled whimper caught in his throat. When Ashley pulled away, he rested his head on Morgan's shoulder.

"Who are you, Ashley?" Morgan whispered.

His neck hurt like hell, but Ashley's color looked better. With a wave of Ashley's hand, the blood stopped seeping from the bite marks on his neck and from the cut on his arm.

"I'm in love with a man I thought I knew, and now I find that I don't know a damn thing about him," Morgan continued. Ashley sighed and released him. He motioned to the house and Morgan went inside.

* * * *

Several vampires scurried out of the path of the heavy wooden chair as it flew through the cold air with no particular destination. The room had grown chilly and it was growing colder the more Mordell's anger grew. No one dared to speak, not even to each other. Another object was hurled across the room. A stone block arced through the air with blinding speed and crashed to the floor, catching the foot of one of the lesser vampires who huddled in one corner. Howls of pain and rage echoed off of the stone wall and with a flick and wave of a hand, he was hauled off kicking and shrieking to the dungeons below.

Within seconds, the main hall was cleared, and Mordell sat down on his throne, brooding over the latest turn of events. Ashley and Morgan had been caught by Loren, but they had escaped, a fact which wasn't entirely surprising. Mordell remembered all too well Ashley's knack for getting in and out of places without much trouble. For a brief moment, he allowed himself a memory of a life long ago.

Back then, they were two different people, two different men. Back then, he was John Stockton, the lonely son of a powerful lord, who was in love with a thief. He smiled, a rare occurrence these days, as he remembered the face of a rogue with platinum hair and silky skin. Even then, the thief had unusual strength—strength which could either sever a man in two with a sword or hold a lover in an enthralling embrace. Yes, back then Ashley was simply a man, but his hold over those around him was godlike. He was a master of shadows, mystery, magic ... and men.

Mordell's smile turned to a scowl. Ashley had another now, but Mordell would have Morgan Adamson for his own, come Hell or high water. Morgan was a mystery, and because of that, Mordell couldn't blame Ashley for wanting him. He also knew of Morgan's lineage, a little tidbit of information Ashley did not know. Once he had Morgan under his control, he would gain control of Ashley. He turned his hand over to look at the small scar just below his palm, where his wrist bones met the bones of his hand. It was a small reminder of Ashley's unshakable control.

"Rene!" he shouted into the empty hall.

A tall, lithe man stepped out of a doorway in the shadows. He, too, had known the rogue long ago, but their affair had been brief and lacked the depth Mordell had with Mychael Potter. Mordell wanted to have the rogue at his mercy; Rene didn't care either way. That suited Mordell's plans well as he had no intention of sharing the sorcerer once he had him. Yet Rene was always near Mordell when all others failed to be. His loyalty was true even though Mordell refused him the chance to serve as anything other than a lover. He was much too pretty to be mussed up. Now Mordell had no other choice for his only other man was now a lump in a mass grave behind the castle. Ivan had been trustworthy, but his failure ultimately cost him his life, what little there had been to begin with.

"Yes, my lord?" Rene's sensuous lips curled around his words, enticing Mordell despite his anger.

"Loren's witless idiocy has resulted in Ashley's escape."

"And that's anything new?" Rene was obviously amused at the notion that Loren would even begin to think he could hold Ashley when his brother was free. "And what of the mortal, my lord?"

"Morgan is with him," Mordell said as he drummed his fingers on the curled arm of his throne. He could not help but grin. While Ivan had been better at covert operations, Rene bested him in brains alone.

"What are your orders, my lord?" Rene asked. A faint glimmer of hope sparkled in his pale eyes.

"Your time has come, my friend," Mordell said. "We're going to drive them to the Red Sea, whether by force or enticement."

"Enticement?" Rene asked. "How can you entice Ashley Porter? The thief has no weaknesses, save the

mortal, and he is in Ashley's care now."

Mordell grinned. "I know all of Ashley's weaknesses. Blood he cannot resist, none of us can, but he also craves control and the thrill of the chase. He has memories. He will remember." Mordell turned his hand over to show Rene the scar.

"Attempted suicide?"

"Oh no," Mordell said, shaking his head. "Mychael Potter put it there with the tip of his sword over four hundred years ago. More precision than the world's finest surgeons, I must say." He leaned forward. "Where do you think I got my love of pain?"

"Mychael Potter is a sadist?"

"Not just any sadist, my friend, but one of the best. He now tries to run from his past, thinking he can escape his memories by simply changing his name. He thinks he can run from the pull of steel on flesh, but he cannot escape it. He will remember."

Rene grinned. "What are your orders?"

"Ready yourself; ready everyone. We leave tonight. If I know Ashley, he's in hiding, but even he cannot hide forever. We will find him. Prepare for travel to the Red Sea."

"Yes, my lord," Rene said with a low bow.

Mordell felt his body grow flush as he watched the vampire's spine arch over, bending his body in two. It was nearly ten in the morning, and while sleep was a necessity, he simply could not pass up the opportunity before him. Without a word, he grabbed Rene's arm and pulled him to the throne. Rene settled on his lap and a moan escaped his lips as they kissed.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Daylight hit the leafless trees of the woods outside, but no amount of light could pierce the grime on the windows of the small shack. With the flight from the tower, Morgan completely lost all bearing on where they were and the woods outside did not look even remotely familiar. He turned back to the twins who were sleeping near the low-burning fire. It was a schedule he simply could not adjust to: sleeping during the day and being awake at night. How did they do it?

He walked to the wooden table and sat down against one of the legs. He stretched out his hand and slid his fingers along Ashley's brow, brushing silver and white strands away to reveal a serene face. Ashley could easily pass for an angel—if it were not for the coldness of his gaze or the sharpness of his teeth, which he no longer had to hide. He was beautiful and deadly, a predator who enticed his prey with a flick of his tongue. Morgan smiled. Even after discovering Ashley's true nature, he was still hopelessly in love with him.

He traced his fingertips along the vampire's closed lips, marveling at their softness. Unable to resist, he leaned down and brushed his lips over them and was pleasantly surprised when a pointed tongue slid into his mouth. When their kiss ended, he sat back up to look into those cold gray eyes.

"How long have you been awake?" he asked, smoothing his hand over Ashley's cheekbone.

"Long enough to know you need something to eat."

Morgan raised an eyebrow at him. "How did you know that?"

Ashley shrugged. "Call it a good guess. You only ate a handful of berries last night."

Morgan smiled. "Yeah, you're right, but in all honesty, I haven't thought much about food until you just mentioned it. Besides, berries aren't that bad. I have no qualms about giving up meat."

Ashley chuckled.

"Well," Morgan said as he let his gaze travel down Ashley's body, "maybe not all meat."

Ashley crooked his finger, beckoning Morgan to him. He pulled Morgan on top of him, then shifted his weight with a grin.

"You're insatiable," Morgan whispered close to his lips.

"Aye," Ashley purred. "Stamina is a thief's best friend."

"Thief?" Morgan asked, raising himself on his elbows. "Do tell."

Ashley grinned, gripped Morgan's hips, and ground up against him. He trailed his fingertips down Morgan's spine. "Before I was turned, I was a thief. I made my living 'acquiring' things of value for others, and when the work was scarce, I stole what I needed or wanted."

"Well, I can assure you that you haven't lost your touch," Morgan said with a laugh.

"I never meant for any of this to happen," Ashley said. "But when you cornered me in your bedroom, I didn't have much choice."

"Mm," Morgan murmured as he layered kiss after soft kiss on his neck, "I'm sure you didn't."

Ashley groaned and thrust his hips up as he pulled Morgan down against him. Morgan chuckled and his breath caressed the flesh of his neck.

"Morgan," Ashley whispered. Morgan kissed his neck again, trailing his tongue along the curve of his throat.

"Shh." Morgan blew lightly across Ashley's neck, causing his hips to lift once more. Beneath him,

Morgan could feel every inch of Ashley's body tighten; he smiled.

"Morgan," Ashley growled low.

Paying no attention, Morgan moved his lips to the nape of Ashley's neck. Ashley dug his fingers into the small of his back as Morgan opened his mouth over his neck. Then Morgan bit down, slowly and gently.

"Morgan..."

Morgan slid his hand between their chests and thumbed Ashley's right nipple. Then he gripped it between his thumb and index finger, twisting it. Ashley drew in a sharp, quick breath. Morgan felt him grow harder beneath him. He increased the pressure of his teeth on Ashley's neck and was met with a startling surprise.

With a force that knocked the wind out of him and shocked him to the core, Morgan landed on his back. Ashley pinned him down to the floor tightly. His wrists burned from the pressure of Ashley's hands and his head ached from the impact against the wood, but it was the look in Ashley's eyes which truly terrified him. It was not the look Ashley had in the tower; it was something more, something darker. Morgan's breath caught in his throat as Ashley leaned down and slid his tongue into his mouth. He opened his eyes and tried to push Ashley away when the first signs of the sorcerer's intentions became clear, but Ashley's hold on his wrists tightened and Morgan felt the use of his voice drain away in Ashley's kiss. When Ashley raised his head, his eyes were narrowed in a tense gaze.

"I warned you, Morgan," he said, "but you didn't listen. You wanted me to show you what you're getting yourself into; now you will know."

With his left hand pinning Morgan's wrists to the floor and his strength overpowering him entirely, Ashley drew a dagger from his belt. Morgan's eyes widened.

"This," he said, turning the blade around in all directions, "was a gift from a former client. I used it on him when my sword was too cumbersome to deal with."

Morgan felt his blood run cold.

"Oh, don't worry, Morgan," Ashley whispered. "I didn't kill him and I would never kill you."

Morgan swallowed hard and watched as Ashley licked the edge of the blade, leaving a tiny red trail along the length where the steel slid through his tongue.

Ashley closed his eyes. "It's intoxicating, Morgan," he whispered, "to draw a blade along a person's flesh and watch the blood come to the surface, trickling over the edge in a slow, steady stream."

Morgan began to struggle against Ashley's hold as the blade came near his chest.

"Don't struggle, Morgan; you won't get away from me."

Ashley slid the blade over Morgan's ribcage. It skimmed along the surface of his flesh with the precision of a surgeon. Morgan's heart raced in his chest and he squeezed his eyes shut. The blade's tip grazed across his breastbone and his breath stilled. With a tiny prick, his eyes flew open. Ashley's lips were curled into a frightening grin as he drew the blade up Morgan's chest to his collarbone. A thin, bright red line followed in its wake. Morgan's body tensed as the white-hot pain shot through him, overloading his senses. His hands were curled into fists as the searing pain ran the length of his chest. It spilled over into the rest of his body, causing every part of him to tingle and setting every nerve on alert.

Ashley set the knife down beside Morgan and leaned down. He drew his tongue along the cut, and Morgan tried to buck him off. Ashley's free hand went to grasp his throat, cutting off his breath with a

sickening ease. Morgan's cheeks grew wet with his tears as Ashley's grip on his throat served to still his body. He knew Ashley's strength—one slight squeeze and he could kill. His fists tightened as Ashley's tongue slid along the length of the cut, sending a stinging shot of pain through his entire body. His heart pounded uncontrollably and he began to feel lightheaded. When the pain began to overwhelm him and he was certain he was going to pass out, Ashley released his throat.

Morgan arched his back as the air rushed into his lungs once more. Within seconds, spasms of the most intense orgasm he had ever experienced bolted through his body with lightning speed. They began at his cock and traveled through him, dragging a soundless scream from deep within his throat. Ashley grinned down at him, his lips stained red from his blood. When he finally began to relax, Ashley kissed him softly, releasing his voice once more.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" Morgan fought to catch his breath. "What the fuck did you do to me?"

Ashley gently kissed the tears from Morgan's cheeks. "Now you know why I relieved you of your voice. If we were alone, I wouldn't bother. Hearing the screams is all part of the fun for me."

Morgan was speechless.

"I told you," Ashley said as he raised his head to look into his eyes, "you have no idea what you're getting yourself into. Now you've had a little peek into what I once was."

"Once?" Morgan asked with a raise of his eyebrow.

"I don't do that anymore, Morgan. That was the first time I've done it in over four centuries. I try to forget it."

With Ashley's attention diverted, Morgan pulled his hands free and cupped Ashley's face with them. "Why forget, Ashley?" he asked. "I want every part of you, everything you can give me." He sat up, bringing his lips close to Ashley's. Then he noticed Ashley's breath had slowed to a bare crawl. "Breathe, Ashley," he whispered on the sorcerer's lips. "No matter what happens, always breathe."

* * * *

By the time Loren's rage ran its initial course, half the mansion had been destroyed. Broken furniture, bookcases, shredded books, ripped linen; everything was in shambles. Upon finding Morgan and Ashley gone, Loren ripped the wooden door of the tower room off its hinges, flinging it to the ground below where it landed with a thunderous crash. No one, not even Elissa, dared approach the enraged lord as he paced across the rooftop of the mansion. Ashley's name and harsh curses mingled in the thin air of the night. When he had absolutely no rage left within him, Loren returned to the lower floor of the mansion.

After several hours, Elissa finally went to him. "My lord?" she asked as she cautiously opened the bedroom door.

Loren was standing by the stone fireplace, staring into the red-orange flames. "Don't fear me," he muttered without looking at her. "Out of all the others, you're the only one I won't harm." He sighed and turned to her finally. The fire and anger in his eyes had died out.

Elissa smiled nervously and went to him. Loren met her halfway, slipping his arm around her waist. "Do you really believe Morgan is that important?" she asked him in between his light kisses. Loren stopped and looked at her.

"I believe there's more to him than anyone realizes, himself included," he answered her. "But I would not have such talk right now."

Elissa wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer. "Oh, I would agree, my lord," she said

and kissed him in return.

"Shall we..."

The door burst open, snapping both of them out of their sensual explorations. Loren glared at the vampire who stood in the doorway.

"I'm sorry, my lord, but word has reached us that Mordell is on his way to the Red Sea. Morgan and the twins must not be much farther ahead of him."

Loren cursed and spun around, slamming his fist into the stone mantle. Elissa stepped back, wary of his temper. "Make yourselves ready," he growled. "We're going to Egypt."

The vampire nodded and left. Loren turned back to Elissa who stood nervously beside the bed, her arms folded over her chest. He went to her and slid his hands over her shoulders. "Are you ready, my dear, to take your frustrations out on him?"

"Oh yes," Elissa whispered, moving closer to him.

"What a pleasure it will be for both of us to finally see the infamous Ashley Porter groveling at our feet for mercy," Loren whispered on her lips. "Tell me, have you ever whipped a man—a mortal man—before?"

Elissa shook her head. Loren smiled and groaned as he pressed himself against her body, backing her into the wall. "They can't take the pain like Ashley can," he said. "Ashley can only be broken one way. When he sees you unleash your hatred on Morgan, he will crumble and beg."

"What of Mordell, my lord?" Elissa asked. She trailed her fingernails down Loren's chest, raking his skin through the thin silk of his shirt.

"He is no fool. If anyone knows Ashley's true weaknesses, it is Mordell."

Elissa looked up at him in confusion. "Why Mordell?"

Loren grinned. "Mordell was once known as John Stockton. He was Ashley's first love."

Elissa moaned and leaned into Loren. He took her fully into his arms and kissed her.

"Yes," she murmured as he kissed her neck, "he will pay dearly."

* * * *

Ashley watched Morgan pace back and forth in front of the window. Morgan's arms were crossed over his chest and his shoulders were drawn tight. Outside, night was drawing near and they would have to leave soon. Morgan stopped and stared out through the grime on the window.

"When I was fourteen," he said quietly, "my father sat me down and told me he had a family secret he had to pass on. I was expecting it to be some wild and fantastic story, like maybe we were displaced royalty or something like that. Then he started to tell me a story I knew all too well from my years in Catholic school—the story of Cain and Abel. I didn't believe him at first, but my grandfather confirmed it for me." Morgan turned from the window to face the twins. "I am a direct descendant of Cain."

"Morgan," David said, "I think I have a theory as to why Mordell wants you so bad."

"Oh?"

"Do you know the legends that describe what happened to Cain when he left?" Morgan shook his head and David continued. "He went to the Red Sea, and there he met Lilith, Adam's first wife who fled Eden when she refused to sleep with Adam in an inferior position. She taught Cain about blood, and in essence, turned him into the first vampire. Together they had children, from which your family is

descended. Mordell thinks if he were to introduce the blood of a vampire into your veins, you would become the greatest vampire the world has ever seen."

Morgan blanched. "I have no desire to be a vampire," he stammered.

Ashley closed his eyes slowly. Morgan knelt down in front of him and tucked a silver bit of hair behind his left ear.

"Ashley, I'm sorry, but I have my family, and no matter how much they drive me crazy, I still love them."

Ashley felt his heart break in two and he stood, pulling away from Morgan's hand. "And what about me, Morgan?" he asked, turning to face the man who had stolen his heart and now threatened to break it. Love or no, he began to fear what was between them. Above all, he feared he would have to make a choice—between Morgan and Heaven.

Morgan sighed and looked into the fire. "Ashley, I love you more than the waking world, but I don't want to live forever."

"You mean you don't want to live with me."

"No!" Morgan shouted, jumping to his feet and grabbing Ashley's shoulders. "I want you, Ashley. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. But when it's my time to go, I want to go. I don't want to stay in this world forever." Ashley lowered his gaze and Morgan released him.

"Morgan," David said, "we have to get you out of here."

"But what do we do?" Morgan asked. "From what I've seen and heard, the three of us are no match for Loren and Mordell, not to mention all those under the both of them. How can we possibly survive with them on our trail constantly?"

"We can't," Ashley said sourly.

With his jaw clenched in anger, Morgan turned and stormed outside. Ashley slammed his fist into the wooden wall of the shack. The mere force of the impact rattled the entire structure. He was sick, sick with the heartache Morgan was causing. He felt his heart, his mind, and his soul rip into pieces, each one taking on Morgan's form. David did not try to stop him as he tore open the front door and stormed out in a rage.

* * * *

Morgan desperately needed the fresh air to clear his mind. He felt his heart playing tug-of-war with Ashley on one side and the rest of his family on the other. He found a tree behind the shack and sank down the trunk to the ground. He set his arms on his knees and looked into the woods, searching for a solution to the turmoil that played with his heart. He leaned his head back against the trunk of the tree and let out a ragged sigh. His anger was gone, and if the sound he heard was the door to the shack, so was Ashley. He felt the overwhelming pain of heartbreak and loss seep into his soul. Yet as he watched the sky grow darker, he became aware of someone near him, watching him.

"Ashley?"

No answer came and Morgan grew nervous. The shack was several yards from where he sat, but he could get to it if something was out there. The woods were eerily quiet and still. Then a whisper of tree branches came from behind him. He stood up and turned around, trying to see into the darkness of the forest.

"Who's there?" he asked nervously.

Without a sound, a hand closed around his throat. "Make a sound and I'll kill you right here," a voice growled in his ear. His heart froze; it was definitely not Ashley.

"Well, well, Mr. Adamson," another voice said from the darkness in front of him, "it's about time I found you."

Out of the darkness of the woods, a tall, slender man appeared. His hair was pulled back into a ponytail and a black cloak shrouded his body, obscuring it in the surrounding darkness. Morgan knew in an instant who the man was.

"Mordell."

The man grinned and nodded briefly. "You've proven yourself hard to acquire, Morgan, but I imagine I have Ashley Porter to thank for that. He's a slippery one." Mordell glanced over Morgan's shoulder. A commotion came from behind Morgan and the man holding him captive turned him around to see David held by two other men. Ashley was nowhere to be found.

"Where is your brother?" Mordell asked as he walked up to David.

"None of your fucking business," David said bitterly. He struggled against the men holding him.

"Hm," Mordell said with a sneer, "we'll see about that." He drew a dagger from his belt and walked to Morgan.

"It looks like Ashley's started his handiwork with you, too," Mordell said, tracing the tip of the knife blade down the newly formed scar on Morgan's chest. The sharpness of the blade pierced through the thin layer of dried blood, bringing fresh blood to the surface. Morgan squeezed his eyes shut and hissed through his teeth.

"Ashley always did like the sight of steel on flesh," Mordell said. "You see, I even have my own damned scar to remind me of Ashley's control." He held up his hand and Morgan opened his eyes. Mordell grinned at his confusion.

"Oh, did your beloved Ashley fail to tell you?"

"Tell me what?" Morgan asked, feeling his blood run cold.

"That he did this?" Mordell said, waving his hand. "Although when he did that, I was going by the name of John Stockton, and Ashley was nothing more than a thief and a rogue sorcerer." He moved closer to Morgan, the blade sliding up to his throat to rest under his chin. "We were lovers, Morgan. It was then I, too, learned of Ashley's need for pain. He craves it. He loves to hear the screams of his lover as he slides a blade along their flesh. He cut my wrist with the tip of his sword in 1564. It's a sickening reminder I see every fucking day; a reminder of how one fucking man can hold so much control over another."

Morgan felt sick. Mordell brushed his lips over his, sending a chill down his spine.

"Tell me, Morgan," he said, "when he cut you, did he make your body writhe in passion without touching you? He can do that, you know. He can make a man come without a single touch. Oh, your dear Ashley has a hell of a reputation, don't you think?"

Morgan swallowed hard as Mordell drew the knife down his chest to his stomach and then over the zipper of his jeans. His breath caught as Mordell pressed the tip of the blade into the denim.

"You know," Mordell whispered, "I learned a lot from Ashley. I learned how to inflict pain as well. Just ask your cousin when you visit his grave."

Morgan's jaw tightened in anger, but the hand on his neck tightened considerably in response,

rendering him motionless. Mordell pressed the knife harder into his jeans. The tip cut through the denim and the boxers underneath, nicking Morgan's skin. As Mordell leaned closer, his lips barely brushing Morgan's, one of the men holding David slumped to the ground. Mordell wheeled around, grazing Morgan's thigh with the knife blade. The other man quickly joined his comrade on the cold ground. David was free and the moonlight glinted off a sliver of steel behind him.

"Mychael Potter."

"Mychael?" Morgan asked.

"Oh yes," Mordell said, not taking his eyes off of Ashley's. "Before Ashley was turned, he was Mychael Potter and his brother was William."

Morgan looked to Ashley, but Ashley seemed to be intently focused on Mordell.

"It looks like you haven't lost your touch, Ashley," Mordell said, glancing down at the two dead vampires on the ground, both of their throats slit from ear to ear. "Was it as much fun to mark Morgan as it was to mark me?"

Ashley didn't say a word as he started across the short distance to where Mordell stood beside Morgan. His right hand was wrapped around the hilt of a sword, and in his left hand he held a bloodied dagger. His jaw was clenched in rage. He stopped two feet short of them when Mordell held his knife at Morgan's throat.

"Come any closer and he dies."

Ashley looked from Mordell to Morgan. His anger had not dissipated and Morgan felt the sting of his stare in the core of his soul.

"What do you want?"

"Follow me to the Red Sea, Ashley. There you can witness a ritual to create the ultimate vampire. It's all planned, even down to the mansion I've built just for the occasion."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then Morgan dies," Mordell said with a shrug.

The man holding Morgan's throat pulled his head back and Mordell drew a shallow line across Morgan's neck. Ashley made a move to stop him and Mordell pressed the blade harder, causing a steady stream of blood to trickle down Morgan's neck and chest. Ashley stopped.

"What's it gonna be, Ashley?"

"Fine," Ashley said through clenched teeth.

"Good. Then drop your weapons. You, too, David." The twins did as Mordell instructed. Then others came out of the darkness to secure them.

PART THREE: SALVATION

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Mr. Adamson?"

Morgan rolled over to see a young woman, possibly in her twenties, kneeling over him.

"Sir," she said, "it's time to wake. Here, I brought you something to eat."

It was then Morgan remembered what happened and he looked more closely at the woman, suddenly wondering how many hundreds of years he should add to his guess at her age. *Hell, Ashley looked younger than she did.*

"Thank you," he said with a grateful smile, although he was a bit wary of her kindness. "Who are you?"

The young woman smiled and a flash of light pink stole over her cheeks. Her golden hair brushed her shoulders in tight ringlets, creating a halo effect around her head, illuminated by the torch on the wall behind her.

"My name is Annette, sir. My brother, Rene, is the lord's lover."

Morgan nodded. "Please, call me Morgan." He looked around the cell for the first time, noting the wooden walls and the clean-picked bones in the corner—handiwork of rats, no doubt. A shudder ran through him. "Why do you come to me when all others will not?" he asked, turning back to Annette.

"Oh no, sir," she said. She shook her head and the tiny gold curls bounced all over. "There are many who would come to you, but the lord does not want anyone around you or Ashley."

"Ashley!" Morgan nearly jumped up from the floor, but thought better of it when a stabbing pain shot through his chest. He winced and slumped back down against the wall. "Where is he? Is he okay?"

"Yes, sir ... Morgan, but Ashley is weak because the lord only allows him enough blood to keep him alive. The lord doesn't want him to be strong."

"I can't imagine why," Morgan grumbled. "Where is he? For that matter, where are *we*?"

"We are crossing the Mediterranean Sea," she said. "We will be making port in Alexandria by daybreak."

"I assume I'm not the only mortal on this ship then," Morgan said.

"No, the lord has many mortals in his employ. Most of them are donors and companions to the others. The rest of us sleep in our coffins until we land."

"Then why are you here? You didn't come to bring me food, did you?"

Annette looked down at her hands as they lay folded in her lap. "No," she murmured,

"I did not."

"Then why are you here?"

She looked up at Morgan, an unspoken plea in her eyes.

"Something tells me not all of you agree with this plan of Mordell's," he mused.

Annette shook her head slowly. "Rene supports the lord, but many of us do not," she said. "Lord Mordell holds us with fear; we wish to be out from under his rule."

"That could be a tricky situation to deal with," Morgan said, wincing as he sat up once more. His chest

still ached from the cuts.

"Yes," Annette said. "But with you, Ashley, and Ashley's brother, David, we can do it."

"Us?" Morgan asked her. A dark eyebrow arched skeptically. "Why do you think we can help much?"

"The lord fears Ashley—he even keeps him gagged. Rumors are going around that Ashley can steal a person's voice with his tongue."

Morgan could not begin to stifle the chuckle. "Yeah, I can't argue with that one."

"It's true?" Annette asked as her blue eyes widened in wonder.

Morgan nodded. "Yes, it's quite true. Now what exactly do you expect from us?"

"The lord has kept Ashley weak, as I said, but his brother is in good health, even though he, too, is chained. Lord Mordell thinks he can keep them from talking by separating them, but others say they can talk with their minds."

"Yes, that's a plus," Morgan agreed. "But if Ashley is weakened, what can he possibly do?"

"If he were to be fed properly," Annette said, lowering her gaze, "his strength would return."

"And how do you suggest we do that?"

Annette drew a small dagger from her belt and held up Morgan's water cup. Morgan's face grew pale.

"More knives," he grumbled. "How do you expect to get to Ashley if you're obviously taking a risk by talking to me?"

"A close friend of mine is the one who has been giving Ashley the small amount of blood each evening," she said. "No one will think it odd if I were to go to him."

Morgan sighed and nodded. "All right," he said, holding out his right arm. "Might as well add to the growing number of scars." He drank the water and set the emptied cup on the floor.

Annette held his arm still over the cup and with a slow, steady hand, she made a two-inch cut on Morgan's forearm. He sucked in a breath as the knife slid through his skin, but he knew it might be Ashley's only hope for survival. He watched as the blood trickled into the cup. When the vessel was full to the brim, Annette released his arm and wrapped it in a strip of thick cloth, tying it tight enough to stop the blood flow.

"I certainly hope this works." Morgan sat back against the wooden wall of his cell, holding his arm tightly.

"Should I tell Ashley who gave him this blood?"

"I think he'll know," Morgan said dryly.

Annette nodded and stood. Morgan watched her leave the cell, closing the door and relocking it on the other side. He leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes. He prayed this plan would work.

* * * *

"I've brought you something."

With his senses muddled from the lack of blood, Ashley could barely make out the petite woman who knelt to the floor in front of him. He felt her remove the cloth from his mouth and he licked his lips, wetting them for the first time in several hours.

"Here, please drink this," the woman said.

Ashley did not recognize her voice as the one who was kind enough to bring him blood every day. However, thinking it was simply time for his next sparse meal, he opened his mouth on the lip of the cup she held ... and instantly knew this time was different.

The sweet taste flooded his senses and ran through his veins like fire, a painfully familiar fire. He closed his eyes as she tipped the cup, pouring more into his mouth. His own blood began to race and his head began to swim as Morgan's blood filled him, revitalizing him and giving him back the energy he had lost. With a pained groan, he finished it and desperately wanted more. The woman set the cup on the floor and brushed his hair from his eyes. Only then did Ashley recognize her.

"Annette," he whispered.

The woman smiled and hugged him to her. "Mychael," she said through her tears, "I didn't know it was you the lord had captive." Then she sat up quickly. "William! The other one they have locked up is William."

Ashley nodded.

"Morgan is so very worried about you."

"How is he?" Ashley asked. He was still hurting, still angry, but he still loved the man regardless of the hell Morgan put him through.

"He is fine," she said. "Listen to me: there are several others who wish to be rid of Lord Mordell."

Ashley looked at her with a rather amused expression. "Now that's an interesting turn of events. How do you suggest we do that?"

"Well," Annette said, "being a mortal, Morgan is no match for a vampire."

Ashley narrowed his gaze as her intention became clear. "Are you aware Morgan has vehemently stated he does not want to be one of us?" he asked her, trying to hide the anger once more.

Annette shook her head, then smiled. "But what if you were the one to change him?"

Ashley shook his head. "I don't think he would agree even if I were the one. Despite how we both feel, he doesn't want to be a vampire."

"Then I will ask him," Annette said as she stood. She covered Ashley's mouth with the cloth once more. "Shh. No one can know you have had his blood, Mychael. If the lord finds out, then we shall all pay the price."

Ashley nodded.

"I'll be back."

* * * *

Morgan had just started to doze off once more when the door to his cell opened. Annette slipped inside, closing the door behind her.

"Morgan," she said, kneeling at his side. "He drank it and his strength is returning, but there is one more thing you must do if we are to survive."

Morgan knew where this was going. "What would that be?" he asked with a sigh.

"Become one of us, Morgan," she pleaded. "Let him make you one of us."

Morgan groaned.

"Please, Morgan," Annette begged him. "It's the only way we can survive; the only way you can

survive."

"Ashley is angry with me," Morgan said with a dejected sigh. "Besides, what makes you think it will make a difference if I'm a vampire or not?"

"Because," she said, bringing out a small key and unlocking the manacles from his wrists and ankles, "with your heritage and Ashley's blood, you will become the most powerful vampire the world has ever seen."

"So I've been told. But why Ashley? Is there something else about him I should know about?"

Annette stopped after removing the last of Morgan's restraints. "Yes," she whispered. "You were bound together long ago, long before you both were ever born."

"What?" Morgan asked with a laugh. "You've got to be kidding me."

"Oh no," Annette said. "There is a prophecy which states: 'With the blood of the twin-born sorcerer, the descendant of Cain will come into his power.'"

Morgan looked at her like she had lost her mind. "Now I've heard everything."

"Morgan, you were destined to be together. On your own, you both are strong men, true, but together, you both are much more powerful."

Morgan cradled his head in his hands. "This is getting stranger every fucking day," he mumbled.

He felt Annette's hand on his shoulder and looked up.

"Morgan," she said, "if you don't become what you were born to be, then Lord Mordell will do it for you with his own blood, thus cementing his control over you and rendering you helpless."

Morgan sighed and with a nod, he agreed. "Okay, take me to Ashley."

* * * *

Ashley opened his eyes when he heard the door to his cell open once more. Annette stepped inside and then, much to his surprise, Morgan walked in behind her. Ashley's eyes grew wide, then immediately narrowed with the resurfacing of the pain and anger. Annette knelt to unlock his restraints and remove the cloth from his mouth. He felt his chest tighten as Morgan stepped up to him. Morgan held out his hand and Ashley took it. As Morgan pulled him to his feet, Ashley's anger broke the surface. He shoved Morgan hard against the wooden wall of the cell and twisted Morgan's shirt in his fists until his knuckles turned white.

"Don't ever fucking walk out on me again," he growled as his eyes darkened in anger.

Without saying a word in his own defense, Morgan cupped Ashley's face in his hands and pulled his head down to kiss him. With the feel of Morgan's lips on his once again, every shred of Ashley's anger dissolved within a matter of seconds. He released Morgan's shirt and gathered the man into his arms, deepening their kiss.

When Morgan finally pulled away, he brushed his fingertips across Ashley's lips. "I'm sorry. Please forgive me, Ashley."

"You've agreed to it, haven't you?" Ashley asked him.

"Yes." Morgan nodded. "But I wouldn't have agreed to it if it had been anyone else."

Ashley closed his eyes, knowing his failure would damn him eternally, but Morgan's life depended on the strength of his heritage—a heritage only he could unlock. *Michael, forgive me*, he prayed silently. Then he opened his eyes.

"Go release David," he said to Annette without looking from Morgan.

"Yes." Annette left and closed the door to Ashley's cell.

Morgan gripped Ashley's hips and pulled him tight against his body. "How do you want to do this?" he asked as Ashley descended on his neck, laying soft kisses along the curve of his throat.

Ashley sat down on the floor and pulled Morgan onto his lap. He slid his hands under Morgan and unbuttoned his jeans, freeing himself. "You said I was insatiable," he said with a grin.

Morgan lowered his mouth to Ashley's and groaned when Ashley slid his tongue across his lips. Then he broke the kiss abruptly and met Ashley's darkened gaze. "You really are a sorcerer."

Ashley nodded and ground his hips up against him. "Of a sort. I haven't done anything truly spectacular in a few hundred years. Hell, I'm surprised I remembered the voice trick." Morgan's gaze narrowed and Ashley chuckled. "Don't worry," Ashley reassured him. "I don't plan on using that again."

Morgan gripped Ashley's cock and squeezed it tightly. "Does this mean you're submitting to me, Ashley Porter?" he asked as he began to stroke the hardened flesh slowly.

"No," Ashley whispered. "I don't submit to anyone."

"Really? We'll see."

Morgan slid from Ashley's lap and pushed him to his back. He lowered his lips to Ashley's cock and slid his tongue across the head. Ashley's hips rose up from the floor.

"*Crist*," he breathed. Morgan's tongue was sweetly hot, and a rather unnerving thought entered Ashley's mind. If Morgan was this enthralling as a mortal, God help him when the man was turned.

He threaded his fingers through Morgan's hair, giving himself over to the seduction wrought by the man's tongue. With every silky slide, Morgan drew another part of Ashley's soul into him, further cementing his hold on him. He drew in a sharp breath as Morgan's teeth grazed the length of his cock, creating trails of sweet fire in their wake. With every swirl of Morgan's tongue, Ashley grew harder, until he could not possibly stand it any longer. With a deep growl, he gripped Morgan's arms and pulled him on top of him.

Quick to take a hint, Morgan unbuttoned his jeans, stood, and slid them off, along with his boxers. He kicked them to the corner, then straddled Ashley once more. With an agonizing pace, he lowered himself onto Ashley's cock. Ashley groaned as he felt Morgan's body stretch to take in all of him. He gripped Morgan's hips and thrust upward, impatiently burying himself to the hilt inside Morgan's body. Morgan winced and threw his head back.

Delicious waves of pleasure washed through Ashley as Morgan's body enveloped him in velvet heat. Once he was fully inside him, Ashley stopped moving, giving Morgan time to adjust. Then with a slow grind of his hips, Morgan began to move. Ashley groaned and closed his eyes, savoring the feel of Morgan's movements, the feel of his body as it wrapped around him.

Morgan began to stroke his own cock as Ashley slid in and out of him. Ashley knew Morgan was close to orgasm when his movements became harder as he ground down. With a particularly deep thrust, he pushed Morgan over the edge.

"Oh, fuck!" Morgan shouted.

Ashley groaned and gripped his hips, then began to thrust into him at a harder, faster pace. He felt Morgan's body tighten as he neared climax. Before long, Morgan rocked back and forth as his entire body shook with his orgasm. As he thrust into Morgan, Ashley brought his own wrist to his lips, and with a deep breath, he sank his teeth into the flesh of his wrist. Blood poured into his mouth and he

looked to Morgan.

Dear God, forgive me for what I'm about to do, he silently repented.

He watched breathlessly as Morgan covered the bite with his mouth and began to suck gently. At the same moment, Ashley's hips arched and his orgasm hit, sending white bolts of pain mingled with agonizing waves of pleasure throughout his body. Morgan's pull on his arm increased, and without warning, Morgan bit down at the same moment Ashley came.

"Morgan!" Ashley cried out through the torrent of tears as they streamed down his face. He squeezed his eyes shut as every sensation—every thought—of Morgan's echoed through his own mind.

Morgan's throat tightened as Ashley's blood seeped into his veins. He felt the cells in his body mutate, becoming something dark—and dangerous. His pulse pounded as the blood raced through his veins, Ashley's blood turning mutinous and taking over his own. A heat stole over him, washing him in the fire of thousands of years of Hell, dragging him along a line of pain and pleasure, of blood and death, of love and forever. His chest ached with the furious beating of his heart as it struggled for control, but no amount of fighting would save it now. With a deep inhalation of breath, he collapsed onto Ashley's chest and his heart ceased its furious beating.

Ashley's breath came in painful spurts, made more so by the unexpected connection during Morgan's turning. Morgan's body was limp on top of him and Ashley's fear increased.

"Morgan?" He prayed silently to God that Morgan was okay. "Morgan," he said again. He rolled over gently, letting Morgan down slowly onto his back. "Morgan, please answer me."

He brushed stray strands of black hair from Morgan's face. Morgan's eyes were closed and he looked peaceful. Ashley moved his hand softly over Morgan's mouth and laughed with nervous relief. Morgan was breathing.

Morgan opened his eyes then. "Ashley."

"Morgan." Ashley breathed with relief. "You're going to need more than what I could give you."

Morgan stroked Ashley's cheek, bringing his hand down to cup the curve of his jaw. "She was right," he whispered. Ashley cocked his head in confusion. "Annette. She told me we were made for each other long before either one of us was born; that we were soul mates. Now I believe her."

Ashley smiled and with a graceful ease that startled the breath out of him, Morgan had him on his back on the floor. Morgan gripped his wrists and Ashley struggled against him, only to discover no amount of strength could budge Morgan in the least. With an indescribable feeling which began in the pit of his stomach and worked its way up through his body, Ashley quickly realized what Morgan had already figured out: things had changed; the tables had turned between them. Then Morgan kissed him.

Ashley screamed into Morgan's mouth as a bolt of pure energy shot through him, bringing his back up into an arch beneath the weight of Morgan's body. Tears spilled down his cheeks as Morgan deepened the kiss, stealing his breath and binding him with his own.

Morgan broke the kiss and stared into Ashley's eyes. Then he brushed his lips over Ashley's. "You are mine, sorcerer." With his second kiss, he stole the last of Ashley's resistance ... and his soul.

At the sound of the door opening, Morgan jerked his head around, breaking their kiss abruptly. Ashley looked around his shoulder. David stood in the doorway, his jaw dropped open in dumbstruck silence.

"Oh, *Crist*. Ashley, what have you done?"

Morgan got off of Ashley and helped him to stand. He caught Ashley under his arms as the sorcerer's legs threatened to give way.

"I gave us all a chance to survive," Ashley said as he leaned into Morgan for support.

What about your task? You were supposed to protect him from becoming immortal!

Fuck my task. It was either my soul or Morgan's life.

"We must get to the others quickly," Annette said. "Daylight is coming, and we must find the three of you shelter from the sun as soon as possible."

Morgan nodded and dressed. They followed Annette through the dark passage which ran along the belly of the ship. When they reached a thick wooden door at the end, Annette knocked three times in quick succession, followed by two knocks spaced out by ten seconds each. A moment later, the door opened and an older woman stood in the doorway.

"Annette," she said with relief. "I was so worried. Where is..."

At that moment, Annette moved to the side and Morgan stepped into the room.

"Are you," the woman asked as she stared at him in disbelief, "Morgan Adamson?"

"I am," he said.

"I am Mary Cosworth, an old friend of Annette's. We must get to sleep. Mordell and the rest of his horde are above. They've slept the entire trip, leaving me, Annette, and a few others to watch over you three. As soon as we make port in Alexandria, the crew will take us to Mordell's mansion outside of Cairo. No one will wake until nightfall. That is when we all must make our move against Mordell and the others."

Ashley nodded and led Morgan to the largest coffin. It was made of rich mahogany with gold accents. Ashley opened it to reveal a crimson velvet lining. "I never did like these damned things," he muttered. "They're too confining."

Morgan pressed up against his back. "Maybe it's because you haven't had someone in there with you," Morgan whispered in his ear. "Get in."

Ashley settled into the coffin and Morgan slid in beside him. The coffin was obviously built for a large person, as they were nearly able to lie side by side. Morgan closed the lid over them.

Once they were enveloped in darkness, he slid his hand down Ashley's stomach and unzipped his jeans. Within seconds, he wrapped his hand around Ashley's cock, bringing it to life.

"*Anniwall*," Ashley whispered as Morgan brushed his lips over his mouth. A single stroke of his hand coaxed Ashley's hips to rise.

"Insatiable," Morgan echoed. With another stroke, Ashley gasped and Morgan captured him in a kiss.

* * * *

"M'lord, we have arrived at your outpost near Cairo."

Loren woke from his peaceful slumber and peered through the mass of black curls splayed across his face and chest. Elissa moaned sleepily as he brushed her hair away. "And Mordell?"

"He's already at his mansion, m'lord," the captain replied.

"Very good. Wake the others, Captain."

"Aye."

"Is it time?" Elissa asked him as she raised her head.

Loren smiled and kissed her forehead. "Yes, my dear, it is time. Within a few hours, the mortal will be

ours and Ashley Porter will be groveling at our feet, begging for mercy."

Elissa sat up and stretched. Her full breasts were utterly inviting. Loren thought for a brief moment to take her before they left the ship, but time was of the essence if they were to get to Mordell while he was conducting his ritual. Elissa climbed out of the coffin and slid a dark red gown on, then pulled her hair back. Loren watched her for a moment before getting out. His body ached from being in the coffin for so long, but the thought of Ashley kneeling and begging was enough to wash away the pain. With a grin, he dressed quickly and followed Elissa out onto the deck of the ship. The sun had set and the land was nothing but a sea of dark sand. The air was dry, but much better than the stifling air of a coffin after several days.

"My lord," Karl called to Loren from a doorway, "we've received our initial reports from our scouts posted near Mordell's mansion."

Loren nodded and left Elissa to join Karl in the small building. "What have they reported?"

"There seems to be a disturbance within Mordell's camp."

Loren raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Aye, my lord. It seems over half of Mordell's forces have turned against him."

A grin snaked across Loren's lips and he shook his head. "Why do I have the feeling this has something to do with Ashley Porter?"

"Aye, from what our scouts have reported, Ashley and Morgan are leading the rebellion."

"Morgan? You mean he's survived this long?"

Karl nodded.

"Well, that's heartening news. It looks like Elissa's whip will have a nice, weak target this time. Very well," Loren said, "we move out now. If Ashley manages to kill Mordell, then it will mean less work for us."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Rene froze, unable to move as a knife pressed into the tender flesh of his neck. He felt his captor nod his head, then a figure appeared in the doorway of the cell where moments before Rene himself had discovered Ashley and David gone from the coffins meant for them. Morgan was nowhere to be found. Rene knew he would be executed as soon as Mordell found out, but this was not his lord's doing. The figure moved into the light of the torch and Rene's blood ran cold.

"Annette," he whispered breathlessly.

"Hello, dear brother," the vampiress purred.

"Ann, what's going on? What are you doing?"

"Something I should have done a long time ago, Rene." She nodded her head and Rene found himself spun around to face the very mortal he thought he had lost.

"You're Mordell's whore?" Morgan asked him.

Rene nodded slowly.

"Good, then send him this."

Rene crumpled over into Morgan's arms, impaling himself further on the dagger in Morgan's hand as his blood began to run from the corners of his mouth. With a coldness that surprised even Morgan, Annette came up behind her brother and drew a knife across his throat to seal his death. His blood spilled out over Morgan, and Morgan dropped the vampire's body to the floor. He stripped off his shirt and threw it on top of the body.

"Where's Ashley?" Morgan asked as he wiped the blade on his jeans.

"This way," Annette said. "He's waiting with the others."

Morgan followed her to another room in the basement of the mansion and opened the door. Nearly thirty vampires stood waiting for him with Ashley in front.

"Are we ready?" Morgan asked.

All thirty heads nodded in unison.

"Good, follow me."

A group of vampires—a small gathering of Mordell's trusted companions—stood at the entrance to the lord's throne room. Morgan pressed his back against the wall and peered around the corner. Ashley stood beside him, his breath coming in steady but hardly calm inhalations. Morgan knew that rhythm like he knew his own.

"There's seven of them," he whispered, not looking away from the group. "Can you handle this?" he asked, knowing Ashley was still recovering from the voyage itself and the restrictions which had been placed upon his feeding. A single, curt glance from Ashley's pale eyes told him enough. "Annette and the others are in place," Morgan whispered as he spotted the golden curls of Annette's hair across the small receiving foyer. "Ready?"

"Aye," Ashley said, taking a deep breath.

Morgan looked over at him for a moment and without warning, he pulled the surprised sorcerer into his arms. "No matter what happens, remember one thing," he whispered, placing his lips close to Ashley's but not quite touching them.

"What would that be?"

"That I love you."

Ashley's legs nearly gave out from under him as Morgan descended on his lips. Morgan caught him and held him tight. When he broke the kiss, Ashley smiled.

"Let's go," Morgan said. He turned and nodded to Annette.

* * * *

Annette stepped from out of her hiding place around the corner. The group near the door turned to her. "I wish to see my brother."

"Rene is not here," one of the vampires said. "Lord Mordell is already raving about killing him, woman, so I wouldn't hang around here too much longer if I were you."

Annette smiled demurely and a visible shudder stole over the vampire before her. "Oh, that's all right. I'll just deal with Mordell when I get to him." She drew her dagger and within seconds, the small receiving room was filled with fifteen vampires, all armed and ready to kill.

The small group of seven dropped into puddles of blood without putting up much resistance. A few had their heads severed, others bearing Ashley's touch—a nice, clean slit from ear to ear. The other half of the rebellion, led by David, was outside disposing of the rest of Mordell's followers. Annette glanced to Ashley briefly and gripped Morgan's shoulder in a token of good luck. Then she and her group left to help David. Morgan and Ashley watched her leave before they turned to the closed door. It was all that stood between them and Mordell. Ashley drew his sword and nodded. The wooden doors splintered from the force of Morgan's kick.

* * * *

Mordell jumped from his throne just in time to see dust and wood settle, revealing two figures in the doorway. They came into focus as they walked down the middle of the room. One of them carried a sword and the other held a six-inch dagger. When he realized who they were, Mordell's blood ran cold.

Morgan's hand closed around the lord's throat, squeezing the air from his lungs with an iron grip. "I think someone has a score to settle with you."

Mordell looked from Morgan to Ashley with wide, terrified eyes.

"Hello again, John," Ashley said. He leaned on the pommel of his sword. Its tip was lodged between the stones of the floor, much as it had stuck in the roof of the barracks of Merydd so long ago. "It seems your plans have gone a bit awry, don't you think?"

Morgan's grip eased, allowing Mordell the use of his voice.

"M-Mychael," Mordell stammered, hoping the use of Ashley's former name would rouse him, "we could be powerful, truly powerful. We could rule all of England, Wales included, if you would but let me make Morgan one of us."

Ashley smiled. The sight set every hair on Mordell's body on end and he followed Ashley's gaze to Morgan. Morgan smiled, revealing unusually pointed teeth.

"Oh God," Mordell muttered.

"I'm afraid God has given up on you, John," Ashley said as he dislodged his sword. "Perhaps with your death, some salvation will be wrought."

Ashley nodded and Morgan lifted Mordell from his throne by his neck. Then he threw him to the ground and pressed Mordell's back onto the hard stone floor with the pressure of his foot on his ribcage.

"Mychael, no!" Mordell begged. Every breath became more painful with the weight of Morgan's foot.

"Go to Hell," Ashley growled. He brought the sword down swiftly.

With a throaty scream from the vampire lord, tempered steel sliced through tender flesh, severing Mordell's head from his body. Morgan removed his foot and stepped back as the slain lord's blood seeped across the floor, turning it an odd golden color as the red mixed with the sandy dust.

"Morgan," Annette called from the shattered doorway. She stopped when she saw the headless body of the vampire lord lying in a pool of blood. Slowly, she crossed the room to stand beside Ashley. "I can't believe it," she said quietly. "He's really gone."

"Aye," Ashley said, looking to Morgan. "It's over."

"No," Annette said quickly. She turned to Ashley and gripped his shoulders. "Loren is nearing the mansion. Our scouts report he has nearly fifty others with him."

"Is Elissa with him?" Ashley asked.

"Aye."

"Good. I have a plan."

Morgan and Annette followed Ashley out of the throne room and to the courtyard. The ground was scattered with the bodies of vampires and mortals alike. Many were headless, some had been charred by fire, and others had their throats cut.

"Jesus, Ashley," Morgan said. "Have you been covertly teaching the others your techniques?"

Ashley grinned. "No, but they learn quickly. Follow me." He led the two of them to a small hut near the stone wall which encircled the mansion and its grounds.

The sounds of the sea drifted over the south wall and the night sky was clear and full of sparkling stars. The glow from the silvery moon illuminated the land and brought out the brilliant sheen of the silver in Ashley's hair, making him look more like the sorcerer and less like a rogue.

"What's your plan?" Morgan asked, standing before Ashley.

"Let them believe they have us," Ashley said. "I know Loren; I know Elissa. They will want to force me to submit to them and no doubt Elissa's whip will be part of their technique."

Morgan's gaze narrowed and he crossed his arms over his chest, his jaw tightening.

"Wait," Ashley said, raising his hand, "the trick is to let them think they've won. They can't see you until the last minute."

"So what you want is to be bait for a diversion of their attention," Morgan said.

"Essentially, yes," Ashley said, meeting Morgan's gaze with an equally stubborn and determined one.

"I don't like this idea, Ashley, but I'll go along with it because I trust you, even if your judgment seems to be a bit clouded."

* * * *

With his plan set into action, Ashley sat on the steps of the mansion with David at his side. Morgan hid in the small storeroom off to their left and the others were scattered around the courtyard, out of sight.

"Are you sure this is going to work?" David asked him as they settled onto the steps.

Ashley sighed and looked to the door that stood ajar in the storeroom. From the depths of the dark, he could see a flash of steel. "Aye," he said, "I think it will."

"When is the last time you did any significant magic?" David asked him, bringing his leg up and resting his arm on his knee.

"Overall? Or are you counting the few times I've toyed with Morgan?" Ashley asked him with a chuckle.

"Overall," David said with a sigh and a roll of his eyes.

"Oh, a little over four hundred years ago, but it's going to take more than sorcery to win this one," Ashley said with a glance to his twin.

David nodded. "Aye. Has Michael come back to you?"

Ashley lowered his head. "No. I fear I've doomed myself, David, but if I had the chance to redo things, I wouldn't change them." He looked up to his twin then. "Morgan means more to me than any salvation ever could."

A noise from the massive gate in the south wall drew the twins' attention. The air was still and charged. With a deep inward breath, Ashley watched the gate swing open. A large group entered the courtyard with Loren, Elissa, and Karl in the lead.

"Well, well," Loren said as he and the others stopped several paces from the steps, "it looks like Ashley's had a bad day."

A raucous laughter sprang up in the crowd.

Ashley simply smiled. "What brings you to this neck of the woods, Loren?" he asked. His nerves turned to a dead calm as he felt a familiar voice catch hold in his mind.

I'm here, Ashley.

He smiled inwardly, wondering how Morgan managed to keep his telepathy from him.

"You know why I'm here," Loren replied. His grin turned into an all-too-familiar scowl. "Where is Morgan?"

Ashley shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine, Loren. I haven't seen him since this mess ended." He waved his arm around at the courtyard, emphasizing his point.

Loren's scowl deepened. "Then maybe a little work is in order to draw him out. I don't think you would be so calm if he were dead," Loren said.

He turned to Elissa as she stepped up to Ashley. Moments later, several others had Ashley's arms pinned behind him and they shoved him to his knees. Another ripped his shirt off his body, exposing his naked skin.

"Now, Ashley," Loren whispered as he crouched down to brush Ashley's hair from his face, "this is your last chance to turn over Morgan."

"Fuck you," Ashley growled at him.

His eyes darkened with the hatred that threatened to consume him as his control slowly slipped away. He winced in pain as Loren slid his fingers through his hair and jerked his head back. The lord's mouth descended on his with such force it left his head reeling. He fought for control as Loren shoved his tongue down his throat, the kiss laced with Loren's poisonous craving for total control over him. Loren broke the kiss abruptly and stepped back. With a nod of his head, Elissa stepped forward and lifted her arm in readiness to strike.

* * * *

Morgan watched with bated breath as Loren's kiss ended. His anger boiled up inside him, causing his body to shake with the mere force of it; yet he waited. Then he heard a voice in his mind, one he did not recognize.

They hurt him, Morgan. Look closely and see what they have done.

Images shimmered before Morgan's eyes: Ashley struggling under Loren, tears streaming down his face; Ashley chained to a bed and Elissa forcing him to show her his magic; Ashley tethered to a post with streaks of red trailing over his back.

Look, Morgan, and see what has been done.

Morgan's eyes narrowed as he noticed for the first time the scars on Ashley's back, scars that could only come from a whip. Morgan felt the rage boil in his blood. Ashley had been through this before, long ago. With blinding speed, Morgan burst through the storeroom door and went straight for the vampiress. He caught her hand just as she was about to swing her whip.

"Lay a fucking hand on him and I'll rip your throat open with my bare hands," Morgan growled through his teeth.

Ashley looked up then and chaos erupted throughout the yard.

Those who held Ashley lost control of him in the fray and ran to protect Loren as the lord backed away in shock. Morgan threw Ashley his sword and they fought side by side, cutting their way through the crowd to Loren and Elissa, backing them into the east wall. Morgan's rage coursed through his veins. They hurt Ashley and for that they would die.

They had nearly backed Loren's small group into a corner when one of the guards slipped away and rushed at Morgan, catching him under his ribs and driving a knife into his body. Ashley froze just as David and Annette came to help them. Morgan stumbled back and looked down at the knife.

Barely a second later, a blue-white bolt shot through the murderous vampire's body. He convulsed violently as blood poured from his mouth and nose. His eyes lit up with a brilliant light for a split second before he collapsed to the ground. Smoke rose up from his body as if he had been burned from the inside out. Silence fell over the crowd on both sides and all turned to see the bolt arc back into the sorcerer's hand. Morgan doubled over and pulled the knife from his ribs.

"Jesus Christ," Morgan said through his teeth as Ashley helped him to stand. "It still fucking hurts like hell."

Loren began to laugh, but stopped when Morgan stood. "Ashley, you've clearly lost your mind," the lord said nervously, not taking his eyes off of Morgan.

Ashley stepped in front of him, close enough to kiss him. Loren's breath caught in his throat with the light touch. "I've had many people tell me I was crazy for one reason or another," Ashley said, "but no one has ever told me why. Now is your chance, Loren: why would anyone tell a sorcerer he's crazy?"

Loren swallowed hard and Ashley brought his sword between them, lodging the tip under Loren's chin.

"I've already doomed my soul to Hell once more for what I've done," Ashley said, "but make no mistake, I would do it all over again for Morgan."

"Ashley," Loren said with a precarious swallow, "you have no idea what power resides in the mortal's body."

Loren glanced at Morgan out of the corner of his eye. Morgan's hand was splayed across his ribs.

"Oh?" Ashley asked. He grinned and backed away, withdrawing his sword. Morgan stepped up to him

and sank his teeth into his own wrist. He turned to Ashley and Ashley drew him close as he began to drink.

The tastes were stronger this time—much stronger—and Ashley felt his own blood ignite under his skin as Morgan's blood mingled with it. When the heat stole through his body, Ashley released Morgan's arm and Morgan caught him as he started to fall. Then Morgan kissed him. Ashley's blood blazed through his veins and he deepened the kiss, drawing Morgan into him with every breath he took. He gasped as the power shot through his body and into the sword in his hand, molding the hilt to fit his grip. The steel of the blade pulsed with a blinding brilliance.

"No!" Elissa screamed. In a blind rage, she lunged for Morgan and Ashley, snarling and raving.

"Elissa!" Loren tried to grab her arm, but she slipped from his grasp.

Ashley broke the kiss, raised his sword, and impaled Elissa on it. The vampiress dropped to the ground and slid from the sword. Loren looked up at Ashley as the tears filled his eyes. The sword's blade crackled as it burned the tainted blood from its surface. Ashley nodded, allowing Loren to go to Elissa.

Loren dropped to the ground and lifted her head, cradling her in his arms. "No," he whispered as he caressed her hair and kissed her forehead. "Please, no."

Morgan left Ashley's side and pulled the metal-barbed bullwhip from where it hung at Elissa's waist. He walked back and handed the whip to Ashley with a wink. David and several others grabbed Loren and pulled him away from his dead vampiress. He kicked and screamed, trying desperately to break free from them, then he saw Ashley with the whip in his hand. Loren's shirt and cloak were ripped from his body and David gripped his hair, shoving his face onto the blood-soaked ground. A shadow appeared over him, cast by the torches held by several others around them.

"You have cost me over four hundred years of freedom," Ashley said. "I gave everything to you—my heart, my soul, my body—and you used me for your own tortured pleasures. Then you discarded me like a used rag. Still you haunted me; still you were intent on breaking me." Loren inhaled deeply as he saw Ashley's arm rise in the air. "Never again, Loren. For once, it is you who must kneel before me and beg for mercy."

With an ominous hiss, the whip sliced through the air and cracked across the former lord's bare flesh. His shriek pierced the night as the tears began to run down his cheeks.

"You've fucking tormented me long enough!"

Another crack of the whip across Loren's back sent him fully to the ground. His pitiful sobs echoed up from the fallow earth. As Ashley raised his arm to strike again, Morgan's firm grip on his wrist stopped him.

"That's enough," Morgan said calmly.

Ashley glared at him.

Ashley, he warned silently.

The single thought brought Ashley's arm down to his side. The whip dropped limply to the ground.

"Take him to the basement and lock him up," Morgan ordered without taking his eyes off of Ashley.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Morgan stood on the balcony of the largest bedroom in the mansion, looking out at the Red Sea—a place he had never expected to see in his lifetime. The dark of night was upon the land, yet the vast expanse of water beyond shimmered under the light of a full moon. The smell of the sea reminded him of living near the ocean in the States. A warm breeze blew up over the wall and he inhaled deeply. It wasn't anything like home.

Then again, where was home? He hated living in the States and Alec was the only reason he had moved to London. The thought of his cousin—his best friend—came to him then. He crossed his arms over his chest and fought back the tears when they threatened to fall. They grew up together, and now Alec was gone. Morgan wondered what would become of his life now that he was changed. A pair of strong arms encircled his waist, startling him for a brief moment.

"Damn rogue," he said.

A soft chuckle and a flick of a pointed tongue along the curve of his left ear was the response. Morgan leaned back against Ashley's chest.

"What should we do with Loren?" Ashley asked quietly as he rested his chin on Morgan's shoulder.

Morgan sighed. "I don't know, to be honest. Any ideas?" He instantly regretted asking such a question of Ashley.

"Hmm," Ashley murmured against Morgan's neck, "I could always hang him up and use him to conduct electricity when we get back to Cardiff. Or maybe use him as target practice with my knife?"

Morgan chuckled and shook his head. "You don't hold grudges much, do you?" Ashley nipped at his neck and thrust up against him in response. "I saw the scars on your back." He felt Ashley tense behind him. "Did Loren do that?"

"No."

"What happened?" Morgan asked him.

Ashley sighed, released Morgan, and stepped around him. He leaned over the balcony rail and looked out at the vast expanse of the Red Sea.

"I was born in 1541 in Cardiff, Wales," he began. "In truth, I was never meant to be. No one knew the single child who was supposed to have been William was, in fact, two. I was much smaller and nearly died a few times as a result. Because I fought to survive, our parents named me after the Archangel Michael. William and I were sixteen when our parents died. We were living in London at the time, but once they were gone, he and I went back to Wales, to the tower."

Morgan stepped up and leaned on the rail beside him. Ashley continued.

"When we were twenty-three, we went to a small town called Merydd for a night of relaxation. While we were there, I ran into Lord Stockton's son John. There was an instant attraction and before I left that night, we made love. Over the period of a week, we met in his room at night. On one particular night, I tied him to a support beam in the stables before I left and gave him the cut you saw on his wrist. It was then I told him he was mine. The captain of the guard nearly caught me that night; I still have the scar on my thigh to prove it."

Morgan nodded. He remembered seeing a pale, six-inch line down Ashley's leg. "I noticed that."

Ashley grinned. "Aye, one of my many battle wounds. After that night, William and I went to Cardiff for a little time to relax. That's when we first met Loren. He held me captive with nothing more than a look back then. Before anything could happen, however, the captain of the guard from Merydd found

us. We were arrested and taken back to the keep where we were charged with the kidnapping and murder of John Stockton. Even though I was innocent, the captain whipped me repeatedly to get me to confess. When I still refused, the lord himself ordered me to hang as a thief and a murderer. If it hadn't been for Loren, I wouldn't be standing here now. He turned us both that night and helped us to escape. I was a fucking fool to think I was free."

Morgan remembered what the voice had whispered to him before he stopped Elissa's whip. "Ashley," he said quietly, "when Elissa drew her whip, a voice came to me, one I've never heard before. Whoever or whatever it was showed me visions of you and Loren ... and of you and Elissa."

Ashley remained silent for several minutes before saying anything. "The first and, indeed, the only time I was with Loren, he raped me. In all honesty, it took a lot of cajoling on my part to keep David from killing him right then. Also, not too long ago, Loren and Elissa chained me to their bed and she forced me to fuck her. She wanted my magic, so I gave it to her. The heat was more than she could handle, and Loren ordered me back to my room under close guard."

Morgan glanced over at Ashley and noticed the shimmer of a tear as it rolled down his cheek. He stood and pulled Ashley into his arms, holding him tight as he kissed his hair. "How did the sorcery bit come about?"

Ashley chuckled. "I was born with it. We found out I had the ability when I was young and got mad at our parents. I set fire to their bed with nothing more than a thought. Over the years, and especially after finding the tower, I was able to gain control of my abilities."

"So you were a firestarter?"

"At first, but then I learned how to manipulate the other elements and people, which aided me in my work as a thief. Instead of sneaking around to steal, I stole from people while charming them."

"Why do I have the feeling you only 'charmed' men?"

Ashley laughed against Morgan's chest. "Aye, you got me there. I've always loved men. There's something so intoxicating about a man's strength," he whispered as he ran his fingertips over Morgan's skin. "Something about the way a man reacts when he realizes he must submit or be broken completely." He kissed Morgan's neck softly. "Something about the hiss of a man's breath when a blade crosses his flesh, bringing his blood to pool around the steel." He looked down to trace the scar he had made.

"Submit?" Morgan asked him. Keeping one arm around Ashley's waist and pulling him tight against his body, Morgan slipped his other hand under Ashley's chin and raised his head to meet his gaze.

"Aye," Ashley breathed. The word was nothing more than a hoarse whisper.

Morgan grinned and drew Ashley closer. "Submit to whom?"

"To me," Ashley murmured.

"I think not," Morgan growled. He slid his tongue between Ashley's lips, silencing any further arguments. With a carnal grind of his hips, he backed Ashley up against the railing, letting him know he would tolerate no further protests. When he ended their kiss, he stroked Ashley's cheek. "Ashley, I would never do anything to hurt you," he said with a soft smile. "I love you for who you are. I wouldn't want you any other way."

"So you understand why I'm disinclined to give up control?"

"Yes, and I don't ever want you to do anything that makes you uncomfortable. If I ever go too far, stop me."

"How?"

"If something becomes too much or bothers you, then say 'black.' It's a safe word to let me know you've had enough of whatever I'm doing."

Ashley lifted a pale eyebrow at him. "You talk like you've done this before."

Morgan grinned and shrugged slightly. "Let's put it this way: two years ago, I was engaged. My girlfriend and I played around a little bit. She wanted to be dominated; I was more than happy to oblige."

"So what happened?" Ashley asked as he encircled Morgan's neck with his arms. "Why didn't you marry her?"

"I found her sucking another's guy dick in our living room. Needless to say, I promptly broke off our engagement."

"I guess that would put a damper on things," Ashley said with a chuckle. "But I imagine you made a lot of women happy after." The corners of his mouth turned up in an impish grin.

"Actually," Morgan admitted, "I was celibate for two years ... until I met you."

"You're joking."

Morgan shook his head. "Not in the least. I had consigned myself to life as a bachelor."

Below the balcony, David waved at them.

Morgan sighed. "I think we have a prisoner to visit."

* * * *

"Ashley, please, let me go. I swear I'll leave and you'll never see me again."

Ashley looked down on his former master with nothing but contempt glimmering in his pale eyes. "Do you really think I'm going to let you out of my sight? Do you honestly believe I'm going to release you only to have you come back to haunt me later? I think not."

"What are you going to do to me?" Loren stammered, backing away as Morgan stepped into his cell.

"I don't know what we're going to do with you, Loren," Morgan admitted, "but you're coming with us when we leave Egypt. I might keep you around, let you get a taste for what you've put Ashley through for so long. How do you like the idea of being a slave? Does it suit you?"

Loren blanched. "You can't be serious."

Ashley hunched down and gripped the fallen lord's hair tightly to jerk his head back. "And why the fuck not? You put me through hell for over four hundred years, you son of a bitch. I'll spend the rest of eternity in a monastery if it means seeing you suffer."

He released Loren's hair and shoved his head backwards, causing the vampire to fall onto his back. Ashley stood and scowled at his former master, then he turned to Morgan. "Are you really going to keep him as a slave?" he asked quietly.

"Why not?" Morgan said with a shrug. "We can use him to rebuild the mansion in Cardiff ... unless you had other plans for him."

Ashley turned to Loren again and looked at him as if considering the myriad of possibilities a sorcerer could have for a prisoner. When he grinned, Loren cowered in the corner. He stepped up to Loren once again and lifted him by his shirt collar. Loren's eyes widened.

"Hmm," Ashley said, doing a better job of hiding his amusement than Morgan was, "we're going to need a slave, and I'll most likely need a guinea pig for anything I whip up. How strong is your stomach, Loren? It's been over four hundred years since I brewed anything."

All the color drained from Loren's face. Ashley dropped him to the floor with a narrowed gaze and walked out of the cell with Morgan close on his heels.

"What do you want to do, Ashley?" Morgan asked, blocking Ashley's path in the hallway with his body, a wry grin on his face.

"I want to stay in Wales," Ashley said, "but not in Cardiff." He grinned at the rather dubious look Morgan gave him. He pulled Morgan closer to him. "Have you ever lived with a rogue, Morgan?"

Morgan laughed and shook his head. "Ashley, I was born in 1978 in Manhattan, New York. I graduated from a Catholic high school and spent four and a half years at Brown University in Rhode Island. I had never even stepped foot out of the United States until I moved to London. Now how in the world would I have had any time to spend with a rogue, especially when there are no rogues like you left in this world?"

Without warning, Ashley attacked Morgan's mouth, his tongue darting around Morgan's to taunt him.

Morgan groaned and shoved him against the stone wall. "Don't fucking tease me," he growled.

Ashley trailed his fingertips down Morgan's chest and stomach, stopping just above the waistline of his jeans. Morgan's eyes narrowed in warning. He gripped Ashley's wrists and pinned them over his head.

"Morgan," Ashley murmured as Morgan descended on his neck, nipping and licking a trail over his throat.

"The tables have turned, have they not, Ashley?" Morgan whispered.

Ashley shivered as a chill stole up his spine.

"Morgan?"

Morgan and Ashley both groaned as David stopped at the bottom of the stairs. They turned and glared at him.

"Sorry," David said with a sheepish grin. "We're going to have to hire some more people to sail the boat back to Wales."

Morgan nodded and released Ashley's arms, but not without giving him a final kiss and a quick wink. "This isn't over."

"I should think not."

They both followed David back up the stairs and into the outer hall surrounding the throne room. The others were finishing up the cleaning when the three of them stepped into the room.

"My lords," Annette said with a bow. "What are the plans for Loren?"

"We're taking him back to Cardiff with us," Ashley told the others. "When we get back, David will be head of what was once Loren's house. In fact, Loren himself has been volunteered to help in the clean up and rebuilding."

"Yes, my lords," Annette said. "What of you and Morgan?"

Morgan pulled Ashley back against him. "We're going to the tower for a while. I think we'll be fine."

David stepped around them and gave Annette a smile. "I'm going to need someone to help me control things, someone who isn't afraid to get her hands dirty from time to time."

Ashley glanced at the pair. "Aye, I think David will be fine, too."

Morgan leaned his head down to his ear. "And I think we have some unfinished business."

Ashley turned his head slightly. Morgan pulled him tighter to him, pressing their bodies together. Ashley swallowed hard.

"Upstairs. Now."

Ashley felt a heated nervousness wash through his body as Morgan steered him out of the room and up the stairs.

Once inside the room, Morgan grabbed Ashley's wrist and pulled him roughly against him. "Now," he said, "what was that about submitting to you?"

Ashley grinned, but didn't answer. Morgan's response was to deliver a swift slap on his ass. Ashley groaned.

"Hmm," Morgan mused. "Did I just find another weakness?"

Ashley growled low. "You have an unnerving talent for doing that."

"For doing what?" Morgan asked with feigned innocence as he slipped his hand under the waistband of Ashley's jeans.

Ashley drew in a breath. "For finding..." He stopped, unable to finish as Morgan slid his fingers down his ass. "My..." His words trailed off again as Morgan teased him with his fingertip, slipping it inside him the smallest fraction of an inch. "Weaknesses."

Morgan groaned and captured Ashley in a kiss. When Ashley pulled him closer, Morgan slid his finger completely inside him.

"*Crist*," Ashley breathed as he pulled away.

"I want you," Morgan whispered on his lips. He began sliding his finger in and out slowly.

"Dear God, I'll give you anything you want if you keep that up."

"Really?"

"Aye."

"So, you *do* like to get fucked," Morgan said with a grin.

"Well, I've never had anyone do it other than the one time with Loren," Ashley admitted with a sheepish grin.

Morgan pulled back and looked at him in confusion. Then a slow, telling smile crossed his lips. He held Ashley's gaze and slipped a second finger inside him. Ashley bit his lower lip and whimpered.

"So you're essentially a virgin to this?" Morgan asked as he spread his fingers apart. Ashley's legs nearly gave way beneath him and Morgan held him up with his other arm.

"N-not exactly," Ashley stammered. His breath came in short bursts as he tightened his arms around Morgan's neck. "*Crist*, Morgan," he pleaded. "Stop teasing me."

"So," Morgan said, ignoring Ashley's plea, "you've experimented with yourself then?"

Ashley nodded and a light pink stole over his cheeks.

"Blushing, Ashley?" Morgan teased, sliding his fingers deeper inside him.

Ashley pressed his body harder against Morgan's, a soft moan escaping his lips. "Morgan, please."

Morgan grinned and kissed Ashley's chin softly. Ashley tilted his head back as Morgan's lips slid down his throat and over his chest. Without removing his fingers, Morgan knelt down and undid Ashley's jeans with his free hand. He pushed them to the floor and drew his tongue up the underside of Ashley's cock. As he slid his lips over the head, he began a rhythm with his fingers and his mouth.

Ashley gasped and wrapped his hands in Morgan's hair, thrusting into his mouth. "Morgan, fuck me already," he begged. "You're driving me fucking crazy."

Morgan chuckled softly. He slid his mouth off of Ashley's cock and removed his fingers. He stood and undid his jeans, quickly pushing them down and off. Then he pulled Ashley to him, their naked bodies pressing tightly together as they kissed. A few moments later, he turned Ashley around and pushed him onto his stomach on the bed.

"On your knees," he ordered in a gentle yet commanding voice.

Ashley got on his knees and Morgan knelt behind him. He shuddered as Morgan ran his hands over his spine, his sides, his hips. Then Morgan leaned forward and kissed a slow path down Ashley's back before sliding his tongue inside him.

Ashley immediately backed into him with a moan. "*Paid a gorffen.*"

Morgan slid his tongue in and out of him, licking around the outside, then darting back in. Before long, Ashley was breathlessly muttering a flurry of Welsh curses. When Morgan rose up and rubbed the head of his cock along his ass, Ashley stilled immediately and drew in a sharp breath. With a slow, gentle pressure, Morgan pushed the head inside him.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Morgan groaned. "You're tight as hell."

Ashley moaned and rested his head on his forearms on the bed.

"You okay?"

"Aye," Ashley muttered.

Morgan pressed further in and stopped.

"Just fuck me, Morgan. Please, for the love of God, just fuck me."

Morgan wasted no time in responding. With a deep growl, he pushed his entire length inside Ashley. Ashley's body tensed immediately and Morgan ground against him, pulling him back hard.

"Oh, fuck." Seconds later, Ashley's body seized up and he growled into the bed. "*Fwcia fi ...*" He turned his head to the side and twisted the blanket in his fists. "Don't stop, Morgan. Harder."

Ashley rocked back as Morgan gripped his hips, thrusting into him as hard as he could. The bed shook with the force and Ashley's breath left him in a quick gasp. "Harder, Morgan," he pleaded. "I *need* to feel the pain."

Morgan groaned and slammed into his ass again. Leaving one hand on Ashley's hip, Morgan grabbed a fistful of his hair with the other. He jerked Ashley's head up and thrust hard inside him.

"Yes," Ashley ground out hoarsely.

Morgan thrust into him again and pulled his head farther back. Ashley winced from the pain and began to stroke his cock furiously.

"*Dod i fewn i mi.* Come inside me, Morgan."

Morgan growled and with a final, forceful thrust in Ashley's ass, he pulled him up and bit down on his neck. Ashley cried out as he came in his hand. Morgan drank deeply, and seconds later, he came as

well, growling as he filled Ashley's body with his release. Ashley gripped his head with his free hand and held him tight against his neck. When Morgan's cock ceased its spasms and he released Ashley's neck, Ashley collapsed onto the bed, face first. Morgan followed him, sliding up beside him and pulling him close.

"Dear God," Ashley panted into the pillow.

Morgan chuckled and traced his fingers down his spine. Ashley shivered from the sensation and moaned softly.

"You okay?" Morgan asked him as he kissed his shoulder.

"Aye," Ashley mumbled, "just horribly, horribly exhausted."

"I know the feeling."

Ashley turned over onto his side to face Morgan. He brought a hand up and caressed Morgan's face softly, a satiated smile on his lips.

"I never thought in a million years I'd find anyone," Morgan said quietly.

"Well, anyone like me," Ashley said with a grin.

Morgan smiled and whispered on his lips, "Ashley, there is no one else on this earth like you."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"You all right?"

Morgan knew the answer to his own question before Ashley could even open his mouth. He held the sorcerer to him. Yet, despite their closeness, despite Morgan's arms around his waist, Ashley was still nervous. It was all over. The mansion no longer belonged to Loren but to David and Annette. Morgan knew there was more to it, however. Ashley had spent the past hundred years in that mansion after he and David had moved back to Cardiff with Loren; he would never really ready to return to it. Morgan kissed his hair and brushed his cheek over its softness. Ashley drew in a deep breath and backed into him, as if to reassure himself Morgan was still there.

"Aye," Ashley whispered.

Morgan closed his eyes when he heard the tremble in Ashley's voice. He knew if he turned him around, he would see the glitter of tears in Ashley's eyes. He held him tighter.

From behind them, a commotion stirred up as Loren was dragged over the damp, dying grass. The four of them watched as the others pulled Loren into the house, the vampire fighting them for everything he was worth. Not once did Loren dare to look at the three men who had ensured his fall.

Once he was inside and secured in a room with guards posted at the door, Mary came out.

"Are you boys sure you don't want to stay?" she asked Morgan and Ashley.

"Yeah," Morgan said, holding Ashley tighter when he felt him shiver. "I don't think he needs to be here any longer than necessary. He's seen enough of this place to last him for several lifetimes." Morgan spared her the details of what all he knew; David would tell her later.

Ashley smiled and closed his eyes as a tear fell. Morgan turned him around to hold him, and Ashley buried his face in Morgan's hair. Ashley clenched his hands into fists in an effort to stave off the tears and Morgan leaned up against the tree behind him, nodding to the others to leave them for a bit. David and Annette followed Mary inside, leaving Morgan and Ashley alone in the yard.

"The decision to leave is yours, Ashley," Morgan whispered.

Ashley nodded in silence.

"Do you still want to?"

Ashley nodded again.

Morgan raised Ashley's head to see his face. Ashley tried to lower his gaze, but Morgan caught him with his hand under his chin.

"No," he said as he brushed his fingers across Ashley's cheek to wipe away a tear.

"Don't hide from me—and don't hold back when the pain becomes too much, Ashley. I'm here when you need me."

Ashley blinked and the tears began to fall unheeded. He drew in a ragged breath and his shoulders shook as the tears increased. Morgan pulled him tight to him. Ashley rested his head on Morgan's chest.

"I love you," Morgan whispered, "more than anyone in this world, Ashley."

"I love you, too. Can I ask a favor?"

"Anything."

"I'm tired of being 'Ashley.' It reminds me too much of the past four centuries of hell."

Morgan kissed his head. "Be whoever you want to be, so long as you know and understand I will always love you regardless."

"Aye."

"At least now no one knows the name 'Mychael Potter,'" Morgan said with a chuckle.

"Thank God."

"Although if I slip up in the throes of passion and call you 'Ashley,' don't hold it against me." Morgan smiled when he felt Mychael laugh.

"Are you ready to go in?" Mychael asked him, raising his head once more.

Morgan smiled and cupped his face gently, then leaned forward to kiss him. Mychael slipped his arms around Morgan's neck and pulled him closer. When their kiss ended, Morgan brushed his lips softly over Mychael's forehead.

"I'm ready when you are."

Mychael nodded and took Morgan's hand to lead him into the mansion. As soon as they stepped inside, however, Mychael froze and Morgan ran into him.

"Mychael?"

"I'm fine," Mychael muttered. "Just a bit unnerved for a moment." He drew in a deep breath and stepped fully into the receiving hall.

The door to the parlor was open and the glass from a burst light bulb was scattered across the floor. Morgan followed him into the room and watched as Mychael waved his hand over the fireplace, bringing a roaring fire to life from the cold ashes. Morgan stepped back, a bit startled. Mychael gave him a sheepish grin.

"It's a disconcerting habit he has," David said from the parlor doorway. "He's been doing it since he was a kid. I think he does it for the reactions as much as the warmth." Mychael cast a scowling glance in his direction, but David paid him no heed. "You need to come here for a minute. Loren took the liberty of redecorating our rooms."

Without waiting for David or Morgan, Mychael rushed out of the parlor and down the hall. Morgan looked to David for an explanation.

"Living with Mychael means living with books," David said. "But Loren took it upon himself to rip the ones Mychael had here to shreds."

"Oh God," Morgan muttered.

Seconds later, they looked up at each other as the sound of thunder rattled the entire house. From his vantage point in the parlor, Morgan could see outside into the front yard as lightning flashed, illuminating everything in sight. There was no rain.

"Oh, another thing to be wary of with him," David said as he pushed off of the doorframe, unmoved by the odd thunder and lightning, "he's ridiculously tuned to all sorts of energies. When he loses his temper, odd things began to happen."

"Like?"

"Like freak storms popping up out of nowhere, lights bursting, fires dying out or springing to life," David told him. "Mychael has a bad temper at times, and I've always been the one to keep him relatively calm, more or less. When his temper flares up, telepathy is the only way to get through to

him and even that doesn't always do the trick."

"What happens if he loses his temper?" Morgan asked, not completely sure if he really wanted to know the answer.

David laughed nervously. "Well, let's put it this way: he makes Loren's destruction of this place look like a toddler's tantrum. Mychael is dangerous, make no mistake of that, Morgan, but he loves you. I know now that his love for you is what keeps him from completely flying off the handle. Your hold on my brother baffles me."

Another crack of thunder shook the house.

"Go to him, Morgan. You're the only one who can tame him now, and he will destroy everything if he loses complete control—but be careful and watch for flying objects."

Morgan walked down the hall cautiously, peering around the corner until Mychael's room came into view. Mychael was leaning against the wall, his palms and forehead pressed to it. Morgan could feel Mychael's rage even in the hall. He stepped into the doorway quietly.

"I won't hurt you, Morgan."

"I do not fear for myself," Morgan said as he crossed the room to where Mychael stood. "I fear for you."

Mychael turned his head slightly to look at him. "Why?"

Morgan leaned with his back against the wall beside Mychael and said, "You want a round-about answer or a blunt one?"

"Blunt."

"You're reckless, Mychael. I have to get you out of here before you destroy the place or yourself. David can handle things here."

Mychael sighed. "I know." He stood up and looked around the room once more. "I want to go home."

Morgan nodded and David stepped into the room. Mychael turned and they met halfway, throwing their arms around each other. Morgan waited patiently as the brothers held each other for several minutes. Then David stepped back, still holding Mychael's shoulders.

"I love you. I'll always be here and the tower isn't far away, but you have someone waiting, someone who loves you. Go to him, Mychael, and love him," David whispered as he kissed Mychael's forehead.

"I love you, too. We will be back, if only to visit."

David smiled, then turned Mychael around and pushed him to Morgan. "He's yours now," he said with a teasing laugh. "Have fun."

"I certainly will," Morgan said with a grin as he pulled Mychael into his arms.

* * * *

David leaned against the frame of the front door as he watched Morgan and Mychael disappear into the night. They were headed north to Mychael's tower. David smiled as he remembered what life was like before they had been turned. Mychael had driven him beyond crazy many times, but nothing could ever replace those memories. Despite the close calls and Mychael's recklessness, they had been the best years of David's life.

So lost in his daydreams he was that he didn't realize anyone was behind him until a pair of soft, feminine hands slid around his chest. He smiled, closed his eyes, and curled his hands around the

delicate fingers. He brought a hand up to kiss the top, smoothing his lips over the supple flesh. From the moment she had kissed him in the tavern so long ago, David had fallen head over heels for her. He loved the way her golden curls framed the deceptively beautiful curves of her face, hiding her true nature until one had lost either his life or his heart. He loved the way her creamy skin took on a pretty pink hue when he looked at her, catching her off-guard. He loved the way his name sounded when she spoke it—a soft whisper from her lips that sent chills through him every time without fail. Aye, he knew it just as Mychael and Morgan had seen it: he was hopelessly in love with the woman.

"William?" Annette asked quietly, pulling her fingers from his and brushing them across his side as she walked around to stand before him.

"Aye," he whispered as he looked down at her with a smile.

He reached a hand up and caressed her cheek gently, marveling at the softness of her skin. Never did he imagine he would find someone, much less find someone like her. Back when they had simply been brothers on the run, Mychael was the only one who had someone to steal his heart away. David never thought he would find the perfect woman. Then Mychael introduced him to her. He had remained celibate for all of his immortal life, but as he gazed into the softness of Annette's blue eyes, he knew without a doubt his self-inflicted chastity was at its end.

"What of Loren, William?"

David sighed. It wasn't a problem he wanted on his hands, but Morgan had insisted on keeping the broken vampire around. Some who didn't know better would have thought Morgan soft and merciful, but David and Mychael both knew better. Morgan didn't spare Loren out of mercy; he spared him out of pure hate. His reasoning was simple: Loren tormented Mychael for over four centuries and now he was repaying the debt. David grinned. Morgan's attitude was heartening; he was highly protective of Mychael, even though Mychael was perfectly capable of taking care of himself.

"Well," he said as he pulled Annette to him, wrapping his arms around her, "Morgan seems to think he's of use, so we'll use him. We'll put him under guard while he cleans up the second floor."

"Aye," Annette whispered as she ran her fingers over his chest. She continued her gentle, wayward caresses, each stroke bringing a soft catch of his breath. When she raised her head slowly to meet the pale blue of his gaze, she slid her fingers slowly up his neck and cupped the curve of his jaw. He turned his head and kissed her palm softly

As he kissed her palm, David realized he had only kissed one other woman in his life ... and that first one had been forgettable. Annette was not. He watched with enchanted fascination as Annette's golden lashes fluttered closed as he leaned down to her. The moment his lips touched hers, he knew he was hopelessly lost once more. Without breaking their kiss, he swept her off her feet and into his arms. He carried her into the parlor and closed the door. The world could wait. Loren could wait. But the woman in his arms—and indeed his own needs—could not.

* * * *

"Well, here it is: home."

Morgan's gaze traveled up the stone tower before him. He was stunned beyond speech. Never in his life did he expect to see such an imposing sight, such an ancient structure, yet here he stood, poised at the bottom of the tower with his mouth hanging open. Mychael stood against the stone wall in front of him, his arms crossed over his chest and the enchanting grin of a rogue on his lips. He looked more at home against the moss-covered stones than anywhere else in the world.

"Both doors need to be replaced," Mychael said, "but everything else is in fairly decent shape for its

age."

Morgan looked back at him, a dark eyebrow cocked with the memory of Mychael's story of the tower's original owner. "This didn't belong to an ancestor, did it?"

Mychael sighed. "Not quite," he said as he pushed himself off the wall.

Morgan's breath caught for the briefest moment as he watched Mychael walk across the grass. A full moon hung in the sky just behind and above the tower, creating a most alluring picture of the sorcerer and his circular stone fortress. Morgan watched breathlessly as the glow of the moon caught the silver of Mychael's hair, setting it alight as the wind stirred it.

"Not quite?" Morgan asked as Mychael came to stand before him. The sorcerer's lips curled into a grin and Morgan resisted the temptation to kiss him. This was one story he really wanted to hear, but then the thought hit him: something was not quite right about Mychael; there was much more to him and his story than he had told.

"The tower is mine, Morgan." Mychael slid his hands slowly over Morgan's arms.

Without warning, Morgan pulled Mychael to him roughly, threading his fingers in the sorcerer's hair and pulling his head back. "You're more than you seem, Mychael. What else about you do I need to know about you?" He relaxed his grip on Mychael's hair, but not his waist.

"Honest or sugar-coated?" Mychael asked him.

Morgan narrowed his gaze at him.

"Very well," Mychael said. He motioned to the ground.

Morgan sat down. "I'm listening."

Mychael straddled him. "Morgan, your entire existence was predetermined, as was mine. The prophecy has been fulfilled and now the rest is ours to make."

Morgan could not help but laugh at the coy smile on Mychael's face. Mychael was still holding something back, but with the sorcerer sitting on his lap, Morgan's thoughts were becoming quite muddled. "You're fucking hopeless," he chuckled.

"Aye, that I am. And reckless. And crazy. And insatiable. Or at least that's what everyone else has ever told me." Mychael shifted his weight slightly. Morgan groaned and closed his eyes. Mychael leaned down and brushed his lips over Morgan's. "You sure you're ready to spend eternity with a rogue sorcerer, Morgan?"

Morgan opened his eyes and stared into the translucent eyes above him. "I'm always up for an adventure," he said. He pulled Mychael down as he raised his hips the slightest inch. "Question is, Mychael: can you handle living with me? According to my ex, my sex drive is both a blessing and a curse. She used to complain I wore her out too much."

Mychael sat up slightly and slipped his hand beneath him to grip Morgan through his jeans. Morgan growled low.

"Aye," he whispered as he lowered his lips to Morgan's once more. "Fuck me senseless. I can take anything you can give me."

"I will, don't worry about that," Morgan whispered. "But for now, let's get inside before the sun rises. That's one experience I don't wish to endure."

"Good point."

Mychael stood and helped Morgan up. Before he could turn to go into the tower, however, Morgan pulled him hard against him. Mychael moaned softly as Morgan's lips descended on his, his tongue slipping inside to tease and torment him.

"You're fucking cruel," Mychael breathed on Morgan's lips when their kiss ended.

Morgan simply grinned and pressed his body harder into Mychael's. "Come on," he said quietly, "we have a tower to clean up."

He released Mychael and followed him inside and up the winding staircase.

The wooden door, like the one at the bottom of the steps, was strewn across the floor in thousands of splintered pieces. Mychael sighed as he looked around. Morgan left his side and went to the door that led down to Mychael's workshop.

"What's in here?"

"My workshop," Mychael said without looking. He waved his hand over the fireplace and a fire blazed to life. "If you go down there, be careful. The steps aren't completely broken, but there are a few loose pieces. I need to fix that, too."

Morgan nodded and slid his fingers between the door and the frame to pull it open. A rush of cold, stale air hit him as he descended the stone steps slowly, taking Mychael's warning to heart when he felt a bit of loose stone beneath his feet. Once he reached the bottom, he looked around. He picked up a single candle, which sat on a stone table. As he looked around for something to light it with, the wick flickered to life with a small orange flame. Morgan turned to see Mychael leaning up against the wall behind him.

"You're going to scare me to death doing that one of these days."

"What? The flame trick or sneaking up on you?" Mychael asked him with a mischievous grin.

"Both," Morgan said as he looked around the room.

Then his gaze drifted to the stone table. He ran his fingers over the flat stone, brushing away centuries of dust to reveal a golden cross. He glanced up at Mychael, who stood and watched, silent as the grave. He was not looking at Morgan; he was looking at the table. Morgan brushed away the dust on the stone, revealing the table in its entirety. As he ran his fingers over it, a startling truth came to the surface, slipping into his mind through his fingertips from the stone itself. He turned slowly to face Mychael.

"You weren't named after an angel."

Mychael was silent.

Morgan looked back to the stone. "You are one."

"I was, Morgan."

"Oh, my God," was all Morgan could say. "Why didn't you tell me? Why the stories?"

"Because it wasn't time to tell you. Much of what I have told you is the truth—with only a tiny part left out."

"Tiny?" Morgan asked him as he sat down, too shocked to stand any longer.

"Well," Mychael said with a grin, "not so 'tiny,' I suppose."

"What about your life before? The stories of being a rogue and a sorcerer?"

Mychael nodded. "All of it is true." Then he sighed.

"There's more you're not telling me," Morgan said quietly. "I want the truth, Mychael, every fucking bit of it."

Mychael walked over to the stone table. He ran his fingers lightly over the cross. Its golden brilliance was like a beacon, calling him home. This was the moment he had been dreading, the choice he had to make. The cross pulsed beneath his touch, reminding him of who he truly was. Yet there was no chorus beckoning him to return home, no wash of divine strength to help him make the decision that ate away at him now.

"When Lucifer was cast out of Heaven, several of his followers went with him. One of those angels was named 'Kaliel.' When that angel saw what he had done, he went back to beg for forgiveness. He was refused entry into Heaven and was ordered by the Archangel Michael to carry out a task to prove his heart was pure once more. He was sent to Earth to live as a mortal among mortals until the time came when he would meet the one he was sworn to protect. He failed. He was supposed to protect the man from becoming immortal."

Then Mychael turned around and faced Morgan, who sat in shocked silence. Tears flowed down Mychael's cheeks.

"I failed, Morgan. I was supposed to protect you from becoming what you now are now, but instead, I turned you myself."

Before Morgan could go to him, another voice echoed in the darkened room.

"He did not fail."

Morgan looked up to see another man standing before them. The man could have only been the Archangel Michael. As if to confirm Morgan's suspicions, Mychael bowed his head.

"Michael, I failed. I was supposed to protect him and I failed."

"No," the Archangel said with a smile. "Kaliel, do you remember what you were told?"

Mychael nodded his head slowly.

The Archangel turned to Morgan. "Morgan, watch and see what has been done. Kaliel, use your fire."

Mychael raised his hand and a flame appeared in his palm. He blew on it gently and the flame grew. It floated off of his hand to settle in the air between the three of them. With the Archangel's direction, images formed in the flames for all three to see.

"Thou shalt protect."

Ashley held a knife to a vampire's throat, protecting Morgan from the creature.

"Thou shalt love."

"Rwy'n dy garu di."

"Thou shalt sacrifice thyself to save another."

Ashley bit his wrist and pressed it to Morgan's lips.

When the final image faded away, the Archangel looked to Mychael. "You did not fail, Kaliel. You sacrificed your very soul to save Morgan's life. You have been redeemed."

A soft rustle came from behind Mychael, and Morgan's eyes widened as two magnificent wings unfurled, as brilliant as the noonday sun.

"The way to Heaven is open to you once more," the Archangel said.

Mychael lowered his wings. "No."

Morgan jumped to his feet and grabbed Mychael's shoulders. "What? You went through all that trouble to return home and now you're refusing the chance?"

Mychael looked up to meet Morgan's gaze. "If I leave, I will be an angel once more, but I will not have you." He looked over Morgan's shoulder to the Archangel. "Michael, I belong here with Morgan. I'm nothing without him."

Morgan watched in silence as Mychael's wings disappeared with a nod of the Archangel's head. "You would give up Heaven for me?" he asked.

Mychael cupped Morgan's face in his hands and smiled as the tears rolled freely down his cheeks. "Morgan," he whispered, "you *are* Heaven to me."

When Mychael's lips touched his, Morgan felt the urgency of their love, a love so drugging and breathtaking even he was left speechless in its wake.

The Archangel smiled and faded away, leaving Mychael and Morgan to spend the rest of eternity where they belonged: in each other's arms.

WELSH GLOSSARY

Crist—Christ

Gefell—twin

Rwy'n dy garu di—I love you

Fwcia fi—Fuck me

Paid a gorfffen—Don't stop

Dod i fewn i mi—Cum inside me

Duw—God

About the Author Kay Derwydd

Kay Derwydd is an author of erotic gay fiction. She has works appearing in Forbidden Fruit, Ruthie's Club, Clean Sheets, Torquere Press, Freya's Bower, Erotic Dreams, and Chippewa Publishing.

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