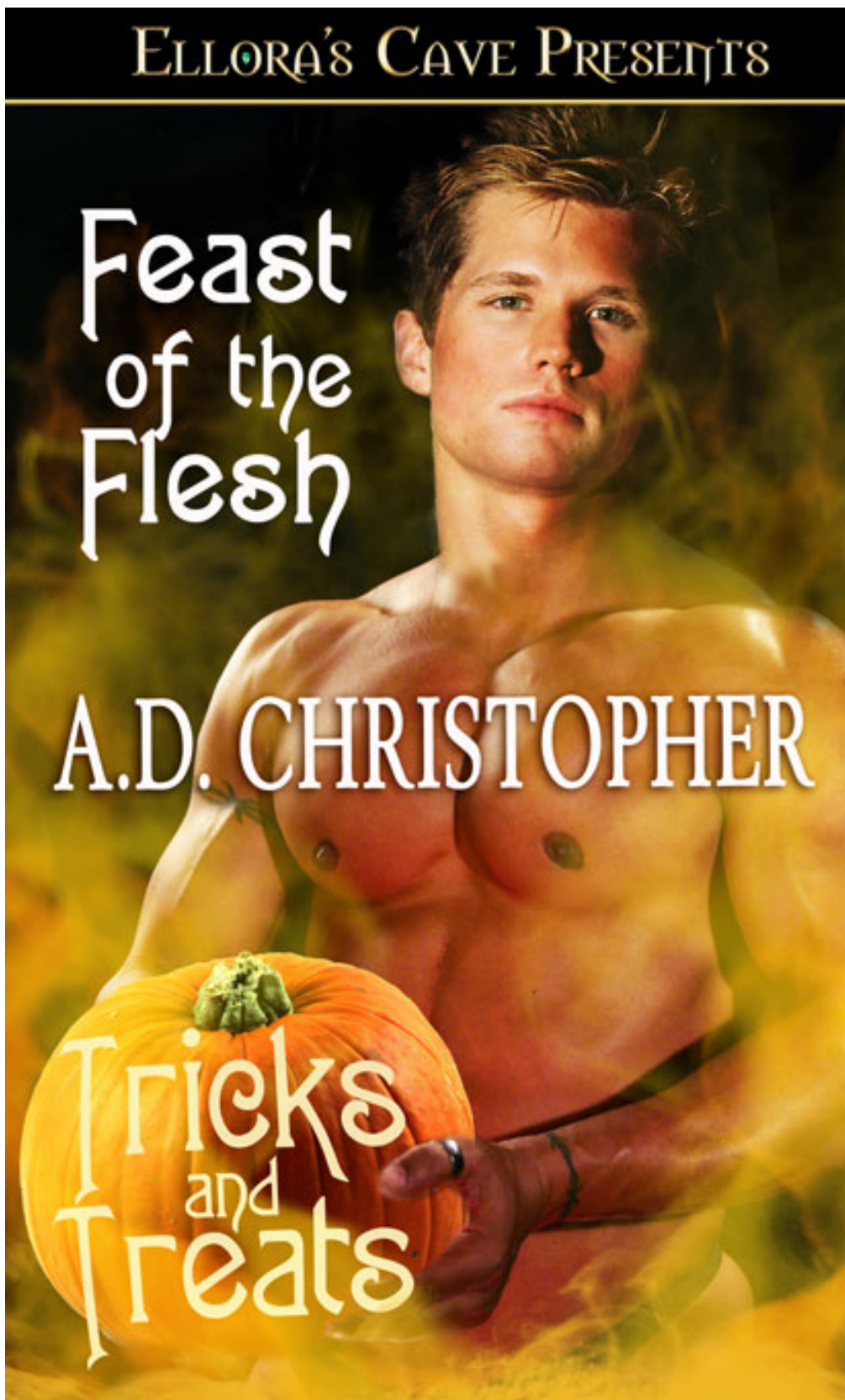


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

Feast of the Flesh

A.D. CHRISTOPHER

Tricks
and
Treats



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Feast of the Flesh

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FEAST OF THE FLESH

A.D. Christopher

Chapter One

He'd waited centuries for this night, centuries to find Padraig again. Every year at Samhain he came through the veil and flew, high above the ceremonies and celebrations, searching for the one soul he craved more than any other.

And tonight he had found him, his love...the one who had betrayed him and left him to die.

The man didn't look like Padraig, of course. His hair was not as dark, nor his body as muscle-bound. But souls could not hide, even if they wanted to.

Caradoc squeezed his eyes shut, trying to force away the images flashing through his mind, but it was no use. The pictures were burned into his spirit and always would be. Years of remembering had made it impossible to see anything but Padraig's face, his smile as he leaned in for a kiss. Centuries later he could still feel the phantom of his lover's hand on his shaft, of Padraig's cock buried deep inside his ass as they both worked furiously toward their climax.

How many times had they been together like this? How many times had he held Padraig's cock in his mouth and felt his love explode over his tongue? How many times had Padraig groaned and sighed and sworn eternal love? Only to betray him when the new god came.

The devastation of losing his love, his human soul-connection, had sent Caradoc spinning away, so far from the world of humans he still wasn't sure how he'd managed to find his way back.

But find it he had, and he'd known someday Padraig would as well. And when he did, Caradoc would be waiting.

"There will be no escape, my love," Caradoc whispered, a soft curse swept away by the cool wind.

Forcing a smile to his face, he made his way into the circle. The feast of Samhain—or so it used to be called—had been a village-wide celebration in Caradoc's time. Women and men would dance naked around the ceremonial flames, while children ran wild through the woods, racing the spirits through the darkness.

Now it seemed only men were permitted, for this circle, this dance, was solidly male. Cardoc's cock hardened as strong arms brushed against him, as muscled bodies covered with coarse hair spun and leapt, sometimes crashing together onto the ground, rolling through the dirt with laughter before coming to their feet again. They danced with holiday abandon, the pure, sexual energy strumming through the crowd enough to make Caradoc join in their laughter.

He fed upon their desire, their lust for life and merriment, growing stronger than he had been in ages. The energy buzzed through his veins, tingling across his skin until he felt drunk with it. It had been so very long since he'd felt this powerful.

Tonight he would put that power to use. He would find Padraig and make him beg for mercy. Find him, and take back the life force he knew his love's soul still held.

Then he would banish him, as Caradoc had been banished, down to the cold Otherworld, to the half-life he had spent centuries trying to reach after being sent even farther away into the nothingness.

Shivering with anticipation and the pleasure of warm skin pressing against his own, Caradoc forced his way through the crush of bodies until he reached Padraig. Whatever name this man now claimed, Caradoc still knew him, and when he reached out and circled the other man's biceps with his hand he knew he was right. The touch sizzled, sent a jolt of energy through his system.

Padraig turned around and grinned. Caradoc's breath caught. He looked so familiar! The wide blue eyes were the same, the broad, friendly face different but close enough that for a moment Caradoc felt dizzy. For a split second, all plans for revenge were forgotten as he stared at the man's soft lips. He fought the urge to reach out and

run his fingertips along them, to slip fingers into the warmth of Padraig's mouth and feel the wetness of his tongue.

Padraig knew what he was thinking. The other man's eyes widened, just a touch, then darkened with desire. Caradoc knew his body was attractive, even now in modern times. His hair was longer than current fashion dictated, apparently, but there were other men with dark golden skin and dark eyes participating in the dance. Without clothes there was nothing else to indicate he didn't truly belong.

"I'm Patrick," Padraig said.

Before he could reply, one of the dancers bumped into Caradoc and shoved him forward. His eyes closed as he felt Padraig's—Patrick's—body against his and caught the familiar scent of his skin. He still smelled of evergreen and spice, and for a moment Caradoc was transported back in time, to those days when he and his lover would spend hours swimming in the cold mountain lakes before rolling onto the grass and letting the sun warm them. They would make love all afternoon, until the sun set and the moon rose in the starry sky.

"Patrick," Caradoc muttered, bringing his hands to rest on the slightly shorter man's shoulders and pressing even closer. They were both a little sweaty from the dancing and the heat of the flames, making their chests rub slickly against each other. Caradoc heard Patrick's breath catch and knew the other man felt it too. The connection between a god, no matter how minor, and the soul he'd once drawn power from did not fade. Ideally it would last forever, beyond death, helping reunite the deity and his follower in the afterworld.

That thought brought him back. He was not here to reconnect, to draw his love back into his circle. He was here to punish, to enact his vengeance. Tonight Patrick would pay for his betrayal with pain, with frustrated desire, and perhaps, even with his life.

* * * * *

Patrick couldn't help himself. As the man—a man whose name he didn't even know—placed his large hands on Patrick's chest, he grabbed them and held them still. He couldn't remember ever feeling this kind of connection with anyone, woman or man.

And Patrick usually liked women. Sure, he'd "experimented" a few times with men, but woman were his preference. He liked breasts and how they felt soft and full in his hand, he liked soft, wet, hidden places...

But *this* man. Patrick's cock leapt to attention as he looked into the stranger's deep, dark eyes. He almost felt he knew this man, like something within him recognized him, and he wanted nothing more than to explore the connection between them further. Even Patrick's pleasure in participating in this ancient ritual, his desire to keep participating, couldn't dampen his curiosity. He wanted to take this man off into the forest where several other couples had already wandered, to lick and suck and tease. Wanted to feel this man's mouth against his, wanted to feel his mouth suckling his cock as he spent his seed, and to watch him swallow every last drop.

And the man knew it. His hands stayed where they were, resting on the muscles of Patrick's chest. "I am Caradoc," he said, in a voice so smooth and deep it sent a shudder through Patrick's body.

Patrick smiled, trying to hide his confusion. "Are you Irish too? I know it's not fashionable anymore to talk about heritage, but my family was always very proud of..." he trailed off. What was he babbling about? Why was he talking about his family origins? What did it matter now, when so many were dead?

It was just that, for some reason, he wanted to share his past with this man, with Caradoc. It was as if he were an old friend who had returned from a long journey and needed to be apprised of what had occurred in his absence. But, surely, that made no sense at all?

Luckily, Caradoc just smiled. "Then we have much to discuss, do we not?"

Patrick nodded, barely realizing he was moving because Caradoc's hand was sliding lower, his fingertips trailing gently down the muscles of Patrick's stomach, almost to where Patrick was already swollen and needy.

"Why do you not come with me into the trees? It's quieter there. We can...talk."

Caradoc's cock brushed against his. Patrick's breath sucked in on a hiss. He looked down. He'd never thought naked men could be so...so blatantly sexual, so incredibly arousing. Even in his few experiments he'd never felt like this, never felt his ass pucker and twitch with desire. But Caradoc's cock seemed to taunt him, bewitch him. He almost groaned at the thought of how it might taste.

He looked back up and almost fell into the depths of the other man's eyes. Caradoc grabbed his arm in a painfully tight grip. "Let us go."

* * * * *

The darkness of the woods closed around them. They were so far from the clearing that the sounds of laughter and music had faded, and not even a hint of firelight illuminated their steps. They were walking solely by the light of the moon, that cold light that had always made Patrick feel lost and empty, as if he were being judged by the glowing orb and found lacking.

Butterflies started dancing in his belly. What was he doing? Leaving the ritual like that, with a man? But when he turned around to try to speak, to tell Caradoc he'd changed his mind, those eyes caught him and held him, rooting him to the spot.

Even more persuasive was the hand Caradoc closed around Patrick's cock. He stroked him up and down, just once, but it was enough to convince Patrick that he wasn't going anywhere.

"I've been waiting for this," Caradoc murmured. "Waiting a long time."

"I don't—I don't think I've ever seen you before," Patrick managed to reply. "I'm sure I would have remembered."

"Don't worry," Caradoc said. His hand twisted slightly. Patrick bit his lip. "I'll help you remember."

He leaned forward, not releasing his hold on Patrick's cock, and kissed him. His lips were soft and warm, familiar somehow, and Patrick opened his mouth to the kiss, placing his hands on Caradoc's hips to pull him closer.

They were almost the same height, Patrick only the slightest bit shorter. If Caradoc's hand hadn't already been wrapped around Patrick's cock, their two shafts would have been rubbing together, soft skin against soft skin. Heat rose in Patrick's body at the thought of it. He moaned softly against Caradoc's mouth, and Caradoc pressed harder against him, the kiss changing from gentle to forceful.

Patrick's legs were weak. Caradoc's tongue swept into his mouth, sending little shocks dancing along every nerve ending in Patrick's body. The shocks were pleasant at first, more than pleasant. But the longer they kissed the more intense the sensations became, until Patrick felt violated by the electricity, by the wild desire coursing through his body.

He suddenly wanted to push the other man away, wanted to stop this. Fear rose in his chest and caught in his throat. This was more than he'd expected, more than he'd ever thought he might experience. The desires coursing through his bloodstream were wicked, delightful but also fearsome. Patrick had never dreaded being consumed by passion, but now he did. Mother Earth help him, but even that made his need spiral higher.

He reached around Caradoc's body to grasp the firm, hard muscles of the other man's ass, round and luscious under his palms. An image swam into his mind, a picture of himself guiding his cock between those delicious cheeks, of Caradoc's hands spreading them farther apart so Patrick could penetrate his puckered entrance. He shuddered and forced his tongue past Caradoc's, into Caradoc's mouth, with a desperation that frightened him.

Caradoc's hips pressed tighter against Patrick's. Patrick thought he might fall over from the force and weight of Caradoc's strong, solid body against his, but Caradoc let go of Patrick's cock and wrapped his hands around Patrick's ass, mirroring Patrick's own grip. Their cocks were slightly slick with pre-cum, and the feel of lubricated flesh against lubricated flesh made Patrick groan.

A sound that grew even louder when Caradoc's hands moved further in, sliding down between Patrick's cheeks.

Oh please, oh please, oh please...

Yes! One rough fingertip found Patrick's entrance and started stroking it, rubbing it. Sparks ignited in Patrick's head. His gasp was caught by Caradoc's mouth, still smoothly taking his.

"Caradoc," he gasped. "Please...please, I don't think I can stay standing up."

Caradoc pulled away and smiled. "Then by all means, lie down."

This was going so well, even better than he'd expected.

Padraig—Patrick—lay on the ground, his hard cock stretching almost to his navel, his legs spread wide. Waiting. Waiting for Caradoc to put his fingers back where they had been, to take that smooth shaft into his mouth.

Caradoc would do all of that and more. It had been too long, and he was so ready. Ready to take his own pleasure, ready to let Patrick have some too...before the punishment began.

Then Patrick would know only torment, like the torment Caradoc had endured for centuries. He had only this night, when the veil between the worlds was at its thinnest, to pay Patrick back for what he'd done, to show him what it felt like to be outside your own body, lost to yourself in a way that made you fear your spirit would never again find a home.

Only one night, but he would make it count.

The cold ground numbed his knees as he rested above Patrick on all fours, leaning in for a kiss, then pulling back, always leaving Patrick wanting more. He could see the other man's frustration in the way Patrick's hips leapt, the way his head lifted off the ground when Caradoc pulled back, trying to prolong their kiss.

"Patrick," he whispered. "Tell me what you want."

Patrick's eyelids fluttered. "I...I don't know."

"Yes you do." Caradoc ran his hand down the hard muscles of Patrick's chest. His skin was so smooth, so unlike it had been when they had last met, when Padraig's chest was marked with scars of dedication.

A dedication he'd betrayed, an oath he'd broken. Caradoc gritted his teeth and forced himself to smile. It wasn't time yet to start the punishment. He closed his hand gently around Patrick's tumescent cock. "Do you want me to stroke you, Patrick? Like this?" He moved his hand.

"Yes." The word sounded like it hurt.

"How about if I use my mouth, or my tongue?" Caradoc leaned down until his mouth hovered just above the swollen head and let his warm breath play across it. "Would you like that?"

"Yes!" Patrick's hand strayed from his side to his cock, as if to stroke it, to lift it and force it into Caradoc's mouth. Caradoc pushed it away. Later he would make Patrick stimulate himself, but not yet.

"Say it, Patrick. Tell me you want me to suck your cock."

"Oh, please, please, just do it—"

"I won't do anything unless you ask for it. You need to say the words, Patrick, to admit what you want." Caradoc had sensed a reluctance in Patrick in this incarnation that hadn't been there before. It seemed he was convinced he preferred a female in his bed. As if that were possible for one who had once been bound as human servant to the river god of the mighty Caradoc. He would have to be persuaded to come to terms with

his desires before this went any further. "You want another man to suck you, don't you? You want me to do it? So say it."

"Caradoc, oh please..."

"Just say the words," Caradoc urged, smiling at how easily the other man's resistance was fading.

"Please, suck my cock. I want you to suck it, I want you to make me come, suck my cock please – aaaaah!"

Caradoc sank his mouth down, as far as it would go, swallowing the hard length into his mouth. It felt so good, even better than it had before. Patrick was bigger than he had been, thicker. His flavor was different, sweeter and more earthy at the same time. For a moment Caradoc forgot what his real purpose was, forgot why he was here, and just savored the moment. He'd dreamed of this for so long.

At times the memory of physical pleasure had been all that sustained him as he drifted through the ether.

And now, no matter what ugliness of soul hid inside Patrick's perfect body, Caradoc's cock still buzzed and swelled with need, with the fierce pleasure of being solid again and ready for love.

He reached down to fondle Patrick's balls, small and round and heavy inside the loose sac. The skin rippled between his fingers. He twisted it, rolled it. Patrick's hips lifted, forcing his cock deeper into Caradoc's mouth. Salty-sweet pre-cum tingled his tongue.

Caradoc stroked his hand along Patrick's cock, gathering up some of his saliva and using it to lubricate his way down along the soft skin between Patrick's sac and anus. Patrick yelped and raised his hips higher, so high Caradoc almost didn't need to bend over anymore. He smiled and very gently bit down with his teeth. Patrick's yelp turned into a wheezing cry.

Caradoc's finger hovered just shy of the little puckered ring he knew would give Patrick so much pleasure, but he paused and lifted his head, letting Patrick's cock slip completely out of his mouth. Patrick groaned.

"Say it, Patrick, tell me what you want. I want to know exactly what you like, everything you like."

"Touch me," Patrick begged. "Touch my ass."

"Like this?" Caradoc sat up, watching Patrick's face as it transformed from desperate to blissful while he manipulated Patrick's ass with his wet fingertip. He slipped his finger inside, just the tip. Patrick's eyes slid closed. The moonlight shone on his pale hair and skin, making him look almost otherworldly.

No...precisely otherworldly. The resemblance to those faint creatures of the ethereal plane was disturbing, especially since Caradoc knew he himself would appear so again, when this night was over.

But it would be different this time. He would have had his revenge. It was worth years as a cipher to have that satisfaction.

Sliding his fingertip wetly in and out of Patrick's ass, Caradoc reached down with his other hand to stroke his own cock. It was almost time to set the trap. He watched Patrick's eyes open, widening as they saw Caradoc manipulating himself. Shivers of pleasure ran through him. He shoved his finger in farther, a little rougher. Patrick's eyes fluttered closed once more.

His cock surged in his hand, wanting to be where his finger was. "Soon," he muttered to himself. "Soon."

Still, there was no reason why he shouldn't move on to the next stage.

Abruptly he pulled away, reaching at the same time for Patrick's shoulders and pulling him forward for another kiss. Patrick's tongue was loose with desire now, tangling desperately with his own. Caradoc reached down to grab Patrick's cock and give it a squeeze. "My turn," he whispered.

Patrick moaned. "Your turn?"

Caradoc nodded and twined his fingers in the hair at Patrick's nape. "My turn. Suck my cock, Patrick." He forced the other man's head down mercilessly, making Patrick shift position if he didn't want to hurt himself.

Caradoc leaned back and smiled, Patrick's hair still twisted in his fist. "Suck it hard."

Chapter Two

Patrick relaxed the back of his throat, yielding to Caradoc's merciless entry. It was either submit or choke on the thick, turgid length the other man forced between his lips.

And it was *force*. There was nothing gentle or questioning about Caradoc's touch. He wasn't asking permission, he was claiming his pleasure, even setting the exact rhythm he preferred by holding Patrick's head still with the hand fisted in Patrick's hair while he thrust his hips forward, hard and deep. A sharp, metallic taste rose in Patrick's throat and tears ran from behind his closed eyes, but he didn't try to pull away. He only yielded, pulling in a breath when he was able, knowing he deserved no better.

He deserved every punishing stroke of Caradoc's cock, deserved to be used for the other man's pleasure. He was a low, vile thing, a man not fit to demand satisfaction from anyone, let alone Caradoc, a being of honor and faith.

Where is your head, Patrick! What are you thinking?

But the voice of reason was a weak thing when compared to the soul-deep shame that had washed over him the second Caradoc had forced him to his knees before him. Patrick had no idea where the horrible feeling had come from, but he was certain it had nothing to do with the fact that they were both male. Caradoc's touch had reminded him how beautiful lovemaking could be between two men, banishing that foolish shame as easily as dandelion seeds blown away in the wind.

Reminded him. There was that thought again, as if he had known Caradoc before, and not only known him, but...wronged him somehow.

How was that possible? There was no way he could have forgotten committing a sin so grievous that even now, with Caradoc fucking his throat so viciously that Patrick knew he would be hoarse in the morning, he still felt he deserved the pain. That he deserved that and so much more for his cowardly wickedness.

He's bewitched you, fool. You're only twenty-five years old. You were barely a teenager when the war ended and so many were destroyed. You have wronged no one. Not in such a way as to deserve this man's cruel treatment.

Patrick groaned around Caradoc's cock, but it wasn't a sound of protest. No matter that Caradoc's use of him *was* bordering on cruelty, he was still hard enough to shatter glass. Worse, Patrick suspected it was the pain and abuse itself that was bringing him to the edge, seconds away from shooting his seed across Caradoc's muscled legs.

"Harder, Patrick," Caradoc grunted, increasing his rhythm. "Suck me harder."

Patrick hurried to obey, suckling the other man's cock until his jaw hurt, the protests of his logical mind fading as shame and desire flamed even higher. He braced himself against Caradoc's lightly furred thighs, pushing forward, taking even more of the other man's cock into his throat.

"Give me your hand."

Patrick obeyed, raising his hand. Letting Caradoc take it into his mouth and sucking it until it was slick with saliva, then guiding it down between his legs, farther down.

"Rub my ass, Patrick. Fuck me with it."

The words were so delicious Patrick had to fight not to come. Carefully he obeyed, moving as slowly as he dared, desperate to prove himself worthy. With his wet finger he probed until he found the tight muscled ring between Caradoc's hard cheeks, then carefully pushed into it. Heat engulfed him, heat and smooth, tight skin. Experimentally he moved his finger, wiggling it, sliding it out then thrusting it back in. His own ass twitched and throbbed with desire. If he was lucky, Caradoc might do this to him in return. If he was very lucky it might be Caradoc's cock forcing itself past his unyielding flesh.

"Yes!" Caradoc's cock seemed to swell even thicker inside him and Patrick had to fight the urge to bring his hand to his own cock, to jerk himself to release at the same moment as his love.

His love? Where had...

But he knew Caradoc wouldn't want that. Patrick would be allowed release only when he had served his penance, when he had begun to make retribution for his betrayal.

"Shall I come in your throat? Will you swallow it down?"

Patrick moaned, knowing the vibrations would help bring Caradoc to release, and sped his hand movements even more. No matter what wild thoughts raced through his mind, he knew he craved the other man's orgasm as fiercely as he had ever craved his own.

"No," Caradoc said, jerking Patrick backward with the hand he still fisted in his hair and twisting away so Patrick was forced to relinquish his ass as well. "Not yet. Not just yet."

Caradoc smiled, as if pleased by the disappointment he read in Patrick's face, as if he somehow knew how deeply Patrick had longed to give him pleasure and relished depriving him of that gift. Even if it meant depriving himself of what looked like a much-needed release.

The other man's cock was swollen to the point that it looked painful, the bulbous head purple with thick veins standing out along his length. Patrick opened his mouth and leaned slightly forward, a silent plea for the chance to finish what they had started.

"I said, not yet!" Caradoc flung him to the ground with obvious disgust, and lifted both hands into the air.

"Please, Caradoc, I don't understand," Patrick said, scrambling to his hands and knees but making no attempt to stand. It was right for him to kneel before Caradoc, right for him to lie on his belly and lick the other man's feet if it was what he wished. "Please, I know I've done something to offend you. I don't remember what happened, but please, let me —"

"You will remember, Patrick." Caradoc moved his hands through the cool air, leaving trails of light as he traced symbols Patrick somehow knew were older than the

ancient dances he and his band brothers had danced this night. "I will make certain you remember everything before we part ways this Samhain eve."

"Please, I—"

"But for now you will be silent, and still, and allow your lover to do as he will."

Patrick tried again to speak but not a sound would come from his mouth. He could take in air, and his lips could move, but not so much as a sharp intake of breath broke the silence as Caradoc stalked slowly closer. There was strange fire in the other man's dark eyes, a fire that made the shred of the sane, sensible Patrick that still remained want to run, but Patrick found he couldn't move. He was trapped in his kneeling, subservient position, vulnerable to whatever Caradoc had planned.

The idea was terrifying...and thrilling.

"Down to the ground once more, I would have you on the forest floor."

Caradoc waved his hands again and Patrick found himself lifted into the air by invisible fingers, fingers that caressed him as they floated his body down to the earth. In seconds he was lying on his back looking up into Caradoc's dark eyes, his erection as hard and ready as it had been the first time he had stretched out before the other man.

"Now...what shall I do with you first?" Caradoc smiled as he crouched down between Patrick's legs, but there was no mirth in his eyes. He resembled nothing so much as a predator, a creature of relentless hunger who would have his fill of blood and flesh and be damned the fate of his prey.

The weak were made to feed the strong. So it had been for thousands of years. It was no different now, no matter how many laws the bands of remaining humans made. They struggled to mimic the peaceful ways of the ancient people, of those who had been tied to the earth and lived in harmony with her rhythms. They worshipped only the earth mother, shunning the gods whose veneration had seemed to fuel the fire that burned up the world, but they refused to acknowledge the darker aspect of that mother.

Death was a part of her rhythm, and perhaps it had come for Patrick tonight, come to collect in the form of a gorgeous man who had danced toward him in the firelight.

"There is fear in your eyes, brother," Caradoc said as he lengthened himself above Patrick, using his thickly muscled arms to hold his body only inches away. "But your body still betrays your desire."

Caradoc lowered his hips, pressing his hard length into bruising contact with Patrick's before he started to thrust, rubbing the silken skin of their cocks together. If Patrick could have groaned, he knew he would have, he was so consumed by the sweet, wicked pressure. It was almost painful, but wasn't. No, it was perfect, the rough touch of the lover of his dreams.

How many times had he awoken in the night, the ache for this exact brand of loving making his heart ache so deeply he could not return to his rest? Countless times, and now he was truly going to live those fevered dreams. His cock leaked with excitement, sweetening the friction of their bodies.

"You have never been taken in this body, have you? I will be your first."

Before Patrick could fully understand the meaning of his words, Caradoc was lifting Patrick's aching balls and sliding his cock beneath. The iron length felt as if it would burn his skin as Caradoc forced through the brief resistance created by Patrick's cheeks and tunneled deep into his untried ass.

If he could have cried out, if he could have squeezed his eyes shut against the invasion, Patrick was sure it would have dulled the pain. But he couldn't move, couldn't speak as Caradoc sheathed his cock so deeply inside him that he could feel the other man's swollen sac pulsing against the flesh below his savaged entry.

He'd wanted this since the moment he and Caradoc had touched, but he'd never imagined he would be taken with so little preparation. His virgin ass ached and stung, making him want to scramble backward howling, to do anything to escape his own skin.

"Relax, Patrick, stop fighting me." Caradoc gazed deep into him, with that look that seemed to reach in and caress his soul. Miraculously, Patrick found himself obeying.

Caradoc claimed his lips with a kiss as soft and tender as his thrust inside him had been vicious. The other man's tongue swept into his mouth, and with each caress Patrick's muscles softened. The pain slowly gave way to a feeling of fullness and then finally, transformed into a different kind of aching.

Patrick's breath came faster and faster as the kiss grew harder, wilder. With no words available to him, Patrick did his best to communicate his desire with his lips, teeth and tongue. Even the memory of the pain had vanished. All he could think of now was how desperately he wanted to be fucked, to have Caradoc pound into him while he fisted Patrick's cock in his large, strong hand.

How many times had it been like that between them? How many times had they made love on the shores of —

No! He wouldn't remember...whatever it was that other voice in his head wanted him to remember. To do so would be to have his heart shatter in a million pieces, Patrick knew that instinctively. He would take his punishment this night, but he would not remember. He refused to remember.

"Is this what you want?" Caradoc mumbled against his lips, beginning to thrust in and out of his body.

Patrick suddenly found himself able to move his hips, able to buck into Caradoc's movements as the other man slowly, deliciously fucked his ass. Yes! This was what he needed, what he craved. This was the pleasure that would banish the darkness threatening at the edges of his mind.

"And this? You want this?" Caradoc took his cock in hand, fisting it, jerking and tugging as his thrusts grew faster.

Patrick's balls ached and throbbed, so full and ready that he knew he wouldn't last long. The feel of Caradoc's hand, the delicious pressure of Caradoc buried deep, the ridge of his cock gliding over that sweet spot deep inside him again and again—it was too much blissful stimulation for him to hold his release at bay for long.

"You're close, aren't you? So close?" Caradoc fucked him harder, faster and Patrick responded in kind, lifting his hips, shamelessly taking everything his lover would give him. Caradoc was right, he *was* close, so desperately close that lights danced in the air around Caradoc and liquid fire surged through his veins.

"But not close enough." He pulled out, even as Patrick felt his body begin the long tumble into the abyss. The sudden loss of Caradoc's cock, of Caradoc's hand, short-circuited the release, leaving Patrick's body screaming with frustration.

It was by far the most torturous feeling he had ever known, to be so close and then have all that primal energy stuffed back inside his body. His skin felt too small, his insides burned and his very bones felt ready to fracture into a million pieces.

Patrick couldn't imagine anything more depraved, until Caradoc did it again. And again. Each time taking Patrick to the brink before denying him relief. By the time Caradoc shoved into his ass for the fourth time, angry tears were leaking from Patrick's eyes.

He no longer wanted to bear this torment, to serve penance for sins he couldn't recall. Now he wanted vengeance of his own, wanted to make Caradoc pay for the savaging of his body and soul.

"I see it in your eyes. Now you experience the slightest glimmer of what it feels like to be betrayed, Padraig," Caradoc whispered, his breath hot against Patrick's neck.

But Patrick scarcely heard him. All he could hear was *that* name. His heated blood pounded in his ears, along with the echoes of the raw, agonizing screams of the man he had been so long ago.

How he had wept and howled with rage and regret that day on the rocky shore of the river Caradoc, when he had realized the magnitude of what he had done.

Padraig had only wanted to ensure the safety of his family. The Roman Christians tortured and killed those who refused to honor their one god in three forms. Padraig's own cousin, two villages to the south, had been locked away in a cave without bread or water for three days in an attempt to turn him to Jesus. When he had still denied the

new god, the Roman lord who had taken over control of the farms had ordered him to be cleansed by fire. The villagers said the screams could be heard for miles as Marbod was burned alive.

Padraig had a mother and father still living, and three little sisters yet to be wed. The protection his family gained from Padraig's service to the river god was no longer enough. In the face of such danger, such madness born of man, Padraig knew that he would be forced to deny his beliefs when the Romans came.

And deny them he had, speaking the words of faith to their new god with his lips. But in his heart, he had remained true to the old gods, and to one intoxicating man-god in particular. To Caradoc, his Caradoc, his love, his best friend, the only being in the world he cared for with the same fierce love he had for his family.

But what lay in his heart hadn't been enough. When the Romans were gone and Padraig had returned to the river to seek his love, Caradoc had vanished. His spirit was simply...gone, as if he had never existed in the first place.

Patrick felt the tears flow faster from his eyes as the memories flooded through his mind at the same moment Caradoc's cock flooded deep inside his body. Greedily he bucked upward, wanting to draw in every last drop of his love's essence, aching to trap some piece of him inside his body, to make certain they would never again be parted.

"You remember," Caradoc gasped as he pulled away from him, as if he couldn't bear to touch Patrick for another second now that they saw each other clearly.

"I do, Great Mother, I do," Patrick said, tears streaming down his face. He did nothing to hide them, didn't even think to try to wipe them away though he found he was now free to move as well as speak.

He sat up slowly, facing Caradoc with new eyes. He did remember. He remembered every touch, every kiss, every vow. He remembered his betrayal and the heartrending loss of realizing the words meant only to deceive the Romans had stolen from him the only lover who had ever touched his heart, or owned his soul.

Patrick also remembered the myths of long ago, the tales of where the shunned gods went when their servants no longer kept them alive with their worship. His modern self wondered if perhaps Caradoc wasn't truly a god, but a supernatural being that he, in his primitive incarnation, had assumed to be a deity.

Either way, god or fantastic creature, he knew it didn't matter what Caradoc was, only that Patrick had betrayed him. And that Caradoc had come to collect the vengeance due one of his kind. Now it only remained to be seen if the god made flesh would let him live to see the sun rise another day.

"Do you see your death written in these eyes?" Caradoc asked, almost as if he too was curious to know the answer, as if he hadn't yet decided Patrick's fate.

It was enough to give him hope. If he could make Caradoc remember how it had been between them, if he could show his lover that he was still the strong, faithful man he had grown to love, there was a chance. A chance not only for survival, but for him and Caradoc to reclaim the destiny stolen from them all those thousands of years in the past.

He would show the river god that he still knew how to worship, that he still knew how to serve. And that he still knew how to make a god beg for satisfaction.

Chapter Three

This was harder than he'd thought it would be.

Even after centuries of torment and loss, all those years of planning this night, dreaming of this night, the reality was more painful than Caradoc had expected. Every time he touched the other man he remembered sweet nights together, long days full of wine and love. Remembered the depth and beauty of the connection they'd shared, stronger than it had been with any of Caradoc's other human companions or any who worshipped him. He'd believed it would last forever.

Patrick lay back on the grass, his cock still incredibly swollen. Caradoc imagined how it must hurt. The thought satisfied him even as some small part of him felt...guilty. How much of Patrick was still Padraig, and how much was an innocent man? Did it matter?

"I'm sorry," Patrick gasped. Tears leaked from the corners of his eyes. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it—"

Caradoc rolled his eyes and leaned back. "Save your apologies," he said. "I asked you a question. Surely if you were truly sorry, you would give me the respect of an answer."

"I don't want to die."

"But do you think you deserve to live?"

To his credit, Patrick didn't answer him right away. Whether this was a ploy or he was truly ashamed, Caradoc didn't know. He didn't even know why he was giving Patrick this chance.

Or perhaps he did, and simply didn't want to admit it. The truth was, being buried in Patrick's body, feeling the wet heat of Patrick's mouth around him, had awakened

feelings Caradoc had thought long dead. Patrick deserved to be punished, certainly. Caradoc just wasn't sure anymore if that punishment should be death.

"I can't say if I deserve to live," Patrick said finally. "Only you can make that decision. But I want a chance to make it up to you."

"Nothing can make amends for what you did."

"Let me try. At least let me try to serve you again, even if just for this night."

"There is no service you could perform for me, in this world or the next, that would —"

"Cadaraig, elg ester."

What? What was he doing?

Words spilled from Patrick's mouth, words Caradoc remembered as if from a dream. The ancient words of service, of binding. The words he himself had taught Padraig, all those years ago.

From the look on Patrick's face, Caradoc didn't think he even knew exactly what he was saying, but the spell worked anyway. Caradoc felt his magic break, felt the transfer of power as Patrick's body once again became completely his own.

He moved quickly, reaching over his head to redraw the symbols, but Patrick was too fast. His hand closed over Caradoc's wrist with a strength that belied his wiry frame.

They were eye to eye, chest to chest, and Caradoc's breath caught. Padraig had not been this beautiful, had he, when the moonlight hit him? No, he had not.

Patrick's eyes widened as they stared at each other, and Caradoc knew his were doing the same thing. Patrick's free hand came to rest on his chest. Already his cock was swelling again, despite the intensity of his earlier release in Patrick's body.

"Let me serve you again," Patrick whispered. "Let me prove my worth."

There was little point in this. Caradoc had only this night, only the hours of darkness to walk on the earth. When the sun rose he would be gone again, on the spirit plane.

But perhaps that was all the more reason to —

His thoughts were interrupted by Patrick's teeth on Caradoc's lower lip, nibbling gently. Caradoc's eyes closed.

"One night," Patrick murmured as he moved down to nibble Caradoc's ear. "Just this one night."

"No!" Caradoc put his hand on Patrick's chest and shoved, but Patrick was too fast for him. He wrapped his strong arms around Caradoc's waist, refusing to let go, so they tumbled over together and landed with every inch of Caradoc's body pressed against every inch of Patrick's.

Patrick's hand wound up into Caradoc's hair, twisting the strands between his fingers, pressing Caradoc's mouth against his. Caradoc tried to resist. This wasn't the time for such things. He'd planned hours more of torture, planned to turn Patrick into a living monument to Priapus here in the forest, not to lie here and kiss. Not to feel his erection growing harder still against Patrick's warm thigh, not to open his mouth and let Patrick's tongue invade it.

A low moan escaped his throat as the kiss deepened even more. Somehow his anger, his feelings of hurt and betrayal, were tangling up with long-dead desire and affection. He'd thought the memories couldn't hurt him anymore, but now they burst in his head like the powders Padraig used to add to his spell-fires.

They'd met when Padraig was barely a man. He'd been newly ordained and so eager to serve it caught Caradoc's heart—or what he'd had for a heart, faded as it was by the years between the death of his last priest and the day Padraig appeared on the shore.

But in the middle of that youth and beauty—and he had been beautiful indeed—Caradoc sensed maturity, a willingness to accept the responsibilities of the connection.

He'd felt Padraig's ability, even then, to lead his people in worship. He'd felt Padraig's eagerness to please, and it had attracted him as much as the firmly muscled body and soft, full lips.

So he'd appeared, and they'd sealed their compact there on the shore. Caradoc could still feel the damp, cool sand beneath him, still feel Padraig's worshipful mouth enclosing his cock in searing, tender heat.

Was this that day, lived again, in the cycle of time? Even gods did not always understand how the universe worked. If he and —

"No!" he said again, trying to pull away, but Patrick held him fast. Releasing his bonding, performing even that bit of magic, had obviously called on the soul-power Padraig had once had. Now that power manifested itself in Patrick's body, making him strong, heavier. Harder for Caradoc to fight.

"Yes," Patrick whispered, running hot hands down Caradoc's back to grip his ass and squeeze. The movement made Caradoc's cock press harder against Patrick's thigh. His own stomach was sticky with the fluid leaking from Patrick's cock. It took everything he had not to reach down and gather that fluid on his fingers, to bring his fingers to his mouth and taste the essence of the soul he'd once loved.

With ease Patrick flipped them over, until he straddled Caradoc, his weight resting on Caradoc's stomach and his knees pressing Caradoc's elbows into the hard ground beneath them. It was impossible to move, impossible even to think of moving, with Patrick's swollen cock so close to his mouth.

He wanted his revenge, yes. But he wanted that body more, at least at this moment. His mouth watered and his cock ached to be inside the other man again.

"How can I serve you?" Patrick asked, his eyes glittering in the moonlight and a very wicked smile playing across his lips. "What can I perform for you, so you know how very sorry I am? That I am much stronger now than I was before, and will never betray you again?"

He scooted forward. The soft skin and hair of his sac slid up Caradoc's chest, eliciting goose bumps on Caradoc's skin. "How can I show you that I am worthy to be taken into your service again?"

Caradoc opened his mouth to say there was no service, to tell Patrick that he would never trust him again no matter what body his soul now resided in or how much he'd changed, but Patrick silenced him with one finger on his lips. "You promised me a chance," he said, although Caradoc had promised him nothing of the kind.

Somehow Caradoc couldn't find the words to argue the point. Not when Patrick's right hand was sliding down Caradoc's stomach to grip his hardness. The movement made Patrick lean back, shoving his hips forward. His cock was only inches away from Caradoc's mouth.

"What was the word we used to say?" Patrick asked. "I remember we said something, a spell..."

The memory was painful despite the shiver of excitement it sent through his body, but he said it anyway. "*Uelor*."

Instantly he felt something cool and sweet wash over him, like dry water. He groaned. It had been so long since he'd felt it, but his body remembered. This was how he and Padraig had cleaned themselves, how they'd sweetened their bodies again after hours of love, so they were ready for the next round. Once again he had the odd feeling no time had passed, that somehow this world and the one he'd shared with Padraig were overlapping. It confused and frightened him, even through the haze of desire.

Patrick nodded. "*Uelor*," he repeated, and his eyes widened. Caradoc knew he was feeling that same cool dry bath. But though Patrick might have remembered there was a word and what it did, he obviously didn't remember the sensation. His lips parted and he cried out as the spell swept over his body. A part of Caradoc, that mad part that wanted to forget his plans for revenge, was tempted to laugh at the other man's amazed expression.

But the urge to laugh quickly passed as Patrick's hand closed tight around Caradoc's cock. He tugged gently, moving the soft skin easily over the hard shaft.

"You feel so good," Patrick whispered as he manipulated him. "So good in my hand, almost as good as you tasted in my mouth. I don't remember you the way you remember me, Caradoc. I remember bits and pieces, emotions...I see you in my head but it's like watching a— Dammit, you wouldn't know about movies, would you? I barely remember them myself."

Caradoc tried to think of how to respond to Patrick's confession, but was hard to concentrate on anything when Patrick's hand moved so smoothly up and down his shaft. His earlier determination and will seemed to have left him. The desire for revenge was still there, his anger was still there, but over it all was the languor of his desire, the reckless realization that this night was not going as planned, so why not take as much pleasure as he could?

He could still have his vengeance, and it would still be sweet. But in the hours before he disappeared from this plane, he could save up memories to last him another century.

"I want to remember you," Patrick said. "And I want you to remember me, the way I really was. I want you to know what truly happened, what I meant to do—"

"Silence!" Sharing bodies for the night was one thing. Having Patrick try to explain his betrayal, as if there was any way it could be forgiven, was another.

For a moment fear flashed in Patrick's eyes. Then he smiled faintly, a smile of both triumph and sadness.

"Your spell won't work now, Caradoc, I broke the binding. You need your hands free to cast again, and I think I can come up with a better use for them, and your mouth. Don't you?"

Before Caradoc could reply Patrick leapt up, his muscles moving smoothly under his gleaming skin. This incarnation truly was perfect, Caradoc thought, before Patrick flipped himself over.

His knees rested on the ground just above Caradoc's head, his cock right before Caradoc's eyes. It was obvious what he wanted, and became even more so when Patrick leaned over and took the full length of Caradoc's erection between his lips, sucking it into the heat of his mouth.

Even after coming as hard as he had before, Caradoc still had to fight to keep his orgasm at bay. Patrick's tongue slid thickly over Caradoc's swollen tip, delving into the neat slit, running down the ridge on the underside and flicking it lightly. Caradoc gasped. His hips lifted involuntarily, but Patrick's hands pressed them back down.

"My turn," Patrick said. The command in his voice sent a shiver through Caradoc's body. Padraig had not dared to challenge him in this manner. He was a god, and not to be trifled with.

So why, then, did Patrick's insubordination arouse him so much?

One of Patrick's hands slipped down to caress Caradoc's sac, to tug on it gently. His tongue moved down as well, to caress the soft skin, before he lifted his head, resuming his work.

Caradoc gasped, his mouth opening, and before he had time to think of what he was doing he reached up to guide Patrick's cock into his mouth. It was harder to do at this angle. He had to arch his back up, to stretch his throat, and the awkwardness of the position made it even hotter. His legs spread as Patrick worked between them, reaching down now to finger Caradoc's ass.

Caradoc lifted his head to pull Patrick deeper, so deep he felt the blunt head hit the back of his throat. His mouth filled with the clean, slightly salty taste of Patrick, with the glorious sensation of velvety skin against his tongue. Patrick was big enough that Caradoc had to open his mouth all the way.

He hand rested on Patrick's hard, hairy thigh. He slid it inward, collecting his saliva on his fingertips and sliding them up, over the delicate and sensitive skin between Patrick's sac and his ass, and then rubbing the tight ring with it.

Patrick moaned, bathing Caradoc's cock in delicious vibrations. Caradoc slid his finger inside, and Patrick mirrored him, so together they were a circuit, a perfect unit. Patrick's cock thrust into Caradoc's mouth as Caradoc's finger thrust into Patrick's perfect ass, and each repaid the favor.

Blood rushed to Patrick's pelvis. He knew he wouldn't last much longer, and from the incredibly swelling of Caradoc's cock he knew he wouldn't either. The need to come, the need he'd thought earlier couldn't get any worse, was now all-consuming, blinding. He'd never needed it so badly in all his life, and even searching the shadowy mists of his newly found memories he didn't think he'd needed it this badly – ever.

He pulled his head away, regretting the loss of Caradoc's thickness in his mouth but needing something else even more.

"Caradoc," he moaned, not daring to look down to see his cock still buried in Caradoc's mouth. If he saw that it would be over. There was no way he could keep himself from exploding. "Caradoc I need to be inside you. Let me...let me perform that service for you."

As he spoke he slipped another finger into Caradoc's ass, stretching him further. Caradoc's hips leapt and he moaned around Patrick's cock.

"Please, Caradoc, I can't hold on much longer...I want to come inside you."

Taking Caradoc's stillness for assent, he slid sideways, off the man he loved and feared in equal measure, and positioned himself between Caradoc's legs.

Another word memory came to him, and he spoke it. "*Dessu mi es.*"

Something slippery and invisible coated his fingers, warm and smooth. It felt good on his hand, and better when he used that hand to coat his cock. Caradoc hadn't used anything but his own saliva to lubricate his earlier entry, but that was all right. Patrick had deserved the pain. Caradoc didn't. He'd had enough pain, centuries of it, and it had been Patrick's fault. Now Patrick was determined to serve his god the best way he could.

Caradoc's entire body was tense, waiting. Patrick rubbed the slippery magic lube between Caradoc's cheeks, into his ass, unable to take his eyes off Caradoc's chest and face as he did so. He was so broad and strong. Even centuries of waste had not changed the beauty of his physical form, the smooth perfection of his skin, the chiseled masculinity of his face. His eyes were open, dark and fathomless, staring at Patrick as Patrick positioned his cock just outside his body.

He'd performed this act of worship, this act of purity, hundreds of times in his prior incarnation. The memories swam before him, some very clear, some not clear at all.

But on the other hand, he'd *never* performed it. Not in this life.

He was about to lose his virginity to a god. One who could take his life if he didn't please him.

Patrick took a deep breath and pressed himself forward, feeling the tight muscled ring give way around him, and decided death was worth it if it meant he could feel something this amazing even once.

Chapter Four

Patrick's cry as he buried himself deep in Caradoc's body was foreign to his own ears. It was a primal sound of joy, a soul-deep bliss that shattered his memories of any lovemaking but this. The cry echoed through the dark forest and up into the starry night sky. The moon suddenly seemed to glow a little brighter, and for once the pale light felt like a benediction, not a curse.

He took it as a sign. It wasn't too late. He and Caradoc could begin again, here in this new world that was, in many ways, so similar to the old one they had known.

"Caradoc," Patrick groaned as he gazed down at the man beneath him.

Caradoc's face was twisted with carnal pleasure, his eyes pressed tightly closed as he arched into Patrick's thrust, taking every last inch of Patrick's cock into himself. Patrick knew he had never seen anything more beautiful. "My love, I—"

"Do not speak words of love." Caradoc's eyes flew open, that fire there that threatened to burn Patrick alive every time he mentioned his love or his regret.

"Please, let me—"

"Fuck me, Patrick," he commanded, the words causing Patrick's cock to twitch inside Caradoc's ass. "If you mean to show your devotion, then fuck me."

The words threatened to destroy the last of his control. Patrick cried out again as he pulled out and then plunged deeply back into Caradoc's welcoming body. Caradoc's ass was so slick and tight, the friction created as he thrust forward the most perfect thing he'd ever felt. He'd never even imagined such bliss.

Patrick worked as slowly as he could, rolling his hips, caressing dark secret places inside his lover's body with his cock. No matter how desperately he needed to come, he needed to assure Caradoc's pleasure even more. Not merely to save his own life, but to

show his old friend that his devotion was as strong and true as it had ever been. Stronger even.

Sweat broke out on Patrick's forehead as he took hold of Caradoc's cock, using the slick substance that still lingered on his hand to coat his lover's shaft. Caradoc groaned, sucking in a swift breath as Patrick thrust and tugged in time, working Caradoc's shaft with the same slow, firm rhythm with which he fucked his ass.

"Padraig," he called out, that old name the most human-sounding word Caradoc had spoken since they met in the dance circle.

"I am Patrick now. I am not that weak coward. I am stronger, my love."

"Don't—"

"I will never betray you."

"Damn you, man. You know—"

Patrick silenced Caradoc's protest with a sharp thrust, a brutal penetration that made Caradoc's eyes widen before they narrowed in anger. Patrick stilled inside Caradoc and leaned close, staring into the dark, fearsome depths of his lover's eyes, meeting the pain and fury he saw there without flinching.

"I know the man I am. And now I know the man I was. I know I can be better."

"You know nothing." Caradoc looked ready to strike him dead, but he didn't move, didn't so much as tense a muscle as he lay beneath Patrick.

"I know you want to punish me, and I know I would deserve that punishment." Patrick brushed his lips across Caradoc's, the softest whisper of a touch before pulling back. "No matter that I never denied you in my heart."

"Your denial, your *betrayal*, was complete," Caradoc hissed. "The centuries I spent wandering the void were proof enough of that."

Patrick claimed Caradoc's mouth again, not flinching when the kiss quickly turned brutal. He allowed Caradoc to bite him, to bleed him. As the sharp, metallic taste of his own blood poured from his lip to coat their tangled tongues, Patrick realized that there

was only one way to prove to the other man the truth of what had happened so long ago.

Now he could only pray that he remembered how to work the magic, and that Caradoc would be willing to let him inside his heart and mind, even if for only a few precious moments.

Patrick pulled away and began to work Caradoc's body again, his thrusts harder and his fist tighter, his desire inflamed by the vicious kiss. It had always been like that between them. They enjoyed walking the razor's edge between pleasure and pain. Caradoc relished the feel of teeth sinking deep into his muscled flesh and Patrick had never come so hard as when he had held his knife in his hand, tracing shallow cuts in his chest as Caradoc fucked him from behind.

Patrick felt a skin-memory wash over him, and for a moment he could see the devotional scars in the moonlight, and remember how it had made him hard just to trace the raised flesh with his fingertips.

"Yes!" Caradoc cried out as Patrick's thrusts grew frenzied, the last of his control vanishing along with the memory.

He began to fuck Caradoc in earnest, ravaging his ass with his cock as his hand worked Caradoc's furiously swollen length. His lover's breath grew faster, as did his own. They were both so desperately close. Patrick's thrusts grew faster and faster, until he was pounding into Caradoc even as his fist jerked up and down, flying over the slick, silken skin of Caradoc's erection. The world narrowed until all Patrick could see was his god, until all he could feel was the achingly perfect connection of their bodies and the overwhelming pleasure surging around them.

"Caradoc!" Patrick screamed the name, a desperate prayer, as Caradoc's cock jerked in his hand, his creamy come shooting out to coat Patrick's hand and his own muscled chest.

The sight, the smell, of the other man's release tipped Patrick over the edge. His cock jerked and twitched, the release almost painful as he shot himself deep inside his

lover's ass. Low in his body, the fierce tension exploded into indescribable bliss. Patrick's eyes squeezed closed and his jaw clenched as wave after wave of release swept through his body, the orgasm consuming him until he felt outside himself, banished from his own skin by the power of his pleasure.

Only then did he collapse forward, cupping Caradoc's face in his hand and pressing their lips together. He murmured the words of the sharing spell into the other man's mouth, giving him no chance to pull away before the magic swept over them.

Patrick gasped as he felt his soul leave his body in his next breath. Suddenly he was inside Caradoc's mind, living his memories, walking through the mists of nothingness, crawling through tight, dark places toward a light he didn't know if he would ever find. And all the while, beneath the physical and mental agony was the wound of Padraig's betrayal, a hurt that never healed, that still bled as freely as it had when Caradoc had realized that Padraig had sworn faith to the new god.

The pain, the sorrow, was almost more than Patrick could bear. He clung to Caradoc, holding him in his arms, sobbing as the other man's arms closed around him, hugging him tightly to his strong chest. They held each other as if they would never let go. Every muscle in Caradoc's body was clenched and tight, and when tears wet the other man's cheeks, Patrick knew Caradoc had made the journey through his own memories as well.

He had known the despair of Padraig, the horror and shame that had slowly driven him mad until, one day, not long after his swearing of allegiance to the Christian god, he had walked into the river. The rocks he'd tied to his legs had pulled him down to the bottom, making certain there was no chance for survival. He had betrayed the only man he had ever loved, and deserved no better than death.

Caradoc had also walked with Patrick in this new incarnation, known the terror of the final war, witnessed the deaths of Patrick's parents and older brother as they succumbed to radiation sickness. He had shared Patrick's grief, known the pain that consumed him as everyone he loved had died and yet he remained. He, who he felt was

so unworthy in comparison, had managed to live and thrive while hundreds of thousands of good people had perished.

Slowly, Patrick felt his soul slide back into his own skin. He opened his eyes to find himself lying on his side, huddled in a fetal position with Caradoc's gentle hands stroking along his skin. He sucked in a breath and dared a look up into the dark eyes of the man he'd been waiting to come for him for longer than he had imagined possible.

"Patrick, my love." Caradoc's eyes were soft, all his anger banished in the wake of what they shared.

Patrick surged upward into his arms, knowing this embrace was the most wonderful thing he had ever known. No matter what the night held, no matter what the morning would bring, he would have peace now. Finally, his soul could put away the sadness and pain of the past, and move forward to a future free of shame.

They made love again and again, for hours, until Patrick lost track of the times he had given and received pleasure. By the time they collapsed onto the soft pine needles, as spent as he could ever remember being, Patrick had no doubt of what the future held for him. He would follow Caradoc to the other side. This time there would be no betrayal, this time he would find his lover in the Otherworld and they would have that eternity that had been denied them for so long.

"I can not take you with me," Caradoc said, as if he had read Patrick's thoughts. The sorrow was evident in his voice, a fact that made Patrick feel strangely blessed. This man would be sorry to leave him. It was a gift, one he didn't intend to take lightly.

"You *can* take me with you. I remember the ways of these things now, Caradoc." Patrick lifted his head from Caradoc's chest to meet his lover's eyes. "Our souls are as bonded as they ever were. I will find you this time. I won't return to the earth. I'll stay in the Otherworld until I find you and —"

"No, I will not have your life cut short again." Caradoc pulled away from the hand Patrick reached to cup his cheek. "There is a reason the gods have sent you back to the Earthly plane."

"What gods? Here we worship only Mother Earth." Patrick stood on shaky legs as Caradoc surged to his feet. "The gods abandoned us when the war began sixteen years ago. Since then, none have dared speak their names."

"You purposefully misunderstand me," Caradoc said, a faint smile on his lips as he raked his fingers through his long brown hair.

Long ago they had spoken of the one true power, the pure life force that came from the earth, the air, the stars, that gave the humans' gods and goddesses their power. It was that force, funneled through human belief, that made miracles happen, that made gods flesh. It was that force which all creation worshipped, no matter what names they would give it.

"Never, my love." Patrick moved closer and wrapped his arms around Caradoc's waist, sliding his palms down to cup the other man's ass in his hands. Caradoc tensed for a moment, but allowed the embrace. "I understand you perfectly, but I believe I have no higher purpose than to serve you."

"The world is not as it was, Patrick. That much is clear. The earth bears many scars." Caradoc took Patrick's face in his hands and stared deep into his eyes. "There is no more river Caradoc. The waters are tainted with death. There is no home for me here. You and I will never have what we did so long ago."

"I know," Patrick said, meeting Caradoc's searching look with a smile. "That is why I must come with you. I don't have the power to bind you to this world without your river home. I'm only one man. That is why I will follow you to the other side."

Caradoc was quiet, but Patrick could see the battle waging behind his eyes. "The Otherworld is a cold, sterile place. I had no form, no flesh. The pleasures of this world were no more, and —"

"That was my doing, my fault. It will be different when we are together. With your human servant by your side, you will find the true Otherworld, the beautiful land where the —"

"We can not be certain." Caradoc sighed and pulled away, pacing through the woods. "And if we are wrong, there is no way to undo the deed. You will be a specter for eternity, never able to return to the earthly plane."

"*You* have returned." Patrick hurried to keep up, afraid that Caradoc would disappear any moment. The air around them was slowly turning the darkest shade of gray, a sign that the sun would rise soon. Neither of them had spoken the words, but they both knew that they had only this one night. When it was finished, Caradoc would vanish. Patrick couldn't let that happen, not until he had convinced his love to wait for him on the other side, to reach out to his spirit through the void and guide him through to the Otherworld.

"Only on Samhain, when the veil is thin." Caradoc moved into a jog, and Patrick followed, ignoring the way the sticks and brambles dug into his feet. "And I am a former god. A human man would be trapped forever."

"I would relish that forever if I am by your side."

"Even if we can not touch, can not speak, can not –"

"Yes! Now stop, please." Patrick tried to keep up but it was nearly impossible. Caradoc's feet were no longer touching the forest floor. He was flying, faster and faster, his body fleeing the light that crept upon them from the east.

Patrick ran until his muscles burned and his feet bled, churning his legs, silently praying he would close the distance between them, that he could somehow grab hold of Caradoc. Then he would hold tight and never let him go, not until the veil had parted and the Otherworld accepted them both into its shadowy realm.

Closer, and closer, he was nearly there, nearly able to reach out and grasp Caradoc's ankles when his foot caught on a twisted tree root. Patrick crashed to the earth with a cry of anguish, an anguish born not of physical pain but from the torment he suffered as he watched Caradoc vanish from sight. He was simply there one minute and gone the next.

With his departure, Patrick felt the magic vanish from the world. No longer was he a god's lover. Now he was simply Patrick, a survivor of the final war, one man amongst a band of brothers struggling to find a way to thrive in the oftentimes inhospitable world Earth had become.

"Caradoc." Patrick whispered his lover's name as he rolled onto his back in the dirt, wishing more than anything that he hadn't lived to see the sunlight creeping through the trees.

* * * * *

One year later, Samhain, 2217

Caradoc had waited only a year for this night, but the time had passed even more slowly than all those thousands of years before. He'd been so desperate to return, to find out, once and for all, if his love was truly his forever. If Patrick had waited, if he had forsworn all other lovers, and had dedicated himself to nurturing the magic and power they had awoken in him just a year before then there was a chance he would be strong enough to bind Caradoc to the earth once more.

If not, his devotion would prove that he understood the chance he took. If he were waiting, then Caradoc would take him back through the veil if a life together were not possible on the earthly plane.

"There is no *if*. He will be here." Caradoc's voice was firm and sure. If only he could say the same for his heart.

He pushed his way through the trees, only to stop dead at the edge of the ceremonial space. The clearing where Caradoc had found Patrick the first time was silent and abandoned. The men who had danced here had moved elsewhere. No one had lit a sacred fire in the pit for some time, that much was obvious from the weeds that grew within the shallow indentation in the earth.

Caradoc knelt by the pit, his throat tight and aching as he sifted the ash through his fingers. Gone. The men were gone, Patrick was gone. Perhaps he had fled the place where he had been reunited with Caradoc of his own free will, or perhaps he had perished in Caradoc's absence. The new Earth was still a dangerous place, filled with disease and violence. It would be ages before the remaining humans were once again at the helm of the planet's destiny.

He should never have left without Patrick, damn his reservations. The man had been as sure of their entwined fates as he was himself. Caradoc had been a fool to let doubt cloud his thinking, to convince him that a year spent apart would teach Patrick the truth of his heart.

"I have to agree. You were a fool," came a soft voice from above him. Caradoc looked up to see Patrick straddling a thick tree limb. "I knew the truth of my heart a year ago, and you have wasted precious time."

Caradoc had never been called a fool, not once in thousands of years, but he didn't refute Patrick's claim. The relief coursing through his veins was too overwhelming to allow room for argument.

"You read my thoughts?" Caradoc asked as Patrick leapt from his perch and came to stand before him.

His body ached to embrace the other man, but he didn't reach out to touch him. Caradoc was almost fearful to make contact, afraid that Patrick was a hallucination that would slip through his fingers and vanish into the cool air.

"I've been working to rebuild my magic. But even without it, I think I would have read the truth on your face," Patrick said with a smile of pure joy. "You looked like you were pretty sorry you didn't take me with you the first time I asked."

"You are right." Caradoc leaned closer, inhaling the sweet scent of the man he knew he would never be without again. "Is there any way you can forgive me?"

"I can think of a few ways." Patrick moved forward and claimed his lips.

The first contact between them was as overwhelming as it had been the year before, even more so if such a thing were possible. Their connection was strong, fierce and true. The power coursing from Patrick's human form was staggering, a tidal wave of magic that made Caradoc's lips buzz and his skin itch to be pressed tighter to the source of his pleasure, to his lover.

But when he moved to close the last of the distance between them, Patrick pulled away.

"My band of brothers moved into the mountains last spring," he said, holding Caradoc at a distance with strong hands on Caradoc's shoulders. "Several of the brothers have found women. We have built a village, a real home for ourselves."

"Then you are...happy here on Earth?"

"I am. The village is hidden and easily defended. The soil there is good and pure. We made our first harvest only a few days past."

"Then I am happy for you." Caradoc smiled. Patrick's happiness and love were all he required. He would gladly wait for him, returning each Samhain until his lover was ready to depart the earthly plane.

"There will be no waiting." Patrick kissed him, grinning against his lips. "There is a stream that begins high in the mountains. A clear, uncontaminated stream that becomes a river as it flows toward the valley."

"Is that so?" Caradoc asked, running his hands lightly down Patrick's back, itching to free him from his robe.

"We were so grateful to find clean water at last that we began leaving offerings on the banks. It didn't seem fitting to leave offerings to a nameless river, so I suggested we call our saving grace the Caradoc."

The Caradoc. Patrick had found him another home, and what sounded like the beginnings of a small band of followers.

"They will accept you gladly, but none will worship you," Patrick said, stepping closer, heat glimmering in his eyes. "I alone will attend to that, tonight and every night until we once again pass through the veil, together."

Caradoc opened his arms and pulled Patrick close. Just holding him again was like receiving every offering he could ever want.

"So what do you say, my love? Will you come see our new home?"

Caradoc smiled and kissed Patrick's throat. "Soon."

"Soon?"

His confusion turned into a wide smile as Caradoc grabbed the hem of his robe and began lifting it. "We have a year of separation to make up first."

Their lips touched again, in a kiss so full of love and passion it healed the remaining wounds in Caradoc's heart. He would never feel that loneliness again. He'd found his way through the veil, and this time it would be forever.

About the Author

A.D. Christopher came back to his love of writing after ten years as a florist and wedding planner. A love of romance, combined with a passion for...passion inspired him to pen tales of strong, powerful men and the alpha males who love them. A.D. is lucky to have many gay friends as well as straight friends who know how to act gay in public.

He welcomes mail from readers and is thrilled to be writing for Ellora's Cave.

A.D. welcomes comments from readers. You can find his website and email address on his author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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