

SHATTERED



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Best-Selling Author of *Vertigo*

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M. L. RHODES

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

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SHATTERED
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Copyright © 2008 by M. L. Rhodes
ISBN 978-1-60272-393-1
Cover Art © 2008 Trace Edward Zaber

Layout and Formatting provided by: Elemental Alchemy

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

CHAPTER 1

Within the confines of the dark tunnel beneath Gallasfor City, the stench of death, decay, and things *unnatural* seeped like toxic waste into Simon Saint-Saëns body. It crept through his skin, slid through his veins, and settled deep in his bones. All his hunting instincts told him to turn and get the hell out of here.

And yet...he continued to follow the man in front of him, Jaden Cole.

That didn't stop him from registering his concerns aloud, though. "This doesn't feel right," he said, staring at the back of the younger man striding forward with no hesitation. In the nearly pitch-black of the dirt and crumbling concrete walls, lit

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only by the glow of the flashlight Simon carried and kept pointed at the ground, he could barely make out the sinuous lines of Jade's backside. But he felt him, in every pore of his being—a constant hum of awareness electrifying Simon's nerve endings, even now, with the foul reek of things unseen pressing in on him. "Are you sure this is where we're supposed to go?"

"This is the place," came the deep, gritty voice that, even down here, in the depths of whatever hell had been formed under the city, stirred a fiery heat in his balls.

"I don't like it."

"We already talked about this and you agreed. You said you were willing to go through the ritual." Jade continued to move unerringly, his preternatural instincts obviously guiding him since Simon's light didn't penetrate much past him.

"Yeah, but you weren't real forthcoming on the details of this ritual or *where* and with whom we were going to do it. It's closed in, isolated down here. It'd be too easy for someone to set a tra—"

Jade stopped abruptly and turned. His eyes glowed a predatory silver in the darkness. "Damn it, Simon, you either trust me or you don't."

Simon narrowed his gaze and stared at the man before him, at the unruly lock of dark hair that had fallen over Jade's eye, the stubble across his cheeks and chin that gave his angular face a rugged, sexy edge, his clenched jaw, and the firm set of his full, sensual lips. The language of his tightly strung body betrayed his current exasperation at Simon. This wasn't the

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first time since they'd entered the old, abandoned subway shaft in a desolate section of the city that Simon had questioned their direction.

Damn. Simon sighed, knowing he could continue to argue, but deciding right there that he wouldn't. The last thing he wanted was for Jade to think he didn't trust him or didn't respect his decisions. Nine years ago he'd rescued the then nineteen-year-old Jade from a life of slavery in the dark and demon-filled world known as Vertigo. He'd brought him back here to this world and tried to care for him as best he could...until things had gotten complicated between them. Fearful for Jade's life and thinking he was doing the right thing in order to protect Jade, he'd made the decision to send him away. Jade had fought it, saying he would be safest *with* Simon, not away from him. But Simon had stubbornly refused to listen and had pushed his own agenda.

He cringed now at the memory of what he'd done—he'd snuck sleeping powder into Jade's drink one night and effectively taken away his freedom yet again, as if the six years Jade had spent in Vertigo hadn't done sufficient damage to the young man's psyche. Simon had sent Jade to an abbey in the country where the brothers could look out for him and keep him safe, telling himself it was for the best. A few months later the abbey had been attacked by demons and all had been slain. Including, Simon had assumed, Jade. Simon had lived since then with the guilt and grief of knowing, in his desire to control, he'd destroyed the life of the only person he'd ever loved.

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And then ten days ago, Jade had reappeared. To say Simon had been stunned by the knowledge Jade had survived the attack on the abbey and had been alive all these years would have been an understatement. But Jade was no longer the gentle, innocent young man Simon had once known. The years Jade had spent enslaved in Vertigo had altered him emotionally and physically, and the sickness he'd suffered from when he'd lived with Simon had evolved into a permanent and savage reminder of that darkness. Now, Jade was part creature of Vertigo—something Simon had known nothing about until Jade's return. Yet Jade had chosen, of his own free will, to seek Simon out, knowing his life was at risk because Simon hunted his kind, in order to warn Simon of a new, potent, and deadly power rising in Vertigo. A power that could sweep into this world and destroy everything.

Their reunion hadn't been all smooth, and Simon still had many unanswered questions about where Jade had been and what he'd been doing during the years they'd been apart...questions Jade, so far, had avoided. But the bottom line was that Jade was back and by some miracle still had feelings for Simon. And so Simon swallowed the argument on his tongue about where they were going. He owed Jade this. In truth, he'd do pretty much anything for the man just for the gift of having him alive and getting a second chance to make things right with him.

"I do trust you," Simon said.

Jade arched one dark upswept brow. "Yeah, that's why it just took you so long to answer."

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"I do," Simon said firmly. "I swear...I do."

Still, he wondered what Jade could possibly hope to find down here that could offer them any protection from the dark magics of Vertigo? He wished Jade would be less evasive and just talk to him. But this new, edgier Jaden came with a defensive armor Simon found difficult, at times, to penetrate.

"Then prove it," Jade said, his voice gravelly. "Just...shut up. And follow me. I know where I'm going." His features softened, showing a hint of the innocent vulnerability of old. A hand reached out, cupped the back of Simon's head, and pulled him close. "I'd never intentionally harm you, Simon. You know that, don't you? That's why we're doing this. Because I damn well don't want anything to happen to you."

His lips were mere inches away now, and Simon's skin tingled in response. He breathed in Jade's spicy, masculine scent and savored the familiarity of it. Jade had been back only a short time, but every cell in Simon's body vibrated in recognition. Even beneath the primal aura of the wolf that now lived within Jade, the essence that flowed from his core was still that of the young man he'd fallen in love with long ago.

"I know. It's just...it's been a long time since..." Simon dragged in a deep breath.

"Since you've had anyone to trust in?"

"Since I've even had anyone to talk to," Simon admitted, his voice hoarse, as memories of the gut-wrenching loneliness of the past years washed through him, reminding him all over again of the hollow ache that had consumed him after he'd thought Jade had died. It had been that god-awful ache, along

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with raw despair and guilt, that had pushed him out on the streets to start demon hunting. He'd been driven to make amends.

As if he knew what was going through Simon's mind, Jade buried his fingers in Simon's hair and tugged him closer. "You're not alone anymore."

At the merest brush of lips against lips, fierce need churned between them. The brush became a caress, which quickly evolved into an intense, heated kiss. By the time they wrenched their mouths apart, they were both breathless, and Simon fought a painful hard-on and the urge to push Jade against one of the crumbling walls, tear off his clothes, and bury himself so hard and deep in Jade's hot, willing body it turned them both inside out.

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to burst free and consume them again and again. He suspected that even if they locked themselves in his apartment for days on end, focused on nothing but one another, they still wouldn't be able to get enough.

But the sense of unease that had weighed on him since they'd entered this dark abyss hadn't let up, and though his libido urged him to lose himself in Jade's body and welcoming embrace, his instincts demanded they move on and not linger here.

Jade seemed to be struggling with the same torn sense of priorities. His breath came warm and harsh against Simon's neck, and one hand slid down to cup Simon's cock and balls through his jeans and give them a squeeze. Then he swore softly and stepped back. "Let's go," he said, his voice deeper and more ragged than before. "Let's get this done so I don't have to worry every second that wraith's going to find you and finish the job he started the other night. And so we can go home, get the hell out of these clothes, and go back to bed."

His midsection cramped with need and his balls tightened at Jade's words. Still, Simon managed to take his own step back, furthering the distance between them, but still feeling a gut-deep pull toward Jade, like a powerful magnet seeking steel. "Yeah. Let's go," he rasped. *Before I lose control.*

Jade's gaze told him he was barely hanging onto his own. But without arguing, he turned and resumed his path onward in the damp and dark.

Simon followed, once again keeping his flashlight trained at the ground, and hoping the hell they got wherever they were

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going soon.

The broken concrete walls eventually gave way to nothing but earth. The ceiling lowered, and the path narrowed and gradually began descending. The deeper they plunged, the more ill at ease Simon grew, and the more the weight of the earth seemed to press on him. He'd never before experienced such a heavy, cold dread. At least not that he remembered. It took all his concentration not to lunge at the walls, seeking escape. But there'd be no escape like that down here.

Jade wasn't the only one with preternatural abilities. Simon had his own set, though the origins behind his were a mystery shrouded in shadow and pain. He had no idea from where they came or why he had them, he only knew he did...super strength, the ability to heal quickly from virtually any wound, and the ability to phase through solid matter, including walls. But not when there was nothing beyond those walls but endless miles of dirt and rock. If he tried down here, he'd end up trapped and suffocating beneath tons of earth. The thought made him shudder violently.

Why was this place affecting him so much?

Minutes passed, maybe longer. An hour? Two? He lost track of time. In the endless dark, his senses blurred.

But finally Jade stopped in front of him.

"This is it." Jade's voice sounded unnaturally loud and unexpected in the small space.

Simon flashed his light up and found Jade facing a heavy, old-fashioned, arched wooden door set into the wall. Again a tremor of unease shot through him. How had Jade known this

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was here? A closer inspection revealed no knob or handle or means of opening it from this side. Simon ran the beam of the light around the door's edges once more to confirm he hadn't missed something. He hadn't. But it didn't matter. He didn't need a knob.

He grabbed Jade's hand and walked toward the closed door.

But much to his surprise, Jade shook his hand free of Simon's grip and held back. "You can't phase us through this."

"It's a door. It has to lead to somewhere, which means there's open space on the other side. Of course I can."

"Not this door."

Simon ignored him. But when he tried to push his way through the wood, searing pain surged through him and he was thrown backward with the force of what was equivalent to a psychic blast. He hit the unforgiving dirt ground with a jarring thud and a loud grunt.

"Stubborn ass," Jade said softly but with concern as he knelt next to Simon and ran warm, callused hands over him, obviously checking for injuries. "I told you it wouldn't work. Are you hurt?"

Simon pushed himself up to a sitting position, his pride stinging. "No, but what the hell is going on?" He'd never felt anything like that force field, or whatever it was...his internal organs still quivered from the jolt. Clearly some sort of magic was at work here. And Simon didn't like things he couldn't explain, especially magic.

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Jade stood and held out a hand to help Simon up. Simon accepted it and rose. He brushed the dirt off his jeans, readjusted his sword in its scabbard hidden beneath his long coat, then leaned over to retrieve his flashlight from the ground. It had gone flying when he'd been thrown backward.

Jade turned back to stand in front of the door.

"How exactly are we supposed to get in?"

"Like this." Jade dug into the pocket of his leather jacket and pulled out...something. Simon couldn't make it out. Jade made a quick movement with his hand and simultaneously gave a sharp hiss. Then he lifted his hand and, with the object he held, drew a scrolling symbol on the door...something dark and coppery pungent.

"Is that blood?"

Jade drew another symbol and, as he did so, Simon noticed the first one disappearing. The second began to fade almost immediately as well, as if some invisible force were wiping it clean like an eraser on a slate. Or—an eerie impression planted itself in Simon's mind—as if the thick wood was swallowing the blood like an offering.

"It's the only way to enter."

The hair on the back of Simon's neck stood on end. "What kind of place is this?"

"A place where they can protect you," Jade said, continuing to draw symbols. He hissed again and winced, and though Simon couldn't see it, he suspected Jade had just cut open a new wound or gouged whatever he held into the previous one. "And down here, you have to be willing to give

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in order to get something in return.”

Oh, crap. The blood *was* an offering.

“Who are *they*? We don’t have to do this, Jade. We can find another way.”

But even as the words left his mouth, the door suddenly and silently parted from the wall on one side and swung inward.

“There is no other way. Not for what we need. Come on.” Jade didn’t hesitate. He stepped across the threshold, leaving Simon to follow. Or turn his back on this whole freakish thing and walk away.

In all the years he’d been hunting demons and foul creatures who came through the rifts—dimensional tears between this world and Vertigo—Simon had taken out too many evil beings to count and had never had to rely on anyone else. There’d never been anyone *to* rely on. More importantly, he hadn’t needed to because no matter how difficult the situation, he’d always been able to extricate himself from it on his own.

Then, several nights ago, in an old meat packing plant near the river, he’d been set upon by K’arpath demons—sixteen of them, all told, which in and of itself had been bizarre since the huge, brutish K’arpaths usually worked alone. If it hadn’t been for Jade’s timely arrival and help, they may very well have killed Simon. But they’d merely been the minions of another creature...the being Jade referred to as the “wraith.” The moniker was fitting. The shadowy gray being had appeared, oozing pure evil. He and Jade had been lucky to escape. The

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wraith had come looking specifically for him, Simon, and had meant for him to die that night. It had easily controlled the K'arpath demons, and had used magic to find Simon.

It was that magic Jade feared. They still had no idea who or what the wraith was—if it was the big evil Jade had heard rumblings about, or if it was a harbinger of something worse. Nor did they know why it hunted Simon in particular, except that Simon was known to the people of Gallasfor City as “the Saint,” because he dared to fight the beings of Vertigo that came nightly through the rifts. Whatever it was, Jade was convinced the wraith would stop at nothing to find Simon, would use whatever means—magic or otherwise—he had at his disposal to seek him out and destroy him. Simon had seen enough the other night to convince him the assessment could be right. Jade believed the only way to protect Simon from that magic, to keep him from being found, lay down here, underground. Behind that door.

More important to Simon, however, was that because Jade had come to his rescue the other night, the wraith now knew of Jade also. Once again Simon had put Jade in danger. So if walking through that door meant finding protection for himself, it meant finding protection for Jade as well.

Although the urge to be far, far away from this place churned in Simon's gut, he didn't turn away. He dragged in a deep breath, hoping the hell where ever they were going, the cure wasn't going to prove more dangerous than the disease, then stepped through the doorway...

...and into more darkness.

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The door swung shut behind him, resealing itself with a dull but resounding thud that reverberated through Simon like a death knell.

CHAPTER 2

The new tunnel Simon found himself in curved round and round and the descent grew steep. At times it was hard-packed dirt, at others he found himself navigating narrow stone steps. It took all his concentration to keep his footing. Ahead of him, Jade continued to prowl down the passage without missing a beat.

As they traveled, the beam on Simon's flashlight grew dimmer and dimmer, until only a small, dull circle of anemic light guided him. And then it flickered out.

"Shit." He shook it, whacked it against his hand a couple of times, and pushed the switch up and down, but the batteries were fried. "I can't see a damn thing."

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“We’re almost there.” Jade’s voice came back to him from somewhere ahead, farther away than Simon liked. “You won’t need it.”

“Like hell I won’t,” Simon muttered under his breath, shoving the dead flashlight in his coat pocket. “I’m not a wolf. I will actually need to see where I’m going to get out of here.”

His pace considerably slower since he couldn’t make out a blessed thing, he crept forward, keeping one hand on the cool dirt wall to steady himself as he felt his way with caution. His concentration was such that he was completely unprepared to slam into Jade’s back. He let out a low “oomph.”

“We’re here,” was Jade’s response, as if he’d barely noticed Simon had plowed into him.

“Here? How can you tell anything in the pitch black.”

“I smell it.” Jade’s voice had a low rumble to it, an almost feral sound, as if he were struggling to hold back the beast.

“It?” Simon asked cautiously.

“Blood. Sweat. Magic. Passion.”

Jade’s wolf senses gave him advantages, but his sense of smell was the most highly developed. He’d found Simon the other night at the warehouse by scenting Simon’s blood from blocks away. Hearing of more blood here didn’t give Simon peace of mind.

Before he could question, though, he heard a creak and a heavy scraping noise. A long sliver of golden light appeared, but, oddly, it didn’t illuminate past the opening and into the tunnel. The tunnel itself remained as dark as before...Simon couldn’t even see his hand when he moved his fingers before

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his face. What did waft out of the opening, however, was the scent of something sweet and clinging. It filled Simon's nostrils and crept into his head. Herbs? Incense?

"We've been expecting you." A haughty voice that Simon could define as neither male nor female spoke from somewhere near the doorway. Except Simon didn't see anyone standing there. "Come forward, supplicants."

As he stepped across the threshold behind Jade, Simon felt a sensation that wasn't unlike the one he experienced when he phased through objects—as if his body were being compressed and rearranged, then was suddenly snapped back into shape like a rubber band, leaving a lingering prickling in his skin and muscles.

The golden glow he'd seen through the opening as they'd stood out in the dark tunnel made it possible to see now. As he moved forward again, he took stock of his surroundings. They were still in an enclosed passageway made of rock and dirt, but this one far more winding than the previous one. It seemed to Simon that they turned a corner after every few steps. The gold light flickered and danced around them, giving him the impression a fire or fires burned nearby. Yet he felt no warmth. In fact, it seemed cooler now than it had been in the tunnels leading here. At the same time, however, the spicy-sweet scent of the herbs, or whatever it was, infused his senses, making his head light, his body heavy, and, oddly...his cock hard.

What *was* that smell? It was making him feel a little drunk and a lot horny. His body was reacting to it as if it were an

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aphrodisiac.

With each step, the effects grew more profound. His skin became so sensitive that even the brush of his shirt against his nipples and the friction of his cotton briefs were almost too much to bear. He tingled and burned and throbbed—but not exactly in a painful way, unless one considered raw and consuming sexual stimulation pain. He had the sudden urge to strip off all his clothing to find relief. And once that idea planted itself in his mind, he couldn't shake it. He caught himself reaching for the buttons of his shirt before he jerked his hands away.

What the hell was going on?

“Jade?” He was surprised to hear his voice come out as little more than a ragged whisper.

Jade wordlessly reached back, grabbed Simon's hand, and squeezed, but didn't stop walking.

Simon looked past him and saw no one. Where was the person or being who'd spoken to them when they entered? Simon had assumed whoever it was would be leading them. Yet Jade moved forward without guidance, as if he knew exactly where he was going.

A part of Simon felt like he should be suspicious about that—had Jade been here before? But, instead, all he could focus on was the heat of Jade's hand wrapped around his and how it grew scalding, sending currents of heat through Simon's arm and into the rest of his already keyed-up body in slow, undulating pulses that brought his arousal up another notch.

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“Jesus,” he rasped, tugging at his shirt and giving in to the need to unfasten at least the top couple of buttons. He wished he could do the same for his jeans and relieve some pressure there. “I feel like I’m going to crawl out of my skin.”

“I know.” Jade sounded as breathless and jangled as Simon felt.

“That smell, the way I feel... are we drugged?” Simon wondered aloud.

“Yes.”

He said it so assuredly, Simon jerked his hand free and stopped. “You knew. You knew they’d drug us, didn’t you? And yet you brought us here anyway.”

Jade finally stopped. He turned slowly, as if movement hurt. When Simon glanced down at the hard bulge straining against the fly of Jade’s jeans, he understood why. Understood, and felt his own respond with a painful throb.

“I knew. It’s their way, Simon.”

“Their way? Again, who’s *they*?”

“Shh. Keep your voice down. They use the drug to keep...visitors too high and too aroused to pay attention to where they’re going, so they can’t find their way back. And because...” He hesitated and his dark brows furrowed together.

“Because?”

But before Jade could answer, the disembodied, androgynous voice that had greeted them earlier swirled around them, sending new shivers—and not the good kind—along Simon’s skin.

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“Best keep up, supplicants. You don’t want to become lost in the labyrinth and stuck here as our guests forever.” The tone was taunting, but Simon sensed the words were dead serious.

“Let’s go,” Jade said.

“Jade, wait—”

“Just follow my lead, don’t speak unless you’re spoken to, and, please, trust me.” His words were firm, but the look he gave Simon was a plea.

Then, without giving Simon a chance to respond, he turned, and once again Simon found himself looking at Jade’s backside as Jade strode forward following...nothing. How were they supposed to “keep up” when Simon had yet to see a guide? But Jade took it all in stride, seeming to know what was expected of them in this den of iniquity, while he, Simon, was left in the dark.

Simon grimaced and followed, wondering how the sweet, innocent young man he’d once known had come to learn of unholy places like this.

::Because you betrayed him, Simon Saint-Saëns, when he needed you most, when he was at his most vulnerable.::

The voice whispered in his mind, his and yet not his, but condemning in its honesty all the same. Simon winced as it continued...

::Because of you, he was forced to learn how to survive in your wretched world on his own, in whatever way he could, barely existing as half-man, half-beast.::

“I didn’t mean for that to happen,” he murmured, more to himself than out loud.

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::Didn't you? You were so caught up in your own life, your own problems, you didn't want the responsibility of looking out for someone else. So you sent Jaden away.::

"No, I sent him away because I didn't know who or what I was, what I was capable of, and I didn't want to hurt or kill him."

::Accept the truth. You failed him. When he was alone and desperate, fighting for his very survival, where were you? You are responsible for everything he's been through. You abandoned him.::

The ache of grief that cut through Simon was so sharp it almost, for a split second, managed to clear his head and temper the arousal that pounded through his body.

He stared at Jade's lean but powerful back, aching with guilt. "I didn't know what would happen," he whispered. "My intentions were sincere."

::What is it they say in your world? The road to hell is paved with—::

"Stop! Just get out of my head."

He swore he heard faint, icy laughter.

Trying to shake himself free of the unsettling voice, he glanced at Jade again, suddenly fearful Jade had overheard him, but the younger man gave no indication he had. Simon sighed, relieved Jade hadn't heard the conversation he'd just had with... Damn it, with himself?

What was happening to him? Who were these people? Using drugs to control their actions and behavior, causing cruel whispers in his mind...

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“How much longer until we get there?” he asked.

But Jade either didn't hear him or chose not answer, which, for some reason, only served as another twisting knife of guilt in Simon's gut. Wishing for all he was worth to be out of here and back topside, in a world where he had control rather than someone having control of him, Simon trudged on in suffering silence, finding no relief from his spinning thoughts and questions, or the sexual distress that continued to assail him.

They finally emerged into a sizeable cavern and halted. The large hall sported rows of carved rock columns at each end that began at the polished gray stone floor and towered up to the arched beams of the ceiling far above. Delicately etched and frosted glass panels stretched between each column from floor to ceiling, staggering in their sheer enormity and impossibility. Two long stone tables stood side by side near the center of the hall, but with no benches or chairs in sight. In fact, Simon saw no other furnishings or trappings of any kind. Yet despite the starkness of the vast room, it had an ethereal beauty Simon couldn't put his finger on. He wondered just how far below ground they were now. It felt...deep. And ancient.

The source of the gold light was a fire indeed, as he'd suspected earlier, but unlike any fire Simon had ever seen. It burned at one end of the room, its flames a rich orange-yellow shot through with streaks of blue and purple. There was nothing natural about it. And though the light cast gold highlights on everything, sparkling and reflecting off the

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frosted glass and the gleaming stone floor, even up close it gave off no warmth.

Magic.

Of course. From the moment Jade had told him a *ritual* existed that could hide and protect them from the wraith's magic, Simon had known magic would be involved. How else to fight magic but with more magic? And then there'd been the blood and the disappearing symbols on the wood door. The light that hadn't seeped into the tunnel, but remained firmly behind the threshold. And now this fire that wasn't fire.

Simon was leery of magic. He had a deep-seated distrust of it, but no memory to back up where the distrust might have come from. Maybe it had been magic that had stolen his life from before. He always thought of it that way—*before. Before* his memories began. *Before* the pain and guilt. *Before* the nightmares. Ten years ago he'd awakened in a compromising position, the sole survivor of what had clearly been a massacre, with no memory of how he'd gotten there or where he'd come from, whether he'd been a victim or the perpetrator of the carnage. He'd been clutching a bloodied sword—the one he still carried to this day. It, along with his unusual abilities, were the only clues he had to who, or *what*, he really was.

Seeking reassurance, he reached for his sword beneath his jacket to rub a hand over its hilt...and found nothing.

A knot of icy panic filled his gut.

"My sword's gone."

Jade's brows drew together, but before he could speak, the

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disembodied voice responded.

"Of course," it said in a sing-song that bordered on scornful. "You left it at the portal. No outsider may bring weapons here."

"I didn't leave it."

"But you did. You yourself removed it as you entered and left it at the entrance."

"No," Simon insisted. "I *didn't*." He damn well would have remembered doing such a thing because the bottom line was, he never gave up his sword. It wasn't just any sword. It, like he, had abilities that set it apart from others.

"Simon," Jade said in a low voice, "let it go. It'll be returned to you later."

"You know what that sword can do, Jade," he hissed. "And it's my only link to my past. I have to get it back, now."

"I know what it can do, but they'll return it to you," Jade repeated.

Simon narrowed his eyes. "Them taking it...is this something else you knew about ahead of time but didn't bother telling me?" He was sick at heart that Jade had kept yet something else from him about this excursion. Obviously Jade still had a way to go before he felt he could trust Simon again completely, and Simon knew he had no one but himself to blame for that.

Jade had the grace to look apologetic, for all of a second, before his sensual lips tightened into a frown as if indicating this wasn't the time to get into further discussion.

But Simon wasn't ready to put an end to it yet. "And

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please, tell me why I'm even listening to voices that come from nowhere."

"Shhh. They come from somewhere. Believe me," Jade murmured.

"Silence, supplicants," the voice commanded. "You will prepare yourselves to meet Her. You have been allowed to enter this realm based only on Her whim. Whether you remain and are granted Her favor will also be Her whim. You will offer Her your fullest respect at all times. That means no speech unless you are asked a question. You will stand here in silence and await Her."

A powerful whiff of the sweet smell surrounded them, stronger than before. It had to be coming from the fire, Simon decided, and wondered if perhaps their testy, invisible guide had dosed them again to keep them quiet and in line.

But he soon found rational thought too taxing as his focus turned to more basic needs.

Everything he'd experienced in the passageway became magnified. Even the importance of retrieving his sword was secondary to the way his body thrummed, as if a deep drumbeat pulsed within the room, within him. His skin virtually crawled for want of being set free from his clothing, which scraped and chafed. He tugged at his shirt again, pulling open another button. "I can't... I have to..."

If the guide's intent had been to subdue them and keep them rational, he/she/it shouldn't have added the ingredient that made Simon think with the head that *didn't* contain his brain.

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Jade looked to be faring little better. Color flushed his stubbled cheeks and his chest rose and fell with ragged breaths. He turned to look at Simon, and his gaze was pure, unadulterated come-on.

Simon didn't know if it was against the rules or not—at this point, he didn't care. The need that drove him was too much. He reached for Jade.

Their bodies melded, hard and hungry. Jade's eyes flared deep silver just before he dug a hand into Simon's hair, angled his head, and his mouth closed over Simon's. He bit Simon's lower lip and tugged, drawing a low moan from him. Which became a series of moans as Jade released it and his tongue licked into Simon's mouth, tracing his teeth and stroking with raw sensuality.

Their hips ground, dragging their groins together in a sweet crush again and again.

"Need to touch you," Jade groaned, ripping open Simon's shirt the rest of the way and burrowing his hands inside it to slide his palms over his chest and abs.

Simon was already pushing Jade's jacket off his shoulders and dragging it down his arms with the same intent.

"Well, well, well, what's this lust I find stirring in my great hall?"

The rich, rippling female voice swirled around them like smooth but icy water. And it had the same effect, tearing them apart as if they'd been doused.

Breathing hard, Simon stared around them but saw no one. "Who's there?"

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Jade, on the other hand, had his gaze focused ahead as if he'd found the source of the words. Did he see something Simon couldn't?

"You will kneel before the Lady!" the taunting androgynous voice from the passageway ordered.

Simon felt something whip-like strike the backs of his legs. He was about to turn and throttle whatever invisible entity might be there, but Jade caught his arm.

"Do as the guide says," he said quietly. "Follow my lead." He dropped to his knees on the gleaming stone floor, his hands clasped behind him, shaggy dark head bowed. Yet in spite of Jade's forced calm, Simon could see him still shaking with barely contained lust from their interrupted liaison.

For a moment the sight stole Simon's breath.

Jade looked shockingly and deliciously submissive. A rush of need shot through Simon as he wondered what Jade would look like kneeling before *him* like that, except nude, quivering with desire, perhaps with a cock ring, or a collar marking him as his.

Oh, God! What am I thinking?

Simon shook his head, trying to snap himself out of it. He'd never had desires like that before. Could never, *would* never ask Jade to subject himself to such a thing. It had to be the drugs making him think about it.

::You wish for him to submit to you. You wish to master him, control his life, his fate, do you not? Like you did before when you let him trust you, but then you betrayed his needs for your own.::

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“No, damn it,” Simon muttered, experiencing a flash of fury at the invasive voice in his head that taunted him. A voice, he suddenly realized, that sounded suspiciously like it belonged to the “Lady” he was expected to bow to.

It wasn’t until Jade lifted his head and looked at him, his brows drawn together in question, that Simon realized he’d just spoken aloud, and he’d been staring at Jade, lost in thought, for a long time. That brought him fully back to the here and now and the current situation.

Jade’s face tightened into the pleading look he’d worn earlier, begging without words for Simon to comply with the demand to kneel.

Simon sighed, unable to stand firm when Jade looked at him that way, and sank slowly to his knees. But he refused to put his hands behind his back or bow his head as Jade had done. He had his limits, and supplicating himself to some unknown, invisible entity wasn’t high on his list, no matter how much Jade wanted this to work.

The “Lady” seemed to accept what he was willing to offer, since there was no more whipping.

Instead, after a pause where Simon got the distinct impression he and Jade were being measured up, the unseen woman spoke again.

“A half-breed wolf mage and an an’kshalon come to call upon me and ask my favor.” The being’s tone said much about her—aloof, elitist, with a touch of scorn.

Wolf mage? An’kshalon? Simon’s clouded mind tried to make sense of the words. “What’s an an’kshalon?” he asked.

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The word felt foreign on his tongue.

“You’ve not been given leave to speak, impertinent one,” she snapped. “But even if you had, I would tell you no more than what you are ready to hear.”

“And what’s that?”

“That your time has not yet come. Many questions burn within you. Answers you seek. But the road to finding them will be fraught with trials...some you’ve already faced, some you’ve already failed.”

The brittleness of her words grated through Simon like broken glass, stirring to life his anger again. “Failed?”

“You will learn no more until you have *earned* the right to know.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Silence! I will speak of it no further. You dare much to show your face here at all, an’kshalon. Be grateful I’ve not already slit your throat to silence you. Now we must address the matter at hand. I already know what you seek from me, wolf,” the being said, obviously now addressing Jade, “but I would hear you say it.”

“Protection from those of the demon world, Vertigo, who would use their magics to seek and destroy Simon,” Jade said without hesitation.

“And you ask this protection for yourself as well, do you not?”

“I do, but I would see Simon receive it whether or not you choose to grant it to me also.”

“Noble sentiment. For a creature such as yourself.”

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“Why would you not give it to Jade also?” Simon asked.

Jade glared at him and shushed him, but Simon refused to be silenced like a child.

“Why?” Simon demanded.

The being laughed, but the sound was far from comforting—again Simon was struck with the sensation of glass grating on glass. “The wolf knows why.”

Simon looked at Jade, but the other man now refused to meet his gaze. His angular jaw tightened and released, giving away his tension.

“I’ve broken no laws of *your* land, Lady,” Jade said.

“True enough. Had you done so, you would have been slain on the doorstep of my portal.” A space of eerie silence followed. “Still, you have dabbled with the fabric of reality, wolf, wielded what power you have with a recklessness of which few can approve. I will grant your petition, and give my protection to you both. *But*...what you seek will not come free. In addition to the teind I assume you came here expecting to pay, you, wolf, will also agree to serve me at a later date. You know of what I speak, and know the task will demand much of you, perhaps even your life. It will not be negotiable. I will expect you to fulfill the obligation with no exceptions. Are you willing to pay this price?”

“I am.” Jade’s deep voice was firm and resonant, echoing through the hall.

“Jade!” Simon reached out and grasped Jade’s arm. “I don’t know what you just committed to doing for this *thing*, but like hell you’re doing it.”

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“It’s not your choice to make, Simon. It’s mine.” He turned slowly to face Simon. His features suddenly looked far older, wiser and *wearier* than Simon had ever seen.

Anger and confusion churned in Simon’s gut. “So it wasn’t okay for me to make decisions for you nine years ago, but now it’s fine for you to make them for me? I won’t have you committing to God knows what, risking your life, for my sake. It’s not going to happen, you hear me?”

Jade cupped his face in a callused hand. “There are things you don’t know, things that, much as you may not like it, are out of your control, Simon. There are penances to be paid.”

“Penance?”

“My penance,” Jade said in a hard voice. “And I’ll pay them as I choose. It’s not your affair.”

“Then our contract is sealed,” the woman said, her tone echoing rich and regal through the cavern. “Sealed with the blood you shed to enter here, and by which you are bound until the time your debt has been cleared and I release you.” She clapped her hands. “Let the ritual begin.”

Simon, still reeling from the finality of Jade’s set-down and the woman creature’s declaration, barely felt numerous pairs of invisible hands pulling him to his feet, tugging off his jacket and ripped shirt, and unbuckling his belt.

CHAPTER 3

Jade knew his words had both angered and hurt Simon. But as much as Simon didn't like it, Jade had told him the truth...it was his bargain to make. He'd make it all over again if it meant keeping Simon safe.

He loved the man, had for his entire adult life, even after Simon had sent him away. But it was more than that. Jade knew in his gut, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that without Simon alive and fighting, whatever powerful entity was currently brewing a plan to invade and wreak havoc here would succeed. The wraith had come looking for Simon specifically, which meant it perceived him to be a direct threat. The being was powerful beyond anything Jade had ever

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seen...and he'd seen a lot. It was a power rooted in darkest evil. Just being in close proximity to it had made Jade physically ill, sapping his energy, stealing his strength, twisting his insides into writhing, nauseating knots. He'd found himself impotent against it, and it wasn't a feeling he wanted to experience again anytime soon. It wasn't something he wanted Simon to have to face again either. The wraith's demons had almost killed Simon...he couldn't even fathom what the wraith itself would do to him now that Simon had defied him by escaping.

Which was why Jade would protect Simon at any cost.

That didn't help the ache in his heart, though, as the Fae undressed him, undressed Simon as well, especially since Simon wouldn't look at him.

He'd just found Simon again. He didn't want to be at odds with him, didn't want to fight with him or feel this distance between them. But Simon didn't leave him any choice. Damn the man for being so stubborn. Simon Saint-Saëns always wanted to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders, wanted to take all the burdens upon himself, protect the helpless—which he pretty much saw as everyone but himself—and keep tight control of all events around him as a means of protecting who and what he cared about. He had the best of intentions, and a generous heart...he really did. But his tunnel vision, if he kept it up, would be his downfall.

He used all his energy, every ounce of it, to protect others, which meant at the end of the day, or month, or year, he had nothing left to sustain himself. Jade had seen up close how

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Simon had lived his life nine years ago—alone, cut off from human contact, riddled with pain and guilt over something from his past that Jade hadn't understood at the time. Now, very little had changed except that Simon went out every night to hunt. But the hunting was driven by the same guilt as before and he still had virtually no contact with the humans he fought to protect. If anything, Simon seemed even lonelier and more isolated than ever. He'd moved from a dark, basement rented room where he'd live so long ago to a large, open loft apartment with windows that overlooked the city. A step up for him, it would seem, at least on the surface. But the part of the city he viewed day in and out was the part mostly abandoned by humans, ravaged from the effects of fighting and death, fear and desolation, thanks to the influx of Vertigoan demons. It was like Simon lived in full view of it as a way to taunt himself with the encroaching darkness, as if he were responsible for it, too. It broke Jade's heart.

Simon was pissed Jade had made a deal with the Faerie queen against Simon's wishes. Jade got that. But, damn it, it was time for someone to look out for and protect Simon for a change. Time for Simon to learn that it was okay to receive sometimes and not just give and give until, one day, his soul had been bled dry.

The Fae led Jade to one of the stone tables and directed him to lie on it. The stone was cold against his back, but not unbearably so. In contrast, his body still felt feverish. Cool hands stroked him, gliding over his bare thighs, his abdomen, chest, arms, and even, from time to time, brushing against his

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hard dick, which ached for release thanks to the herbal concoction their hosts had flooded the hall with. But the various sets of hands on him meant nothing, and though they heightened his arousal, which was probably their intent, and the Fae themselves were some of the most beautiful and enticing beings he'd ever seen, with their tall, slim, regal bearing, elegant silver-threaded clothing, glistening long hair, finely crafted features and startling jewel-toned eyes that could see right through a man, Jade only had eyes and a soul-deep craving for Simon.

They'd stretched Simon out on the second table just feet away from Jade, displaying his tall, muscular body in such a way it made Jade's mouth water. Simon's dark blond hair looked like a golden halo around his head in the flickering glow of the Faerie fire. In spite of the fact Simon still wouldn't make eye contact with him, Jade's sensitive nose picked up the powerful tension radiating from him like a live thing, rippling and shifting, angry yet aroused.

Simon didn't fight what was happening to him, which surprised Jade a little. Especially since, unlike Jade, Simon couldn't see who was touching him. To him, it would be invisible hands pressing him down, stretching his legs and arms spread-eagle, and tightening leather cuffs around his wrists and ankles to keep him in place. Simon had strength that far surpassed that of a regular human. Jade suspected Simon could pull free of the bonds any time he wished, and yet he accepted it with stoicism.

Meanwhile, the Fae were strapping Jade down in the same

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manner, in preparation for the ritual.

It was a position symbolic of his and Simon's submission to the Faerie queen, a dig at them to remember they were but lowly beings, little better than slaves, and beholden to her for granting their petition. It was also, in point of fact, because the Fae got off on the display of aroused human flesh. There was no coincidence in the fact he and Simon were spread out upon tables in the great hall like a banquet to be feasted from, because that's exactly what would happen once they'd received the ancient protective symbols. Their lack of clothing, the touching and stroking, the aphrodisiac drug they'd been given facilitated the paying of their teind when the time came.

A part of Jade wished he'd shared more of this with Simon before coming here so Simon would have been more prepared. He knew Simon thought he hadn't told him because he didn't trust him, when that was the farthest thing from the truth. Jade did trust him. With his life. He'd just been afraid that if he gave Simon too much detail, the man would have nixed the idea from the start and then Jade would never have gotten him down here, short of using magic on him to sway his mind...something Jade could never do.

Never.

He found himself breathing hard, and it wasn't just from the extreme sexual craving that pounded through him. It was fear...for himself...at the thought of calling upon the dark and powerful magic he'd learned during the years he and Simon had been apart. It would be so easy to focus the intent on

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Simon, cloud his mind just a bit so he'd forget what happened here and would no longer be angry with Jade. Oh, God...so easy. So tempting.

But, no, damn it! No. Why was he even thinking about this now? No magic. Not on Simon. *Never* on Simon.

And if you started, you might not be able to stop there...

"You must relax, wolf-mage," a soothing Fae voice said. Jade turned his head and looked up at the beautiful, smooth-faced male Faerie with long, raven black hair and eyes the color of amethysts. He appeared no older than Jade, but because people here aged much differently than humans, could easily be several hundred or even thousands of years old. The Faerie's skilled hands smoothed over his shoulders, rubbing and pressing in all the right places to ease Jade's tight muscles. "The marking will be much easier on you if you relax."

Relax. Jade was fairly certain he wasn't going to be relaxed until this was done and he and Simon were safely out of here.

Yet as with most things down here, he found himself succumbing to the Faerie's ministrations. The problem was, the more relaxed he became, the most desperately he wanted Simon. Simon's scent swirled through him, a combination of citrus soap, musk, and aroused male. Jade couldn't move his limbs, but he turned his head to look at his lover and found himself once again mesmerized at the beauty of Simon's body and his thick shaft jutting up from his groin. Simon stared at the ceiling as if trying hard to separate himself from what was

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happening. But his chest rose and fell in ragged breaths, and his jaw clenched in a rhythmic pulse, giving away his continued tension.

Jade was about to speak to him when the Fae male grasped Jade's cock in a sleek, encompassing hand, drawing a low groan from Jade and tearing his eyes away from Simon to look up at the Faerie.

"It would help, perhaps, if you let me relax you here, as well, and give you some relief," the man said in a silky voice, stroking Jade's shaft. "You're clearly uncomfortable in this stiff and swollen state. I could bring you ease, which might help your plight during the ritual."

Out of his peripheral vision, Jade saw the words finally get a reaction out of Simon. Simon's head whipped to the side and Jade felt his heated, blue-eyed stare on him along with a wave of possessiveness.

It sparked a new and even deeper flare of desire in Jade that had nothing to do with the cool hand working his genitals.

"No," Jade said firmly, making sure he spoke loudly enough for Simon to hear every word. "I appreciate the offer, but only one man gets that privilege." He turned and met Simon's gaze. "Only one man can ever satisfy me."

Simon's nostrils flared. His eyes burned like twin blue flames.

The Fae man witnessed their exchange with raised eyebrows, then, after one more slow stroke, unhanded Jade. The Faerie shuddered as if the fingers of lust had just fondled *him*, and Jade realized they probably had, figuratively

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speaking. He and Simon were creating immense sexual heat and energy just by looking at one another, and the Fae fed off of it.

“You can see them, can’t you?” Simon asked.

Jade didn’t have to question what he meant. “Yes.”

The flame in Simon’s gaze sputtered to be replaced by hurt once again.

It squeezed Jade’s heart. “The Fae can choose to be seen or not by humans. Most often they choose not to be. But they can’t hide their true form from...”

“From animals,” the Fae male interjected.

Jade winced. He knew what he was, but the words gouged deep into painful memories of the past. Ones he’d prefer to forget because they were part and parcel of some of his darkest days. When he was younger, he’d thought seeing his parents murdered by demons and the years he’d spent as a slave to a Volgaran demon in Vertigo would be the worst he would ever experience in his lifetime. He’d been wrong. It hadn’t been until much later he’d discovered there were far worse things.

“Yes,” he said in a low voice, “from beasts. Like me.”

As if he’d somehow read Jade’s pain, Simon’s expressive gaze had shifted again, offering... Offering what? Jade couldn’t tell. He just knew it somehow made him feel better. Cleaner.

“So you can see them because you’re a werewolf,” Simon said softly.

“Yeah.”

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“I want to see you, too,” Simon said, raising his voice and addressing his request to the room at large and, obviously, the Fae in it. “I think it’s only fair that if I’m trusting my life and protection to you, the least you can do is show yourselves.”

Jade cringed as he watched the dozen sets of Fae eyes in the room turn to his lover. Simon was pushing his luck and might end up at the receiving end of something unpleasant with that attitude.

But, surprisingly, the Fae man attending to Jade waved a hand through the air and murmured a word in the Faerie language.

Simon drew in a stuttered breath and his eyes widened.

Damn...they’d actually done what he asked. Jade was more than a little shocked.

“Your lover speaks true,” the black-haired Faerie said, as if he’d been reading Jade’s mind. Hell, maybe he had been. “Although, his manners leave something to be desired. It’s good for him my Lady was not here when he spoke in such a way. And I notice he knows not how to offer thanks either.”

“Thank you,” Jade murmured for him.

Simon once again turned his head to look at Jade. “It’s... They’re so...”

Jade nodded, trying not to smile, knowing the first sight of a race as breathtakingly beautiful as the Fae was hard to process. It was in their appearance, the way they moved, spoke. They’d been gods in their own right on Earth long, long ago before human hatred and intolerance had driven them deep into their own realm. Their past history with the human

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race was the reason their realm now existed in a slightly shifted dimension from the humans', why they were difficult to find unless one knew exactly where to seek and what rituals to perform, and why they seldom showed themselves to humans. They owed humans nothing, refused to directly aid and interfere in human causes, and only granted petitions if they expected to receive something they needed or wanted in return. Philanthropists they were not. But their magic was ancient, which made it some of the most powerful imaginable.

"What are they doing to us?" Simon asked in a tight voice, eyeing the Fae man and woman who leaned over him with what looked like thin fillet knives sharpened to gleaming razor edges.

Jade drew in a shaky breath as the black-haired male Faerie and another woman readied blades over his chest and abdomen as well.

"We are doing what you requested...giving you the protection of the Fae," the black-haired Faerie told Simon. "This can be as unpleasant or as pleasant as you make it. I would suggest you breathe deeply"—he waved a hand at the fire and another thick wave of the aphrodisiac herb wafted around them, the strongest dose yet—"try to relax, and let it be, if not a pleasurable experience, a stimulating one."

"More of the drug," Simon murmured. "Oh, God..."

Oh, God was right. Jade wasn't sure he could take much more of the drug without his dick exploding.

"That comes later," the Fae man said in a low, seductive voice meant for Jade only.

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“Bloody hell,” Jade groaned as the drug fill his lungs, his head, and seeped with tantalizing fingers into every part of his body.

But the tantalizing soon became torturous as the sensations grew more profound, bringing him to a heightened state that felt as if a single wrong touch could cause him to shatter into a million excruciating pieces.

Something... He gasped for air. Something wasn't right. He didn't think he should be feeling this...God, this... *fractured.*

Every slice of the Faerie blade in his skin was an agony. His skin, his cock and balls, his nipples, his nerve endings all felt too tight, too stretched, like thin tissue over boiling magma. And much to his horror, the rich, coppery aroma of blood—his and Simon's—stirred to life the beast within him.

“Not good,” he gasped.

It all quickly became a churning chaos, fighting for dominance inside him—the pain, the beast clawing for escape so that it might feed, and the heavy, drunken sexual yearning throbbing through him like a primal drumbeat. He writhed on the stone table, pulling at his bonds, groaning and growling, on the verge of too many emotions, too many sensations at once.

“Jade?”

He heard his name being spoken from what felt like a huge distance as he continued to be torn apart from the inside out.

“Jade!”

Simon. Jade wanted to respond, tried, but couldn't...

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couldn't seem to manage any sounds but low snarling gasps that morphed into throaty animal moans.

Bloodlust raged in him, savage and fierce, twining together with a burning sexual craving. He wanted to attack. To feed. To fuck. All at once. *And then again and again.*

He yelped as more pain tore through him, but rather than mute or slow his antagonism, it only served to enrage him more. Pain and anger merged into one, rolling through him, a firestorm unleashed.

"Jade...Jade! What's happening to him?" he heard Simon say. "Damn it, what's happening?" His voice sank through Jade's frenzy because he'd never heard Simon sound so scared.

"It's the beast within him," a calm Fae voice responded. "The ritual has brought it to the surface, but we cannot let him shift. The ritual must be completed while he's in human form. So we're suppressing the shift, which is...*unpleasant* for him."

"Unpleasant, hell," Simon said. "It's killing him! It's the blood. He smells it. The blood and that damn drug."

"Yes, the blood," the Faerie echoed. "Blood drives everything. Gives us all power. Gives us life."

Fuck. Feed. Kill. Jade fought harder, yanking at the bonds, feeling the bite of pain in his wrists and ankles, but not caring.

"Help him!" Simon shouted. "Stop it. We'll find another way!"

"The ritual cannot be stopped until it's complete. It won't be long now."

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“Jesus...Jade! Hang on!”

Simon’s words now barely reached Jade, growing more and more distant, coming to him through a red haze of lust and agony. With the tiny, still rational part of his mind that functioned, Jade felt real fear that if the beast was fully released under these conditions, with him drugged and unable to rein it in or control it, he might not be able to come back from it. It might consume him and the last of his humanity with it.

And then, like a hand of darkness, things suddenly got worse.

The magic he kept suppressed even more deeply than the beast, that he hadn’t dared use for over a year, began flooding through him. No... *No!*

Oh, God, Simon...help me!

Freed from its prison and feeding off the drug that released all Jade’s natural human inhibitions and controls, the dark power thundered through him like a storm surge.

He heard words murmured in a tongue not his own. *Fae words*. The still building black magic opened all his senses wide, allowing him to see and feel the silver strings of Fae magic holding his beast at bay, keeping him bound to the table far more efficiently than the cuffs that encircled his wrists and ankles. It held him under its thrall, forcing him to its will.

No!

Never again would he be enslaved by another’s magic.

Never. Again.

Fury erupted from him, bolstering his strength and power.

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The dark magic fed from it and buzzed in his veins. With a snarl, he tore free of the leather cuffs as if they were paper, and in the same motion, severed the strands of Fae magic that dared to control him. When he sprang to his feet, the Fae around him fell back.

Good. They should fear him.

“Jade!”

The voice calling his name was only a nuisance now.

He felt the Fae reach out with their magic again. With a few muttered words that sounded like they came from the depths of hell—because, in truth, they did—he swiped away their attempts as easily as if batting away a pesky gnat, and sent them flying backward.

All except the black-haired one. His magic was stronger than the others. He stood his ground, looking irritatingly calm, murmuring words in the lilting Fae tongue.

Jade snarled and drew forth a ball of flame in his hand, letting it build and grow bigger and bigger.

“No, Jade...no. No!”

He was going to have to take care of that irritating voice when he’d finished with the Fae. He threw the fireball, aiming true at the dark-haired being.

But before it could hit, the Fae man raised a hand and the fireball stopped in midair, turned into ice crystals and scattered.

Jade suddenly found himself flying through the air. He hit one of the stone columns hard, then slid to the floor. In a distant part of his mind, he knew there was pain, but the magic

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kept him from feeling it. He was back on his feet in a split second, hands raised out at his sides, letting the dark power swirl and build until it churned in a frenzy, like a black funnel cloud. His hair fluttered around him, slapping his face; his body hummed with the strength of the unholy energy.

And then he released it.

The ground shook, and with a deafening roar, the towering glass walls at either end of the hall shattered.

The Fae covered their heads and slipped from the cavern as glass rained down on them. The human had gotten free from his bindings and ducked beneath one of the stone tables for protection. Not a single shard of glass came near Jade...the magic formed a spherical shield around him, invisible, but pulsing with life, leaving him standing in a clear circle twelve feet in diameter at the center of the mayhem

But in the next instant, his shield fell and an invisible grip tightened around his throat, lifting him up... up, until he dangled far from the ground.

The dark-haired Fae stood only feet away, still as sleek and perfectly groomed as ever, a hand raised, his amethyst eyes glistening.

Choking and struggling as his air was cut off, Jade's head began to throb. He tried to control his magic, bring it forth to set himself free, but whatever the Fae had done to him had muted its effectiveness. He couldn't marshal it. Each time he tried, it slipped through his fingers like oil.

"Stop it!" the human shouted at the Fae man. "You're killing him!"

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Jade gave up on the slithering and unmanageable magic and instead turned to the only defense he had left. He used his remaining oxygen and strength to shift into the beast. Bones morphing and popping, muscle shifting and burning, and fur covering his body, he let the wolf take him.

But still the Fae didn't release him, and even the normally enhanced strength of his preternatural form could do little with no oxygen to fill his lungs. His throat hurt. Black dots formed behind his eyes.

"Let him go, damn it! Don't kill him! Don't you dare kill him! Let me get to him."

The pressure around his neck was suddenly gone...and Jade fell several feet to the floor with a jarring thud. This time he had no energy left to blunt the impact and he yelped in pain.

He lay on his side on the cold stone, gasping in precious air.

Strong arms curved around him, pulling him up and close, and holding him tightly from behind. Still weak from lack of air for so long, he snapped and snarled, struggling to free himself, but with little effect. The arms were bands of steel.

"Jade, it's okay. It's okay."

That voice... The rational part of Jade's mind crawled through the dark murk and fought to function again.

"It's okay. I'm here. Come back to me. Please...come back to me." Hands rubbed through Jade's fur, kneading the back of his neck, his shoulders. Familiar hands.

Jade stilled.

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Human memories and emotions began to trickle back into him.

Simon.

Simon, whom he loved. Simon would be strong enough to hold him back, to help him fight the beast and the magic. Strong enough to keep him from hurting anyone.

Something that had been wound excruciatingly tight inside Jade broke free. He struggled and gasped, trying to concentrate, trying to regain control...and bit by bit he felt the magic slither back into its deep, dark prison where he slammed the door shut on it and locked it in.

And then, with another struggle, he slowly regained the upper hand with the wolf as well. With a whimper, he welcomed the dull aching pain of shifting back to human form.

The beast still fought inside him, angry and eager to feed, incited and aroused by the bloodscent and the Fae drugs clinging in the air, but at least in human form he had a better prayer of reining himself in.

When the shift was complete, he sagged against Simon.

Being human again, however, brought back a resurgence of other painful problems. Even with the magic locked away, between the wolf still fighting for freedom and the damned lust still pounding through his veins, he hoped the hell he could stay in control.

He pried open his eyes and saw the destruction. Shattered glass everywhere, the Fae gone, even the dark-haired powerful Faerie had taken his leave, though Jade still felt him nearby

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somewhere...out of sight, but close enough to finish him off if Jade lost the battle over the beast and the magic.

Oh, shit. What had he done?

But nothing affected him as deeply as when he sat up, slowly turned to look at Simon, and saw the caution and the hundred messy, condemning questions churning in Simon's blue eyes.

"Jade..." Even Simon's voice sounded damning, though Jade wasn't sure if it really was or he was just hearing what he felt he deserved. Simon gaze continued to search deep. Too deep. Jade winced and turned his face away.

But Simon grasped his chin and turned it back. "Are you with me?"

Jade closed his eyes and nodded, still fighting an internal battle but trying not to let Simon see it. He didn't want to make things worse than they already were.

"You okay?"

Jade continued dragging air into his lungs. "Yes. No," he croaked, his throat so dry and bruised it was hard to force out words. "I didn't want..."

"Didn't want?"

"Didn't want you... to find out... like this. What you... just saw."

"Truthfully, I'm not sure what the hell I just saw. Jaden—"

"Questions...I know you have them...but..." A low, rumbling half snarl/half groan tore free from his throat and he doubled over, still fighting the primal urges within him.

"Jesus, are you all right?" Simon asked again.

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Simon's smell swirled around him...hot, musky desire, with a lingering scent of anger, but also a hint of...fear. Jade's chest tightened with sorrow. Simon was afraid of him.

Maybe not of you, maybe for you.

Either way, the beast in Jade picked up on the fear and found that particular aroma powerfully intoxicating. It wanted to lunge at Simon and devour him, if not his flesh, in a variety of primitive sexual ways. Jade's cock leapt, and his balls tightened and throbbed.

"No," he growled. "I'm not all right. I'm still... Fuck! I need..." He stood and paced away several steps, needing to put some distance between them, from Simon's alluring scent and the effect it was having on him.

"Need what?" He heard Simon rise behind him.

"Stay back!" Jade growled again, this one sharper than the last.

"Jade? Tell me what you need."

"You, damn it! You." He glanced over his shoulder at Simon, torn with desperation. "But...I don't...want...to hurt you," he said through gritted teeth.

Simon's eyes grew dark, like the midnight sea. The faint scent of fear still clung to him, but it was suddenly overpowered by raw, hungry lust oozing from his pores and dripping like glistening pearls from his erect cock. "Do what you need to. You won't hurt me."

"No. You don't know what..." Jade grimaced as another round of feral heat tore through him, causing him to shudder. "Don't know what I might do. Can't trust me right now."

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Simon stepped closer, invading Jade's space. "Do it."

Jade shook his head and backed away. "Shouldn't. Not when I'm...like...this."

But Simon closed the distance between them until Jade was backed up to the stone column the Fae had thrown him against earlier. Simon dragged a thumb over Jade's lower lip, then down and around one of Jade's hard, aching nipples, causing Jade to hiss with painful pleasure.

Simon's voice, when he spoke, was like rich, potent whiskey. "Do your worst. I can take it."

Oh, God.

He tried one last time to protest. "Simon..."

But Simon leaned forward and crushed his mouth to Jade's, possessive, yet raw with emotion as well.

The last of Jade's reluctance fled. He dug his fingers into Simon's broad shoulders, reversed their positions, slamming Simon back against the column, and gave himself up to the hunger.

CHAPTER 4

Hot, powerful need such as he'd never known before surged through Simon, dragging him into the pounding surf, pushing him under until he couldn't breathe, freeing him at the last second, letting him rise to the surface of the boiling sea just long enough to drag in air, then pushing him under again.

Jade was relentless, ravaging Simon's mouth with kisses that took what they wanted, thrusting, probing, invasive in a way that might have cowed a weaker man, but only fed the storm in Simon. The cold stone of the column bit into his bare backside, but the furnace that was Jade's body, pressing against his front, more than compensated. It was fire and ice, coalescing in the surging tide of desire at Simon's core.

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He couldn't deny he was confused, hurt, angry, and flat-out worried about Jade after what he'd just seen and experienced. He wanted to sort it out. Wanted to question. Wanted answers, damn it. But this...*thing* between them consumed him. For hours he'd been aroused to the breaking point—he'd been taunted, teased, touched—and now he'd broken. There wasn't a damn thing he could do to stop what was happening. He didn't *want* to stop it. All he wanted right now was Jade.

Jade tore his mouth free and licked down Simon's neck to the hollow where it joined with his shoulder, his tongue hot and rough. When he bit into the muscle, Simon groaned at the unexpected sharp pain and his fingers dug into his lover's thick, dark hair. At the same time, his cock jerked and he ground his groin hard against the younger man's. Jade sucked at, then licked over the wound, and with each pass of his tongue, Simon thrust again, savoring Jade's hot flesh against his own and the buzz of pleasure-pain throbbing in his shoulder.

Jade lifted his head and his hot, feral gaze locked with Simon's, as if daring him to protest.

Simon couldn't. Wouldn't. It was obvious Jade was barely hanging on by a thread—the wolf hovered just beneath the surface—but Simon couldn't have stopped things now even if he'd tried. Jade's demeanor stirred up something equally fierce in Simon. Power and control—those were things, in the dark of the night, when he lay in his bed, that haunted Simon. Over the past ten years, since he'd awakened with no

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memories of the past, he'd often been torn by vague sensations that once upon a time those very things had been his, perhaps not in a good way. In fact, based on the intangible gut feel he experienced, he was afraid it was a power he'd abused in the past. Yet, no matter how much he fought to stay on the side of right, to hunt the demons and keep the humans of Gallasfor safe, to give and protect and make amends, and despite the guilt that tormented him daily...deep down inside, he secretly still craved that power.

Now, he sensed the same in Jade. Sensed it, and understood it on the most primitive level. Simon hunted to keep his own inner demons in line. For Jade, in order to control the beast and whatever else it had been that had taken him over earlier, turning his eyes from silver to a shimmering black and filling him with power and darkness, he needed to channel those urges in another direction. Until he did, Simon suspected Jade would be unable to regain complete control of himself.

So if Jade needed him here and now, Simon would give him anything he wanted.

Jade's head dipped and this time he licked over one of Simon's tits, fluttering his tongue lightly against it, then scraping it hard, light, hard, alternating until Simon felt each lick all the way to the base of his scrotum, as if it were connected by a vibrating thread...but never more so than when Jade suddenly drew the swollen nub into his mouth and sucked hard.

"Christ!" Simon gasped, tangling handfuls of Jade's hair

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between his fingers, not holding him back, not pressing him closer, not even guiding him...just holding on as the suction intensified.

One of Jade's hands slid down between them to capture Simon's cock, massaging it in the same firm rhythm as he sucked on his nipple. Then his other hand was there as well, rolling Simon's balls between his fingers for several seconds, before curling around the base of his sac and squeezing...squeezing...squeezing.

Simon's head tilted back. He gasped for air. One hand stayed on Jade's head. The other slid over Jade's back, fingers clawing, as the need to come tore through him. But Jade's tight grip around his balls prevented it. Simon bucked and jerked against Jade, swearing and groaning, seeking relief his lover wouldn't allow. The suction on his tit grew more intense, as did the vise on his testicles, leaving him panting, raw, desperate.

"God..." he whimpered.

The pressure increased.

"Please...God, please!" He didn't know if he was begging for it to stop or begging for more. Maybe both.

When Jade released his nipple with a final tug, Simon's head spun. Jade didn't give him a chance to recover, though, immediately grasping Simon's neck and pulling him into another breath-stealing, hard kiss. The sexy stubble on Jade's chin grated against the skin of Simon's face, turning him on even more.

Then Jade let go of Simon's balls, stepped back, and with

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his hands on Simon's shoulders, pushed Simon down to kneel in front of him.

Simon was immediately struck that this was exactly the position he'd envisioned earlier...except with Jade kneeling nude before him, not the other way around. But there was nothing submissive in Jade right now. *Nothing*. He looked down at Simon with glittering, hungry eyes, and as one of his hands moved to Simon's head, the other grasped his own stiff cock and aimed it at Simon's mouth.

"Get me ready," he growled.

Knee-jerk desire shot through Simon at the words, at the position he was in, at the command in Jade's voice, and at the knowledge of what Jade intended. Deep inside, however, some small bit of him, that same vague sensation that taunted him at odd moments telling him *he* should be the one to have the power, recoiled at being expected to submit this way. But as quickly as it fluttered through his thoughts, it was gone once again, leaving in its place the throbbing urge to do anything Jade wanted.

"Do it!" Jade dragged the head of his cock across Simon's lips, leaving a smear of salty dampness in its wake.

Simon licked his lips, savoring the flavor, all while looking up at Jade, whose eyes had gone hazy with desire.

Jade took another swipe, and this time, Simon opened his mouth, silently begging Jade to drag the tip across his tongue. When he did, Simon licked out, capturing the remaining droplets of pre-cum that had beaded and trickled over the broad head.

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Jade sucked in a quick, harsh breath, then pulled back and stroked himself several times, just out of Simon's reach, until new pearls of fluid glistened in the golden firelight. Simon watched, his mouth watering, breathing hard. He wasn't sure which was more mesmerizing—Jade's fingers working over his stiff cock with such sensual dexterity, or the gleaming and plentiful evidence of his desire. Simon wanted it. All of it this time.

When Jade leaned near again to give Simon a taste, Simon was ready. This time he curled his fingers around Jade's hips, dug them into his ass, and pulled him closer. He opened his mouth and captured the entire head, sucking it in and closing his lips around it.

Jade groaned, letting him have his way.

Simon licked and suckled, teasing his mouth up and down the shaft, exploring the satin texture, the ribbed veins, and the way the bulbous crown flared at the end.

But it quickly became clear Jade wanted more and would have it. He gripped Simon's head in both hands. "Take it all," he ordered.

He thrust in hard and deep, pushing into Simon's throat without giving him a chance to protest or prepare. Simon dug his fingers deeper into Jade's ass and almost gagged. Even if he did, though, he knew Jade wasn't going to pull out. And a part of him welcomed it...the pleasure to be found just at the edge of pain. Jade was asserting his control, exuding an animalistic power that aroused Simon in ways he'd never expected. His heady, musky scent filled Simon's senses as full

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as his prick filled Simon's mouth and throat. He breathed through his nose and held Jade's length, not fighting it.

Slowly, Jade slid out, leaving just the tip of his cockhead against Simon's lips, allowing Simon a chance to swallow and ease his throat. But that was the last bit of quarter Jade gave. A second later, he pushed back in suddenly and without mercy, making Simon's eyes water and gouging a guttural moan out of him. Jade hissed when the vibration surrounded his cock, so when he pulled out and plunged back in again, Simon moaned once more.

Jade shuddered in appreciation. "Damn it...you have no idea...what you're doing to me, Simon." Jade began to fuck his mouth with abandon, his palms pressing against Simon's head as he held him in place and plunged deep again and again.

Simon's throat ached, so did his knees from the unforgiving stone floor, and his own hard dick bobbed untouched between his legs, each movement an agony of untapped potential. Yet, in spite of the discomfort, he found a shocking pleasure in giving up his own control and letting Jade use him as he liked.

Jade suddenly pulled Simon's head back and his cock slid free of Simon's mouth. He bent down and kissed Simon with the same driven intensity he'd been fucking his mouth moments before, thrusting his tongue as he had been his cock, stroking every crevice, biting his lower lip, and licking up his own pre-ejaculate that had trickled out of the corner of Simon's mouth.

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“Mmm...you taste good,” he whispered darkly. Then he pushed Simon to the floor. “Get on your hands and knees. Now.”

His heart pounding, a new heavy heat pooling in his groin, Simon did as he was told, wondering how in hell he'd allowed himself to become so utterly submissive so fast.

“Spread your legs,” Jade commanded, kneeling behind him.

Simon again responded automatically, easing his knees apart on the cold stone to give Jade easier access. He felt open and exposed in the cool air of the hall, but his body burned and his balls were tight and throbbing for release. He fucking hurt all over, wanted, *needed* to come, but knew without asking that Jade expected him to wait until Jade chose to do something about it himself, or gave Simon the okay to do so.

Again, the ease with which he'd slipped into the role of submissive startled Simon. Was this really him or a result of the Fae drugs still lingering in the air?

Does it matter? Either way, you're getting off on what he's doing to you.

He was. Damn...he really was.

He wasn't proud of it, but in his lonely desolation over the years Simon had had his fair share of back-room fucks and liaisons. The kind that had allowed him to get his physical needs met without forging any bonds or even having to exchange names. Blow jobs and hand jobs had worked both ways, but when it came to penetration, he had always, *always* been the one doing the fucking. Even with Jade, up to this

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point, that had been the case. He'd never allowed himself to be taken like this, had never trusted enough to give anyone this kind of power over him...and yet here he was, ass in the air, trembling in anticipation for what he knew was about to happen.

Jade didn't disappoint him, nor did he bother with pleasantries or stretching. Simon's only warning was Jade rubbing the wet head of his cock against Simon's pucker. Then, with an arm around Simon's waist, he pushed relentlessly past the tight, protesting rings of muscle and slid home.

He'd known what was coming, but Simon cried out, unable to stop himself. Though he'd gotten Jade's cock wet, it was far from being a perfect lubricant. He shook from the intensity of it all, the burning in his ass, the fullness that made him feel like he would burst. Jade's length, which was substantial, throbbed inside him, and Simon couldn't stop his muscles from clamping down on the invading rod of flesh. He felt lightheaded, plundered, hot and cold at the same time as his body tried to adjust.

Jade leaned down over him, his hard chest pressing to Simon's back, and shifted deeper.

Simon's muscles clenched even tighter around Jade's cock, denying it, yet relishing it. His body began to tremble, and the throaty moan that escaped Simon was filled with both ecstasy and agony.

"God," Jade groaned. "You're so fucking tight. I've never...unnh! Never been squeezed...like this. It's like you've

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never been fucked before.”

“I haven’t,” Simon admitted, breath ragged as Jade shifted inside him, sending dull throbs of sensation through Simon’s ass.

Jade froze. “You’ve never...?”

“No.”

“*Shit!*” The word was an explosion that juddered through their joined bodies. “Why didn’t you tell me?” Jade voice was gritty, accusing, and his arm tightened around Simon. “Jesus, Simon! I shouldn’t have...it shouldn’t have happened like this.”

“Yes...it should have. Exactly like this. Don’t you dare stop.” Simon’s entire body shook, and in spite of the aching burn that thrummed through him, his arousal began to spike again.

“You have no idea how close I am to the edge right now. Don’t say things like that unless you mean it,” Jade said fiercely. “Because once I start here, I’m not going to be able to stop.” The low animal-like rumble in his voice attested to it.

Simon turned his head and looked into his lover’s tortured face. “I do mean it. I want this. Want you. Do it.”

“You should have told me.”

“Do it!” Simon demanded. He thrust his ass back against Jade’s groin, needing the man to move. “God damn it, just do it!”

Jade’s eyes flashed with anger. He snarled and bit Simon’s shoulder again, harder than before, punishing him for topping from the bottom. The sting caused Simon to hiss in pain and

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arch his back against Jade. Jade's earlier warning that Simon didn't know what Jade might be capable of in this state came back to haunt him. Yet when Simon thought of the alternative, he knew he wouldn't change a thing.

Jade's lean, powerful body rippled with suddenly released control. He pulled out almost to the tip, then ploughed back into Simon, deeper than ever before, drawing a jolting cry from him. But the cry didn't stop Jade. Didn't even phase him. He thrust again. And again, over and over, building a fierce, unrelenting rhythm, driving into Simon as if the hounds of hell were at his heels and his only escape was to burrow as deeply as possible in Simon's clenching ass.

For Simon, the burn morphed into pleasure of the most acute kind, blurring together until the pain, the heat, the fullness, and the need sparked a flame that seared through him from the inside out. Jade rode him hard, without mercy, only pausing once, to pull out, wet his dick again, and then he was back. Their sweat-slicked bodies slapped together, their cries and grunts and moans merged and echoed around them, the scent of musk and desire hung heavy in the air, swirling with the last sweet dregs of the Fae drugs.

"Oh, God...this is...it's..." Simon struggled with the words, not sure what he was trying to say, what he wanted to convey.

Jade suddenly pulled out of him completely, leaving Simon in mid-cry, empty and hollow. "No!" he protested, afraid Jade had stopped because of what he'd said.

Without responding, Jade dragged Simon to his feet, and

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pushed him toward the closest stone table. Simon's feet crunched over the broken glass, but he felt no pain, only a desperate urgency to be filled again and have Jade's body on his.

When they reached the table, Jade swept a hand through the air, the air shimmered for a moment, then all the glass shards on the table and around it scattered across the room, clearing the area for them.

Startled, Simon looked at Jade and saw him grimace, shake his head, and clench his fists at his sides as if struggling with something. Simon reached for him, concerned the black-eyed, glass shattering, dark Jade was returning.

But just as quickly as it had come, it passed, and once again Jade's eyes—still silver, thank God—glazed with wolfen heat. He pushed Simon onto his back on the now cleared table, with his legs dangling over the edge.

Simon stared up him, and the breath left his lungs. The handsome, sensitive, quiet youth he'd once known had become a powerful, sensual, driven man. He exuded a carnal sexuality that thrummed along Simon's nerve endings even without the Fae drugs, and was so damned beautiful in an edgy, bad boy "I'll do what I want and fuck you" way it made Simon's chest ache.

This was the first time since the Fae had left that Simon had had a close-up, uninterrupted view of Jade without distraction. As his gaze soaked up the sight, he discovered the marks the Fae had carved onto Jade's chest and abdomen were no longer bleeding. They hadn't even scabbed over. Instead,

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where the cuts had been, now beautiful, swirling, silver symbols covered the skin, like tattoos, starting around his dark copper nipples, scrolling down each side of his abdomen, and rejoining in an embellished star below his navel and just above the dark curls surrounding his cock.

Simon reached out and smoothed his fingertips over the marks, then looked down at himself to discover the same ones on him.

But Jade was clearly not interested in the symbols right now. His flaring nostrils and lust-heavy eyes quickly rekindled Simon's own desire.

Jade stepped between Simon's legs, lifted them, and pushed them back against his chest, exposing Simon's quivering hole once again. This time it seemed much more intimate to Simon, with Jade looking down at him, able to see his every expression, see him exposed in such a vulnerable way.

"Why did we move?" Simon asked.

"So I can watch you as I fuck you."

Simon's heart stuttered and his groin tightened.

With a scorching look and the slant of one dark, arched eyebrow, Jade bent down and licked over Simon's anus. The action drew a new round of soul-deep shudders from Simon's stretched-taut body. He seemed to have no control whatsoever over his body's reactions. The only person able to command it was Jade. Which he did with masterful aplomb. Jade's tongue plunged in and out of his hole, then slowly scorched a path up the skin between his opening and scrotum, licked over his

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balls, and up to the tip of Simon's leaking cock.

"Jade..." Simon whispered, closing his eyes, then letting them flutter open again because he couldn't seem to tear his gaze away from the man who also couldn't seem to stop watching him.

Jade lowered his head and again painted a wet path over, around, and into Simon's hole until Simon was slick and dripping. Simon recognized what he was doing. Jade wasn't just rimming him for stimulation. In spite of the bestial lust driving him right now, he was holding it at bay long enough to lubricate Simon before he entered him this time.

The gesture meant more to Simon than Jade could know. He rested a hand on his lover's head between his legs, and when Jade looked up at him again, Simon's chest squeezed. "Love you," he whispered.

Jade responded by standing, leaning over Simon, and kissing him deeply. In the midst of the kiss, almost in harmony with it, Simon felt the broad cockhead pressing at his now-slippery opening. Though it still burned when he entered, Jade's length thrust in to the root with much more ease this time. With each stroke of Jade's tongue against Simon's, Jade's cock stroked in and out of his ass. Kiss and stroke. Kiss and stroke. Simon's prick, captured between their hard, sweaty stomachs, found a refuge of sensation as the skin tugged back and forth.

Once again, however, the passion built until it was a tangible ball of heat and energy surrounding them, pushing them on, urging them to go deeper, move faster, ride harder.

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Jade pulled his lips free of Simon's and they both gasped for air as if they hadn't realized until that moment they couldn't breathe. Then he stood, slid his hands under Simon's ass, pulled him closer to the edge of the table, and with renewed frenzy began to drive into him with quick, hard motions that Simon felt all the way to his spine.

"Yes, yes," Simon panted. He reached for and grasped Jade's forearms, locking his fingers around them to hang on, never taking his eyes off Jade's taut, beautiful face.

Jade's eyes closed, opened, then burned into Simon like liquid silver when their gazes locked. His full lips parted as ragged breaths slid past them. His hair, strands of ebony silk, fell over one eye, and bounced with each thrust he made into Simon's body.

Jade moved faster. The muscles along his neck tightened. His shoulders rippled. His thrusts became more intense, delving deeper, harder...

Simon's own body responded, his balls tightening, knowing instinctively his lover was closing in on what they both sought.

And then Jade threw his head back, closed his eyes, and let out a growl so primal, so uninhibited, it sent shivers racing over Simon's skin. Jade's release exploded inside Simon, hot and forceful. The sensation nearly brought on his own climax, even though neither he nor Jade were even touching his dick.

As quickly as he had the thought, Jade was easing out of him and then holding his still erupting prick over Simon's groin, masturbating his seed onto Simon's turgid cock.

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Simon groaned at the feel of the sticky heat coating it and his stomach and groin, then again when Jade wrapped his hand around both Simon's fleshy shaft and his own, and began stroking them together. The slippery cum that still leaked from Jade, combined with his hand job brought Simon to climax almost instantly. He bucked against his lover and came in wave after wave, until finally, Jade had milked them both dry.

Boneless, exhausted, aching in places he'd never known possible, Simon moaned and closed his eyes.

But only a few seconds later, Jade's gentle hand brushing Simon's hair back off his face enticed them open again. Their gazes met and held, and a lifetime's worth of emotion passed between them.

"You okay?" Jade asked softly in his normal voice, deep and husky, albeit sounding as exhausted as Simon felt. His eyes were clear now, no longer haunted by the beast, but troubled in a way Simon had never seen them before.

"Yeah, fine." Simon cupped his stubbled cheek, loving the man so damned much it hurt. "You?"

Jade nodded.

Simon slid more fully onto the table, and Jade joined him, collapsing half on top of Simon with a soft groan, his head resting on Simon's chest.

"We need to get out of here. But I suddenly hurt like hell all over and I'm so...God, I'm so tired." Jade's eyes fluttered closed.

Worried, Simon stroked a hand over Jade's hair. "Are you sure you're okay?"

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“Think so. It’s...the magic.” Jade’s eyes opened and he gazed at Simon, guilt and sorrow swimming in their depths. “It drains me. And then fighting the urge to shift on top of it, plus being slammed against a stone pillar and dropped to the ground a couple of times probably didn’t help either.” He winced. “I’m sorry, Simon. For all of this. I should have told you...everything... sooner.” The last words were barely a sigh and Jade’s eyelids slid closed again as if he no longer could fight the pull of sleep.

Simon’s chest heaved with emotion. *Yes, you should have*, he wanted to say. *And I still know nothing, damn it*. But he didn’t speak any of it aloud. Couldn’t. Worry for Jade drowned out everything else. Out loud, he said, “Sleep. We’ll leave after you’ve rested.”

Then a thought occurred to him, making him a little sick to his stomach when he realized it meant they might not be going anywhere anytime soon. “Oh, shit. Don’t we have to pay some kind of teind to them? Before we can go?”

“We just did,” Jade murmured without opening his eyes.

“What?”

“Listen.”

Simon’s hearing wasn’t quite as sensitive as Jade’s, but when he concentrated, he heard soft sighs, whispered words, and cries of what could only be pleasure. Good God...were the Fae...?

And then it clicked. The drug the Fae had flooded them with that had made them both aroused beyond measure, the nudity, the stroking hands all over his body as the Fae had

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strapped him to the table. “They...”

“Feed on sexual energy,” Jade said, eyelids fluttering open briefly. “I suspect we just gave them one hell of a show and enough energy to keep them going for a good long time.”

Simon wasn’t sure whether the thought of the Fae watching or hearing them, or “feeding” off his and Jade’s lovemaking pissed him off or turned him on all over again. “So we’re paid up then?” he asked.

A pause followed, then Jade finally murmured, “You are.”

A tight knot formed in Simon’s gut as he remembered the exchange between Jade and the Fae queen. “Jade—”

“What’s done is done, Simon. Don’t belabor it.”

Simon swallowed hard. He wanted to argue, to rant and rail and demand... What? A refund? With a sick sense of acceptance he knew that would never happen.

“It’ll be okay,” Jade said, his words slurring together again and his eyes closing.

Simon seriously doubted that, but he opted once more to keep his silence. There was no point arguing with Jade about it again. At least until he got Jade to tell him just what the hell he’d promised the Fae woman.

Instead, he curved his arms protectively around the younger man and resettled him more comfortably, with Jade’s warm, heavy weight more evenly distributed over him, cushioning Jade from the cold, hard table.

Jade found one of Simon’s hands with his own and wound his fingers through Simon’s. “I love you, too, you know,” he whispered just before his body relaxed and he finally slid into

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sleep.

Simon's eyes burned with emotion. What the hell was he going to do? He couldn't lose Jade again.

"It is good that you learn from your mistakes," a silken female voice said to his left.

Startled because he hadn't heard her approach, Simon turned his head to see the Faerie queen for the first time. She wasn't alone. The dark-haired purple-eyed man was with her.

The man shook free a silver cloth he held and spread it over Simon and the still-sleeping Jade. "Most non-Fae find it too chilly here, especially after the heat of lust has worn off."

"Thank you," Simon murmured, not fully trusting the man who'd almost killed Jade earlier, but grateful for the blanket for Jade's sake. Though, so far, the heat from Jade's body still seeped into Simon like an oven.

The queen lifted her hands, palms up, closed her eyes, and, as Simon watched in, he had to admit, open awe, all the broken glass spread hither and yon across the great hall lifted into the air and flew back into place with a gentle tinkling sound, remaking the enormous frosted panels that had lined the hall when Simon had first entered it.

Then, as if she'd done nothing more strenuous or exciting than tying a shoelace, she opened her amber eyes—eyes the exact color of the cool fire that burned at the center of the room—and rested a hand on the Fae man's forearm. He, in turn, placed a hand on the small of her back.

So they were a couple. Which made the dark-haired man, what? The Faerie king? The queen's consort? Did he have a

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name?

“Still impertinent, I see” the woman said, staring at Simon, her beautiful face cool and impassive. “You may think of him as my consort if you must have some way to define him,” she said, answering the question he’d never spoken aloud, “but you will not be given his name or anyone else’s in our realm. One’s true name is one’s real power, an’kshalon. Remember that. It’s never wise to offer it to anyone whom you do not trust implicitly, and I assure you, there are very few beings who will ever earn that trust.”

“Sounds pretty cynical.”

“Cynical to you perhaps in this time, place, and form, but merely a truth gleaned over millennia to me. However, we did not come to you now to address names or cynicism.”

Simon instinctively wrapped his arms more tightly around Jade. If she’d come for Jade, he wasn’t letting him go without a hell of a fight.

The queen’s delicate eyebrow rose again, this time condescendingly. “Now is not the time for your wolf to meet his obligation to me, so do not be so pathetically obvious in your defense. And rest assured that when the time arrives, he *will* come to me, with or without your approval, and he’ll come of his own free will.”

“You sound so certain. How do you know he won’t change his mind?”

“Because if he does, you will die in his place,” she said matter-of-factly. “He knows this, and therefore will fulfill his obligation.”

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Simon's veins froze at her words. *Oh, Jade. What have you done?*

"The more pressing matter at hand with which you should be concerning yourself is your lover's display here this day," the Fae man said. "I trust you now understand *why* he has penances to pay?"

"No, I don't." Simon wanted to keep his voice down so he didn't wake Jade, but couldn't stop the flash of frustration. "I don't even know what the hell happened to him today, or why he did what he did. And you"—he glared at the man—"tried to kill him."

The man, unlike the queen, seemed unafraid to offer a smile. "Had I wanted to end his life, I would have," he said calmly. "But that was not my destiny, nor his. I merely stepped in to keep him safe from himself."

The queen cut off Simon's argument before he ever opened his mouth, as if she saw it coming even before he did.

"It's not our place or our desire to interfere in the deeds of man," she said. "Your lover came to us seeking your protection, and that is what we have given. By rights, we could and should send you away now. But with you I will share this: the decisions your lover made to become what he is today were a result of you forsaking him. He was given to you, an'kshalon, long years ago, to keep safe, to guide, and protect. You alone could have prevented the afflictions that have assailed him. Instead, you passed him off to others and shirked your duty. In short, you failed."

Simon grimaced at the callous words attributed to him

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more than once down here—you *failed*.

“Now he is back in your life and once again, sooner than you might expect, you will have a choice to make. What you do with that choice will affect not only you and your lover, but the fate of your world as well.”

A shiver of unease spread through Simon.

Her amber eyes burned into him with intensity. “Listen carefully and heed my words. Life or death? The power runs through your veins. The wolf could be your greatest asset, your most loyal and trusted advisor and soldier. Or, he could be your downfall and the one whose very hand takes your life.”

Simon stared at her, his heart thudding so hard the pressure made him sick. “What? No. No, you can’t know that.”

“Only you can choose which fate will be yours and your wolf mate’s. Choose wisely, Simon Saint-Saëns. For if you fail again, it could bring about the end of all you know.”

“You talk in riddles. How am I supposed to—”

“Sleep now,” the Fae man said, holding a hand over Simon’s chest.

Simon immediately felt warmth and a strange peace settle over him. More magic, he thought. More fucking sorcery. But he couldn’t find the motivation to do anything about it. Sleep suddenly sounded good. Better than good.

It was the last thing Simon remembered before the comforting darkness closed around him.

CHAPTER 5

It was the cold that woke Jade. Bone-deep cold.

Without opening his eyes, and still hovering at the edge of slumber, he tugged the blanket...no, it was too rough and oddly shaped for a blanket...the *whatever* it was up higher around his neck. It didn't help, though. The cold seemed to come from within him. Jade stretched out a hand, seeking warmth elsewhere.

He found none. Nor any comfort. The sharp edge of something dug into his hip, and the surface on which he lay was hard and gritty.

Shivering, sore, and uncomfortable as hell, the last vestiges of sleep fled and he finally pried open his eyes. But he lay

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unmoving. Far too often in his life he'd awakened in unfamiliar settings, and caution had become second nature to him. He'd learned to process first, get a sense of his surroundings, then react. It had sometimes meant the difference between staying alive or ending up dead.

Here and now, darkness enveloped him, but it wasn't total. A dim red light infiltrated the murk, forming odd stripes on the ceiling and allowing him to make out a peeling wall with brick showing through. Against the wall sat a battered filing cabinet covered with grimy bottles and stacks of yellowed paper, a sagging metal shelf with more of the same, and...what the hell was that on the wall over the shelf? He squinted. A faded, torn, and badly outdated poster of a skinny, big-chested blonde girl in skimpy clothes.

He found that he lay on a narrow, dirty desk that was too short for his frame by several inches, causing his bare feet to hang off the end. His feet weren't the only thing bare. Beneath the "blanket," which was really a long coat draped over him, he was bare-assed naked. Where the hell were his clothes?

The scent of dust, mold, and stale, faintly nauseating human body odor assailed Jade's sensitive nostrils, as if personal hygiene were anathema to the person who used to inhabited the place and, over time, the stench had seeped into the furniture, the floor, and the walls. Overpowering those, however, was a newer more potent scent—spicy, warm and masculine. It radiated from the coat covering Jade, filled the air in the small space, and caused his heart to thrum in recognition.

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Simon.

His lover was nearby.

Deeming it safe to move, still struggling against the cold, Jade clutched the coat more tightly to him and rolled onto his back, seeking the man whose presence had crept into all aspects of his life.

Simon stood, his back half-turned to Jade, staring out a small window with sagging blinds. Night had fallen, but a red neon light outside somewhere crept through the slats, casting Simon's tall, broad-shouldered body in ruby glow.

He didn't seem to be aware Jade was awake, so Jade took advantage of the moment to study him.

Simon gave off the aura of resolute strength, stalwart protector, the epitome of the Saint the people of the sprawling megalopolis of Gallasfor City whispered about, the man who alone and unfailingly fought the demons that came through the rifts from Vertigo. But Jade could also see the heavy weight of the burdens Simon carried. And something else, something...distant about him tonight. His face, in profile, seemed set in stone, immoveable, which caused something in Jade's stomach to tighten into a dull knot.

Unlike Jade, Simon was dressed in boots, jeans and a white button-up shirt that hung loose and untucked from his pants—the clothes he'd worn when they'd entered the Fae realm. Simon's sword hung in its scabbard at his side. The Fae had obviously returned it.

Jade grimaced at the memories of what had happened in the Fae underworld. He pulled a hand out from beneath

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Simon's coat and dragged it over his eyes, pressing into them with his thumb and middle fingers as if he could push out the tainted images.

He'd gone to the Fae knowing there could be risks, knowing the price the Faerie queen would likely ask of him, but he'd been completely unprepared for all hell to break loose. The things he'd done...the hated and heinous magic he'd allowed to escape, the destruction, the bloodlust. And how he'd treated Simon...using him, abusing him, fucking him like a beast in rut. That, following on the heels of Simon finding out about Jade's darkest secret in a way Jade would never, ever have wanted. *Not like that. With me out of control.* A dull ache formed in his head, and he pressed harder with his fingers. *He wasn't supposed to find out like that. What can he possibly think now?*

But Jade already knew. He'd seen the distrust, the condemnation, and all the questions in Simon's eyes.

He let out a broken sigh...which gave him away.

Simon shifted and turned to face him. "You're awake." His voice was low, gritty, distant to match his posture, yet so beloved it made Jade's heart ache.

"Yeah," he croaked, discovering his throat was still sore from the dark-haired Fae choking him. Jade rubbed a hand over it, feeling the heat and swollen skin where it was bruised. Then he forced himself to sit up, although his body protested every movement, causing him to hiss and grimace.

"How are you doing?" Simon asked.

Shitty. He was pretty sure there wasn't a bone, muscle, or

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inch of skin on his body that didn't ache or feel like it had been squeezed through a wringer. And in spite of the fact his preternatural senses told him the temperature tonight hovered around sixty degrees, he still couldn't shake the unnatural cold that cut through him, like someone had walked over—or straight through—his grave.

"I feel like I've been drop-kicked off a tall building," he answered honestly. "But I'll live. Are *you* okay?" He thought of the damage he'd done to Simon in his frenzy. My God, he'd bitten—*bitten!*—him twice, shoved him around, forced him to kneel for God knew how long on the stone floor, not to mention fucked him long and hard without proper lube and without taking the time to stretch and prepare him when Simon had never...

God, how could I have been such a stupid prick? I never, ever should have touched him when I was in that state.

"I'm fine. I heal fast, remember?" Simon didn't sound angry or accusatory, but Jade noticed he remained by the window on the other side of the room and didn't act like he wanted to approach.

"I'm glad. I..." Jade bit off what he was about to say, not sure this was the time or place for apologies and explanations. He didn't even know where they were and, truthfully, wasn't sure from Simon's body language that Simon wanted to hear anything he had to say right now. The man wouldn't even come near him and could barely look at him.

Feeling exposed and at a disadvantage, he searched for his own clothes, in hopes they were around somewhere, and spied

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them folded in a neat pile on a straight chair next to the desk. “What is this place?” he asked, pushing aside the coat and gingerly standing.

“Looks like an old bail bonds joint a few blocks from the South Street subway line. Not too far from where we went underground to find the Fae.” Simon turned back to the window as if he didn’t want to see Jade’s nudity or watch him dressing.

Jade swallowed hard and pulled on his jeans, trying to ignore the sharp twinges in his muscles, and even more so the ones in his heart.

“I’m not sure how long we were gone or even how long we’ve been back,” Simon continued. “We went down there in the morning and now it’s probably getting close to midnight, but we could have been sleeping right here for hours for all I know.”

“I hate to say it, but it might not even be the same day. Time can pass differently in other dimensions. We could have been gone a few hours a few days or even weeks.”

“That’s comforting,” Simon said drily.

“How did we get here?”

“Not a clue. One minute she and the man were talking to me, and then I woke up here a half-hour or so before you did.”

Jade had just pulled his T-shirt over his head. He paused in reaching for his shoes. “The Fae queen talked to you? You mean...after? I don’t remember that.”

“You were already asleep.”

“What did she say?”

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Simon's shoulders stiffened. Not enough anyone else might have noticed, but Jade wasn't anyone.

"She...told me the dark-haired Fae is her consort."

The scent of evasion curled around Simon. Jade frowned at his lover's back. "Anything else?"

"No, not really. Not that I recall."

The twinge in Jade's heart spread, creeping out into his whole chest. Simon was keeping something from him.

Simon turned, his face schooled into an unemotional mask. "Are you okay enough to travel? She obviously returned us near to where we went underground, but, unfortunately, it's smack in the middle of one of the worst demon playgrounds around. And it's nighttime."

He understood the point Simon was making. Jade had made sure they'd come here looking for the Fae in the light of day for safety reasons. He'd hoped they'd be able to get in and get out before night fell, or if they experienced a significant passage of time, that they'd return during daylight hours. The demons and creatures of Vertigo didn't do sunlight because their world was perpetually dark and the sun had adverse effects on their eyes and skin. They usually only hunted prey at night.

Though a half-breed like Jade was scorned by purebred Vertigoans, he could usually shift into wolf form and, if he stayed quiet and kept to himself, move through demon territory at night mostly unnoticed. Simon was another story. Aside from being clearly human with no way to disguise that fact, he also had a reputation with the beings of Vertigo. He'd

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killed too many of their kind for them not to know of him, and most would gladly like to be the one to bring him down. Jade knew Simon had hunted this area in the past, suspected, if it weren't for Jade, he'd have no qualms about doing so still. But things were different now.

With the wraith looking for Simon, and God knew how many demons it had working for it, things had become dicey. The Fae symbols tattooed into Jade and Simon's skin would make them invisible to any magics used to seek them out, and would also offer them some protection against magics used to harm them. But the symbols did nothing against old-fashioned brute demon force. In other words, as long as what hunted them wasn't magical, then they were fair game.

It might be better if they holed up here until morning. It was dangerous to linger, yes. On the other hand, at least here they had a chance of staying hidden. Crossing through demon territory at night when the demons were the strongest and would be out on the prowl was a risky proposition at the best of times. The likelihood of a fight was higher if they were on the move. And at this point, given his current physical state, Jade was afraid he'd be more liability than ally to Simon if they should face a fight. Even if he scrounged up the energy required to shift into the wolf, which was his stronger form, he didn't know what, if anything, he'd have left to defend either of them.

There's always the dark magic...it makes you strong.

No! God, no. That's what had gotten him into this pathetic state in the first place. He should never have allowed it to

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come out in the Fae world, should have fought it harder. When it emerged, it controlled him rather than the other way around, and that created consequences Jade didn't even want to think about. Right now he was damned grateful the only harm left to show from his fuck-up was his own weakened physical state and the bruises the dark-haired Fae had given him when he stopped him. Thank God the Fae had been able to stop him. Otherwise, Jade was afraid he might have killed everyone down there...including Simon.

"Jade?"

Jade swallowed past a hot, throbbing lump in his already aching throat, and looked up to find Simon's expectant gaze on him, reminding him he hadn't answered yet.

"We should maybe stay here and lay low until daylight," Jade mumbled. "It'd be safer." *And give me a few more hours to dredge up the energy to even make it out the door.*

"We could, but..." Simon scowled. "I'd rather us be gone. I feel like we're sitting ducks."

"But we have cover here and as long as we don't draw their notice..."

"No." Simon's voice was hard, determined. He'd clearly already made up his mind. "This is one of the absolute worst parts of the city. We need to put as much distance as possible between us and here." He gave Jade a pointed stare. "I think we've already gambled with our lives more than enough today, don't you?"

The dig cut deep. Jade tried to steel himself against the pain of it, but failed utterly.

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Too exhausted and heartsick to either argue or defend himself, he sighed and stabbed his arms into his leather jacket, giving in to Simon. “Fine. Let’s go then.”

Simon stepped closer to Jade and Jade’s breath caught. But Simon merely reached past him to pick up his duster coat from the desk. He avoided any contact with Jade—didn’t even look at him as he put on his coat.

He was close enough now, though, that Jade could smell his scent more fully, including the warm, musky aroma of cum still lingering on his skin from their fucking in the Fae realm.

Oh, God. Even now, in spite of Simon holding him at an emotional distance, Jade could no more control his feelings for the man than he could stop his own heart from beating. He curled his fingers into fists at his side and closed his eyes as a wave of need pounded through him. He could still see Simon spread open for him on that stone table, his magnificent body slick with sweat and heaving with desire, eyes gone dark with passion, his welcoming heat sucking Jade in deeper, squeezing him tighter, until Jade relinquished his last bit of control and gave himself up body and soul to Simon’s allure.

Their encounter might have started with Jade in charge, but in the end, Simon had mastered him. And Jade wouldn’t have had it any other way.

“You ready?”

Jade found himself once again having to pull in his wayward thoughts and return to the here and now. The here and now where although Simon stood only a few feet away, he might as well be halfway across the planet.

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“Yeah.” Jade nodded and went to the window where he could see the street and try to scope out any potential dangers before they walked out into them.

Needless to say, it shocked the hell out of him to suddenly feel the heat of Simon’s body pressed to his back and long, strong fingers curl around his bicep. Simon’s breath was warm against Jade’s neck, sending a shiver of longing down his spine. “I know you’re hurting, Jade. Hang in there. We’ll be home soon and you can rest.” The fingers squeezed gently, and then Simon stepped back and the heat was gone.

But his words and the gesture lingered, giving Jade a shard of hope, and bringing the hot sting of unbidden moisture to his eyes.

CHAPTER 6

Simon had just allowed himself a small breath of relief that they'd successfully navigated the worst part of the demon grounds and were nearing human populated areas, when Jade stopped suddenly in the alley in which they'd been traveling.

His body tensed. And then he swung around to face Simon, his nostrils flaring. "Veen!" he growled.

The single word sent ice through Simon's veins.

"Shit!" He grabbed Jade by jacket collar and threw himself and Jade backward through the carved stone wall of the stately mission church, St. Ignatius of Antioch, just as two sickly-green bodies leapt through the air toward them.

The bodies disappeared as the dark stone impeded Simon's

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vision, then he and Jade were crashing to the floor inside the church. Simon cushioned Jade's body by taking the brunt of the fall, and let out a winded *oomph!* when Jade landed atop him.

They'd entered through the north wall of the nave, near the pulpit. A few feet more and they would have smashed into it.

Simon lay still for a second to catch his breath, but they had to move. "Gotta get up," he said, nudging Jade.

The Veen demons weren't the biggest species of demon, but they were, by far, one of the nastiest. Their sole purpose in life, at least that Simon had ever found, was to feed. Though they stood upright in a humanoid fashion at around six feet tall with human-like appendages, they were almost reptilian in appearance. They hunted, however, with the speed of a cheetah, shredded their victims to pieces with long, needlelike claws, and then ate with ferocity. One Veen could efficiently tear through a household of people in minutes. Two or three could take out an entire gathering of humans, and in fact they often targeted places where humans congregated. They were also tireless. Once they'd locked onto a victim's scent, they didn't give up until they'd taken the kill.

Which is why he and Jade had to move.

Jade rose with a barely restrained grimace. "They're going to keep coming, whether we run or stay."

"We're staying," Simon said. "We can't outrun them."

Especially with Jade in the condition he was in. Jade hadn't made a single complaint over the past hour as they'd slunk from alley to alley, building to building, in their exodus

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from demon territory, but Simon could tell he was struggling to stay on his feet. The events in the Fae realm had taken a heavy toll on him. Though Simon didn't fully understand why beyond what Jade had told him—*It's the magic. It drains me*—he saw the truth of it in the pale, sickly tint of Jade's skin, the dark circles under his eyes, and every grimace and silent moan he made but tried to hide. It's why Simon had insisted they leave the small, exposed bail bonds office. He wanted to get Jade home, where he felt like he had a better chance of keeping him safe from Fae and wraiths and dark magic that turned the man he loved into a pissed-off black-eyed half-wolf sorcerer who wanted to kill everyone.

Now, though he had to wonder if he'd made the right decision. A K'arpath or Volgaran demon, even a warg-wolf or one of the rodent-faced Mole demons he could have dealt with had it become necessary. But the Veen...they were in another category altogether. They were seldom seen because they attacked without provocation or warning, slashed and fed and moved on so fast, most of the time the only way to know they'd even been there was finding the carnage they'd left behind. They weren't easy to take on head-to-head, and were damn near impossible to kill because of their speed.

Damn it. Why'd it have to be Veen? Was it his curse to always have the best of intentions, but instead make things worse?

What is it they say in your world? The road to hell is paved with—

Simon gave a mental groan as the Fae queen's voice in his

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head came back to haunt him. The road to hell was paved with good intentions, so the saying went. If that was the case, it seemed he was doomed to burn.

"It would be harder to trap them if we were on the move," Jade said.

"Exactly. And they'd stick with us until we were back to more populated areas. There's no way in hell I'm offering them an all-you-can-eat smorgasbord of innocent humans. We can contain them better here." He hoped. "Check the sides and the back and make sure all the doors are shut and locked. I'll get the main entrance," Simon directed.

Jade took off in one direction, he in the other. They'd lock everything up tight, but the Veen would find a way in. That's what they did. Maybe they could phase through matter like he could...although if that were the case, they would have followed him and Jade through the wall.

As he ran down the center aisle of the nave, between the long rows of dark pews toward the entry, an elderly, black-robed priest opened a side door that obviously led to offices or some other inner sanctum of the church. His hair stood up in a shock of gray around his head.

"May I help you, son?"

"You need to hide, Father!" Simon ordered as he passed by. It was too late for escape.

The priest started to protest, but Simon interrupted before he could. "Demons. Hide, now. No matter what you hear or see, stay hidden, you understand?"

The old man's eyes widened. He gave a quick nod, then

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disappeared back to where he'd come. In Gallasfor, especially this close to the demon grounds, most humans dreaded to hear the word "demon" and knew better than to try to face them. Even here, in a house of God, no one was safe. Years ago, when the first beings of Vertigo had entered this world, the religious had believed Satan's army was upon them and had labeled the creatures "demons." There was a belief that they wouldn't attack churches and sanctuaries. Simon had believed it himself. He'd sent Jade to live at an abbey nine years ago, thinking it would be far safer there than living in the city near the rifts. He'd discovered the hard way that these demons, whether biblical or not, had no qualms about taking what they wanted, even on holy ground.

This church and its symbols would offer no protection. The only way to survive was to fight.

The main entry doors were locked, but Simon slammed home the heavy wooden bolt across them for additional security.

Jade met him halfway back into the nave, in the center of the church. "Everything's sealed up, but it won't take them long to find a way in."

"I know." Simon pulled off his coat, threw it onto one of the pews, and drew his sword in readiness. The creatures of Vertigo weren't easily killed. Guns did little to deter them since most Vertigoans were so strong they'd continue to fight long after being shot, which made things messy and complicated. Some demons even had the ability to regenerate after being wounded. But whether the being was beastlike or

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humanoid, severing their heads did the trick, killing them quickly and permanently. Simon's sword had never let him down, and could cut through things no normal human blade could.

"There's something about these Veen, Simon." Jade pulled off his own jacket as well.

"What do you mean?"

Jade scowled and shook his head. "They're...off"

"Off?"

"Not right. Their scent is off. They're Veen, but...I don't know, different. Like an added ingredient I can't identify. I think that's why I didn't recognize the scent until they were almost on top of us out there."

"Do you think they're physically different?"

"I don't know."

"Or maybe being controlled by something or someone?"

"I don't know! I'm doing the best I can, okay? I'm not exactly at the top of my game right now."

His outburst and his face drawn tight with tension, pain, and exhaustion finally plunged a hard fist into Simon's gut, knocking the breath and the bull-headedness out of him, making him realize just what a childish asshole he'd been with Jade since they'd left the Fae. The defensive barrier he'd put up between himself and Jade crumbled.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, sincerely.

Jade's gaze scudded over him in surprise, as if an apology had been the last thing he'd expected. Which twisted Simon's gut just a little bit tighter.

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You betrayed him, Simon Saint-Saëns, when he needed you most...

Simon hated that he couldn't get the condemning voice of the Fae queen out of his head, but just as he hadn't been able to deny the truth of the words in the underworld, he couldn't here either. Damn it, he'd done it again, hadn't he? While Jade was suffering obvious aftereffects from what had happened to him in the Fae realm, Simon had held his distance since they'd awakened. He'd been torn by what the Faerie queen had told him, by Jade's display of dark magic, and had struggled to find a way to mesh those things with the gentle Jade he'd once known. Discovering Jade was a werewolf had been a big enough shock, but everything that had been unveiled to him since had blindsided him. Once they were back in the real world, without the Fae drug clouding Simon's mind with intoxicating lust and confusion, he hadn't known how to deal with it. So he'd pushed Jade away. He'd done the same damn thing ten days ago when Jade had come back into his life and he'd found out about the wolf.

Was the Fae queen right? Is this the man he'd become? Offering support, comfort, pledging to protect, but at the first sign of trouble, he'd forsake the very person he'd promised to be there for?

Instead of abandoning Jade tonight, he should have been doing everything in his power to help him and meet his needs.

Like when he wanted to stay put until daylight, but you refused to listen and insisted on leaving. And now look at the danger you've dragged him into.

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You failed.

No, damn it. He hadn't. Wouldn't. Not anymore.

"When they get in, watch yourself, okay?" Jade said, pulling Simon back to the present, his expression taut with genuine worry for Simon.

It touched Simon deep inside.

Here Jade stood, joining him without question, to make a stand against a vicious threat in spite of his own battered body and soul, and he was worried about Simon. It humbled Simon, and suddenly all the worries and fears the Fae queen had planted in his head dissolved. It didn't matter what the future held. Didn't matter what secrets haunted Jade's past. This was Jade, who still had the same bold, giving, courageous human heart as always.

Impulsively, Simon reached for him, cupped his cheek in his hand, and kissed him.

"What was that for?" Jade asked, his voice etched with vulnerability.

"Because I love you and need you to know it."

Jade's dark brows drew together, his expression troubled. "Simon, I need to talk to you. Need to explain, right now, about what I was doing those years we were apart."

"Whatever it was, whatever happened, you don't owe me any explanations, Jade. And certainly not now. You've been through enough already the past twenty-four hours."

"Yeah, I do need to talk about it now. I need you to know, to understand, in case we..."

Simon's chest tightened. "Don't say it. We're going to get

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out of here.”

Jade swallowed hard and nodded, but didn’t look convinced. “I hope so. I really hope so. But this can’t hang between us anymore. It’s like a burr, that just keeps eating in deeper and deeper, and I’m afraid of what might happen if it continues.”

He looked so torn up, Simon couldn’t bear it. He’d do anything for this man, especially if it meant wiping away the look of torment that haunted him. “Okay. I’m listening.”

His face pinching, Jade nodded. “About a year after the demon attack on the abbey, I was hurting, angry—”

“At me?”

“Mostly at the unfairness of life in general because all I wanted was to be human. I hated the wolf that had taken over such a big part of me, that I had to struggle to control every second, because back then I was just really learning how to control it. And the fear was always there that if I let down my guard for even a few minutes, I could lose the fight and then it would take me and I’d never find myself, my real human self, again. I heard about a man who dabbled in magic, so I went to him, hoping to find...I don’t know. A cure? A way to overcome it? Control it so I didn’t have to struggle so hard with it? I’m not sure exactly what I was looking for.”

“Did he help?”

“No. Not with that anyway. But he did teach me a lot and I discovered that magic was something I was good at. Which was a big thing for me, because up to that point, I didn’t really know what I was good at, or good for. I spent six years as a

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slave in *Vertigo* where thinking for oneself isn't an option. Then the previous year had been focused on just trying to keep the beast at bay. So for the first time in my adult life, I discovered something I liked and had an aptitude for. The man, his name was Robin, didn't look down on me for being *other* like everyone else did, and we became friends."

Simon wondered, with a twinge of jealousy, just how close a friend the man had been, but then he forced it away because even if they'd been lovers, Jade had deserved to have someone he liked and could trust. "So, what happened?"

"About a year and a half after I met him, Robin was killed by a demon while he was out one night. I continued to study, but without Robin as a guide, I started to delve deeper, into areas that if he'd been alive, he no doubt would have cautioned me against. I was obsessed, though, and couldn't learn enough, always wanting more and more, trying more and more difficult spells and incantations. That's when I found a sorcerer name named Braddock. I knew little about him except that he was very powerful. So, stupidly, without researching him, I approached him and asked him to apprentice me. To make a long story short, he agreed, I moved into his estate with him, and..." His voice caught and pain flashed in his eyes.

Simon reached out and smoothed a palm along Jade's stubbled cheek. Jade seemed to take comfort from it, closing his eyes for a moment and leaning into the caress.

"I take it it went badly?" Simon asked softly.

Jade sighed. "Yeah. He taught me magic, dark stuff, darker

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and more powerful than anything I'd done...but there was a price." He shook his head. "There's always a price for power."

"Yeah, there usually is."

"I spent the next five years as..." Another hard swallow. "As his...*slave*." His gaze met Simon's, and what Simon saw in it left him faintly nauseous.

"Oh, God. He..."

Jade dragged down the collar of his T-shirt and tilted his head to give Simon a better view. "See this?" He pointed, and beneath the blooming blue and purple bruise the Fae queen's consort had given him, a series of rough looking scars marred his neck.

Simon had noticed them before, when they'd made love for the first time after the K'arpath demon attack, but now, putting them in context with what Jade had just told him, he understood. And a cold fury built in him. "A collar. That's where it dug into you."

"Yeah," Jade whispered. "He controlled me with magic, and with force. Called me his animal. Made me...do things." His jaw clenched and his brows pulled together.

"Oh, Jade. I'm sorry." Simon dragged in a deep breath, trying not to double over as guilt churned in his stomach. It was his fault. He'd deserted Jade and in doing so, had given him into the hands of this monster. "What did you... How did you get away?"

"I learned as much as I could in secret, read every text he had, practiced when he wasn't around. And then, when I was strong enough, I killed him." Jade said it matter-of-factly. "I

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killed him and I stole his power and added it to mine.”

The tone of Jade’s voice was chilling.

“After that, I was supercharged and full of fury...which is a bad, bad combination. I went on a rampage. Did a lot of stuff I shouldn’t have, stuff no being has a right to mess with. Pretty soon, inevitably, I lost control of it. I did things you can’t imagine. Things I’d rather you not imagine.

“And then I imploded. One morning I woke up and by some grace of God or I don’t know what, my life thus far was illuminated for me to look back on, and what I saw...sickened me. I couldn’t...couldn’t stand to even look at myself in the mirror. And so I stopped, cold turkey. All of it. That was fifteen months ago. I went into the mountains, as far away from people as I could get, and I stayed there, where I couldn’t hurt anyone. Every day was its own hell because I was an addict and I craved my fix so badly, more than once I thought I’d rather end my life than go on without the magic. But I fought it, and over time it started getting better. When I finally thought I could trust myself, I began venturing out, trying to see the world with new eyes—not the eyes of a slave, or a sorcerer gluttoned with power, or even as a wolf, but the eyes of a human.”

His gaze came back to Simon’s, dull with sorrow from the past, but flaring with warmth around the edges. “That’s when I found out about you. I knew it would be a risk to seek you out, knew you’d become a hunter, but I was worried, and I couldn’t stay away.”

Simon closed his eyes. Opened them. “I’m so glad you

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found me.”

“I think...I think I’ve really complicated your life, and I never wanted that.”

Simon stepped closer, drawn by Jade’s warmth, honesty, and courage. He could only imagine what kind of fortitude and strength of character it had taken to fight back from the dark place he’d gone.

“My life has always been a mess,” he told Jade. “You’re the one thing in it that *isn’t* a complication.”

“I don’t know how you can say that,” he whispered.

“I can say that because being around you makes me a better man, and what better way to see yourself than in the reflection of others?”

Jade’s eyebrows tugged together as if he hadn’t considered that.

“No matter what happens in the future, or what happened in the past,” Simon said, “you have my heart, Jade. Unconditionally. Don’t ever doubt that. I know I’m an ass sometimes, and I’ve made more mistakes with you than I’ve done things right, but, please, don’t ever doubt my feelings for you.”

“You know I love you, right?” Jade’s voice was gritty.

“I do. I don’t know how you could stand to put up with me otherwise.” And Simon meant it. He knew he had a treasure in Jade, always had, and was pretty damn sure he didn’t deserve him.

His words pulled a small smile at Jade’s mouth, turning his exhaustion and pain upside down for the brief moment it

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shone on his face.

Then it was gone and he was serious again. "It's making me nervous. Why is it taking the Veen so long?"

"I don't know. This is an old church, solid, built from stone. Maybe they're having a hard time finding a way in. Not that I know how in the hell they ever get into places."

"Or maybe they're already in."

Simon's pulse stuttered at that thought. He lowered his voice. "Stalking us?"

Jade nodded. "I don't smell them, though."

"You'll tell me when you do?"

"Of course I will."

"Jade, when they do show their faces, please, please be careful." Simon shook his head. "I shouldn't have put you in the middle of this mess."

"I don't want you worrying about me, Simon. You concentrate on what you have to do. I refuse to be a liability to you."

"I always worry about you." Simon grasped the back of Jade's head and pulled him in to kiss his forehead, then, with an ache in his chest, brushed another kiss over his lips. "I need you. I'll be watching your back."

"Just watch your own first, okay? 'Cause I worry, too." He started to say something else, then stopped short, his body tensing.

"It's them?"

Jade was already yanking off his T-shirt and unsnapping his jeans. "They're in," he said, scrambling to push his jeans

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down his lean hips and toe off his shoes. “I smell them. Shit...they’re coming!”

With a groan that sounded so painful it made Simon ache, Jade began the shift into his wolf form. As he did, Simon stood over him, sword raised, protecting him in those vulnerable moments when he wasn’t quite human, but not quite beast yet either.

And then the attack came, both from in front of and behind them. The bastards had gotten in and managed to trap him and Jade between them.

Simon swung his sword at the nearest blur, and Jade lunged, powerful body and silver-black fur streaking through the air at the other Veen that leapt at them from over a row of pews. Simon felt the tip of his sword make contact with something, but it wasn’t enough to even slow the demon he’d engaged, which turned and came back at him, hissing and screeching in its own language.

Out of the corner of his eye, Simon watched Jade tear off down the aisle to the back of the church. Probably following the scent of the other Veen, which had disappeared. His gut knotted in fear. Were the Veen using the same strategy Simon employed when he was trying to take down more than one enemy—divide and conquer? The urge to follow, to protect Jade surged through him. How could he watch Jade’s back if Jade took off?

But the Veen he fought forced him to keep his mind on what he was doing, and made going after Jade an impossibility.

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Left. Right. Left. Simon thrust, ducked, thrust again, but the Veen kept coming at him, taking swipes at him with its claws, drawing blood first on Simon's chest where it ripped his shirt, then tearing through his jeans to leave slashes in his thigh. Simon managed to make contact again and again, nicking it as it nicked him, but unable to gain any real ground. The Veen was relentless, clearly trying to wear him down. Each time it attacked, it seemed to lunge closer to him. So close that, in spite of its speed, Simon could see its eyes—a glittering beady black—and see the spittle dripping off its razor-sharp teeth. But no matter how he timed it or swung, he couldn't land the blow that would decapitate it.

He moved and parried, trying to get position, darting behind pews, pillars, getting closer to the altar.

In spite of Simon's super strength, the unceasing attacks, over and over, grew wearying. His arms ached from the weight of his sword. Sweat dripped down his cheek...or maybe it was blood. He couldn't tell anymore.

He heard Jade's snarls and growls from a distance, and dared to look back and up for an instant at the choir loft, where he saw a flash of black fur roiling with a green body.

He's still alive.

But Simon didn't know how much longer Jade could last. They had to end this. If he was growing tired, Jade could only be running on fumes at this point. And the more tired they were, the more vulnerable they became to the Veen. Especially Jade.

Simon leapt up onto the front pew, going for a height

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advantage, and this time when he made a hit with his sword, the demon screeched, a god-awful sound that echoed off the arched ceiling.

And then the demon disappeared. Vanished.

Simon stepped cautiously off the pew, and stood, breathing hard, his right hand still clutching his sword, his left resting on the pew's back to steady himself. He looked from side to side, alert and at attention, trying to figure out what in the hell had just happened and whether the Veen was really gone or—

It appeared suddenly in front of him and, and in a movement so fast Simon was barely able to register it, thrust something toward Simon's gut. More out of instinct than any real sense of knowing it was coming, Simon shifted to the side just enough that the long, thick pointed protrusion missed his stomach and speared through his hand, pinning it to the wooden pew. The pain was so intense Simon cried out. He looked down to discover the Veen's hand and lower arm had become a sharp, bone-like skewer.

Oh, shit... A metamorph?

He had a split second to digest that fact before the Veen lunged at his throat for the kill, its breath hot and fetid, its yellow teeth bared and dripping.

But Simon was faster, raising his sword in his free, right hand, and in an awkward movement because it was at point-blank range buried his blade in the Veen's throat.

The Veen's blood-curdling screech sent shivers up and down Simon's spine as it twisted and flailed. But Simon knew it wasn't enough to stop the demon. He was only going to get

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one shot at this before the demon recovered from the shock, so with a growl, he jerked his hand off the pew, breaking the thick skewer as he did and dragging his impaled hand free. He reached up, ignoring the jolts of agony that shot through his hand and into his arm, and wrapped his bleeding palm around the grip of his sword to join the other, using it as the extra force he needed to pull his blade from the Veen's throat.

This time, two-handed, he swung again...and sliced off the demon's head. It flew across the floor to stop against the railing in front of the altar. The Veen's body twitched in the throes of death, then dropped to the floor at Simon's feet.

"Fuck!" His breath ragged, he ripped a strip off the bottom of his shirt and wrapped it around his throbbing hand, even as he moved out into aisle and looked toward the rear of the church, up at the choir loft, searching desperately for a sight of Jade's black fur and a sign he was still alive.

He found it...but the sight sent his heart pounding into overdrive. *Oh, crap.* From here, it looked like the Veen had captured Jade, or maybe it was the other way around. He couldn't tell, damn it. The sounds of vicious, attacking growls merged with the high-pitched Veen shrieking as the two creatures twisted and turned.

"Jade, hands! Watch its hands!" he shouted.

They moved close to the edge of the loft, and Simon's breath shot out in a gasp of fear when they lunged against the wooden railing and a chunk broke out of it, leaving their thrashing bodies teetering over the twenty-foot drop.

"Shit!" Simon was already running down the aisle, sword

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in hand, his goal the stairs at the back of the church that led to the loft.

But as his feet pounded the stone floor trying to get there, the writhing ball of black fur and scaly green skin toppled over the edge of the loft and fell.

Jade and the demon landed with a sickly resounding thud that Simon felt shudder through the floor and into his own body.

“Oh, God! Jade...Jade!”

Neither moved, and all Simon could see clearly was the Veen’s back. It lay atop Jade, its head lolling to one side. But as Simon approached, still at a run, his heart in his throat, searching for signs Jade was alive and okay, he was completely unprepared when the Veen suddenly rose. Its arm and hand twisted and change in the blink of an eye, becoming one of the sharp, bony skewers like the other Veen had sported. It angled the weapon toward Jade, lying on his side, his black wolf’s body a dark smear on the gray stone floor.

Simon, off balance as he scrambled to a stop, knowing he wouldn’t be able to get his sword up in time to decapitate it, acted on instinct and let his forward momentum crash his weight into the Veen’s legs.

They both tumbled to the floor, the motion skidding them a few feet away from Jade.

Simon caught a glimpse of Jade out of the corner of his eye, still unmoving. Was he okay?

He had no choice but to focus his attention on the Veen, however, which was already scrambling to its feet again.

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Simon rose as well, twice slipping on the blood on the floor, but finally dragging himself to his feet just as the Veen turned to face him with its full wrath.

Well, maybe not its *full* wrath. When he got his first glimpse of it from the front, he realized Jade had done a real number on the demon. Its neck was pretty mangled, bitten open and bleeding in a bright red-black spurting fountain. Bites covered its body and it wasn't moving at top speed anymore because one of its legs had a chunk gone out of it.

It snarled at Simon, edging closer, dragging its leg.

Simon lifted his sword, angling it in front of his body. "You want it? Come on...come and get it! Not so quick now, are you?"

They moved in a circle, facing off. It was a rare opportunity to watch a Veen in slo-mo—slo-mo for them anyway. By Simon's way of thinking, the demon's neck was bleeding out so much that sooner rather than later, the thing was going to collapse from blood loss.

The Veen didn't seem concerned with that, however, and plunged at Simon with its long, spiked weapon. Simon side-stepped it and leveled his own strike. But the Veen's defense was faster than he'd expected and he missed. The Veen slashed out again, this time catching a piece of Simon's shirtsleeve. Then again, faster, not backing down.

Simon had had enough. He needed to get to Jade. Needed to see him move, see his eyes open and look at him, and know that everything was going to be okay. He bore down on the Veen, sword swinging, beating it back step by step.

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“I’m...sick...of...this!” he growled. He lunged for the killing blow...

...and his feet slipped out from under him from all the Veen’s blood.

He landed with a bone-jarring thud on his injured hand and his left shoulder. His sword flew out of his grip and clattered across the floor. “Shit!”

With the tables now turned, he felt the rush of air as the Veen attacked. Simon rolled onto his back and tried to scramble away, but the floor was still slick and he couldn’t find purchase.

The Veen was already in the air, its spike aimed for him.

Only one thought rushed through his head in the second before the blow came. *Jade*.

And then a black snarling blur filled his vision and flew past him, taking the Veen with it. A loud, whimpering yelp echoed through the church, followed by a gurgling Veen shriek.

Simon, his heart banging like a bass drum in his chest, his heart in his throat, rolled to his hands and knees. What the hell had just happened?

But then he spied the pile of black fur and bloodied Veen.

It was like *déjà vu*...that same god-awful, gut twisting sick fear that he’d felt only minutes earlier when he’d watched Jade and the Veen fall from the choir loft. Except this time...everything in him trembled in warning.

He crawled to the wolf and the demon. The Veen’s throat had been ripped out the rest of the way and it was dead.

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However, it was the silent body of the wolf sprawled facedown on top of the Veen that consumed Simon's thoughts.

"Jade!" His voice was so choked he could hardly get it out.

He reached for Jade, but before he could touch him, Jade began to shake, then convulse, his back arching, his paws clawing beneath him as if desperately seeking to escape some version of hell.

Terror shot through Simon and all he could think of was that this was it...this was the end.

But then slowly, Jade's legs stretched and straightened, the fur faded, and his body shifted into a lean but horribly battered and bloodied human man. With a gasp, and one final shudder, he lay quiet.

He was still lying facedown so Simon couldn't see him properly, couldn't tell if he was dead or alive. "Please," he prayed. "Please." With shaking hands, Simon gently grasped his lover by the shoulders and started to pull him off the Veen. When he moved him, Jade let out a soft pained whimper.

Hope shot through Simon. "Hang on, Jade!" Simon rose to his knees and even more gently lifted him from the demon's body. When he did, he heard a cracking sound, and saw the Veen's long spike had been broken off its arm. Where the hell was it?

Oh, no.

He sat back, turned Jade over in his arms...and found it. The demon's skewer jutted up straight from Jade's chest, its thick length buried directly in his heart.

Simon stared it and turned cold as the reality of what it

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meant crashed over him with the force of a tsunami, shoving him to the very bottom of the surge, beating out the last of his air and filling his lungs with icy agony. “No. No...no, no, *no*! Not this. Not like this! Please, Jade...please!” He clutched Jade to him and pushed the thick, damp dark hair back off his pale face. “Please!”

A soft whimper slid past the younger man’s lips, and then his eyes opened.

“Simon.” It was a barely-there whisper of air.

“I’m here. I’m right here. Stay with me, okay?” He cradled Jade more comfortably against his arm. “Stay with me, babe.”

Jade’s chest rose and fell in irregular, shallow breaths, but his lips twitched into a faint smile. “I was watching... your back.”

A dry, aching sob built in Simon. He dropped his forehead to Jade’s and pressed his lips against his. “I’m sorry. So sorry, Jade. I should have listened to you earlier. I should have taken care of you. We should never have been out on the streets tonight.”

Jade’s fingers curled through his and his beautiful, soulful silver eyes locked on Simon’s face. “No blame. Things happen... for a reason, Simon.” He grimaced. “I just wish... wish we’d had more time...”

His eyes fluttered closed, he exhaled one last breath, then his body grew still and heavy in Simon’s arms.

Simon’s chest heaved. “Jade? Jade? No... no, no, don’t leave me like this! Please, God, don’t leave me! *Jade!*”

He grasped the Veen spike embedded in Jade’s chest and

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yanked it out. Blood pooled in the gaping wound, around a heart that no longer beat. A heart that should have had a long, long life, but Simon had stolen it away, just like he'd stolen away so many other things from Jade because he'd turned his back on him. So many years of loneliness. So many years of pain.

"It's not fair," he whispered. Then hurt rage tore through him. "You hear me, God?" he shouted. "It's not fair! He was the good one! He deserved to live! I'm the one who fucked up! You should have taken me instead! Should... have taken... me..."

Simon buried his face in Jade's hair and gave himself up to the grief.

CHAPTER 7

Simon didn't know how much time had passed, only that at some point his sobs had tapered into a slow, hot leak of tears, and then stopped. His chest ached, his eyes burned, and he felt dry and hollow inside like a fire had gutted him and taken everything. He had nothing left to give.

::But you do have more to give, Simon Saint-Saëns, if you so choose.::

"Go away," he muttered. The last thing he could deal with right now was the Fae queen's voice in his head telling him he'd failed, failed, failed again. He already felt it in every cell of his body. Saw it every time he looked down at the prematurely and forever arrested life of the young man he held

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in his arms.

::I did not come to speak with you of your failures, an'kshalon. I came to remind of your choices.::

Simon lifted his head, and if he'd had the energy to care, might have been shocked to see the Faerie queen herself standing in front of him, dressed in a long silver-trimmed gown of pure white, her red hair falling loose, and the same silver crown on her brow Simon had seen her wear before. Her form was fuzzy, though, as if she wasn't really here, but was just a projection. Or in a dream. Maybe he'd fallen asleep.

::You are not dreaming, and I am here in your world, yet still in my own. I am quite real in both places, I assure you. But enough of this. You do not have time to dawdle. Time is running out.::

"In case you hadn't noticed, it already did run out." Then Simon scowled at her. "You knew this was going to happen, didn't you?"

::I did try to warn you. I told you that sooner than you might expect you'd have to make a choice. Remember?::

"Yeah, well I did. I chose to go out on the streets tonight when Jade didn't want to. I chose to stand and fight the Veen instead of run. I was supposed to be watching his back. I told him I would. And look how I fucked that up."

::You are not becoming when you wallow. The wolf's passing here tonight was already written. There was no way to alter it. If you had not gone on the streets, he still would have died.::

"How can you say that?" Simon snarled. "You can't

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possibly know everything! You don't know what would have happened if I'd taken care of him like I should have. And if you knew he was going to die, then why'd you make him go through all the hell he did down in your underworld? Why'd you give him the protective symbols? Was that all for your own sick amusement?"

::And still we ramble about trivialities instead of focusing on what is important.::

"This *is* fucking important! To me!"

She sighed audibly and shook her head as if he were a two-year-old to which she was weary of having to explain a simple concept. But she finally deigned to answer. *::You think in far too linear terms. Time, space...they are all around you all the time. I forget how narrow-minded this world is. Broaden your mind. Think! Why would I have agreed to give the wolf my protection if I knew he was going to die and have no use for it? You seem too dense to recall this, but I will say it again...because you, an'kshalon, have choices!::*

"Choices." Simon dragged a hand through his hair, then rubbed his eyes. "What the hell's that supposed to mean? I'm so tired of you talking in riddles, telling me half-truths or half-lies—I'm never sure which—and only giving me bits and pieces of information. You told me I'd have a choice to make and that it would affect whether Jade became my ally or, apparently, my enemy. But clearly you were wrong, since instead, Jade is dead. He's *dead*, damn it! I'm holding his body in my arms and feeling the cold set in as we speak."

She sighed again, but without the caustic undertone this

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time. ::*Which is why time is of the essence. I know you grieve. It's all around you, dark and empty, consuming you. But it doesn't have to be that way.*::

She moved—glided, actually, as if her feet never touched the floor—closer to him, and reached out. He recoiled, not wanting to feel her touch. But when her hand glanced over the back of his neck, it was cool, but not unpleasant. If he had to describe it, he'd almost call it her attempt at...comfort. Though he couldn't quite mesh that with her normally aloof disdain.

::*You must remember, Simon Saint-Saëns.*:: She pressed her palm flat against his neck, and her other on top of his head.
::*Remember. And choose.*::

Simon's eyes slid closed, and he was suddenly back in the Fae realm, lying on the stone table, holding Jade's warm and still breathing body against him. *Oh, God...Jade.* He looked down at Jade's dark head resting on his chest and brushed his hand through the soft thickness, savoring the silky feel of it, the sight of it curling gently against his neck. Jade shifted slightly in response, then sighed.

Simon had thought he was all cried out, but hot tears stung his eyes. What wouldn't he give to have this back? To be able to hold Jade like this again, sleep with him close, feeling his breathing and the rise and fall of his chest, the weight of his leg wedged between Simon's thighs, and the hot flesh of his cock pressed into Simon's groin.

::*Focus, an'kshalon. Remember.*::

Simon looked up to see the Faerie queen and her dark-

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haired consort standing next to him, as they had been in the realm. The queen was speaking, the same words as before...

"He was given to you, an'kshalon, long years ago, to keep safe, to guide, and protect. You alone could have prevented the afflictions that have assailed him. Instead, you passed him off to others and shirked your duty. In short, you failed."

Simon grimaced at the callous words attributed to him more than once down here—you *failed*.

"Now he is back in your life and once again, sooner than you might expect, you will have a choice to make. What you do with that choice will affect not only you and your lover, but the fate of your world as well."

A shiver of unease spread through Simon.

Her amber eyes burned into him with intensity. "Listen carefully and heed my words. Life or death? The power runs through your veins. The wolf could be your greatest asset, your most loyal and trusted advisor and soldier. Or, he could be your downfall and the one whose very hand takes your life."

Simon stared at her, his heart thudding so hard the pressure made him sick. "What? No. No, you can't know that."

"Only you can choose which fate will be yours and your wolf mate's. Choose wisely, Simon Saint-Saëns. For if you fail again, it could bring about the end of all you know."

::Do you remember now?::

Simon felt himself whisked away from the Fae realm, from Jade's sleep-heavy, breathing body, and opened his eyes to find himself once again sitting on the floor of the church

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holding his broken, lifeless one.

A sob caught in his throat. "I can't do this. Do you know how cruel that was? To let me relive that moment, with Jade still alive, then stick me back here?"

:: Life or death. That is your choice, Simon Saint-Saëns. Let your lover go now, in peace, and insure you will not meet your end by his hands in your future. Or save him, find what comfort you can in one another, but live with the knowledge that you will have set in motion a future riddled with darkness, danger, and questions. Neither path will be easy, each has lessons and pitfalls. The choice is yours. I've done all but spell it out for you. The rest is up to you.::

Her form began to dim.

"Wait! Are you saying—"

::Life or death. But you must hurry. Once he is cold it will be too late and the choice will be made for you.::

Simon stared at the fading image of the Fae queen. "But how? Even if it were possible, I don't know how."

::Feel it, an'kshalon. It's inside you. It's your power.::

Her image blinked away.

Simon stared at the empty space, his gut clenching. "It's my power..." he murmured.

He looked down at Jade's pale, unmoving body in his arms, so beautiful even now, like the subject of a Renaissance painting. It wrenched his heart inside out. "I don't know what to do," he whispered, stroking a lock of soft, black hair back from over the closed eyes. "I don't know what to do, Jade."

The soft weight of a blanket settled around his shoulders,

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and a gnarled hand gripped his shoulder firmly and gently. “I do.”

Simon looked up at the old priest, standing next to him. He handed Simon another blanket and gestured toward Jade. *Use it to cover him*, the gesture said.

But Simon held it and couldn't do it. Covering him...it was too final. He set the blanket down next to him and cradled Jade closer.

“It's time to let him go, my son.”

“Can't,” Simon breathed. “I can't.”

The priest crouched next to him, old knees popping. “So much blood and death here this night. So much everywhere since the demons arrived. Is there someone I can call for you? Someone to come be with you?”

“No.” Everyone Simon had in his entire world was lying dead in his lap.

“Then God will be here for you.” He picked up Simon's injured hand. “Perhaps you should let me look at this?”

Simon shrugged, not caring. All he could think about was the Lady's last words. *It's inside you. It's your power.* What was that supposed to mean?

He barely felt the priest's gentle hands unwrapping his makeshift bandage. When the last sticky layer had been peeled off, the priest hissed in a soft breath. “It's been nailed through.

“The demons. They had spikes. One pinned me to a pew. The other...” His throat tightened.

“The other impaled your friend.”

Simon nodded. “Through the heart,” he choked out.

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“Your hand...it looks as if it’s already beginning to heal,” the priest said, a note of surprise in his voice.

Simon glanced down at it, seeing that the jagged edges had begun to knit and the hole was already smaller than it had been. It ached less already, though Simon still didn’t have proper feeling in it and his fingers were numb. By tomorrow, it would be closed completely and no one would be able to tell it had ever happened. Such was his healing pow—

Oh, my God.

“I... Oh...”

“Son? Are you all right?”

“I... I think I know what to do.”

He gathered Jade’s body in his arms and rose, the blanket falling from around his shoulders as he moved. “My sword. Bring it for me, please.”

The priest’s bushy gray brows drew together. “Think, son...what is it you’re planning?”

“A healing.”

Simon’s booted feet tapped on the stones as he picked up his pace and ran toward the low altar. He stepped up to it and swiped away the accouterments on top of it, then laid Jade’s body carefully atop the white altar cloth.

“Do you want to pray? Is that it?” the priest asked, clearly distressed Simon had defiled the altar. But at least he’d brought Simon’s sword. Simon took it from him.

“You pray, Father. Please. We need all the help we can get here.”

Simon leaned over Jade and brushed a hand over his cool,

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smooth forehead. Then he pressed a gentle kiss to his lips.

“Prayer is always good. I will gladly pray for your friend’s safe passage to heaven and that you will find peace in your life. But, my son, you do understand your friend has already left this mortal coil, don’t you?”

He turned to look at the priest. “Do you believe in miracles, Father?”

The old man’s face took on a beatific expression. “I believe the hand of God works in ways that cannot always be explained, yes.”

“Then pray for a miracle.”

Simon reached behind his head to unfasten the silver chain around his neck on which a well-worn, silver Celtic cross pendant hung. He took it off and fastened it around Jade’s neck, then aligned the cross so it was centered just below the hollow of his throat. “I think you need this more than I do right now,” he said softly. Jade’s mother had given it to Jade on his thirteenth birthday. Jade had given it to Simon nine years ago, on the night Simon had sent him away. Simon had never taken it off in all that time, until now. He brushed his fingertips over a line of the silver, swirling Fae symbols on Jade’s chest, fascinated by how similar some of them were to the Celtic scrollwork on the cross.

“I’m not one big on rituals,” he said, speaking to Jade. “I think you already know that. So I hope this will cover everything.”

The power runs through your veins.

He took a deep breath. Then spoke, clearly and firmly. “I

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understand I have a choice here. Life or death. I choose *life* for Jaden Cole.”

It's inside you. It's your power.

Simon held his right hand over the gaping wound on Jade's chest. Then he gripped his sword in his injured hand and slid the blade across his right wrist.

He vaguely heard the priest gasp, then begin murmuring prayers.

Simon wasn't sure how much blood it would take, so he'd wanted to go for a spot that would provide plenty. Fat droplets of crimson fell from the cut and splashed into the hole left behind from the Veen's spike.

The power runs through your veins.

The priest's prayers grew louder. The poor man was no doubt praying for Simon's soul, thinking he was trying to commit suicide atop his dead lover.

But that thought and the priest's prayers faded as Simon's body began to pulse. A strange, warm pulse, that seemed to bubble from a source deep within him and spread, like a ripple over water, through his veins.

The power runs through your veins.

More, thicker beads pumped from his wrist and splattered onto Jade, each one a sanguine raindrop, falling and rippling in its own right into a life-giving pool.

Blood drives everything. It gives us all power. Gives us life.

Blood was what drove Jade as the wolf. What sealed the bonds of magic. It bound families together. Made lovers hard.

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Blood was life.

Simon began to feel light-headed, but he held steady. The warm pulses from his core were still strong, the flow unfaltering.

Come back to me, Jade. Please...

He watched Jade's face, hoping for a sign. Any sign. His soft dark stubble stood out in relief against his alabaster skin. His full, sensual lips had a blue tinge to them, yet still looked firm and supple. His long eyelashes were black whispers against his cheeks.

Simon's legs suddenly felt weak. He dropped his sword to clutch the edge of the altar to steady himself. The clatter of his blade on the stone was a startling sound in what, he suddenly realized was silence. No more murmured prayers. He understood why when the priest's arms encircled his waist, and the old man's surprisingly strong body offered support.

Simon leaned on him, but continued to hold position with his right wrist poised over Jade.

But...was it his imagination or was the flow slowing?

No. Not imagination. Because the rippling sensation inside him had slowed as well, easing back, like the spigot on the well had been turned down. And, eventually, turned off.

One final small droplet hung, in suspended animation, from his wrist, quivering for a long moment, before its weight pulled it free.

Simon watched it in fascination as it fell. It landed dead center of Jade's injury...and sizzled.

Something in Simon's chest squeezed and held. The priest

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stood unmoving as well.

Utter silence hung over the church.

And then white light burst from Jade's wound, like spiking rays of purest sunlight. Simon and the priest took a step back, holding their hands up to protect their eyes from the blinding display. The light began to swirl around Jade's body, pulsing, much as the well inside Simon had pulsed as he bled.

Then, in a swift retreat, it coalesced into a sparkling, twining strand, and, much to Simon's shock, rushed toward him and was absorbed into his chest, into his heart.

Simon stood, trembling so hard he wasn't sure he could stay upright.

The priest stared at him, hazel eyes wide with shock in his wrinkled face. "Who are you?"

"Simon?"

The soft, raspy whisper curled like the comforting, homey glow of firelight around Simon, drawing him in.

He took a step, then two, then closed the distance on his shaking legs, tears already blurring his vision. But not so much he couldn't see those beloved silver eyes open and beckoning to him.

"Jade," he breathed, stumbling to his knees next to the altar and resting his head against Jade's.

"There was a hole in the world," Jade whispered. "But then you came and filled it with light, and everything was okay again."

CHAPTER 8

This time, instead of cold, it was heat that woke him. He lay on his side, and the heat radiated through Jade's body from behind, searing into his skin, sinking into his muscles, and causing a bone-melting relaxation to creep through him that almost, *almost*, made him want to close his eyes again and slip back into sleep just to keep from losing the sensation.

In truth, though, he wasn't tired any longer. He felt well-rested. But that didn't mean he wasn't content exactly where he was.

Darkness surrounded him, but for the first time in, well, he didn't know how long—maybe ever—he felt no immediate need to sniff for danger or scope out his surroundings. Along

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with the relaxed feeling, a strange sense of peace and security enveloped him.

The bed he lay in was familiar and cradled his body in soft comfort, as did the pillow beneath his head. But when he stretched and felt strong callused fingers flex against his abdomen, he realized the heat-generating body behind him was what gave him the most comfort of all.

He reached down beneath the covers and folded his hand over the broad, possessive hand already resting there, and smiled when the fingers twined through his.

More details filled his senses... The warm, even breaths against his neck. The gentle, steady rise and fall of the solid chest pressed to his back. The spicy, soapy scent of clean male, mixed with a musky undertone of latent arousal. And the tickle of kinked hair and the hot, half-erect cock nestled in the crease of his ass.

The warm figurative fingers of relaxation that had been working Jade over, very quickly became warm fingers of other, more urgent sensations. An ache began deep in his balls, a tingling tripped along his spine when he turned his head slightly and the warm breaths puffed against his ear instead of his neck, and he couldn't resist the instinctual need to grind back into the groin behind him.

Jade eased the hand on his abdomen lower, guiding it to his filling shaft. Roughened fingertips complied, brushing over the head, around the underside, then back up again in a lazy motion. Jade sighed in appreciation, and let his own fingers play along the length in light strokes as the other hand

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continued its leisurely exploration of the tip. Then they traded places, the larger palm skimming over his hand, their fingers meeting, lingering in a tender caress, before moving apart again.

After a few minutes of that, Jade was hard as a rock, and craving more. But there was something satisfying about not being rushed. About savoring the moment. It made the ache of anticipation that much deeper.

The fondling hand moved lower, tickling over his balls, tracing each one, then cupping them both and rolling them in a gentle motion that pulled a soft moan from Jade. The first sound to break the silence other than his and his lover's breathing.

The hand glided up again, this time wrapping around his entire shaft, folding it into a grip that wasn't too gentle, wasn't too hard, but was just right. It tugged on him in easy but insistent motions, slowly tightening, then pausing to skim down to his balls for a squeeze, before returning its attention to his cock.

Jade pushed his groin into the massage and moaned again. The gloriously hard body behind him pressed closer, until he was lost in a dark, hot ride between his cock being masterfully stripped in front, and a hard log of flesh sliding against his crease from behind.

Not wanting it to end too quickly, he slowed his pace, and his lover did as well, then released him. Jade felt shifting behind him and the heat against his back disappeared. But not for long. The bed dipped, the covers were stripped off his

SHATTERED

body, and it was back.

Long fingers encircled his cock again, teasing, squeezing. The pad of a thumb rubbed over his slit, smearing the wet, sticky evidence of his desire before moving away again.

He lay waiting, not wanting to look or speak, and getting even more aroused by the anticipation of what might happen next.

He wasn't disappointed. The hand returned, and this time when it gripped him, it was slicked with lubrication. It coated his cock and balls, slipping, sliding, and when it began stroking him again, it was almost like having his cock sheathed in a tight, well-lubed ass. He thrust into it with ever-increasing passion.

It felt like heaven and at that moment in time, he couldn't image anything being better. Until a sleek, lubed finger pushed between his cheeks and breached his opening. Jade bit back a groan, but couldn't contain it and it rumbled free when the finger pushed deeper.

He drew up the knee of his top leg toward his chest in invitation, opening himself up and making his asshole more easily accessible.

A second finger joined the first, stretching him wider, moving in and out, causing a whole new desirous ache in him, this one centered around his ass. The slick hand in front continued its erotic manipulation of his cock, as the one behind worked yet another finger into him.

Jade's pulse thundered and his breathing grew ragged. He closed his eyes and whirled in the dark, spinning, sensual

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seduction.

It was everything he wanted...and yet not nearly enough.

"Please..." he rasped, the single word expressing it all.

The fingers pulled out of him, and were replaced by a blunt insistent probing at his pucker.

Jade panted as the thick, well-lubed head pushed past his first ring of muscle, paused, then breached the next, in a gradual torment that turned him on something fierce. The muscles of his pelvic floor pulsed as the cock moved farther in, inch by agonizing inch. By the time he was completely impaled, his lover's shaft buried deep and hot and throbbing within him, Jade felt more full and stretched than he ever had in his life.

They stayed that way for long moment, not moving except for the hand now slowly and lovingly rubbing each knob of Jade's spine. Once again, though he burned to be ridden, wanted to feel that thick rod stroking in and out of him until he couldn't breathe, there was something to be said for the closeness and intimacy borne of taking it slow.

He closed his eyes again and savored every sensation, feeling each one more fully and with more appreciation than he ever had before. Never, ever would he take this for granted. The man behind him, inside him, and so deeply entrenched in his heart made him complete.

But soon, the urge to move became critical. As if their bodies were fully in sync, they found an urgent rhythm that quickly had them both moaning and panting, seeking ways to go deeper, deeper so they could be as close as possible.

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“I just want to crawl inside you as far as I can get and never come out.”

The soft, hoarse, emotional words from behind him caused Jade’s arousal to spike and his chest to squeeze tight with love.

The thickness buried in him pulled out suddenly, leaving Jade empty and aching. His body cried out in silent protest.

He heard the scritch of a match being struck, then saw the tiny flicker of golden light, which blossomed into a bigger light. A candle. The glow didn’t reach far, but it flickered and danced, illuminating the big soft bed that Jade knew sat in the middle of a large, open loft apartment.

His heart pounded and his cock thrummed anew when he was rolled onto his back, his knees were pushed to his chest, and as quickly as he’d been deserted, he was filled again with a single thrust.

In the candlelight, he got his first sight since he’d awakened of the man he loved. It flooded his heart with a warmth Jade had never felt with anyone but him.

Simon.

Simon leaned down and captured Jade’s mouth in an emotional kiss that stoked the fire burning within them both into a white-hot flame. Jade grasped Simon’s shoulders and shifted back, pulling him deeper into him. They both moaned.

“Oh, God...need you, Simon. Love you.”

“Love you. Always.” The words were warm and sweet against Jade’s neck.

They surged into motion, rocking together, hands seeking,

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mouths tasting, their soft cries and moans swallowed in hot, needy kisses.

Jade's release hit suddenly and with an intensity that tightened every muscle in his body, arched his back, and exploded in copious hot bursts of cream that coated both his and Simon's hands where they'd been stroking him off. At the same time, Simon plunged into him one final time and stayed, his body shaking and his cum flooding Jade's passage.

Even after they'd both spent the last of their seed, Simon didn't move out of or off of Jade. And Jade was glad. He was in no hurry to break their connection. Having Simon on him, inside him, all around him, was more than he'd ever hoped to have again after the church.

He raised a hand to the strong, lean cheek and pulled Simon's face close. Their foreheads touched.

"Thank you," Jade whispered. It was the first opportunity he'd had to say the words, and none had ever been more important. "Where I was, before you came for me... It wasn't..." His voice broke.

Simon lifted his head and gazed down at him, his handsome face twisted in pain.

"I don't know how you brought me back, but..." Jade choked back a sob that suddenly caught in his chest. "But I'm just really grateful you did."

"I couldn't live without you, Jade. I'd move heaven and earth for you."

Something in his expression made Jade think he might actually have done that very thing.

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“Why do I feel so...healthy? I was thrashed. I should still be a mess.”

“I gave you my blood.”

Jade drew in a shaky breath as understanding and the enormity of what Simon had done for him hit.

It was followed by a sudden surge of worry.

“Things like this, what you did, bringing me back from the dead...” Jade took a hard swallow. “They pretty much always come with a price, Simon.”

Simon’s face hardened, but not because of Jade. Jade could read him well enough to know Simon’s anger was directed elsewhere.

“Maybe. But I don’t care about the price.”

“You should care,” Jade whispered.

Simon’s cock slipped free, and he rolled onto his side, taking Jade with him until they were lying face-to-face, legs entwined.

He pressed a kiss to Jade’s lips and brushed the hair back from over his eyes. His expression was fierce, yet heart-meltingly tender. “There is no price too steep for having you here and alive. No price. I need you, Jade. I need you like I need to breathe.” He dragged in a deep, shaken breath. “*More* than I need to breathe. So we’re not going to talk about prices anymore, okay?”

Jade gazed at him, love flooding his heart for this man who carried the burdens of humankind, and a certain werewolf, on his shoulders. Though he suspected the “price” Simon didn’t want to talk about was going to rear its ugly head in the future,

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as was Jade's own debt to the Fae queen, Jade was just so damned grateful to be alive and be here with Simon still, that for now, for a while, he was willing to pretend it didn't matter.

"The needing thing...I know exactly how you feel," Jade said softly. Memories of the desolate darkness where he'd been before Simon had brought him back crept through him, making him tremble at what awaited him on the other side. "Promise me you won't ever let me go, Simon."

Simon pulled him close, brushing his lips over Jade's, then resting a hand directly over Jade's heart, where the Veen's spike had entered. "I will *never* let you go."

In a world gone mad, that was all that mattered.

M. L. RHODES

Award-winning and bestselling author M. L. Rhodes has been writing for a living for fourteen years. Her characterization and emotional storytelling have received high critical acclaim from such places as *Romantic Times Magazine*, *The Romance Studio*, and *JERR* and have garnered her numerous awards in the writing industry.

In her gay romances, she enjoys pairing together strong, independent heroes who are open to exploring both their sexuality and their emotions. Men fall in love with one another every day, and M. L. believes in celebrating that.

If you'd like to keep up with what's going on in M. L.'s world and find out about her new and upcoming releases, check out her website at www.mlrhodeswriting.com. She also loves hearing from readers. You can reach her at ML@mlrhodeswriting.com.

* * *

**Don't miss *Vertigo*,
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available at AmberAllure.com!**

Each night Simon Saint-Saëns hunts the creatures of darkness that others fear—beings that come through dimensional rifts into our world from a world called Vertigo. Simon has unexplained superpowers that help him fight, but his is a desolate existence, fraught with danger. He works by himself and never allows anyone to get too close to him because his powers come at a terrible cost—a secret he's never revealed to anyone. Better to be alone than jeopardize the life of someone he cares about.

Enslaved in Vertigo for years, Jaden Cole was one of the innocent lives Simon saved when he first started hunting. Jade had almost forgotten what it meant to be human...until Simon found him and brought him back to this world. But when their friendship turned into something more, Simon sent Jade away and cut him out of his life to keep Jade safe.

Nine years later, when a new, powerful evil stirs to life in Vertigo and targets Simon as its enemy, Jade returns. He's not the same innocent he was all those years ago, though. Now he has his own secret, one that could turn Simon against him, even force Simon to kill him. But Jade's willing to risk everything, even his life, to save the man he's always loved.

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