

Aeromancist, The Beginning

Excerpt

Lann was a keeper, but he didn't keep. She knew it from the gossip snippets, but also from intuition. She got up abruptly. "It's getting late."

"Of course."

He immediately pushed back his chair. His compliance both surprised and disappointed her, and the latter sentiment scared her. But Lann acted oblivious to her turmoil. He took her hand and led her down the dimly lit hallway past the garden that was dark now, except for two spotlights that cast the trees and shrubs in a veil of green light. Every part of her body was aware of his strong fingers folding around hers. Her nerve endings came alive, making her skin tingle with an electric crackle. Even if she wanted nothing more than to escape the disturbing sensations, pulling away would only demonstrate that she was affected, so she did nothing but to experience it in silence.

At the library door he stopped, took a key from his pocket and unlocked the door.

"What are you doing?" she said.

"I want to show you my library."

"I've had the tour."

"But not by me."

He ushered her inside until she stood in the center of the room. During the day the broad windows let in plenty of natural light, but now they were dark, and the dim ceiling spots cast the wood in a warm glow that washed over her with the welcome scent of the ink and leather. Lann flicked on the light, and, as always, she looked at the spines with the embossed gold titles in awe.

He led her to the back of the room where the most fragile books were displayed in a glass cabinet, and surprised her by unlocking the door with a cylinder key from his keychain.

"Would you like to touch them?" he said very softly, close to her ear.

She put a bit of distance between them and dared to glance at him. "You'd let me?"

He opened a drawer under the cabinet and pulled out a box of white gloves.

"Here." He handed her a pair.

She started to pull them on, but her hands were shaking and she battled to fit her fingers in the holes. Suddenly, his hands were on hers, finishing the task with sure, strong movements.

"Thank you," she mumbled, trying to appear casual.

"Old verses about magic. One of my favorites." He placed her palm on the page, his big hand covering her gloved one. Her heart and breath started to do funny things. Kat should have only wanted to lift the book from the padded interior, to turn the pages, to hear the crackling of the paper, but all she could focus on was the tall Russian who manipulated her hand, working her fingers to gently turn the pages. Her body felt hot, her mind fuzzy.

"Why the interest in old books?" she said in an attempt to steer her thoughts away from this touch.

He gripped her chin and turned her face toward him. "Do you always talk your way out of situations you feel uncomfortable in?"

Her eyes widened at his arrogance. And at the truth of his observation. She opened her mouth but found no words of defiance.

Thankfully, Lann let her off the hook by dropping the subject. For a while they looked at the books in silence, Lann waiting patiently until she had had her fill.

When she returned the gloves, he left them in a basket on the side, and said, "Come. I want to show you something."

"There's more?"

She followed him to a narrow staircase in the corner. At the bottom he turned to give her a smile, a gesture that almost seemed encouraging.

"What's up there?"

"My den."

She couldn't help but be curious. He led the way to the top level where a landing broad enough to walk on ran around the shelves. There was a door in the corner. As she waited for Lann to unlock it, she took everything in—the smell of the books, the way the wood glimmered in the dim light, the feeling of being Alice in Wonderland, about to pass through a secret door. It was so low even Kat had to bend to pass through it. It made her expect something small, maybe a tiny storeroom with more books, but it was a big, comfortable room with a slanted ceiling and a skylight through which she could see the stars. The walls were covered with wooden panels and lined with shelves full of books. It was fitted with an oversized desk, a leather sofa and a wrought iron four-poster bed. The carpet was a rich burgundy color and the bed linen deep shades of red. Cushions were scattered everywhere, even on the floor. It looked like the perfect place to read. A den, just as he had said.

She smiled. "This is cozy."

"It's the vault. It's fireproof, so this is where I keep the most precious books."

She looked at the skylight. "Even with that?"

"It's fitted with a metal shutter that closes automatically in case of a fire."

Her eyes fluttered to the bed. "You sleep here?"

"No, I don't sleep here. Sometimes I read here, until late, but that's what the sofa is for. The bed is for making love."

Her insides scrambled like broken eggs. Her body flushed. He had stepped up to her, standing close to her now. If she took a deep breath, her breasts would touch his chest. She shook her head, making her curls tumble over her shoulders. "Why are you showing me this?"

"Why do you think?" he said softly.

She stood very still, aware of the silence stretching between them, until he lifted his hand, and with one finger gently traced the curve of her breast.

Kat took a step back. "I have to go."

He tilted his head. "But do you *want* to?"

"Yes," she said, battling to find her voice.

"I don't think you do."

"How would you know?" She failed miserably at sounding annoyed. Instead, her sentence broke off on a needy croak.

"Your breathing is shallower." He took her hand in his. "Your palms are sweaty." His eyes lowered to her breasts. "And there are other signs."

She gasped in horror, because he was right. "Shock provokes the same symptoms."

"Whether it's shock or need, the pleasure I'd give you would be no less intense."

She turned on her heel and hurried down the stairs to the exit, eager to escape into the dark, cool night. She ran into the garden until she stood in front of the statue of Saint Teresa.

Lann followed her outside, but he did so in his own sweet time, leaving her alone for at least a minute to calm down, or maybe to sweat it out. When he stopped short of her, she took a step back.

He frowned at her. "I never force, Katherine."

His proximity was disturbing. "I'm going home, Lann."

He seemed to consider it for a while. "Give me one good reason why you won't stay."

"For starters, I'm serious about my studies. I've worked hard to get where I am. I don't have time for relationships or casual flings."

He nodded. "We can work around that."

"No," she said firmly, "we won't work around anything. Thank you for dinner. I'm leaving now."

"Alright," he said, "I'll tell my driver to take you home."

The fact that he gave in so easily should have had her sighing with relief. Instead, it scared her.