

Dreamspinner Press Presents

DAYDREAMS



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“CAN you love me?” Hayden’s voice was husky with longing and suppressed desire.

Jeremiah thought about it. Could he? Blindfolded and swinging bare-assed in the breeze, he found it an interesting question. It might have helped if Hayden hadn’t been the one to put him in this situation in the first place.

“That was not a rhetorical question.” Some of the longing left Hayden’s voice, driven out by the hard-edged tones of a man not used to being disobeyed. Those tones shivered across Jeremiah’s skin, like steel and leather.

“I’m not sure,” Jeremiah replied, surprised to find it was the truth—that, after all the energy he’d spent trying to escape the man, he still found the thought of loving Hayden attractive.

His answer was met by silence and then an increase in warmth as his captor stepped closer. Still not touching him, Hayden made his presence felt nonetheless. Heat spread down the length of Jeremiah’s back, radiating from Hayden’s armored body. Hayden’s breath teased the hair curling at Jeremiah’s nape, making Jeremiah’s cock twitch.

“I climbed the mountain in pursuit of you,” Hayden whispered, the words caressing his captive’s ear. “I ran the Valley of Streams. I braved the Ebon Forest. For. You.”

The strength of emotion running through those last few syllables had the harsh crack of a whiplash. Apprehension

curled through Jeremiah's belly, cut by a curious sense of anticipation and heightened by the beginnings of desire. He refused to let it temper his answer. "You would have done the same for any other."

Now Hayden did lean close enough to touch, the hardened leather armor of his hunting jerkin softened only by the wool and velvet of his over tunic and the cloth of his breeches brushing Jeremiah's thigh. His scent, the smell of sweat and hide and steel, closed around them.

"Oh no," Hayden murmured, his lips nibbling at Jeremiah's ear. "I would have set the dogs on the others. No possession of mine is left abandoned."

The bitterness welled in Jeremiah's throat, choked out in the next words he spoke. "You'd rather see it torn apart than lose it? Then why not me?"

Death, for a long moment, seemed more attractive than the ache in his arms and wrists—infinately more attractive than the growing pain in his shoulders and upper back. To his surprise, Hayden stepped away.

"Why not destroy you?" There was hurt and shock in the hunter's voice. The man crossed behind Jeremiah, circled beneath the spreading branches of the ebon yew in which he'd hung his prey, and came to stand before him. "Because from you I want something more."

Another unexpected emotion stirred in Jeremiah's gut. "You've a funny way of showing it."

Hayden sighed. "True, but you ran. Why did you run?"

"I had my reasons." Jeremiah pushed up on his toes, trying to ease the slow-burning fire crawling through his

muscles. He had his reasons all right. They weren't many, but they were his—the dream, for one, then his fear that Hayden would discover what he truly was, and the third? The third was a little harder to explain. It was something he hadn't wanted to acknowledge even to himself. Now he'd have to face it and decide.

Hayden reached up, laying the palm of one leather-gloved hand along Jeremiah's cheek, brushing a thumb along Jeremiah's eyebrow. "I should let you down," he said.

"I'll only run again," Jeremiah told him.

"No. You won't." Hayden replied, reaching to his belt and removing the leather hobbles that hung there. He was ready when Jeremiah kicked out at him, giving his prisoner a feral grin as he caught the man's foot.

"Why, thank you," he said, locking the hobble's leather cuff around Jeremiah's bare ankle. Putting the foot down, he stepped on Jeremiah's toes and had soon completed securing him. Reaching up, he released the rope holding Jeremiah aloft, something in the set of his face warning his captive against trying another attack.

Not that he could have attacked, Jeremiah thought, fighting to keep his feet as Hayden towed him closer to the horse and looped the rope through his saddle. Not at all. His arms were aching from holding most of his weight, his wrists burned, and he had trouble staying upright when he moved. The hobbles upset his sense of balance, reducing the parameters in which he usually moved, and his crushed toes were still screaming.

Hayden swung into the saddle and nudged the horse into a walk, leaving his captive to stumble along behind.

It was true the hunter had climbed the mountain and run the Valley of Streams in pursuit of him. It was also true he had braved the Ebon Forest and set the dogs on every other slave that had fled his possession. These facts helped Jeremiah realize that he had, perhaps, not been imagining what he'd thought he'd seen in his master's gaze. Perhaps he had not been overly wishful about the nature of his master's touches or the reasons behind the increasing frequency with which he'd been called to walk at his master's side.

Stumbling out from under the ebon yew's shadow and into the light of a full moon, a hunter's moon, Jeremiah tried to push those memories away. What his fate would be now, he dared not guess. Instead, he focused on putting one foot in front of the other and not tripping. Easier said than done, as the path was stony and rocks hid amongst the tufty grass at its side.

He fell once, grateful when Hayden pulled the horse to a halt while he righted himself and scrambled back to his feet. When he fell a second time, he fell hard and only the rope prevented him from rolling down the mountainside. Jeremiah lay still, trying to regain his breath, to refocus his mind through a patterning of stars. What, he wondered, had he hit his head on?

This time, the cessation of hoofbeats was followed by the soft thump of Hayden dismounting.

Jeremiah flinched as Hayden's boots came to stand beside him and flinched again when a strong arm looped itself across his shoulders and his captor dragged him upright. Resisting the urge to melt into the man's arms, Jeremiah studied the trail, which curved down around an

outcrop of rocks, the trees either side of it growing closer together until the moonlight could no longer break through.

“You ride with me,” Hayden said, removing Jeremiah’s hobbles and taking him closer to the horse.

It whickered in protest and sidled away, earning an oath from its master. Only by trapping it against the trunk of a tall tree could Hayden get it to stand still long enough to push Jeremiah into the saddle and place his hands over the pommel. Wrapping his captive’s fingers around it, Hayden mounted behind him, keeping a tight rein on his mount.

Jeremiah could have told him why the beast was suddenly restive in spite of the long days of pursuit, but he didn’t. That was one portion of his identity he wanted to keep for himself.

He couldn’t help it if the animal could sense a predator in him. Hell, if that bothered it, the horse should be responding to Hayden the same way. Heavens knew the man was more of a predator than Jeremiah, and maybe a touch more dominant to boot.

The thought made Jeremiah wonder why he hadn’t shifted to his beast form when he’d fled, but he had good reason for that—he didn’t want Hayden to find out what he truly was. He had kept the secret he’d been taught to keep since he’d been old enough to change. He’d been protecting his family and its heritage.

Thoughts of his family, of his father and mother, opened a pit of hurt inside him that forced his thoughts to other matters—like the strong arms circling his waist, the warm thighs pressed against his own, the hard ridge of desire nestled against the small of his back. Hayden wanted him.

In spite of the gathering fatigue, the idea of it brought a curve to his lips and Jeremiah was glad it was hidden in the dark. As Hayden's warmth soaked into his aching muscles, and the rocking of the horse's gait soothed him, Jeremiah let exhaustion take its toll. He had neither the energy nor the means to repeat his escape—not yet.

HAYDEN felt the tension go out of his captive and tightened his grip on the man. Stubborn creature! He knew Jeremiah felt the same attraction he did, had seen the slave's covert glances, watched him sigh and turn away as though he thought his feelings misplaced. Stifling a growl of frustration, Hayden kept the horse moving until he was certain Jeremiah was under.

When no sign of returning consciousness stiffened the man's limbs, he eased his mount to a halt and waited. His dogs weren't far away—even though he'd chosen to capture Jeremiah alone, he never hunted without them.

They eased out of the darkness within a few heartbeats, causing the horse to shift nervously in spite of their familiarity. It was used to these beasts, however, and stood still as the largest of them grew into a man and took hold of its bridle.

“Malchisor,” Hayden murmured by way of greeting, and he was acknowledged by a dip of his security chief's head. “Aren't you getting too old to lead the hunt?”

Malchisor raised an eyebrow and studied him. "I am never too old to guard my lord's back," he replied. "Even when the hunt is as long as this one."

"He did not shift," Hayden said.

"No," Malchisor agreed, and Hayden thought he heard respect in the man's voice. There was also a kind of wistful regret as he added, "The hunt would have been longer if he had."

They stared at each other for a moment in which the world seemed to pause, Hayden with his arms wrapped possessively around Jeremiah's waist, and Malchisor gripping the reins of his master's horse. Beyond them, in a solemn circle of long-coated grey and black, sat the hounds that made up Hayden's personal guard.

At a nod from the security chief, one of the more wolf-like creatures resumed the form of a gangling dark-haired youth and approached. Fumbling at the pouch that hung from a leather collar around his throat, the youngster took out a soft muslin bag reeking of herbs and magic. The youth's face twitched with distaste as he held it out, and Hayden wondered what the man had done to earn the duty of carrying it. He said nothing, however. Discipline among the guard was Malchisor's responsibility, and the pack leader would brook no interference.

Taking the bag, Hayden shifted his grip on Jeremiah's still form and held the muslin over his captive's face. The action caused the man to jerk in his arms and lift his hands from the pommel, but the movement was short-lived as the potion took effect. At another nod from the security chief,

two more of the guard took human form and eased Jeremiah out of Hayden's arms.

Neither spoke as they held him upright while Malchisor handed the reins of Hayden's mount to another. As though responding to an invisible signal, the remainder of the pack became men, armed and armored by magic as they retained their protective circle.

"Did she travel with you?" Hayden asked.

"No, my lord, I did not." The prim tones came from a large white owl that flew out of a nearby oak and landed lightly on the ground before becoming shrouded in a column of mist.

Hayden waited while the mist dissipated and his sorceress stepped forth. "My lady," he said. "So glad you could join us."

She smiled briefly and turned to face him, resting slender fingers on his shoulder. "My lord," she purred, "the pleasure's all mine." Taking in Jeremiah's slumped form, she tilted her head and studied Hayden's captive. "Where do you want to arrive... your dungeon? He's very pretty."

Her comment brought quickly smothered grins from the guard, and Hayden felt his cheeks color. "You know where, Lady Ysmani."

The smile was gone, and her expression was more somber than he'd seen it before. "Yes, I know where, my lord," she said, and her eyes grew dark until he saw storm-swept forests in their depths. "Take care you do not break him, for you will break with him. There will not be another who can mend you if you fail to bring his heart to heel."

Malchisor moved as though to strike her, but Hayden raised a hand. "It's prophecy," he said. "Leave her be."

With a shudder, the sorceress blinked and swayed. Only the hand on Hayden's shoulder kept her upright long enough for the storm clouds to clear and her eyes to return to normal.

"Stand back," she ordered. "I will open the portal here." Her hand indicated two upright boulders. "You traveled far. The return journey will not be as long." She hesitated, her gaze traveling between Hayden and Jeremiah. "I hope he's worth it, my lord."

Again, Hayden's upraised palm stilled a bristling Malchisor. His voice, when he answered the sorceress matched her serious tone. "As do I, my lady. As do I."

JEREMIAH woke with the lingering bite of magic in his nostrils and the all-male scent of someone else close by. He was still bound, manacled this time, and by silver if the itching of his wrists and ankles was anything to go by. Smooth sheets and soft blankets covered him but did not conceal the fact that he was buck-naked... and most definitely not alone.

The hard body curled against his back belonged to no one he knew, but the scent was familiar. Still sleepy, his brain fumbled for its identity, while his body enjoyed the warmth of the skin against his own, the weight of the arm cast possessively around his waist, and the hard length of an erection nestled between his buttocks.

Outside the manacles and weight of chain, there was something vaguely wrong about all this, but he couldn't quite identify what it was. For all he knew he'd found refuge and was trapped in some strange dream while he recovered from his escape... except that he hadn't escaped. That thought jolted him awake faster than any other, and the scent found a name. Hayden.

His body had barely tensed for flight than the warmth behind him shifted and the hunter's weight bore down on him. Gods, the man was fast. Pinned on his side, one of Hayden's large hands immobilizing his wrists, one of Hayden's legs trapping his own, and the hunter's body lying the length of his, Jeremiah found he couldn't move. Worse, he found he didn't want to.

"Tell me you haven't dreamed of being in my bed." The hunter's voice was rough with suppressed emotion. "Tell me this isn't where you want to be."

Jeremiah couldn't. The truth was, the situation he was in was uncannily like the dream, except therein, he'd been chained differently... first on his front, while the hunter had worked shay oil into his skin, and then on his back. He sighed, glad that his rapidly growing hard-on was hidden by the way he was lying.

"Now tell me you don't want me to ease your hurts."

A hand tangled in his hair, stroked down Jeremiah's neck with enough pressure to unknot muscle. Jeremiah groaned.

"Do you remember the dream?"

The dream. How could Hayden know about his dream? Heat slithered through Jeremiah's belly. Tension caught in his chest. Part of his mind screamed at him to run, while another part told him to stay, to enjoy, and to yield and dare to hope. He shivered.

"Do you remember how you were bound?"

Jeremiah remembered, only he didn't recall being restrained by silver. Why had Hayden chosen silver? Surely.... He tensed again, ready for flight... and allowed the hunter to soothe him with meaningless sound and long, tender strokes down his neck. When the tension was gone, the hunter continued.

"Do you remember? I want you like that. I want to love you like that."

"You can't love me."

Hayden's head dipped closer, until his nose and lips touched the side of Jeremiah's throat. The hunter inhaled moving from collarbone to jaw line. "I can," he murmured. "I've loved you from the moment I saw you."

"Not possible," Jeremiah protested.

His argument made the hunter pause and lift his head away, giving Jeremiah room to breathe. Hayden's next words stole that breath away.

"You're not the only one to dream," he said. "I've sought you the last two years gone. You've haunted my dreams for three."

Three years. The same distance in time marking the first day Jeremiah had felt the restlessness descend on his soul.

Two years. It marked the day he'd given in to that restlessness and left his family's mountain plateau. Hayden had held him captive for two and a half seasons and never mentioned the dream. What had made the man wait so long?

"I was hoping to win you more gently... but you ran. Now...." The hand over Jeremiah's wrists shifted, separating them. The hunter stretched, stretching Jeremiah's arm with him, reaching over him so Jeremiah had a close-up view of his chest before being rolled to face slightly away.

Chain rattled and Hayden gave a grunt of satisfaction. Still pinning Jeremiah's lower body, he took the other wrist and turned Jeremiah so that he lay face down. "Now, we have only the dream."

"How do you know?" Jeremiah asked as Hayden manacled his other wrist to the opposite side of the bed.

"About the dream?" Hayden murmured, shifting so that he sat astride Jeremiah's waist.

Jeremiah nodded, barely able to form words as the hunter stroked down his arms and rubbed calloused hands across his shoulders.

"Dreamcatchers."

The word made Jeremiah bury his head into the pillows and jerk futilely at the chains holding his arms apart. "No," he groaned. "No, no, no, no."

His struggles made Hayden drop against him, wrapping him in the muscled warmth of his arms and cloaking him with the heat of his chest. Neither provided much comfort.

Every secret he'd tried to keep was gone. Dreamcatchers would have caught them all. For as carefully as Jeremiah guarded his thoughts when waking, there was little he could do to control them while he slept, and his worries had plagued his dreams. It was why his father wove protective magic around their home—magic that protected the plateau from discovery and kept their dreams safe within the walls of their cabin or campsite. It was why Jeremiah had worn the amulet, but the slavers had stolen that from him the day of his capture.

He'd given the amulet no thought, too wrapped up in being taken prisoner when he was used to roaming free. After that he'd been too focused on escape before his true form was discovered or on daydreams of Hayden. All his care to keep his family safe had been for nothing. Jeremiah swore, jerking at the chains again, and heard Hayden shush him.

"I knew what you were the first time I laid eyes on you," the hunter whispered.

"And what was that?" Jeremiah heard tremors of fear and desire as he spoke.

"Mine." Hayden's response was a throaty growl. "Now, relax."

Jeremiah felt the hunter's weight lift away from him but didn't move. The manacles were of stronger stuff than he could break, and the silver lining prevented him from shifting. Besides, Hayden's answer had left him uncertain of what the man knew... until he remembered the dreamcatchers, and even then he felt he had to ask.

"How many did you see?" he asked.

The blankets were peeled back when Hayden lifted off him. Strong hands tugged first at one ankle, then the other, spreading his legs as they had been spread in the dream. Chain jangled as it was refastened.

“Dreams?” The bed dipped as Hayden returned to it and worked his way up the mattress until he could kneel astride Jeremiah’s back.

“Yes. Dreams.” Defeat rode Jeremiah’s voice, and tears nibbled at its edge.

“All of yours.” Desire gave Hayden’s reply a rough edge. The exotic scent of shay oil filled the room.

Jeremiah pressed his face into the pillows to hide his tears, fought to control the fear in his voice. “Please don’t hurt them.”

His words made Hayden become still. “Who?”

“My family. Don’t hurt them.” Jeremiah turned his head, trying to catch Hayden’s gaze. “Please,” he whispered.

Instead of soothing him with promises, Hayden leaned down so that his lips touched Jeremiah’s ear. He rested his hands lightly at the base of Jeremiah’s neck and smoothed outward along the man’s shoulders. “I would never,” the hunter said, repeating the motion, “harm you or yours.”

When Jeremiah remained tense beneath him, he repeated. “I knew what you were from the moment I laid eyes on you. I found your home within the season. Your family is unharmed. They believe you will return. They do not know I hold you captive.”

That explained much. Jeremiah remembered the brooding looks he'd caught when Hayden had first purchased him, remembered the long stares that had made him so uncomfortable on the return journey to the hunter's fortress. He also recalled the hunter's absence shortly thereafter.

"You visited them?"

"I was a weary traveler in need of hospitality. How could they refuse?"

Jeremiah groaned. How indeed?

"I left them unharmed."

"And your dogs?"

"Malchisor and Underweldt left them unharmed also."

"And the rest?"

"Were on guard here, making sure you did not escape."

"My sister?"

"You only have brothers," Hayden replied, "much to your mother's dismay."

That response alone eased most of Jeremiah's fears. It was true.

Hayden's hands resumed their long even strokes across his shoulders, soothing him, making other parts of him long for the hunter's touch, making him remember the dream. Jeremiah closed his eyes. In spite of his fears, the dream always seemed right, and the restlessness that drove him from his home had ceased the day he entered the walls of Hayden's fortress. He'd just been unable to reconcile the fact

he was no longer a free man with the fact that he might have reached his destination.

The scent of shay oil grew stronger, and Hayden's hands moved lower, his fingers pressing deeper into Jeremiah's still-sore muscles. Jeremiah groaned, and Hayden answered by continuing the ever-relaxing pressure of his palms. With each stroke, the dream became more real and another of Jeremiah's fears receded.

The smell of shay oil blended with the hunter's own aroma of leather and steel. The combination smelled enticingly like somewhere he belonged.

"Will you ever come to love me?" the hunter whispered, and Jeremiah let the thought sink into his mind, considering the possibility.

HAYDEN moved his hands down Jeremiah's back, watching his captive relax and wanting more. "Will you ever come to love me?" he whispered, and he let the idea settle. In truth, he'd skirted around the question before he'd ever seen Jeremiah in the slaver's cage.

He hadn't lied when he told Jeremiah he'd dreamed of him for three years; nor had he completely told the truth. The first dreams had been of companionship and loyalty, but they'd rapidly shifted into more. A bond had grown between him and the dream man who walked at his side, and Malchisor had grown concerned. Together they had consulted the sorceress.

Lady Ysmani had looked into the dreams and been delighted. “He is the one for you,” she had said, “but you must be careful how you woo him, for the secrets he carries he considers a sacred duty, and he will let none reveal them.”

“Am I to know what they are?” Hayden had asked.

“You will know them all.” The sorceress’s smile had been enigmatic, but not even her continued counsel had prepared him for the reality.

Running one last pass over Jeremiah’s back, Hayden kneeled between the man’s thighs and focused on his buttocks. Deep strokes to unlock the muscles, tight from two days of running, were what his captive needed, but kneading out the soreness was not what Hayden wanted to do. He tried to focus on the dream and what it demanded, tried to block all thought burying himself in Jeremiah’s body and riding him until he cried out with release. With Jeremiah’s taut ass beneath his fingertips, it was an almost impossible task.

Drawing on all the discipline and patience that made him successful in the hunt, Hayden pulled his mind back from all thoughts of pleasuring his dream man and forced himself to continue working out the muscle tension in Jeremiah’s legs. This was hunting of another kind, and he’d be damned if he’d fail to bring his quarry down.

That idea created pictures of Jeremiah kneeling before him, his lips parted in anticipation. The image brought an answering throb to Hayden’s groin as he imagined his captive’s mouth gliding over him, taking him in, seeking the pleasure of his taste. He imagined Jeremiah’s hands on his

ass, holding him close as his tongue caressed the length of him, and his mouth worked its magic on Hayden's cock.

Jeremiah's groan brought him back to reality, and Hayden focused on the man's feet, glad he'd taken the trouble of bathing them both before sliding between the sheets the night before. Malchisor had been far from amused, but his security chief and lead dog had made no comment as they tended to Jeremiah's comatose form.

Hayden ran his hands over Jeremiah's sole once more, smoothing away the rigor of their massage with a broad, warm palm, before undoing the chain closest to him. Moving back up the bed, he freed the chain holding the corresponding hand.

"Roll," he ordered, and he smiled when Jeremiah obeyed without thought.

"It's the dream," he soothed when consciousness slid into Jeremiah's eyes and alarm followed in its wake. "Remember the dream."

As he spoke, Hayden refastened the chains and released the other hand and foot. He saw the idea of resistance flit across his captive partner's mind and noticed when it was abandoned.

"Another time, you might resist me," he said, and he was rewarded by the faint smile that touched Jeremiah's lips.

"Another time, that might be fun," the man agreed, and he yielded to the dream as Hayden refastened the chains.

Hayden forced back all thoughts of that other chamber he'd prepared. He'd had a few lovers, but none would be as

rewarding as this one. This one was forever—the dream promised it. The sorceress assured its meaning... but first he had to win Jeremiah's trust, then the man's heart.

He sighed and straddled Jeremiah's chest, unashamed that his desire showed clearly in the rigor of his cock, and hopeful his partner felt the same.

JEREMIAH opened his eyes as Hayden's weight settled over him. Momentary panic had him flexing against the manacles and chains that held him, but he pushed it away. This was the dream, and in the dream no harm came to him. No harm, he reminded himself as Hayden's hands descended toward his face.

Light touches traced lines along his forehead, his cheeks, and his jaw, tempting him to try and take a nibble. He didn't—it was too soon for such play. For now, he'd settle for the dream. Later... he sighed... later he would indulge in the temptation to take a bite. His eyes watched the ripple of muscle along the hunter's arms and across the man's chest as fingers stroked their way across his lips and down his throat. Firm palms smoothed the gathered tension from his shoulders and explored the planes of his chest. Thumbs brushed across his nipples, causing him to gasp.

Hayden shifted back down his stomach, lifted himself over the hardening erection Jeremiah could no longer hide, and spread shay oil over Jeremiah's chest, along his flanks, and across his belly. Reaching the top of his thighs, the

hunter paused, resting his hands on either side of Jeremiah's groin.

"This is where you decide," he said. "Do you think you can love me?"

This was the point where the dream had always ended, leaving the choice entirely up to Jeremiah, nothing foreordained, predestined or dictated by fate. The choice was all his. Hayden's question gave him pause. Could he love the man now poised above him?

Looking up, he studied the hunter's face, tracing its lines with his gaze while considering what he knew of Hayden. True, the man kept slaves—it was the way of things in this land—but he treated them well... except for those who escaped. That raised a question.

"The slaves...."

Hayden sat back. "The ones who run?"

"The ones the dogs...." Jeremiah couldn't bring himself to finish the sentence.

One corner of Hayden's mouth twitched, then the other, until the hunter pressed his lips together to keep them still. Looking briefly toward the ceiling and then back down, the hunter finally allowed himself a smile. "They're given a choice," he said. "To repay their blood price in labor on another of my estates and then accept my employ, or find their own way back, or to be sold on to another master. They're captured, not torn apart."

"But...."

Hayden shushed him. "It would do my image as a hunter no good if I let people think my slaves ran roughshod over me, now, would it?"

Jeremiah remembered the strict hierarchy of the world in which Hayden lived. He thought of the noblemen and women he'd seen visit, and the merchants with whom the hunter dealt. His master was right. Any sign of weakness and none of those in Hayden's care, lord, dog, or slave, would be safe. Others would seek to rule in Hayden's place. Jeremiah felt another part of his resistance fade at Hayden's words.

"My family," he said. It was a plea.

"We'll visit them so you can see their safety for yourself."

"The future?"

THAT made Hayden pause. "Future" could mean so many things—the times ahead or the children necessary to continue a family line. "We'll ask the sorceress," he replied. "Perhaps she'll be willing to guide us."

Hayden watched as the tension slowly leached out of Jeremiah's body and noted the wariness diminishing in his eyes. He stroked his way down Jeremiah's chest, keeping his palm flat against the man's skin.

"Do you think you can love me?" he asked as he watched his partner's cock twitch against the flat planes of his belly. "I already know what you are... the silver proves

that. Can you love me, even if I won't let you change form this time?"

At his words, he saw Jeremiah relax.

"Mrow," his captive said, and it was enough.

Hayden refreshed the shay oil on his hands and slid down between Jeremiah's legs. "Let me taste you," he said, and he stooped to lick the hard swell of his partner's balls.

Arousal and desire coated his nostrils as he lapped teasingly at them before pulling them one at a time into his mouth. They were full, satisfyingly hard between his lips. He took them individually and worked his tongue over them, Jeremiah's gasp of surprise and pleasure music to his ears. When he was satisfied he knew their taste, he gently gripped the base of Jeremiah's straining erection and ran his tongue all the way to its tip, eliciting another yelp of want. Chains rattled as Jeremiah pulled at the manacles around his wrists.

With a smirk of satisfaction, Hayden licked the salty droplet forming at the slit. It was all he wanted and more, the flavor full of spice and tempting. For a moment, he thought of taking the whole thing into his mouth, but he decided against it. That, he decided, was for another day, one when Jeremiah's lips were enclosing him and they could pleasure each other. Definitely another day, he thought, swirling his tongue around the engaged head and wringing an oath of frustration from his prey.

Reaching up, he tweaked Jeremiah's nipples, rolling them between his fingers and thumbs until his partner bucked beneath him; then he dipped his hands in the shay oil once again and massaged downward, tracing his way

around to Jeremiah's buttocks and the tight rosette nestled between them.

Slowly, he worked one finger inside, and then a second, before beginning a gentle thrusting motion that had Jeremiah begging for mercy. When he slipped a third digit inside and repeated his question from before, Jeremiah's oath left him in no doubt. Gently he withdrew his fingers and fitted his erection between the man's cheeks.

The feel of those tight muscles enclosing him was almost his undoing, and he paused, refreshing the shay oil so that no harm came to his partner. "Do you want more?" he whispered. He watched Jeremiah's hands curl in frustration around the chains and heard the wantonness in the man's full-throated growl as his lover thrust his buttocks against him.

With the last movement, Hayden pushed all the way in and began a rhythmic stroking that had Jeremiah whimpering with pleasure. All the while, Hayden watched his lover's face, saw passion shifting to fulfillment as the man's seed spilled between them, and observed as contentment followed when he emptied himself deep within.

"I have loved you for an age," he heard Jeremiah whisper as he lay against the man's chest.

Later, when he decided to take those words at face value and undid the manacles and chains, Hayden wrapped his arms around his partner and felt Jeremiah melt into his embrace.

"I'm not going to wake up holding an angry stormcat, am I?" he asked.

Jeremiah wriggled sleepily against him and wrapped his hands about Hayden's forearms. "No," he replied, "just a very contented one."

WHEN Hayden woke, it wasn't to any kind of cat, but to an empty bed and a cool breeze blowing in from the balcony. Jeremiah was sitting on the balcony edge, dressed in leggings, boots, and a warm tunic. He was looking toward the mountain but turned his head as the hunter pushed back the covers.

"What are you doing out there?" Hayden asked.

Jeremiah regarded him with a solemn stare. "Perhaps I was thinking of running," he said, one eyebrow quirking upward in suggestion.

Uncertainty ran through Hayden's heart, soothed only when he noticed the slight twitch playing at the edge of Jeremiah's mouth. The man was teasing him? He could only hope, because in spite of the set of his mouth, his partner looked serious. The hunter strove to keep his tone light.

"You know I'd have to punish you, if you did." It was a suggestion.

Again he saw Jeremiah's eyebrow rise. "You'd have to catch me first," he declared, coming to his feet and placing his hands on the balustrade. For a moment it looked as though he was getting ready to leap over it, and Hayden surged forward to grasp his arm and pull him away from the edge.

“I could take you back to bed and persuade you otherwise,” the hunter declared.

Jeremiah jerked his arm free and took a step back toward the edge. “You’d have to do more than that,” he snapped, but he couldn’t stop the smirk that crossed his face and betrayed his teasing.

It was all the invitation Hayden needed. As Jeremiah turned away to place his hands on the balustrade once more, Hayden reached out and wrapped his hands around the man’s waist. Spinning his lover back toward the bedroom, he seized Jeremiah’s arm and pulled the man around to face him. Before Jeremiah could do more than gasp in protest, Hayden flipped the man over his shoulder and began carrying him inside.

“I have just the place,” he growled in mock anger, “in which to teach you a lesson in respect.”

He felt Jeremiah laughing against his back and could have sworn he heard his partner mutter something like “I can hardly wait.”

ELLIE MOONWATER lives and works in Hobart, Tasmania. When not in the office, she enjoys walking some of the most beautiful and wild countryside in the world and dreaming of romance for all, in places near and far.



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Published by
Dreamspinner Press
4760 Preston Road
Suite 244-149
Frisco, TX 75034
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

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Cover Design by Mara McKennen

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Released in the United States of America
January 2010

eBook Edition
eBook ISBN: 978-1-61581-311-7