



## **Menagerie**

*A Torquere Press Single Shot by BA Tortuga*

Trying not to fret was just making Guy fret more. Lord knew, it wasn't like the vet was late, or anything. Just new, and Guy had never met the fella who replaced Old Doc Hardamon and wasn't sure how long it would take and that poor little filly was in a bad way. She'd gotten all tangled up in a fence, thanks to some idiot kids from New Jersey and the only thing kept him from ripping their little heads off was the need to take care of the horse. Animals were more important than spoiled kids whose parents paid them no mind any day.

Guy petted the poor girl as she shivered, talking low and soothing, avoiding the bad spots as he went. Bless her, she'd done a real good job of tearing herself up. He squinted out the doors, hoping that new doc showed up quick.

A little black pickup pulled up and a youngun stepped out -- no, more uncurled than anything else -- bag in hand. The kid stopped once to ask Hank a question then headed right towards him. Lord. That kid couldn't be old enough to be a doctor, could he? Guy would just have to

give him the benefit of the doubt. "Right over here," he said when the kid was close enough to hear. "I've got her patched temporarily, but she really did a number on herself."

Pale eyebrows drew together and the kid nodded. "What happened? Oh, poor thing, what did you get into?" The doctor bent down, murmuring and unafraid, hands gentle on her flank.

"She hit a snow fence going full tilt, couple of kids chasing her, throwing rocks. Got tangled right up and panicked." He kept his voice low, holding the filly's head.

"Oh, now that's just not right." The doc worked quick, irrigating the worst of the wounds and closing them up, moving with the filly as she stomped and shifted. There wasn't a bit of hesitation, or uncertainty in those oversized hands. The kid was good, and damned if Guy wasn't impressed.

The soft low voice murmured and chattered, the doc keeping the filly distracted as she got sprayed with antibiotic and given a shot. "She's gonna be sore tomorrow, but most of the cuts were superficial. I'll want to come out day after tomorrow to look at that shoulder."

The gloves were snapped off those huge hands and one was offered to him. "AJ Kershner. Pleased to meet you."

"Guy Mason. Good to meet you, too. You getting settled into Doc Hardamon's rounds?"

They shook hands, and he jerked his head toward the bunkhouse. "You want a cup of coffee?"

"Oh, yeah. That'd be nice. I wouldn't mind seeing my new patients either, if you have the time. Don -- Doctor Hardamon -- told me y'all'd keep me busy." The doc's stuff was packed up, quick and easy, the filly checked over one more time and given a bit of carrot from one deep pocket.

"Yeah. You get this many greenhorns about a bunch of animals and things go crazy." Shaking his head, Guy led the way. They'd get coffee and he'd sign the release to add today to their monthly bill and then he'd walk the new Doc through the barns. "Which makes me sound like I don't like the folks that come here, and I do right enough, I'm just peeved at those kids."

"With good reason. Little beasts ought to know better than to hurt critters." The doc ran his hand through his shaggy mass of hair, pushed up his glasses. "How many mounts do you keep here?"

"Depends on the season and the money, I guess. Right now it's high season, so upwards of fifty, I'd say. The rest run in a herd most of the year and we bring 'em in as we need em." Damn, that coffee was strong. He poured out for both of them, leaning against the pitted counter in the tiny bunkhouse kitchenette.

"Do you give them feed and hay?" The doc pulled out a notepad, started jotting stuff down. "And do you hire out to have their feet cared for? Everyone 'round here recommends Emily Pecina, but I haven't met her yet."

"We've got one wrangler who can do basic farrier work, but we call Emily if something comes up that Lane can't handle." The new Doc wasn't bad to look at and surprisingly easy to talk to. Guy wasn't usually so easy around someone new. 'Course the way AJ'd cared for that little filly went a long way.

The doc drank the coffee without a flinch, nodding. "I'll have to meet her, get her in to look at my bunch of beasties."

"I imagine you've got a pile of them." Well, now, the Doc was more likeable by the minute. Anyone who could drink Fred's coffee without a twitch was strong.

"Lord, yes. Seems like every lost or half-broke critter in the state heard a new sucker... er... vet was about." He got a grin, full-out and simple, the wire-rim glasses shifting on the long nose.

It was all Guy could do not to gape. That smile was pure D lethal. "Yeah. Happens that way, I bet. You'll be wanting to see the facilities now."

"Yessir, I would, lest you're too busy. I can make arrangement to come another day." The doc rinsed out the coffee cup just like he lived there, drying his hands on his jeans.

"I got the time. Boss usually lets me cool off for a bit when an animal gets hurt for no reason." Way to go, Guy. Sound like a maniac.

"There's a good man for you." The doc nodded just like he was making perfect sense. "That's part of the reason I'm not living in Chicago playing with spoiled little kids' poodles. Hate to see a critter mishandled."

Well, that made sense to him as well. "Yeah. That and there's no place to go in Chicago that you don't run smack into another person." They'd go to the horses first, and then he'd spring the petting zoo on the Doc. "You from Graybull originally? Or somewhere else?"

"Fort Riley, Kansas, originally, though I've spent a little bit of time in a lot of places. Last long term place was College Station down in Texas. I've been here a few months, slowly learning the land."

"Lord, you're gonna hate the winters up here." That made him grin. "You gotta get some chains for your truck and make sure you've got a good winter coat."

"Yeah, I need to hunt me up a coat, but Don is actually getting me set up with a decent pickup and chain before he heads to Florida." The doc's eyes were green and grey, picking up

the colors of the ground as they rolled. "I figure I'll be a Popsicle for a year or three and then I'll have antifreeze for blood like the rest of you."

"Your feet are what you gotta watch. Here you go." They had a nice set up for the horses, the boss had seen to that.

"Oh, yeah?" The doc's voice trailed away as they went into the stable yard. Every stall was peeked into, every damned horse touched and offered a bit of sugar or carrot or apple. Hell, the man even took a little vial of the water, just to make sure the critters didn't need anything added to their feed.

No wonder Doc Hardamon finally retired. He found a good replacement. The old man would never leave his babies unless he did, but Guy was glad to see the care the fella took. He loved those horses enough in his own right, so he could understand.

"How long have you been here?" The doc pulled a cocklebur out of a dark mane, chuckling as a little roan nudged his hand, looking for some love. "They sure know you."

"Not quite two years. Came down from Montana." Patting noses and scratching ears, he went down the way. "Watch that old paint. He bites."

"Thanks." The paint wasn't avoided, just watched careful, the doc taking care. "I hear Montana's pretty."

"Looks a lot like Wyoming." He actually winked, and felt his cheeks heat up almost painfully. What the Hell was he thinking, flirting like that?

The doc grinned wider, ducking the paint's head as it swung about. "So, big old sky, mountains, cowboys. Real pretty."

"Yeah. Definitely big sky country." The Doc was right down cute. Too damned young, but cute as a button.

"So tell me, how long do I have before I freeze to death, you reckon? I've got a pack of dogs and a pot-bellied pig that need me desperately..."

"A pig, huh?" He chuckled, sidestepping a pile that someone hadn't cleaned up yet. "Won't start getting cold for a good month and a half, but come November, you'll be ready to have all those dogs and the pig in bed with you."

The doc's laugh filled the barn, warm and happy and bright. "Well, now, I know I'm new in town, but I reckon sleeping with your pet pig's a tad desperate. The Shetland on the other hand..."

That cracked him right up. They laughed together until his ribs hurt. It was... well, it was damned nice. "Yeah. Well, won't be long before all the single women from Greybull to Kane are coming around looking to take the pig's place."

The doc pinked and shook his head. "Oh, they're welcome to bunk down with Elmer -- he's a snuggly old pig and could keep them warm, but I don't think I'll be welcoming any of them up at the house."

"You want to see the next batch of critters, Doc?" He waited for the nod before leading AJ on out to the next outbuilding and set of pens. He was just gonna love the menagerie the boss kept for the kids. "Why is that? You a confirmed bachelor? Already married?"

"Oh, I'm not married. Women and I just don't get on, as a rule." The doc's cheeks were rosy, the grin almost sheepish.

"Oh." Oh! Down, boy; that could mean just about anything. Well, not anything, but more than one thing. "Well, here's what will keep you in business, Doc."

"Oh, look at that!" There was that laugh again, enthusiastic and happy, the critters all bleating and rustling and hustling over to the fence, thinking it was feeding time.

Good to see that the man was unflappable as far as geese and donkeys and goats went. Guy got a handful of feed and spread it out among them, talking and petting. The doc just waded right in, checking the donkey's ears and looking at the nanny's teeth. Hell, the man even went over and looked at the box turtles and the rabbit cages. That was all right with him 'cause he got to sit back and watch. The Doc was all knees and elbows and big feet and hands. That made his face heat again. Lord, he shouldn't be thinking on that.

It reminded him a little of a colt, one just about to grow into a stallion, but still enthusiastic, still wanting to run in the fields and play.

'Course, thinking of the man as a stallion was not the direction he ought to be heading. Well, Hell. He'd have to watch that line of thinking, 'cause he was gonna be around the Doc a good bit if it went true to form. Doc Hardamon had never given him this trouble.

"Hmm?" AJ had asked him something and he had no idea what.

"I was wondering if y'all'd like a llama. I have one. He's friendly and pettable." Those eyes were just dancing.

"Oh, I bet the boss would fall over at the chance." Guy grinned right back. He couldn't not. "But those things spit."

"Bumper doesn't spit. Much. He's got some powerful gas, though. I tell you, he can kill entire swarms of mosquitoes with one... blow."

"Oh." Shit. He just about fell over laughing, and the animals scattered, squawking and flapping and bleating. "I'll check with the boss, but I'll bet he'll take him. Want me to come over and pick him up?"

"It would be very much my pleasure. In fact, I'll feed you in return." The doc gave him a quick grin. "Assuming of course you like spaghetti. That's what I know how to cook. Spaghetti."

"I like it just fine." When was the last time he'd laughed and blushed so much in the space of an hour or two? "I'll just give you a call after I talk to the boss?"

"Sure enough." The doc dug a card out of his wallet, scribbling a phone number and address on the back in a neat, square hand. "Just give me a holler. I have rounds until five, but I'm free after."

"Sounds good. I'll give you a holler." They walked back to the Doc's truck, and Guy watched him get ready to leave with real disappointment.

"Do. Hell, even if the boss says no to Bumper you could come and have spaghetti and meet my menagerie." He got another smile, a nod. "I promise not to let Bumper smoke you out."

"It's a ... deal." He smiled, and he was pretty sure his cheeks were gonna start smoking. He'd almost said date. "Thanks for stopping in, Doc."

"My pleasure. Tell those kids they hurt that filly again, Doc Kershner'll send the boogeyman after them." He got a wink. "See you later, Guy. Have a good day."

"You too, Doc." He patted the truck's door as he helped close it and stepped away. Well. Well, well, well. The new Doc not only knew how to handle his work just fine, but he was also one of the most interesting folks Guy had met in a long time. He'd better go talk to the boss. He had a spaghetti dinner he didn't want to miss.

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The water was boiling, the sauce was simmering, the bread was ready to put in the oven, the salad had been poured out of the bag and into a bowl, Ginger was sitting on the edge of the table reaching for Koko's cage...

"Ginger! You get off that table right now. Salt, Pepper, you too, I can hear you both thinking about it." AJ grinned as the kittens scattered, the cockatiel squawking furiously from his cage and the dogs giving chase up the stairs.

That left Elmer, sitting in his bed beside the back door, looking piteously at the empty food dish and grunting. AJ grinned at the little black pig. "No sir. You're on a diet after that last fridge fiasco."

He grinned as Elmer snorted. There was nothing quite as amazing as your pot-belly learning how to open the fridge and declare open feeding night for everyone in the house. Well, maybe the aftermath of Snuffy and Thing 1 and 2 barfing liverwurst the next morning. Good lord.

"Y'all just be good tonight. I got company coming." Mighty fine, dark-eyed cowboy-type company coming and heaven knew he hadn't had such a nice visit with someone in ages. Don had told him that Guy was a good man, quiet, solid, took up for the horses.

Don was so right.

AJ shook his head and put plates out on the cabinet, digging in one drawer and another for forks. One day he'd get this funky old house fixed up and pretty. Hell, he'd fallen in love with it at first sight -- even if the one third story room was falling apart and the space heaters on the second floor whined.

Until then, at least the critters had room to explore.

A solid knock on the back door interrupted his thoughts and he looked out to see a beat up rust colored pickup in the yard, trailer attached. Looked like his guest was there. Sure enough, when he opened the door, Guy stood there, hat in hand, in a good pair of jeans and a dark green shirt. "Hey."

Oh. Oh, most definitely fine. He gave Guy a happy grin and they shook. Man's hand was warm. "Hey there, Guy. Come on in."

"Thanks." Guy stepped in looking around curiously and sniffing. "Smells good."

"Thanks. My mom insisted my brother and me learn to cook one dinner and one breakfast apiece. Spaghetti was mine." He led Guy through the kitchen and into the front room with its ragged old mismatched couches and bookshelves. "There's a hook there for your hat. It'll keep the critters off of it..."

Speaking of critters, there came Thing 1 and 2, barreling down the staircase in a blur of tan, Snuffy bouncing quietly behind, Salt held in her mouth.

"Snuffy, put that kitten down, she'll smell like dog drool for days." He grabbed the twins' collars before they could leap at Guy, their tails beating the hell out of him.

Laughing easily, Guy hung his hat up before squatting down and getting a snootful of dog lovin'. "You weren't just a-woofing about the menagerie, were you?"

The twins were in puppy heaven, licking and wagging and panting, little butts going ninety to nothing. AJ rescued Salt and gave Snuffy a stuffed animal to carry around -- senile old thing -- all the while just watching how Guy didn't seem to mind being adored at all.

"They sure aren't shy." He got a serious look out of those so dark eyes. "I always figure you can tell a lot about a fella by the way his animals react to people."

Oh. Oh, a man could find himself in a world of hurt over looks like that. "Yeah? I hope they're making a decent impression."

"They sure are." The man looked back down at Snuffy, who finally made her way in between the twins, raggedy old doll hanging out of her mouth. "Well, hello there, old lady. What's this you got, hmm?" Guy proceeded to love over the old girl, scratching her ears gently.

"She's my baby-girl." AJ grinned, leaned against the door frame and admired the square shoulders, the way that sandy hair faded right out at the nape of Guy's neck. "I got her for Christmas when I was ten years old."

"She's a doll. And doing pretty well for an old lady, I'd say." They dogs got more than their fair share of loving before Guy finally stood, looking at his drool coated hands ruefully. "I'll help you out if you need, but I'd better wash up first."

"Bathroom's right through there. I'll put the plates on the table." He let the pups out into the yard and took the time to give himself a firm talking to. Ogling and lusting over cowboys would at best get a man ostracized and at worst, get his ass beaten to death. No ogling. None.

Elmer grunted as he put the noodles in the water. "Hush, you. I didn't ask for advice."

"No, but I bet he gives it all the time. Pigs think they're smarter than everyone else, you know." Guy came back in, hands in the back pockets of his jeans. "So what can I do?"

"You can put the bread in the top oven, please. And there's soda and milk and beer in the fridge, if you'd like." He grinned as Elmer watched the strange man, grunting and snorting and letting the world know they had company. "Elmer, this is Guy. Guy, Elmer the Wonder Pig. Oh, yeah, the key for the padlock on the fridge is in the freezer on the door."

That got him another one of those bright smiles, the kind that transformed Guy's quiet, serious expression so completely. "He get into the fridge, did he?" The bread went into the oven and Guy turned to Elmer. "Pleased to meetcha, Elmer."

Elmer grunted and nodded. Silly pig. "Yeah, he did. Thing 1 and 2 barfed for days and I swear Ginger still has cheese in her fur."

Snuffy wandered in, Pepper in her mouth this time and curled up next to Elmer, going right to sleep while ignoring the outraged looks of kitten and pig.

"Never gets boring, does it." While Guy talked he opened the fridge and got a beer. "You want one? That old goat we have, that was the boss' daughter's. She named him Petunia. Anyway, he managed to get into the feed shed one day. Everyone got to eat to their heart's content. You ever seen a goose with bloat? Ain't pretty."



"Oh, good Lord." He laughed hard, the image of a swollen goose tickling him almost as much as the image of the goats teasing it. "Yeah, I'll take a beer, please."

He got the one Guy had pulled out, top popped for him and everything, and Guy pulled another one out, locking the fridge and leaning back against the counter, ankles crossed. "So how did you end up here? Ad in a trade journal or something?"

"No, actually I did some research for Don while I was in school. Y'all had something that was causing spontaneous abortion in the cattle. I was doing some immunology work then and he was afraid it was a virus." AJ took a deep swig, then stirred the noodles. "I just happened to figure out it was a bug in the water. I flew up and we managed to contain it and we got to be friends. When he heard I was graduating, he invited me up."

"That's impressive, the immunology thing. You oughta be somewhere doing that kind of work for good money." That made twice in one day Guy had winked at him. Lord.

"Oh, 'cause you can tell I got into the field to do heavy research." He grinned wide and dared to wink back. "No, I love what I do. I want to look back in thirty years and say I was a part of things. Well, I wouldn't mind a few more acres and to fix my house up, too."

God, he was a dork.

"This is a great old place. Got lots of history." Guy's cheeks were pink. The man did seem to get flustered a lot, or maybe Guy just felt like a dork, too, because his face went red a good bit.

"Yeah? I saw the place and knew I needed it. I have great plans for it. One day. If the pups don't chew it down first." He drained the pasta and plopped it in a big green bowl, grabbing it and the salad. "If you'll get the bread, I'll grab the sauce and the dressing on my next trip through."

"Sure." They got the table set up and got all the food laid out without any tripping over kittens or knockdowns by Elmer, so he figured they were doing good. And the way Guy tucked into the spaghetti told him it must taste all right, so he could relax on that count. They chatted about the town and the people, about the ranch and how that filly was doing and whether cable TV was worth the cost or not. It felt good, lazy and peaceful and just about easy.

When the plates were scraped clean with their bread and the salad bowl was empty but for a few wilted scraps, Guy leaned back in his chair, groaning and patting his belly. "Damn. That was just fine, Doc."

AJ smiled over. "Yes, indeed. Nice to have good company over supper. Thank you."

"Hey, I'm the one should be thanking. It's nice to get away from beans. I mean, Lord knows I like beans. It's in the cowboy handbook that you gotta. But when you're trying to give guests the Real West Experience you end up eating them every night." Looking around cautiously for critters, Guy stood, offering to take his plate.

He handed it over and gathered up the food bowls. "I bet. I imagine sometimes you just want a hamburger and fries and a cold Coke."

Of course, a diet of beans sure made for a pretty nice view from the back...

"Yeah. The best parts are the breakfasts, though, I gotta admit. We do eat well then." Easily sidestepping Snuffy and the, oh Lord, wadded up paper towel she'd dug out of the trash, Guy headed to the sink to and started rinsing plates.

"Yeah? I'm a regular at Lou-Anne's coffee shop, myself. Gotta have my coffee and eggs and an hour to settle my brain first-thing." He picked the paper towel up, pulled Salt out of the trash and Pepper off the top of the fridge and let Elmer out while not letting the hooligans in.

He heard Koko squawk and grinned over at Guy, shaking his head. "Ginger, I swear to God, you'd best leave that bird alone..."

"Oh, now. How's that cat supposed to fight all those years of instinct and leave that bird alone?" They laughed together easily. It was nice. Real nice.

He dug them each out one more beer and took the icebox cake out to warm. "Would you like to see the house? Or the outside critters?"

"Oh, the house. Always wanted to see the inside of this place; way it sits up here on the hill we all see it as we go by, you know?" That pink-cheeked look was back. "Not meaning to be nosy, or anything, mind."

"Of course not! Man, this old place looks like something out of a movie. Come on, I'll tour you." He handed Guy one of the beers and motioned him out. "You've seen the kitchen and the dining room. The front room was the parlor, once upon a time, I think."

He showed Guy the living room -- all empty of furniture and covered with peeling wallpaper, stacked high with boxes and building materials. "This is my staging area. Easy to get stuff in, easy to keep the beasts out."

Guy nodded. "Good to have a plan. Bet this was quite the showplace once."

"Once upon a time, yeah. I figure I've got plenty of time, I'll just work at it one room at a time." He closed that door and led them to the little room beside the stairs, warm and cozy, well-lit, the iguanas lounging on their rocks. "This is the reptile room. There's no room for them at the clinic and this way I can keep an eye on them." He gave Guy a look. "I don't suppose y'all need an iguana or two?"

"Good Lord, no." Guy looked horrified. "The kids would be letting them loose all over and we'd have lizards popping up in the guest cabins. Thanks all the same."

They laughed and left the iguanas to their naps. "They were Don's. I keep telling him to take them to Florida, but he insists someone here will want them eventually."

They wandered up the stairs. "Now the upstairs only had two rooms even started, but there's one functioning bathroom and one not, and four bedrooms altogether."

He turned the light on in his office, the room a mess of file cabinets and boxes and computer parts. "Eventually most of this will move into the office down in town, but I'm trying not to crowd Don out."

Guy had been trooping along behind him, peering in doors and nodding. Now he grinned. "The man probably wants you to, Doc. He needs a shove if he's really gonna go to Florida, of all places. Lived here all his life."

"Yeah, he's talking about leaving in three weeks. Says his arthritis needs it." The last room was his bedroom with his huge old bed and massive chest of drawers. This room was the most finished, all done in navies and maroons, the hardwood floor sealed and shining, Granny's old rocking chair by the window.

"Oh, this is nice." The room really did look nice, and it seemed to draw Guy, because the man took a few steps in and turned full circle, looking. "If you do up the rest of the house like you did this room it'll be a heck of a looker."

AJ just beamed, pleased as all get out. "You think? I redid the headboard myself, it's got reading lights and everything." He walked over and turned on the lights, showing off the drawers and finish.

"That's some good work. A man of many talents, you are, Doc." When he turned around Guy was blushing again though for the life of him he couldn't figure out why this time.

"I'd show you the third story room, but it's boarded up. I'm going to have to get someone better at this than I am to look into fixing it."

"Better safe than sorry. We got a fella at the ranch, more handyman than wrangler, name's Tighe. He can probably help you out. He does love a challenge."

"God knows I have enough of those with the house and the critters and learning the lay of the land." He motioned Guy over to the big window, pointing down at his big barn and the little feed shed. "Those are both mine, along with the dog pen in the back."

"Nice set-up. And you know, after the tourist season is over, a good many of the hands will be looking for something to do indoors part of the day. You'll probably have all the help you

can handle." Guy was practically on top of him, looking out the window, close enough for AJ to smell his aftershave.

"That would work. What do you do after tourist season is over?" Oh, God. He was getting a stiffie. Perfect. Think baseball. Work. Slogging through mud.

"Well, I stayed on last year, worked with the animals. Boss keeps a smaller crew, in the winter and mostly we keep the watering holes free of ice and keep the cows fed. We're still a working ranch, you know? Some of the guys move into Greybull for the winter, work at the plant." Guy brushed against him, soft chamois shirt rubbing his arm.

He shivered at the touch, felt his whole body get warm. "Are you staying around this winter? Maybe help the new vet learn to survive the snow?" Oh, God. Please say that husky, oh-fuck-me-now voice wasn't his.

"Yeah." Guy sounded a little clogged in the pipes himself. "Got me a good place here. Figure I might as well keep it. And I'll be happy to help out, teach you how to keep warm." Oh, Guy's cheeks were just on fire.

"I... I'd like that. A lot." A whole lot. Damn. Just... damn.

"We're on, then." Slowly, as if he were a skittish foal, Guy moved away. "So. How about those outside critters? Bumper, the llama?"

"Yeah." He swallowed hard, belly filled with butterflies. "Let's go down and meet the others."

"Right behind you, Doc."

He wandered down the stairs, wondering idly if his room would still smell any like Guy later on. He sure hoped so. "Watch when you head out. There's a wolf hybrid in the dog pen and he bites. I'm probably going to have to put him down, but I'm trying my damndest to give him a chance."

"Mistreated? Or just wild?" Damn. Guy *was* right behind him, so close that when he stopped Guy plowed into him.

He couldn't stop the soft groan when that heat hit him, shoulders to ass. "Owners thought a wolf was just another type of dog, threw him out in a kennel when he tore up their sofa."

"Oh. Poor old thing." Warms hands closed on his shoulders, Guy steadying both of them. "Any idiot should know a wolf needs company, being a pack runner. Sorry 'bout that, Doc."

"No problem." Oh, there went that huskiness again, rough and low. "He's a beautiful creature, six months old, blue eyes, but nothing I've done has eased him."

"I'll be careful." A slight squeeze of his shoulders later, Guy was moving again, stepping up and opening the door for them.

It was easier once they got outside, Elmer and the puppies pushing around them. The wolf paced in his pen, watching them. As they got to the pasture fence, he saw Susie come limping up, a passel of goats following her. "Hey, Little Susie! How's it going?"

The little three-legged pony bobbed her head, whinnied.

A soft chuckle reached him and he glanced over to see Guy shaking his head. "Lord, Doc. This is worse than the petting zoo. You're a brave fella."

"I think the word you're looking for is fool, but I'll take brave." He dug in his pocket for some sugar cubes, moving everybody aside as he hunted Bumper.

"Nope. It's the fools who take on animals they can't possibly take care of 'cause they didn't do a bit of research. God, that wolf is a pretty thing. Be a shame to have to put him down."

"Isn't he? I'm damned tempted to find him a female, someone to run with. I'd hate it if he jumped her, though, managed to hurt her." Bumper came easy out of the barn. The big old critter loved attention and would be happier at the ranch, getting petted. "You should hear him howl, Guy. It's like magic."

"Yeah. I bet it is. Well, howdy you weird looking thing. This must be Bumper, yeah?" He liked the way Guy just took it all in stride, not looking at him like he'd grown two heads or some such.

Bumper just headed right over, nibbling at his pockets, hunting a treat. "Yep, this is Bumper. You'll not find a better tempered or stinkier beast on God's Earth."

Patting Bumper's neck easily, Guy grinned. "Well, he'll get his share of company from Petunia, and from the burro, Shortstack. And the kids. Boss still has two young ones that live at home."

"Yeah? You got any kids, Guy?" Please say, no. No, hell, I'm *gay*, AJ. Gay and fine and I just happen to be a cowboy in the most heterosexual state on Earth.

"Nope. Never got married, and I always believed you needed that before you got kids." Those cheeks went pink again, those blushes a barometer of how embarrassing Guy found any given subject. "Like you said, women and I have never really gotten on, so it wasn't much of a consideration."

Oh. Oh, wow. Wow. He gave Guy a quick look, patting Bumper's neck. "Must be a lonely way to go. Know it has been for me."

"Yeah." He got a look too, out of the corner of Guy's eye. "I mean, I only get to Casper or Billings a couple of times a year, you know? And that's my best chance to get me a bit of company, but I'm not much on casual, so more often than not the chance slides right by."

"Yeah. It wasn't too difficult in school to meet people of like mind, but casual isn't my way." He swallowed hard. "Thought I might be getting myself in a mighty empty scenario, coming here."

"It's surely not the easiest thing." The foot shifting and throat clearing was getting to the animals, who felt the sudden tension in the air.

"No. No, it's not." He nodded, letting the subject drop. There was no reason to let this good, easy evening get all bumpy on the edges. "Let me grab a lead rope for Bumper and I'll help you get him loaded."

"Yeah. I ought to be getting back, I suppose." That grin was back in place, tension leeching away. "The kids will have a fit over him and it will be an hour 'fore I can get him bedded down."

AJ nodded, grabbing a lead rope. "I'll stop out Wednesday, look in on him and the filly. Make sure everyone's doing okay."

They got Bumper loaded, which was an easy, if stinky process, and Guy locked the gate in place on the trailer. "Sounds good. I'll look forward to it. I just need to go in and get my hat."

"Come on in. Would you like a cup of coffee for the road?" He opened the door, watching as the pups piled in after, Elmer settling on his pillow.

"I shouldn't, but I think I will." The pups made a beeline for Guy as soon as the man sat down, and he laughed and scratched and patted.

He pottered and fixed a pot of coffee and cut a slice of chocolate cake to give to Guy. After all, he wouldn't eat it all.

"Oh. Cake. Oh, damn." That was pure bliss on the man's face as he took the first bite.

"Good sight better than beans." He cut himself a piece and settled, Snuffy stretched out over the toes of his boots.

"Heck, yes." The cake was practically inhaled, but Guy seemed happy enough to keep him company while he ate his.

"Thank you for your company, Guy. The critters and I have had a ball." His drank down his coffee, feeling warm and happy and settled. Okay, horny, too, but he could ignore that.

Mostly.

"I enjoyed the heck out of myself." They were quiet for a few more minutes, just grooving on the easy feel, and finally Guy climbed to his feet and grabbed his hat. "Ought to get that llama back to the ranch, I suppose. You come on by."

"I will. Drive safe." He gathered the dishes up, opened the backdoor just as the wolf howled. "See? Magic."

"You know it, Doc."

\*\*\*

It was Wednesday. Had been all damned day, and that was nothing unusual, except that the Doc was supposed to show up sometime on Wednesday to check on the filly and look in on Bumper. Guy was on edge waiting for him, had been all day, a fact that had not escaped Tighe, or Lane, who gave him Hell for being a grumpy old bastard.

Guy just snarled at them, and they scattered, and he apologized an hour later, and they laughed. Those fellas knew him too well, and he had no doubt that they were off somewhere putting Crisco in his hat or begging Cookie for bean sandwiches for dinner.

As it was, it was late in the afternoon, near on to dinner, when he saw that black pickup coming up the drive, and something tight in his belly went loose as he walked out to meet the Doc halfway. Somehow he was afraid he'd scared the man off.

"Howdy, Guy!" The doc looked tired, but happy as a pig in shit. "Damn near thought I'd have to cancel on you. Liz Randall's mare got blocked up trying to foal and I thought for a bit we'd lose 'em both. How's the day treating you?"

"Better all the time. And you ought to be happy here, then, as that filly is doing a sight better than she was." They shook hands, and Guy couldn't help but linger over it a bit.

"Is she? Good to hear. How's Bumper doing?" The warm hand slid from his, fingers caressing his palm before moving away.

He cleared his throat. "Good. Seems to be anyway. Eating fine, soaking up the attention." Staring like that was probably bad. "He and Petunia fought a bit the first hour or two, but they figured out a pecking order finally."

"Petunia won?" He got another of those damned grins guarantee to throw a train off track.

"Yep." And people told him his grin was unexpected? Lord. That smile made him. Well, damn. It made him hard, which he had to move to hide, motioning for the Doc to follow him over to the petting zoo and leaning on a rail.

The Doc settled beside him, looking homey in faded, worn-thin flannel and jeans, sensible workboots and a gimme cap finishing him out. Bumper came running, immediately nosing around for a bit of carrot or a bite of apple. "Hey spoiled brat. How're they treating you?"

"I think he misses you a bit." He had to grin, because that damned stinky long-necked beast was all over the Doc like he wanted to be. Shit. He shouldn't be thinking like that.

The Doc found a treat and staved Bumper off. "Oh, I bet he loves the kids. Hell, I know he's sleeping better away from Spartacus. That wolf spooked him something fierce."

"I imagine." He'd been thinking about that wolf, worrying at the situation, but hadn't come up with anything yet. "They know the difference, don't they? Predator and prey."

"Oh, yeah. It's in their genes, down deep. There's little getting around it." Those big old hands rested on the fence, heavy and still.

"Yeah." Guy wondered if the Doc could tell that he was the prey now. Because Guy was sure enough gonna hunt him given half a chance. "You want to look in on the filly?"

"I do. She's not been feverish or weeping much has she?" They headed toward the barn, the Doc almost brushing against him once or twice.

That was downright nice, and Guy did a little surreptitious rubbing of his own. "Nope. She seems to be healing up fine. You've got a good touch, Doc."

"Well, she's got good hands taking care of her." Those eyes were bright, cheeks rosy pink.

"Thanks, Doc." God, what a pair of boobs they were, blushing like horny teenagers. Well, that was why he was blushing, and Guy figured he might be more dense than Aunt Felicia's fruitcake, but even an idiot could tell the Doc was flirting right back. The Doc started chuckling and then they were laughing, low and easy and relaxed, the tension still there, but easy and warm, something shared.

The filly nickered at them, coming right over, not a hint of pain in her walk, and Guy was pleased to see it. He just hoped she wasn't shy around kids, because you never knew what they'd remember. The Doc looked her over good, petting and murmuring and feeding her a bit of apple. The sweet thing just pushed in close, trusting in those big hands, nickering and snorting, nibbling at the Doc's shirt. "Oh, yeah. She's gonna be just fine."

"Good." He cast around for something to keep the Doc there, but there was nothing he could think of. Except for what popped out. "So do you do rounds on the weekend, Doc, or can you slip away a bit?"

He got a flash of green eyes and a wide grin. "Doctor Levell and I swap being on call every other weekend. This coming weekend's my free one."



"Yeah? Because we got a light load of tourists in this weekend, so the boss wants me to go on into Billings and pick up a load of stuff. I'll go up Saturday, come back Sunday. We could shop you up a winter coat and a warmer pair of boots." He tried not to hold his breath.

"Oh." He got a quiet, warm look, those cheeks just glowing. "I'd like that. I'd like that a lot."

His breath blew right out of his lungs. "Good. I could pick you up Saturday morning."

"I'll make us a big thermos of coffee for the ride."

"Sounds good, Doc." Lord, his heart was just a beating. He grinned wide at AJ, happy as a clam.

"It does. I...I don't suppose you'd like to go shoot some pool? Maybe split a pizza this evening? I'm not wanting sandwiches ag..." The Doc's phone rang and he picked it up, grin just disappearing like that. "Yeah. Okay, I'll be there in two shakes Liz. Y'all keep her quiet."

The phone was hung up and the Doc looked at him with a sigh. "She's trying to bleed out. Damn it. I'm headed back over there. "

"Okay. Hey, you want me to run into town and pick up some food and bring it over?" He walked the Doc back to his truck quickly. "They don't have a lot of extra folks over there, and the boss won't miss me for dinner." His chores were done, and it didn't hurt to be neighborly.

"Oh, God. That would be fabulous." He got a grateful smile, the tired put back in those eyes. "Liz called me out at midnight, I'm hoping this goes easy."

"I'll do it. What do you like on your pizza, Doc? I know what Liz likes on hers." He held the door open for AJ, smiling back.

"Pepperoni and mushrooms." He could hear the Doc's belly rumbling over the engine of the truck. "You're a life-saver, Guy. Thanks. See you in a bit."

No problem." He backed off so the Doc could get a running start, then headed back to the bunkhouse to call and order the pizza and let the others know he'd be gone.

It was the least he could do. And he'd get to spend some time with the Doc to boot. Not a bad deal at all.

\*\*\*

Saturday morning came bright and clear. AJ fed the critters and left a note for Don, who'd offered to do the Saturday night and Sunday morning feedings. The coffee was brewing, his little bag was packed and there were cranberry muffins on the table.

He'd slept good the night before, even though he'd been all shivery and hot with anticipation. 'Course a couple of good orgasms always helped him sleep.

Hard.

He grabbed some chunks of beef and nuked them to room temperature, heading out to deal with Spartacus while he waited for Guy. Now here was another worry, yeah? Poor unhappy critter.

"What in sam hell am I gonna do with you, boy?"

Just about the time he asked he heard the hum of an engine, and Guy drove up in a Suburban, a much newer vehicle than the old Chevy he'd brought before.

"Hey Doc," Guy said, hopping down. "How goes?"

"Pretty good. Feeding my hard case, here." He poured the meat into the dish and stepped back, watching the wolf creep up to eat. "How're you doing?"

"Feeling fine. Bright morning, good for a little trip." He got a bright grin and a clap on the back.

AJ nodded, admiring the way that tan shirt made those dark eyes shine. "I got us some muffins and the coffee's just waiting to be poured."

"You're a natural wonder." Guy squatted down a few feet from the wolf's pen, watching Spartacus eat, but not pushing the space boundaries. The wolf watched Guy, growling a little, but continuing to eat. AJ walked over to rinse out the dish, careful not to get his new shirt wet.

While he got ready to go, Guy just stayed where he was, talking in a low voice, rambling really, just nonsense words. When Spartacus was done eating, Guy rose slowly and ambled back toward him. "You ready to grab that coffee and hit the road, Doc?"

"I am. Let me grab breakfast and my bag." He gave Guy a grin, just unable to hold back how good he felt, how right this whole thing made him feel.

"I'll help. I can carry at least one muffin in my belly." They wandered into the kitchen together, almost touching. He turned to hand Guy a muffin, ending with their hips and bellies meeting, hot and oh... Oh. Those dark eyes went even darker, and Guy's breath caught, cheeks going deep red. One hand came up to rest against his hip.

"Oh, that feels fine." He put the muffin down and mimicked the touch, fingers sliding over Guy's hip. Oh, yes. Right fine.

"It sure does." Slow, like he might run, which was silly, Guy leaned right in and kissed him, just like that.

Oh. Some kisses were all empty fire and some were all awkward and uncomfortable and some were just right. AJ sighed, learned the softness of Guy's lips, the way the man's breath smelled -- coffee and toothpaste -- and felt on his upper lip.

Easy and light, but not so light they didn't feel it, Guy kissed him, just holding him there and sharing breath for the longest time.

Then Guy leaned, rested against his forehead, eyelashes brushing his. "Oh, Doc. We'd better get going."

"Yeah. We've got plans." He smiled and let his fingers stroke Guy's lower back, just damned near in love with those eyes. "Not to mention good coffee."

"There you go." Another soft brush of lips, and Guy was letting him go and backing off. "We've got time."

He nodded and headed over to pour the coffee into the thermos, eating a muffin as he went. Yeah. They had time.

\*\*\*

The day was better than any Guy could remember in a long while. The drive to Billings was usually a pain in the ass, but with AJ for company it went so fast. They got all the boss' supplies, including going into one fancy ladies' shop to get Bess' sweet sixteen dress, which made him blush like a fool. Then they got AJ some boots and a coat, which meant he got to touch the man to make sure fits were snug and good and that got him all fired up.

Dinner was hot roast beef sandwiches and mashed potatoes and fresh milkshakes, and by the time they got to the hotel he was on top of the world, grinning like an idiot and just happy to be alive.

They had a double room, and Guy tossed his bag and his hat at a chair and flopped back on one big bed, spreading his arms wide and grinning at the ceiling. "This is a pretty nice set up, Doc."

AJ sat on the edge of the other bed, pulling off his boots. "It is. God, but it's been a sweet day, Guy. Thank you."

He looked over, struck by how much bigger those feet looked out of boots. "It was a good day. Good company."

"Yeah. I thought you did a good job dress shopping." He got another smile and then the Doc stretched up tall, all gangly limbs.

Wow. He sat up to take off his own boots, mainly to hide his sudden manifestation of interest. He knew the man was interested. Hell, more than that. But he didn't want to push too far too fast.

"That girl is a menace."

"Most girls are menaces, cowboy. Want a hand?" Just like that, AJ was kneeling in front of him, hands sliding around his calf and heel.

Oh, Lord, did he ever. "Uh. Sure. Thanks." Damn, he needed to get some looser Levi's.

Those hands were warm on him, but AJ didn't push it any further, just backed away, fingers trailing over his feet. Which tickled enough to make him snort and work not to kick. "So." He wasn't sure what to say, his usual awkwardness creeping in for the first time since he'd met the man.

"Buttons." AJ grinned up at him and winked.

"Oh, that was bad. My mother always said 'needle and thread'."

That got him another warm, easy chuckle, long legs drawing up so AJ could wrap long arms around them. "You got any brothers and sisters, Guy?"

"One sister. She lives over in Helena. How about you?" There. That was safe and good.

"I have a younger brother in divinity school in Illinois. Micah."

"Divinity school? Really?" That wasn't something you heard every day. Guy stripped off his shirt and belt, lounging in just his jeans and white t-shirt.

"Yeah. He's got a calling, it seems like." That voice had that low, husky tone Guy was beginning to get fond of.

"My sister, Cass, she got married right out of high school and had kids. She's got three." He could just sit and listen to that voice.

"Y'all close? Micah and I email once or twice a year, say hi."

"Oh, we meet in the middle a couple times a year. She... well, she disapproves, you know?" He might as well have it out.

"Yeah. I know." Those grey-green eyes met his dead-on, understanding written clear on his face. "They don't cotton to my way of thinking much where Micah is."

"No, I don't guess they do. Your folks? Do they know?"

"My mom does. We don't say anything about it, much. My dad passed away about six years ago." AJ shrugged, gave him a wry grin. "Leopard can't change his spots and I reckon I can't live denying who I am, so I don't try."

"Good point." He could see that well enough. "My folks passed on within a year of each other couple years back. But they did all right with it."

"Good to hear. A man deserves to have kin that love him." AJ uncurled and stood up, snapping off his wrist watch and emptying his pockets onto one of the bedside tables.

He stood, doing the same, moving close enough to feel AJ's body heat. "Yeah. Or at least ones that will turn a blind eye."

"Yeah. Although I don't think I could manage turning a blind eye to you, Guy." AJ took a half-step forward. "Kin or no."

"Well, if we were kin this might be bad." The sudden awkwardness was gone as fast as it arrived, and he closed the last bit of space between them, hands sliding around AJ's hips to pull the man close.

"Good thing it's not an issue." Long arms wrapped around his shoulders, warm and heavy and real. Then those smiling lips brushed against his, soft and easy.

"You know it." Tilting his head, he deepened the kiss, touching AJ's lips with his tongue, feeling the softness of them. Those lips parted like rainclouds at the touch of sun, Doc's tongue meeting his and saying hi. So good. Tasted like beer and heat and all of the good things, and he angled his head to get more of it.

The sweetest little moan, rich and hungry, pushed into his mouth and AJ's fingers slid into his hair, keeping them together. That was purely addictive. He hooked his thumbs in AJ's belt loops, pulling them closer, his own sound sliding across AJ's lips. One kiss became another and another, soft touches growing slowly smoky and harder and needier.

Damned if his knees weren't weak. Guy was starting to feel mule kicked. He backed AJ toward one of the beds, intent on sitting down, not wanting to let go that sweet mouth. AJ went easy, straddling his hips as he sat and giving him a handful of hot, willing man.

"Mmm." God, what was a man supposed to do with that besides plant his feet and push up against the warm heat on him and kiss even deeper?

Those sounds got rougher, AJ's tongue sliding deep, tasting him.

He was harder than a brickbat, his cock pushing against his zipper fit to make him crazy. He grabbed a double handful of AJ's butt and pulled, breaking away from the kiss to gasp for air.

"Oh, God. You taste good." AJ leaned against his shoulder, breathing hard. "Damn."

"Yeah. I mean, you do. Taste good." He should stop talking, because the suave thing just wasn't working. Guy decided on nibbling AJ's long neck instead.

"Oh..." Those long fingers tightened, hips started rocking and rubbing against him.

"Damn." There just had to be... he needed skin. Pulling at AJ's shirt got him a tiny slice of it between belt and cloth and Guy slid his hands up under. Smooth, so smooth, and hot, that skin, and AJ's back was so long, the bumps of his spine teasing Guy's fingers.

"Oh, Guy. Is good." AJ shivered, hands stroking his neck, his jaw. Those eyes were warm, shining, staring at him.

"Mmmhmmmm." It was, too, warm and happy and there was a hard ball of need in his belly, but he didn't want to rush, even though he did. With AJ on his lap like that, all he could do was go for the top, struggling with buttons, his right hand so clumsy.

AJ moaned, then one of those big hands started helping, working open the stiff buttonholes and giving him access to hot skin. "You next."

"Yeah." Oh, sure. Him next, if he could ever get enough of AJ's chest, which was smooth and hot and had the tiniest pink nipples he'd ever seen.

"Mmm..." AJ tugged his t-shirt up out of his waistband, hands sliding up along his ribs, over his belly. All the while they rocked together, hips moving like they had minds of their own.

The feel of AJ's hands on him was enough to make him jerk and moan, enough to make his hips rise up off the bed, lifting them both. "God."

"Uh-huh. Please." AJ tugged his t-shirt up and off and then snuggled right into him with a long, low moan.

"Yeah." They were pretty much reduced to one word phrases, and Guy didn't figure he was gonna make it to the pants coming off before he blew. He bent AJ back over his arm and went to see if those nipples tasted as much like candy as they looked. Might as well hang for a sheep as a lamb. Hard and tight and oh, sweet Lord, the touch of his lips to the pink flesh earned him a soft cry, the Doc shuddering right in his arms. So damned good. Guy sucked and licked and just went to town, one hand on AJ's back to hold him up, the other pushing at the Doc's fly.

"Damn. Guy. Gonna come. Feels too good." The words were bit out, AJ grinding hard against his hand, pushing like it had been forever.

"S'okay, Doc. S'okay. I'm close. Need to." He figured AJ could understand him even if he couldn't get the words out, and he squeezed, and bit, and moaned.

Those hands gripped his shoulders, and a strangled cry filled the room, along with the scent of musk and come and AJ and oh, damn. That was good. His cock jerked and throbbed and Guy was just coming in his pants, something he couldn't remember doing in, well Hell. Ever. But even that felt better than sex had with a few other folks.

"Damn, Doc."

"Uh-huh." The Doc was blinking, hands moving over his body in random, long sweeps.

"Maybe we should get a little more naked and clean up some." He could use a shower, and then maybe another go. Or maybe some good snuggling. When you got to be his age you couldn't overrate snuggling. The Doc was awfully inspiring though, so you never knew.

"Mmm... naked sounds good. Clean. too." Those bright eyes shone up at him. "Can I kiss you again, first?"

"You can do anything you like with all of me, Doc." He smiled into those eyes, admiring the Hell out of them.

"Oh. Oh, good." Soft, kiss-swollen lips pressed against him again, this kiss long and lazy like their first one, except better because they were pressed together and AJ's hands were making his skin come all to life.

"Mmm." That wasn't getting him anywhere near the shower, but he just didn't give a damn. AJ was much more important, and their kiss made him hot and horny all over again.

AJ kept taking long, sucking kisses and then letting their lips part, let their moans and sighs and such out before diving back in. Fingers found his nipples, brushing over them, drawing them into tight little peaks with warm touches. "Guess we..."

Another kiss.

"Should"

And another, that thumb rubbing over his collarbone this time.

"Shower."

"Mmmhnn." He couldn't think, let alone move. Well, his lips were moving. His hands were gripping. But his legs? Nah.

"Yeah..." AJ pushed him back on the bed, those lips nibbling and kissing along his chest and belly, drawing his muscles all up tight as those fingers starting working open his jeans.

"Oh, God. Doc. Yeah." He was helping all he could, lifting his hips and shimmying to get the jeans down, but his hands were just caught in that mop of hair and not helping at all.

"Smell so good..." His jeans were pushed away as AJ licked his navel, moaned over his skin. Hands cupped his ass, that tongue sliding over his hipbones, teeth just scraping enough to feel. AJ was driving him to distraction, and he was just going with it, hips bucking up, thigh muscles like iron bands. Killing him.

That tongue stroked over his balls, tickled his inner thighs, just worked to make him wild as a hornet-stung bull. His spine was gonna snap, and his brain was full of white noise. His eyes rolled at the feel of AJ touching him like that, and he figured those noises were his, but he just didn't care. The base of his dick was getting treated to quick, hot little licks, every square inch of skin licked and lapped. Thumbs stroked his balls, the sensitive, private skin behind.

He all but hollered, letting go of the Doc to grip the sheets, shivering and shaking. "Doc! AJ. I can't..."

"Yeah. Yeah, Guy." The words brushed over his swollen cock, AJ's evening stubble scraped against him at the same time.

No way. No damned way was he coming again so soon, but he damned well was, cock jerking, muscles jumping under his skin.

AJ groaned, lips just brushing the super-sensitive tip of his cock. "Oh, damn... So fine."

"Oh. Doc." His hands were clumsy, but not rough anymore, and Guy petted AJ's hair and face. "So good."

"Uh-huh." AJ wiggled out of his own jeans and moved up until their lips met again, bodies meeting together, full-on naked. "Shower?"

"I figure yeah. You all right?" He wasn't gonna move for at least a year.

"Mm-hmm." He could feel the Doc's prick, full and hot against his hip, but AJ was curling in close, snuggling into his arms just like he'd offered an invitation.

Nice. Real nice, something he could get used to if he let himself. He shifted them just a bit, just enough to get a hand between them and feel the Doc up, get a good hold on that hot prick, pulling and weighing.

"Oh..." The sound was soft, almost a whimper, the Doc's lips brushing his shoulder.

"Yeah? You feel good, Doc. Hot." Smooth and hot, such soft skin and springy hair. He moved his hand faster, rubbing the tip, squeezing the base.



"I...Oh, your hands, cowboy." AJ arched, biting that bottom lip and shaking. "Make a man crazy."

"Just returning the favor." He was. Just, damn. "Come on AJ. Want to feel you come."

The breath whooshed out of the Doc in a rush and that heavy cock jerked in his hand, hot wet pouring over his hand.

Just like that. That was just what he wanted. He rubbed AJ's come into the skin of their bellies, sighing and pulling the Doc close. "You're something else."

The Doc snuggled right in, damn near purring. "Mm... Just have good inspiration."

"Mmmm." They could get a shower later. He was ready for good old fashioned sleep. Guy pulled the covers up around them. Later was good for shower. Like in the morning.

\*\*\*

AJ sat on the back porch, petting Snuffy carefully, watching Thing 1 and Thing 2 run. It was getting colder every day, Elmer flat-out refusing to leave the house, Snuffy moving slower and slower. Still, the pills were helping her and he thought she might even have two more winters in her, maybe three. That damned wolf, though? Probably didn't, he couldn't get it socialized and trusting.

Damn it.

He hated when he couldn't get on through to an animal.

Thing 1 and Thing 2 set up a barking, and even Snuffy's ears went up, telling him someone was coming. Sure enough, when AJ looked up the road a familiar, rust colored pickup was headed his way, bumping down the road at him. The pickup stopped right up by the back door, Guy stepping down and smiling at him.

"Hey there. Got a new patient for you." Guy motioned to the bed of the truck, where an animal carrier was bungeed down.

"Yeah?" AJ gave Guy a grin, then put Snuffy on the little bed he kept outside for her, and headed over, curious. "Who is it? What's wrong?"

"His name is Fluffy." Guy detached the cage and pulled it up to the tailgate. Inside was the biggest, fluffiest gray rabbit AJ had ever seen, all big eyes, fat cheeks, and lop ears. "Boss' nephew used to raise rabbits for the 4-H shows. He left for college in September, and he sold off all but this one, and well. The dogs got to him today. His back end is chewed up some."

"Damn. Let's get him in and I'll grab my bag." He grabbed the lop's carrier and headed in, careful not to jostle. "Leave the twins outside, they'll scare him. You want a cup of coffee, cowboy?"

"Yeah, Doc. I think I do." They got inside, Guy following easily on his heels. "You want me to haul him out while I still have my gloves on? He'll bite the fire out of you. Poor critter is hurting a bit."

"Yeah. Let me draw up some anesthetic before you do." He washed his hands real good, got a shot ready. "About how much you reckon he weighs?"

Poor critter. Lucky he had all the stuff handy to sew it up.

"Oh, he's a whopper. Eight pounds and not a bit of fat." Guy waited until he nodded, then opened the cage and grabbed Fluffy gently by the scruff, pulling him out. The poor thing tried to bite, but just got the cuff of Guy's glove.

AJ dosed the bunny, murmuring low, smiling as it slumped, went boneless. "There we go. Better."

He started cleaning out the wounds, sealing the little ones easy as pie and checking for broken bones. "How's the world treating you, sir?" He hadn't seen Guy in a day or two, missed the lanky cowboy in his bed, too. Something fierce.

"Been busier than a one-armed paper hanger, Doc." Guy watched him, watched his hands move. "The season's really wrapping up and we're battening down. Been missing you."

"Yeah." He smiled up. "Bed was cold this morning. You taking Thanksgiving weekend off?"

"I am. The boss asked if I wanted to eat with them, but I told him I wasn't sure. Might have plans." Oh, there was that smile he'd been missing, Guy's dark eyes warm, quietly happy.

"I have a turkey and pumpkin pie stuff already. Another vet's on call Thursday and Friday and I'm taking her call Christmas day."

"That sounds just fine. Just fine. I'll tell the boss. Better for me to come here anyway. We'll be ass deep in snow by then."

"That sounds cold. Hold that leg out for me? I need to stitch a little."

"You bet." Guy gently cradled the injured leg and held it out so he could work on it. "And yeah. Gonna have to spend some quality time making sure you stay toasty warm, Doc. I've got a good stake in keeping you around."

"Oh." He blushed, smiled wide. "I can't think of anything I'd like better, Guy. Not a thing."

"Well, that's all right then." Guy was blushing a little, too, his cheeks only a little pink, which AJ had learned was pleasure, not embarrassment. "This one gonna be all right?"

"Oh, he'll be fine. Sore, but nothing's broken or torn." He sewed the bunny up, quick as a... well, a bunny. Then he bandaged the lop and gave him antibiotics and vitamins. "There we go."

"Thanks. Got, uh, another favor to ask." Guy's flush deepened, and this time it was that embarrassed look.

"Anything you need, cowboy." Anything at all.

"Well. If I build up a hutch, could he stay here? Those two hounds of the boss' will come after him again now for sure, and he's getting neglected a bit and I just don't have the time to be looking in on him..." Guy trailed off, looking sheepish.

AJ chuckled, nodding before he even thought too long. A house needed a rabbit. It did. "We'll need a good sized one. Come spring? I'll have a shit load of abandoned Easter gifts."

"I reckon so. And it will need to be somewhere warm. I'll get the lumber this week." The heavy work gloves finally came off and Guy cupped his cheek, drawing him up for a kiss. He moaned, pushed closer. Oh, Hell yeah. Hello, cowboy. So good to see you. A deep, husky sound came as reply, Guy pushing his lips apart, pressing in to taste him. Oh, that was fine. AJ rubbed, both of them hard, just from the kiss.

"Mmm." Guy pulled back, breath hot on his cheek. "We'd best put that bunny away before he wakes. Then I'm all yours."

"Sounds like a plan. I need to get Snuffy in, too. It's too cold for her out there." He found some soft towels, covering the bottom of the carrier first.

He got another short kiss, a reluctant smile. "I bet we need to feed, too, huh? I'll take Spartacus and the goats."

"Yeah, I'll do this menagerie and put something on the back of the stove for us." He had leftover chili.

Elmer came grunting and they both laughed. "Man, that boy knows the word food."

"He sure does." Guy slipped past him, one hand trailing lightly over his back, his ribs as the man moved to go feed the animals, moving sure and steady. The last few weeks since Billings Guy had been there as often as not, and knew where stuff was. He'd spent a heck of a lot of time with that stubborn wolf, and kept saying he was making progress, though AJ failed to see it.

They even had a system, both of them enjoying the work, enjoying the way the animals came to see them, eager and happy.

He'd just finished up and put a pot of stew on to heat when Guy came clattering up the back steps, grinning ear to ear. "He licked my hand."

"No shit?" AJ grinned, almost maybe bounced. "You still have all your fingers?"

"Yeah! His head and tail were down, but he wasn't growling, and he was looking right at me. And he licked them." Oh, Guy looked just happy as a clam.

"Oh, man. That's good to hear. I've been worrying on that pup. I want him to have a good life, you know?"

"I know. I do know that about you, Doc." Grabbing him, swinging him around, Guy gave him a kiss that rocked him back on his heels.

AJ moaned and arched, hands on ass and neck, holding them together. There was nothing in Heaven or Earth like this cowboy.

Nothing.

He was breathless by the time Guy lifted his head, and blinky. Guy? Was still just grinning to beat the bad, wiggling into his hands a little.

"Stew first? Or..." He rubbed a little, offering. Wanting to touch and taste. "Bed?"

"Stew will keep if we turn it down low and Elmer can't get up there." He got another grin, this one with pink cheeks, Guy dancing him back toward the door.

"Sounds perfect." If it burned? He'd order pizza.

"Yeah. I like it." They got to the stairs before Guy stopped to kiss him again, fingers working nimbly on his clothes.

He got Guy's workshirt pulled from the tight jeans, fingers running over the soft cotton of the undershirt, stroking around to cup that fine ass.

"Mmm. Not sure I'm making those stairs, Doc."

"No?" He licked and lapped along Guy's jaw, the salty column of throat.

"No. Got a powerful want." Yeah, he could feel that want pressed against his thigh.

"How do you want me, cowboy?" He reached down, cupped that heavy prick, thumb rubbing.

"Any way I can get you."

Bold words, accompanied by the cutest damned look, half shy, half gonna eat you up. AJ chuckled, pleased all through. He worked opened Guy's jeans, breathing in deep. Guy moaned for him, the sound deep and needy, all fire. Just for him. That hot prick pushed into his hand, Guy's hips rocking, starting up a rhythm.

"Cowboy..." His thumb brushed over the tip, spreading that hot fluid around. "You smell so good."

"Oh, God, AJ. You feel damned amazing." Guy's skin was burning up, so warm against him. Like sunshine on this cold Wyoming day. Those hands finally worked off his shirt, smoothing over his shoulder and chest. "I love your hands. They're a good size."

"They're big, but they work." He slid his free hand along Guy's back, petting. "You make me want, cowboy."

"Same here. Your couch is closer."

Guy herded him that way, making him grin. The man wasn't a wrangler for nothing. Moo. He walked easily, balls feeling heavy, sore, full. He leaned in, nuzzled at Guy's neck as they moved. They finally flopped on the couch, Guy under him, his legs on either side of Guy's thighs.

"Mmm..." He worked Guy's t-shirt up and off, his own going the same way as they kissed, tongues sliding together.

"Oh, this is just right." Guy rubbed against him, petted his neck, pinched his nipples. The man wasn't shy at all once they got touching and kissing.

"Yeah." Guy made him dizzy with it, made him need like nothing else ever.

They rubbed and kissed and Guy worked open his jeans, taking his cock out to tug on it, pull it.

"Uhn." AJ moaned, rocking into Guy's hand, hips moving of their own accord.

"So pretty, Doc. So damned hot. I still can't believe you're real." Guy kissed him, sweet and deep and slow.

"Real and needing you." So easy, to whisper those great big truths to this man.

"Good." Guy shifted them, moved up and moved him down so their cocks rubbed together, caught in one of Guy's hands.

He balanced on one hand, fingers twining up with Guy's, making it them touching, them needing. They moved together, rocking, panting, soft groans coming from Guy. Those dark eyes never left his, Guy speaking volumes with them, telling him he was admired, wanted. He leaned in, tongue sliding along Guy's lips. Close. So close. So good.

"Mmmmmnnh." He could feel Guy jerk under him, feel those rough fingers squeeze down on him. Guy grunted, pushed up, came all over their bellies.

"Hot." The smell was heady, sharp, male, pushing him over the edge with a sharp cry.

"Oh. Oh, Hell, AJ." Guy kissed him, deep, drugging kisses that left him as woozy as Fluffy the bunny.

"Uh-huh..." He was petting, rubbing, touching Guy's belly as he blinked. "Damn."

"Think I'm just gonna stay here a bit." Guy pulled him close, kissed his cheek. "You melted me worse than the chili in the pot in there."

"I can handle that." He settled in, warm and melty.

"Oh, good. We can order a pizza. We'll get one with extra mushrooms for Elmer."

"You're a good man, cowboy." He kissed Guy's jaw. "A damned good man. I reckon I'll keep you."

Guy looked at him, serious as all get out. "I'm yours as long as you'll have me, Doc."

His heart beat real hard, made him dizzy for a second, but he didn't let that stop his nod.

"Then I'd say we have a long haul ahead of us, Guy. A good long haul."

Guy laughed as Elmer came out of the kitchen, grunting, looking for that pizza. The laugh rocked him a little, Guy squeezing him tight. "I'm counting on it, AJ. I'm counting on it."

End

Menagerie

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