



**BROOMSTICKS  
& STONES**

**A TORQUERE BIRTHSTONE  
BY JANE DAVITT**

Broomsticks and Stones  
*by Jane Davitt*

**Torquere Press**

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"Ah, there you are, Peter. Yes, sit down, sit down."

Peter Carruthers gave his employer a cautious smile and took the only chair available; an upright wooden one, placed squarely in front of the wide mahogany desk. "Thank you, sir. I was told that you wanted to see me as soon as possible, so you'll have to excuse my appearance. I've come straight from the links."

A hand cramped by age waved away his apology. "Doesn't matter. Doesn't matter at all." Faded blue eyes narrowed. "Although I hope that if you were playing golf with Scott Perham you took care not to offend him."

"He won on the final hole," Peter said dryly. "And, yes, he cheated as usual; conjured up a wind spirit when he thought I wasn't looking and had it help his ball into the hole."

Mr. Callum groaned and closed his eyes for a moment. "Man's a bounder," he muttered. His eyes opened. "Played for money, did you?"

Peter nodded. A guinea a hole...

"Put in a claim for it. I'll see that it's authorized."

"Thank you, sir," Peter said politely.

"If his account wasn't so valuable—well, we'll say no more about that." Mr. Callum leaned over his desk, his eyebrows drawing together portentously. "Lady Amanda died an hour ago, Peter."

"My condolences," Peter said automatically. "She was your aunt, I believe? A sad loss."

"Tush; never mind that folderol! I'll miss her, of course I will, but she was over a hundred and quite, ah, quite..."

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"Batty?"

The blue eyes narrowed. "There has never, never been any vampire blood in my family, young man! She was ... eccentric. Yes."

Peter remained silent. If Mr. Callum wanted to use that word to describe the antics of a woman who, when compos mentis, had been capable of anything from riding an elephant around Grovesnor Square wearing nothing but the Viscount of Altringham to celebrating her seventieth birthday with an incantation that turned the sludgy water of the Thames into champagne for an hour—although an inferior vintage, and the water weeds and dead fish still present in it rendered it undrinkable—well, who was he to argue?

"And she was, as you know, the current holder of the Luck of the Callums."

"Quite," Peter murmured, flicking a small piece of dried mud off his plus fours and then regretting it as he met an arctic glare from his employer.

"This firm has dealt with the affairs of my family for centuries," Mr. Callum told him. "Since the Transmogrification Accord. Which is, in part, why it's tradition that the third son should always work here." He looked wistful. "I didn't want to be a lawyer. Not like you. No, I wanted to be—but it's of no consequence! Family duty..."

"Yes, sir," Peter said, trying not to let his impatience show. His plus fours were damp, his socks soaked through—and even if it was January, that squall on the ninth hole had been suspiciously ... localized. Perlham had taken three steps sideways and remained perfectly dry. How the man had

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managed to bypass the anti-magic charms on the course, Peter didn't know. His own talents, such as they were, lay elsewhere.

"With Lady Amanda's death, the Luck has to be delivered to the new Head of the Family," Mr. Callum said, managing to invest his words with capital letters effortlessly.

"And that would be..." Peter searched his memory, frowning slightly. The Callum family tree was convoluted to say the least, and the inheritance wasn't based on anything as simple as a direct line of descent. Rather, every decade, on January the twenty-third, anyone over the age of twenty-one with a drop of Callum blood had their name put in a hat once worn by the Lost Prince and left behind at Callum castle as he'd fled from the hunters in the form of a white wolf.

Or so the legend said. Peter had studied the fable and found it to be littered with inaccuracies, inserted purely to make a deadbeat, spendthrift prince into a romantic hero for political reasons. Primming up his mouth, he wondered if the Callum family really believed that the spirit of the prince chose a name from the hat to be the head of the family for the next decade. Odd, if so, that Lady Amanda's name had been chosen the last three times; the prince hadn't been a woman-hater—far from it, which was one of the reasons he'd fled the court—but he had been a firm believer that outside the bed a woman had nothing of value to say. Peter was fairly certain that the voting was rigged, but had no intention of sharing his opinion.

"The interim drawing, necessitated by the death, takes place tomorrow morning," Mr. Callum said. "Pity really; the

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official drawing would have been held in just two weeks, and it's by no means certain that whoever is drawn tomorrow will be drawn then. Imagine! Two weeks of fame and fortune and then it's all snatched from you! Tragic."

"Quite," Peter said, unable to decide if his employer was serious. The Callum name was as venerable as it was possible to be, and, yes, granted, there were financial advantages to being the Head of the House, but it wasn't exactly the windfall Mr. Callum implied.

"The Luck has to be given to the new Head by sunset or—"

"The castle falls, nae stone left standing, nae slate to shield thee from the howling gale." Peter quoted from memory. "Indeed."

Mr. Callum scowled at him. "'Indeed'? Is that all that you can say? My ancestral home is doomed and you—"

"Well, it isn't doomed yet," Peter pointed out. "I take it that you want me to deliver the Luck to the Castle? I assume all the potential Heads will be there?"

"Aye," Mr. Callum said tersely. "I do, and they will, and ye'd better." He sounded suddenly very Scottish. "Here." A black velvet pouch was tossed at Peter, landing in his outstretched hand and leaving it tingling slightly with the unmistakable residue of magic. "It has to be carried by magical means, ye ken?"

"Hmm?" Peter was peering inside the pouch at the glitter and wink of the huge garnet, carved with a thistle and a stag rampant—very rampant. The significance of his employer's words sank in. "Oh, sir!"

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"Aye," Mr. Callum said, sounding smug. "Ye can leave your fancy new car where it is—and I think we're paying you too much if a junior lawyer can afford a Tornado—and take a broom."

"Sir, with all due respect for tradition," Peter said, "it's a hell of a flight and there's snow forecast."

"You've got until sunset tomorrow," Mr. Callum said inflexibly. "It's no more than six o'clock now and you won't melt for a few flakes of snow—or freeze, either. Many's the time I've flown up there for a Gathering. Bracing. Yes."

Peter nodded gloomily and stood, tucking the pouch into his pocket.

Mr. Callum stared at him solemnly. "By sunset tomorrow, that garnet has to have touched the hand of the new Head of the House. Fail me in this, and you might find yourself recreating the Flight of the Lost Prince."

"I can't transform," Peter said weakly.

"Then the hounds won't have as far to run!" snapped Mr. Callum. \*\*\*

Peter peeled one cramped hand from his broomstick and swiped ineffectually at his goggles. The charm designed to weatherproof the broom—and its rider—was starting to fade and the snowflakes were seeping through the weather shield in increasing numbers and melting on his face. Recharging it would mean landing, and he wasn't sure, given the gale, that he'd be able to take off again. Especially as he seemed to be passing over a forest.

Peering down at the compass attached to the central stick and set to the castle's co-ordinates, he saw to his dismay that

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it was spinning wildly instead of pointing north-west as it should have been. He couldn't have arrived at the castle yet; even in the blizzard he'd have been able to see the lights of the many rooms and, as they were expecting him, a landing beacon.

There was something visible below though, a small, wavering flicker of yellow light in a clearing. The shielding charm spluttered and died as he tried to decide where it was coming from, and Peter felt the breath driven from his lungs as the full force of the storm hit him.

Cold. So bloody cold.... Clamping his chattering teeth together and scrubbing snow-encrusted goggles one last time, Peter switched to manual control and settled his feet firmly in the stirrups.

Going down...

The rush of frigid air and stinging, spiteful pellets of icy snow scoured the exposed skin on his face, but he clung grimly to the stick, guiding the bucking broom toward the patch of light. As the ground rushed up to meet him, he realized that he wasn't going to be landing in the approved touch down, stride forward, stop method. In fact, he was going to be lucky to be left standing at all.

His feet smacked into deep, soft snow, the end of the broom carving a narrow path through a drift before it hit something solid—a rock?—and then he was flying forward, his feet still tangled in the stirrups and the broom managing to twist and deal him a smart rap on the forehead before he landed on it with an ominous crack.

As he opened his mouth to say 'Oww', it filled with snow.

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Peter lay still for a moment, assessing the damage, and concluded that he was still alive, which was good, freezing cold and wet, which was less pleasant, and in trouble, as his broom was broken and he had to be some miles away from the castle.

He got to his feet, pulling off the goggles and blinking away some stray snowflakes as he looked around. The light he'd seen was from an attic window in a small cottage over to his left. Hesitant though he was to impose on a stranger—for many reasons, not least the knowledge that he was carrying something valuable—he really had no choice. Picking up the two halves of his broomstick, Peter trudged through the drifts to the cottage and knocked on the door, propping his broomstick tidily against the wall.

The door opened, warm air rushing out to meet him.

"Good Lord, it's a snowman come to call."

Peter gave the pleasantries a perfunctory smile and cleared his throat, glancing up at his prospective host. The explanation died on his lips. God, the man was, well, he was—

"Och, come in, will you?" His appreciative appraisal of wide shoulders beneath a green sweater, narrow hips and long legs enclosed in a sinfully threadbare pair of jeans was interrupted when a large hand reached out and grasped him by the shoulder. Another began to dust him down, thwacking at the snow lying thickly on his flying suit. Peter made a soft sound of protest and gray eyes studied him thoughtfully from under a shock of red-brown hair. "Sorry; was I a bit rough with you?"

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"No, it's just—I crashed on my broomstick; still a little shaken up, I think."

The man pulled him into the blissful warmth and kicked the door shut. It was suddenly very peaceful as the howl of the storm became a muted whisper.

"Crashed, did you? On a night like this, you're lucky to be alive, man."

"Indeed, I am," Peter agreed. He glanced around, avoiding another look at his rescuer because the first had been enough to leave him breathless, and saw an untidy but pleasant room, lit and warmed by a large wood fire burning a clear green, signifying that the hearth sprite was content. Shabby but comfortable chairs and a wide, sturdy table covered with the remnants of a meal filled most of the space, and the walls were lined with bookcases. "If I might ask for shelter from the elements?" he said, trying to remember the exact formal phrasing. It was considered distinctly old-fashioned in the south; archaic even, but he had no wish to offend. Summoning up the energy to bow, although the warmth was making him sleepy, he recited carefully, "A traveler benighted, asks naught but this; a bed, a sup, and a friendly ki—" He faltered, watching the gray eyes narrow in amusement.

"Go on then, as you're doing it properly," the man said.

"—friendly kiss," Peter muttered, his face flaming with heat. He could understand the reasoning behind the wording in the days when a village had only a small number of able-bodied men, thanks to the near-constant fighting, and the young women were glad of any chance to seduce a passing

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visitor and get with child, but dear heavens, it was ludicrous these days.

"Aye, well," the man replied, one long finger scratching meditatively at his square chin. "You don't look like the sort who'd murder me in my bed—" Given that Peter was three inches shorter than the man who looked to be solid muscle, that seemed a safe bet. "—but I'd like to know a little more about you before I agree to some of that."

Peter shrugged, sending a trickle of melted snow down his back. "My name is Peter Carruthers and I work for a firm of lawyers in London. I'm in these parts to see a client."

The man nodded. "You've given me your name, so I'll do likewise; Jamie MacGellis. I work for no man but myself."

Peter extended his hand. "It's an honor to make your acquaintance, sir," he said politely.

"'Sir' is it?" His hand was shaken briefly and then released. "Call me Jamie, as you're dripping on my floor."

"Gladly." Peter glanced up at Jamie, his hand going to the zip of his suit. "So—I may stay?"

A warm hand closed around his, startling him because, unlike the handshake, it lingered. "Not yet, lad. I'll not ask you your business, but tell me who it is that you plan to see."

"Client confidentiality—" Peter began. A crook of a russet eyebrow stopped him and he sighed. "I am bound for Callum Castle on a matter of some urgency."

The hand left his. "Amanda is dead and you carry the Luck."

It wasn't a question. "Why, yes, but how do you—"

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Jamie took his hand out of his pocket and sent a scatter of sleep crystals flying toward Peter, who was too surprised to duck. They swirled around his head and popped in a series of tiny explosions, filling the air with a pale-pink mist. Peter tried to step back without breathing, but Jamie's hands gripped him and held him in place until, the oxygen in his lungs exhausted by his struggle, he had no choice but to take a breath and sink into fathomless slumber.\*\*\*

Waking brought with it the realization that he was naked, in bed, and not alone. Panic and a violent thrashing of his limbs followed as he tried to extricate himself from the clutches of a feather mattress and a heavy quilt.

"You woke me up," said a voice in his ear. "I hope you're going to make up for that."

Peter turned his head and glared into the darkness. "Do you?"

Jamie yawned, then gave a soft chuckle. "Now I've seen you naked? Aye, and if you're stuck as to how, I'd be happy to show you. Och, I'm sorry; was that too blunt of me? I'm forgetting you're not used to folks being straightforward, what with you being a lawyer and all."

Leaning on his elbow, Peter extended his hand and snapped his fingers. "Light," he said crisply. The expected glow failed to materialize, and he frowned and tried again, with a similar lack of success.

"No magic but mine will work between these walls," Jamie said lazily. "But if you want to see what you're doing, I've no objection."

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A globe of light flared to life and dimmed to a gentle glow before floating up to the ceiling. Peter waited for his eyes to adjust, and then met Jamie's amused gaze. "Why did you do that?"

"The light?" Jamie asked, frowning in pretended bemusement. "I thought you wanted it."

"Putting me to sleep," Peter said tightly. "Stripping me—oh!" He turned over, his eyes searching the room for his belongings. His suit had been tossed over a chair, still damp, and the rest of his clothes lay in a heap on the floor. The pouch containing the garnet had been stored in an inner pocket of the suit, but Peter couldn't imagine that it had been overlooked.

A hand came to rest on his shoulder and a long, strong body moved close enough to him to leave Peter in no doubt of Jamie's intentions. He jabbed his elbow back sharply and got another of those annoying chuckles for his pains as Jamie twisted so that the blow did no more than glance off his side. "Lad, there's no need to fret. If you're not of a mind to fuck—" The hand moved and slid down over Peter's chest, slowly enough that he could have stopped it if he wanted, fast enough to make it less a caress than a hand on its way to somewhere else.

When it got there, with Peter taking short gulps of air to try to stay calm, it paused. "You'll have to help me out here," Jamie said mildly. "I'm getting confused. Do you want to fuck, or don't you?"

*Of course I do, you stupid man,* Peter railed silently as the hand wrapped around his aching hard cock stayed

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frustratingly still, Jamie obviously waiting for an answer. *You're bloody gorgeous, apart from your habit of knocking people unconscious and it's been months since—*

"Months?"

The surprise in Jamie's voice was genuine by the sounds of it, but that wasn't something that Peter was overly concerned about. "Get out of my head!"

"You didn't say that aloud?"

Jamie sounded worried, which was rich. Peter reached down and put his hand over Jamie's, tugging it away from his cock and gritting his teeth as Jamie's fingers opened at once—then slid down over his balls in a move surely designed to render him speechless. "No, I didn't. I thought it, and you've no business performing unauthorized—unauthor—oh God, stop that!"

"Your skin's so soft there," Jamie murmured in his ear, stroking the inside of Peter's thigh, high enough that Jamie's wrist was nudging an erection that wasn't going away. "And I didn't do it on purpose. You must've been shouting."

Peter took a shaky breath. "Please—I can't think, and I need—need to ask you—"

Jamie sighed and rolled over. "Fine. Ask."

The sudden, and not entirely welcome, capitulation left Peter feeling at a loss. Sitting up and wrapping his arms around his knees to keep himself from reaching out to Jamie as he was tempted to do, he stared across the room, which was, judging by the sloping roof, in the attic, and tried to compose himself.

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He intended to demand an explanation for Jamie's appalling behavior, but when he spoke he found himself asking, "Have you bespelled me? Because I can't look at you without wanting you and that's just ridiculous given that we've barely met."

"You looked at me like that the instant you saw me," Jamie said, sounding tired. "How the hell could I have bespelled you that fast?"

Peter flushed, feeling the tips of his ears turn pink. "I was—you weren't what I was expecting," he confessed. "I thought—I don't know who I thought I'd find. Not you." He turned his head. Against the green and white diamonds of the patchwork quilt, the colors clear and fresh as snowdrops in the grass, Jamie's bare arms and chest looked nut-brown, and the red in Jamie's hair shone like bright autumn leaves. Peter wanted to lie against that broad chest, his fingers teasing the sprinkle of brown hair curling softly over it, his tongue tasting the tanned skin, his head filled with the reassuringly steady thump-thud of Jamie's heart.

He'd done none of that, and yet he knew exactly how all of it would feel.

"Look, it's late," Jamie said. "Ask what you will and let's get some sleep. Tomorrow I'll send you on your way, never fear."

"My broomstick—"

"I'll drive you," Jamie said shortly. "The castle's not far away, although we'll have to do some digging first to clear a path."

"I have to fly, I'm afraid," Peter said. "I don't suppose—"

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"No," Jamie said. "I don't have a broomstick I can lend you."

"Then I'll have to walk," Peter said with a sigh. Walking wasn't magical in itself, but if he enchanted his shoes to hover it should fulfill the requirements.

"Suit yourself," Jamie said. "Is that it?"

"You know it isn't," Peter said gently. "You have to agree that your treatment of me has been—"

"Better than you deserve."

Anger stirred, driving his arousal down. "I beg your pardon? Clearly you have some connection to the clan—" Jamie snorted inelegantly but Peter carried on. "You can't be a potential Head, or you'd be at the castle waiting for me. Would you care to tell me your interest in this matter?"

"No, I would not," Jamie said, the rich, deep timbre of his voice changing to a cold, clipped tone. "Would you care to make me?" Peter smiled because somehow the idea of Jamie threatening him was something he couldn't take seriously, and after a moment Jamie's face softened. "You'll be thinking me insane, won't you?"

"No," Peter said without hesitation. He didn't have the faintest idea what Jamie was up to, but the gray eyes that met his were concerned, not crazed.

"I can't expect you to trust me—"

"You know that I do," Peter said steadily. "I can see that you're not willing, or able, to tell me the truth, but tell me this; when you searched me, what were you looking for?" That was puzzling him; the garnet was in his flying suit; there

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had been no need to strip him of all his clothes once that had been found.

Jamie sighed and rolled his eyes, looking a little shame-faced. "I was looking for witch marks," he confessed.

Peter gaped at Jamie and then went scarlet. "You—but—" He wasn't sure if it was the enormity of the accusation that bothered him the most, or the fact that to be sure he carried none Jamie would have had to have examined his body quite literally inch-by inch, from his scalp to between his toes.

His skin should have crawled at the thought of such an invasion; instead it tingled as if Jamie's hands were still on it and he was left breathless with the intensity of his arousal.

"You've nothing to be ashamed of," Jamie said in a reasonable voice that made Peter long to punch him.

"You're—what was it? 'Gorgeous'? Aye. You are. You're a summerchild, aren't you?"

Blue eyes, golden hair, fair skin that showed every fugitive emotion ... Peter shrugged. "And you're an autumnson. So?"

"Our sort are rare these days," Jamie said thoughtfully. "Rare and powerful. And you tell me you're a lawyer, sent on errands?"

"My powers are not—they're no more than average," Peter said, keeping his voice calm as he made an admission that got no easier to say no matter how often he voiced it.

"Nonsense," Jamie said matter-of-factly. "We wouldn't be sparking like this if you were no more than middle-range, and you know it."

"Witch marks?" Peter said abruptly. "You really thought I—" He shuddered. Those bearing the marks were damned souls,

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capable of much, yes, but paying for their borrowed power in so many terrible ways that Peter had never been able to understand the temptation.

"Well, it's possible I just wanted to see you bare," Jamie said easily. Peter glared at him, and he sighed. "You made me feel like I wanted to fuck you where you stood and you were carrying the Luck; what else was I to think but that you were sent to tempt me?"

"Right," said Peter coldly. "Perfectly reasonable to think I was hellspawn. Mistake anyone could have made, I'm sure."

He hunched his shoulder and stared at the un-curtained window, watching the snow flurries beat silently against the glass.

"Peter?" Jamie's voice sounded uncertain. "I didn't—I was scared. I'm sorry."

"'Scared'?" Peter said incredulously. "Of me? Oh, please! You could have overpowered me without breaking a sweat; you didn't need to do any of what you did."

He felt the tentative brush of fingers against his arm but refused to turn around.

"Will you not look at me?" Jamie begged. Peter shook his head and shivered as Jamie's lips pressed a kiss on the back of his neck. "God, I wish I could have it to do again," Jamie whispered, sounding tormented. "I was so damn afraid I'd weaken, and as for overpowering you, if I'd tried, if I'd got that close, I'd have been lost." Another kiss, and then a third, and Peter was shaking with the need to turn toward Jamie and slip inside the arms he knew would be waiting for him.

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"You must tell me," Peter said, making his voice as steady as he could.

"Tell you that I want you?" Jamie said roughly. "That you taste of sunshine and light and I could sleep in the snow and not cool the heat that's in me when I think of how you'll feel around me?"

"Sweet talk," Peter said. "Sweet as heather honey. Can you save it, please? The truth's sweeter still."

"You're a stubborn one, aren't you?"

Peter closed his eyes for a moment, fighting the urge to lean back, turn around, surrender. "I've had to be," he said coolly.

"If I tell you—"

"No bargains," Peter said swiftly. "D'you understand? I can't agree to anything whilst I'm under contract to my employer anyway."

"I want you to look at me," Jamie said, his voice low and forceful. "That's all."

"If I do, we won't be talking, and you know it," Peter said harshly. "Tell me, damn it."

The bed creaked as Jamie moved away from him, leaving emptiness where there had been warmth.

"If it's what it takes, I will." Jamie sounded dispirited. "You were wrong; my name's in the hat along with the rest of them; I felt the Summons as soon as Amanda passed over, bless her soul."

"You did?" Peter frowned. "Your name—did you lie to me then?"

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"I'm a Callum on my mother's side, you idiot, and if I could touch you in anger, which I can't, the way I'm feeling about you, I'd bloody well thump you for that!"

Peter winced. As insults went, accusing someone of lying about their name was right up there with the worst of them. Still—"You thought I was witch-marked!"

"Aye," Jamie growled, the sound of it creating a not unwelcome heat in the pit of Peter's stomach. "So I did. But if you think that means we're quits—"

"I do," Peter said firmly. "Now can we move on?"

The silence that followed might well have been described as seething, but after a long moment Jamie made an indeterminate sound that might have been a curse in Gaelic and began to speak.

"I don't want it and that's the top and bottom of it. Don't care to be part of a family that disowned my mother for marrying beneath her; don't want to be head of it. And I really don't care to be Summoned when I made it plain as day that if they gave me that fucking jewel, I'd sink it in the ocean."

Peter shook his head. "The Summons goes to all who are eligible," he said. "It's automatic and can't be tampered with. So you can scratch that off your list of grievances for a start."

This time he could have sworn he heard teeth grinding. Fixing his eyes on the window again, he clenched his fists to keep from turning.

"Be that as it may," Jamie said through his teeth, "I'm not going."

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"It's immaterial," Peter said. "Your presence isn't required. If—and you don't seem to be taking into account that the odds are slim—you're chosen, then that's it. There's no appeal. You don't have to ever set foot in the castle, don't have to lift a finger to deal with the Family's affairs, but you're still the Head until the next one's chosen."

"You're wrong there," Jamie said, sounding smug. "I have to lift a finger to take the Luck."

"Well, yes," Peter allowed. "I suppose you do have to do that." A horrifying thought struck him. "You wouldn't."

"Refuse to let it near me? Watch the castle that my mother was turned away from crumble into dust at sunset?" Jamie chuckled. "You know, you've convinced me. I'll go with you and watch the show; it'll be well worth the trip."

"You haven't been chosen yet," Peter said coldly. "And if you were, it's highly unlikely that you'd be chosen a second time, so you'd only need to bear the terrible burden for two weeks."

"Amanda was chosen again and again," Jamie pointed out.

"True, but why are you so convinced that you'll be picked?" Peter asked.

Jamie stood up and walked over to a picture hanging in the corner, lost in the shadows, his path taking him in front of Peter who found himself utterly unable to look away. Jamie's hair hung in a shaggy point, low on his neck, and his back was smooth and heavy with muscle. His backside was—Peter bit back a moan of longing—firm and neatly-rounded, the skin a shade or two lighter there.

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"You're staring at me again," Jamie said, unhooking the picture. "I can tell." He turned around and smiled as Peter whimpered. "I'd laugh at you if I didn't know how you were feeling." Jamie glanced down at his thick cock, jutting out proudly, and sighed, smacking it. "No. It's not seeing sense, I'm afraid."

Peter lay back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling and reciting the clauses of the Abuse of Unicorns Act in his head in the original Faerie. It didn't help.

"Stop that and look, will you?" Jamie said.

Peter opened his eyes. The painting was of the Lost Prince, astride a horse at the battle of Lothian, judging by the goblin spitted on the end of his sword. His hair was black but his face was Jamie's.

"Oh."

"Aye," Jamie said savagely. "Oh. Now do you see? This will be the first drawing since I came of age. It will be me."

"It's still not certain," Peter protested. "Really, it isn't."

Jamie shrugged. "I don't care. When the drawing is made at dawn, I'll know. If it's me—"

"If it's you?" Peter asked, knowing what the answer would be.

Jamie's wide mouth split open in a grin. "Then—nothing. It's simple, no? All I need do is—nothing."

"I could force you to take the Luck." Peter said, knowing he couldn't.

Jamie's grin widened. "You'll have to find it first, laddie." He shook his head at Peter's furious look. "What, do you think I left it for you? It's safely hidden. Oh, never fear; I'm an

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honorable man; if by chance another's chosen, I'll give it up and let you take it to them. It would seem like cheating to bring down the clan when the power wasn't mine to wield." He set the painting aside and sat down on the bed, cupping Peter's face in his hand. "But if the spirit of that blasted idiot chooses me, I'll show no mercy, d'you hear me?" His fingers spread and his thumb stroked slowly along the line of Peter's cheekbone. "And now that you're finally condescending to look at me, and there're no secrets between us—barring one—do you not think we can occupy ourselves until dawn in some other way than fighting?"

"I should tell you that I'll have nothing to do with you," Peter said ruefully, knowing that he wouldn't do anything of the sort. "Mr. Callum wouldn't approve of this at all."

"He's your boss? Got his eye on you himself, has he?" Jamie said, sounding interested. "Never thought any of my maternal relatives had that much good taste."

"The very thought of that's enough to render me incapable," Peter snapped.

The sheet was pulled aside and Jamie glanced down, his lips twitching as he tried not to grin. "No, it's not," he said.

Peter slipped his hands behind Jamie's neck and brought their faces close. "Perhaps you're right," he said, and then he had Jamie's mouth on his for the first time and the world shrank to a bed, in an attic, in a cottage, storm-held and safe.

The first kiss was no more than a touch, mouths closed, lips meeting in a rush, because neither of them was capable of keeping apart. It didn't need to be more for them to both

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feel the promise of what was to come. Jamie pulled back from it a moment later, and Peter watched the gray in his eyes darken with passion before Jamie put his hand on Peter's shoulder and pushed Peter down onto the bed. Peter gasped as Jamie lay on him. Their bodies met, the solid weight of a lean, hard body full on Peter's until Jamie propped himself up on his elbows, hands thrust deeply into Peter's hair. Jamie smiled and kissed him again.

This time, with Jamie's thigh between his and their cocks warm and hard against each other, the kiss was something that left Peter moaning into it, Jamie's tongue teasing at his lips, which were kept closed simply to invite exactly that insistent request.

Peter's hands were still linked behind Jamie's neck, the soft fall of Jamie's hair caressing them as Jamie kissed him. He could feel the tension there as Jamie fought to keep still, tongue tracing over his lips as they parted. Jamie's cock jerked as Peter darted his tongue out to slip inside Jamie's mouth, finding the taste of Jamie at last, sweet and spicy.

Slowly, relishing the first strokes of his hands over Jamie's skin, Peter ran his hands over Jamie's shoulders and down the wide back, taking his time, lingering over every place where his questing fingers made Jamie's breath come faster, Jamie's kisses harder. One of Jamie's hands was moving, too, roaming over what he could reach of Peter's body; a callused thumb rasping over a nipple and leaving it swollen and ready for a softer tongue to soothe, the curved backs of Jamie's fingers dragging over the hollow of Peter's hip with maddening delicacy.

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Then, with a timing that surprised neither of them, Peter's hands reached Jamie's backside just as Jamie's fingernails scraped gently across Peter's belly and curled lightly around his cock.

The kiss ended and they stared at each other, their breath coming fast now, heartbeats quickening.

"Can't make this last," Jamie warned him.

Peter shrugged, his attention divided between the throb of his cock and the way Jamie's mouth looked when it was kiss-swollen and wet from his tongue on it. "Don't try," he said briefly. "We've got all night."

"You've more sense than most," Jamie said admiringly. "Are you sure you're a lawyer?"

Peter lifted his hand and brought it down on Jamie's ass, hard enough to sting his palm. "Yes! Now will you just—"

"Oh, you're going to pay for that," Jamie said, wriggling his ass and not looking in the least upset.

"Jamie..." Peter said, willing to plead if it got Jamie's hand tighter and moving. "Please?"

"You want it fast?" Jamie whispered, fingers threading though Peter's hair, pushing it back off his forehead.

"I thought that we both did," Peter said, tilting his hips up so that he got a little friction at least.

Jamie's leg shifted and bent, his knee pinning Peter's leg to the bed. "That," he said austerely, "was before you assaulted my arse."

"Can I apologize later?" Peter said hopefully.

Jamie's quick grin flashed over his face. "Well, you can do it again, if you've a mind to, if that's what you mean."

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"I see," Peter said ominously. Jamie began to laugh and he took advantage of that, rolling them over and slipping down the bed to take Jamie's cock in his mouth, hearing the laughter cut off with satisfying abruptness.

"You—och, Peter—" Jamie groaned, his body taut and trembling, hands coming to stroke through Peter's hair in jerky, rough touches. Peter lifted his head, rubbing his cheek against one of those large hands before returning to what he was doing.

He could feel Jamie's urgent need—could taste it against his tongue as he lapped around the head of Jamie's cock, could smell it, musky and male as he nuzzled into the soft curled hair framing Jamie's cock and heavy, tight balls. With a pang of regret, because he wanted more of this, all of it, he allowed himself one final long lick along the length of Jamie's cock, exploring the ridges and changes in texture with his tongue and fingers, and then took Jamie in deep again. The grateful moan he got reconciled him to the need to hurry, as did the warning pulse that brought his own climax closer as his body responded to the feel of Jamie's cock in his mouth. His legs parted as well as his lips, in an instinctive, unseen invitation.

When Jamie came, crying out Peter's name, his body writhing under Peter's firm hands, it felt like a beginning, not an end. Peter rolled onto his back a moment later and let Jamie's hand finish him, clutching at Jamie's arms, his mouth hungry on Jamie's throat and chest, marking Jamie's shoulder as Jamie's thumb swept across the slick spill of pre-come leaking from Peter's cock. He pressed as close as he could to

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Jamie as his climax swept through him, so that they both felt the jolt and splash of heat against their skin.

Jamie's arms came up to hold Peter even closer, not speaking until they had both calmed enough to make coherence possible.

"Are you angry with me?"

"For what?" Peter shifted so that he could lie against Jamie's chest as he'd wanted to do earlier, noting absently that they were both somewhat sticky.

"Taking the Luck."

"It's either going to belong to you at dawn, or you'll return it," Peter murmured sleepily. "And, although if you do let the castle fall I'll be in trouble, I'm finding it difficult to work up any righteous wrath for some reason. Give me an hour or two, will you?"

"You want to sleep?"

"Aye," Peter said, making Jamie chuckle deep in his chest. "I've flown for hours, been knocked out and seduced—I want to sleep."

He felt Jamie sigh and tug the covers up over them, heard Jamie murmur a charm that took care of the drying residue of his come on them both, and then he fell asleep with Jamie's arms warm around him.

\* \* \* \*

Emerging from his doze a few hours later he found Jamie watching him.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. I'm just not so used to sharing my bed."

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"Well, neither am I," Peter admitted.

"Aye, so you said," Jamie agreed. "Though why a man like you has to go months between lovers is beyond me."

In the shadowy room, Peter had only the tone of Jamie's voice to go by. The man sounded sincere, but even so...

"I don't know why you're surprised," he said. "I'm really very ordinary; I told you; I can't transform and I'm—"

"Why can't you?" Jamie ran a hand down Peter's arm and found his hand, linking their fingers. "It's nonsense to say you're weak when I can feel your power. You're fair crackling with it, like cat's fur in a thunderstorm."

"I am?" Peter said doubtfully. "I find that hard to believe, but thank you."

Jamie snorted. "You wouldn't bother thanking me for pointing out that you had blue eyes; this is no different. And I'm still waiting. What's your form, anyway?"

"A hawk. And I'm scared of heights," Peter said flippantly.

"As you arrived here by broomstick, I'm thinking you'll need to do better than that," Jamie said dryly. "Or did you fly two feet off the ground the whole way?"

The soft, slow brush of Jamie's thumb against his hand shattered Peter's reticence. "I don't transform because—"

Jamie kissed him when his voice trailed away, looking slightly ashamed. "Don't be telling me if you don't want to, lad. I've no right to force a confidence."

"No," Peter said. "I don't mind. It's just that I never do tell people, and it's a hard habit to break, somehow." He curled up against Jamie, who obligingly lifted an arm so that Peter could get closer and rest his head on Jamie's shoulder.

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"My parents shared the same form; they were hawks, too."  
"That's rare," Jamie commented.

Peter nodded. "They actually met in their bird-forms, flying over the Forest of Dean, and didn't know the other was human until sunset came and my mother changed back because she had a party to go to. They both loved transforming so much—"

"It's like nothing else," Jamie said. His large hand swept over Peter's chest and down. "Well, almost."

Peter laughed without humor. "I'm an only child," he said. "I think for them even sex couldn't compete."

"So what happened?"

"Nothing. At least—my mother died and my father..." Peter swallowed down the anger and sorrow he felt. "He transformed and stayed that way. I never saw him again until his body was found; he'd been killed by a predator; an eagle, they thought, and, of course, he transformed back when he died."

"And you—" Jamie shook his head. "I can see a few ways this could go," he said frankly.

Peter traced a glyph on Jamie's chest, twining their initials and then kissing the spot. "So could the therapists I saw weekly for more years than I care to remember. I was either resentful because transformation took my parents away, terrified that the call would be so strong that I'd never return, or simply incapable. Quite a range of possibilities there. Angry, scared or weak. You'll see why the whole issue's not one I care to think about."

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"Oh, aye," Jamie admitted easily. "It's a proper mess." He turned his head and kissed Peter soundly. "But it's a pack of nonsense to say that you couldn't transform, or return, given your power, and you're not the type to hold a grudge."

"Unlike you," Peter said pointedly, deflecting the conversation away from a wound so old that it really shouldn't have still stung.

"Oh, once crossed, I'll curse someone to the ends of the earth," Jamie said easily. "Never forget, never forgive."

"Your family motto?" Peter asked, getting a pinch on his nipple that made him gasp and then squirm closer.

"No," Jamie murmured. "That's more along the lines of never passing up an opportunity." The movement of Jamie's hand on Peter's chest became slow and sensuous. "You'll forgive me for taking advantage of this one?"

"There's nothing to forgive," Peter replied. "Unless you stop."

Jamie's hand paused and he chuckled. "I'm eccentric, maybe, but I'm not touched. You're safe there; I'll not stop until we're both satisfied."

"Or I fall asleep," Peter said provocatively, just to make Jamie smile again.

"If you fall asleep, I'll take the hint."

\* \* \* \*

When dawn came, they were both awake and busy.

"Oh God, yes," Peter said tightly. "Right there, Jamie, right—ah God, yes—"

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Jamie's hands tightened on Peter's hips and his cock slid home again, leaving Peter making a sound that was close to a whimper, because he'd already worked out that when he did that, Jamie loved it, and the next thrust came harder and faster, just how he wanted it. He was a little hazy about cause and effect sometimes, but he was sure about that.

Not that the whimpering was entirely voluntary...

"Summer boy," Jamie whispered thickly, bending over to nip at Peter's shoulder with teeth that had already left half a dozen marks on Peter's skin. "You feel so hot when I'm fucking you. Like sliding my cock into—"

His voice broke off and Peter smiled unseen, not blaming Jamie for being unable to come up with something suitably poetic at such a moment, and more than willing to exchange words for actions. When Jamie remained still, cock deep inside him, he frowned, wriggling slightly in a gentle hint.

Jamie pulled out of him, leaving Peter gasping and bereft, and, as Peter twisted his head around to stare, Jamie drove his fist hard into the bed, his mouth set and angry.

Peter rolled onto his back and tilted his head to look at the pale gray square of the window, comprehension replacing bewilderment.

"Dawn."

"Aye," Jamie replied from the foot of the bed. "And you're being fucked by the Head of the Clan of Callum, if you care."

"I care that you stopped," Peter said truthfully, "although I can quite see why you did." His cock, slow to understand, still stood tall, and he sighed and ran his hand over it idly, his gaze fixed on Jamie's back, wondering what to do.

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"It was like a sword through my skull," Jamie said irritably.  
"Damn the man!"

"The prince?" Peter guessed.

Jamie turned, his face stormy. "Well, who else?" His eyes dropped to Peter's hand and widened with outrage. "I was taking care of that!"

"You stopped," Peter said evenly. "And from the look of you, you're about to spend a considerable amount of time sulking, so don't mind me, will you?"

Jamie's jaw dropped slightly and then he smirked and reached for a pillow, propping his elbow on it and settling down to watch. "Off you go, then."

Raising one eyebrow and fighting to keep a calmly amused smile on his face for the first few strokes at least, Peter curled his fingers around his shaft and began what was an all-too-familiar action.

Of course, he didn't usually have an audience whose gray eyes seemed torn between watching his face—and he was damned if he'd close his eyes when the only man he was interested in picturing was right there in front of him—and his cock, contained in a grip he knew would look painfully tight.

And it was. He liked it that way. The average person spoke blithely about the cruelty of the children of winter, and Peter knew many who enjoyed living up to that preconception, but they forgot, perhaps, that summer could be harsh too, with its drought and searing sun.

And none of that mattered, because no season was forever, and relief from heat came with the storms of autumn and the clean, fresh winds that scoured the trees bare.

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Peter whimpered Jamie's name deliberately, challengingly and waited for his own autumnson to quench his fire.

Jamie grinned slowly, unpeeled his hand from his own cock and crawled across the bed to Peter, kissing him first and sucking at his bottom lip until it stung. Then Jamie worked his way down Peter's body until he got level with Peter's cock.

"Move your hand," Jamie said, lifting his head to stare up at Peter.

Peter showed Jamie his teeth and pushed through the tight tunnel of his own hand one more time.

"Very well," Jamie said, ducking his head and waiting. Peter thrust up again, throwing in a moan for good measure, and then gasped as Jamie's tongue flickered out, a warm, wet slash of a touch across the exposed, sensitive head of his cock.

He managed to endure three more of those lightning-fast caresses before his resolve faltered and his hand fell away, leaving him at Jamie's mercy.

Jamie, who sighed patiently, put Peter's hand back where it had been, with Jamie's own over it, holding it in place, and made him carry on until every sound that fell from Peter's mouth was genuine, heartfelt and increasingly desperate.

By the time Jamie's grip slackened, lips sliding down further, Peter was lost to sensation, his eyes tight-shut and his skin heated and tingling.

"Jamie, oh God, oh love—"

He felt Jamie hum with satisfaction and then he was coming, hips jerking as he rode out a release intense enough to leave him shaking.

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Jamie lifted his head, wiping the back of his mouth with his hand as Peter blinked up at him hazily.

"Turn over," Jamie said and then added, rather charmingly, "Please?"

\* \* \* \*

They woke again at full light, kissing their way through dressing and coming close to falling back into bed again. The storm had blown out and a high, blue sky smiled down on white crispness.

Peter sat with the remnants of his broom, examining them ruefully as Jamie cleared away the breakfast dishes.

"You never did say what on earth you were doing coming that far on one of those," Jamie remarked, coming back into the room and stretching out on a couch. "It's a hell of a long way to fly."

"That's exactly what I told my employer," Peter said, "but he insisted that the Luck had to be delivered by magical means."

"Stuff and nonsense," Jamie said roundly. "Amanda brought it with her by helicopter last time and there's nothing magical about that."

"Really?" Peter said. "How odd. Not that it matters, I suppose." He prized the compass out of its holder and gave it an exasperated look. "Will you look at this? It's insisting I'm where I should be—"

"Good to hear," Jamie murmured. "Clever compass."

Peter smiled at him. "Well, yes, but the fact remains that the co-ordinates I gave it were for the castle." He went back

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to glaring at it. "Honestly. Brand-new and a little blizzard has it confused."

"Send it back with a curse," Jamie said lazily. "Better yet, chuck it away and come here and kiss me."

"I can't, not really," Peter said. "I'm technically at work today, and I really should go to the castle to explain why I'm not there." He blinked. "If you know what I mean." He gave Jamie a severe look. "And if you really do plan to go through with this revenge of yours—"

"I do," Jamie said firmly.

"Then we—I—no, we, dammit! We need to warn people before the castle falls. Unless slaughtering your relatives is also part of your plan for revenge?"

"Have you ever met my Aunt Dolores?" Jamie enquired. "Because if you had, you wouldn't be quite so free with your mercy. Och, what's it to you, anyway?"

"Well, I don't suppose old man Callum was serious about setting the hounds on me," Peter said with some asperity, "but I think it's safe to say I'm unemployed as of the moment he discovers I've failed to complete my task."

"Hounds?" Jamie said, jerking upright. "He said he'd set the hounds on ye?"

"Something of the sort, yes," Peter said, wincing as a splinter from his broomstick worked its way under his nail. "Don't worry; I feel sure that they were metaphoric hounds."

"Oh, aye," Jamie said grimly, rolling up the leg of his jeans and tapping at a ragged silver scar on his calf, half-hidden beneath the russet hair. "They might be. In fact, as they're

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ghost hounds, I suppose they are. But their damned teeth are real enough. Laddie, why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I know good and well that he didn't mean it?" Peter said. "Don't be silly, Jamie. Besides, they'll answer to you now, so I'm safe unless you take a sudden dislike to me."

Jamie stood up. "I'm wanting your word," he said roughly. "You're to swear that you won't try to trick me into touching it, and then I'll give you the Luck and we'll take it to their fucking castle and they'll no' be able to blame you when I refuse to touch it, because you'll have done all you could. But you're to swear, you hear me?"

Peter stood, too. "Don't you trust me?" he asked quietly, the hurt he felt finding its way into his voice.

Jamie shook his head. "Lad, if I didn't, I wouldn't be doing this much, believe me. Aye, I trust you."

Bending down, Peter sorted through the fragments of wood and picked up a twig from the tail. Birch. It would do. He stood and walked over to Jamie and stopped far enough away that he could extend his hand, folded around the twig.

"By this I swear," he said. "Neither by trick, nor threat, nor coercion will I force you to touch the Luck. Let it bear witness to the truth of my words." He felt pain lance through his hand as the wood twisted and stabbed and then sighed as the twig went from bud to leaf, the soft green dappled with his blood.

"Thank you," Jamie said softly.

Peter placed the twig on the table and waited.

"It's in a tree," Jamie said heading toward the door. "Just across from where you landed."

It wasn't there.

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Somehow Peter had known that it wouldn't be that easy.

Jamie leaned his forehead against the tree trunk and brought his hand up, fingers spread, to touch the bark. Peter watched him in silence. Jamie hadn't spoken since Peter had withdrawn his empty hand from the hollow in the tree, but Jamie hadn't needed to; the dismay followed by fury had been plain on his face.

"My land."

"I'm sorry?" Peter said.

Jamie turned, straightening and looking dangerously unstable. "They came onto my land and stole from me," he said through his teeth. "I'm going to fucking kill them."

Clearing his throat and hoping that Jamie wouldn't take out his evident frustration on the closest warm body, Peter said mildly, "But does it matter? You don't want the Luck, and one could say that they've done you a favor."

He got an uncomprehending look. "My land," Jamie repeated before shaking his head. "Och, you're a townie, and English as well; I wouldn't expect you to understand."

Keeping hold of his temper, Peter said patiently, "Be that as it may, this changes nothing. I don't know who would have taken the Luck, or why; it's valuable, but more for the associations than for the jewel itself; garnet's only semi-precious and—"

"It is what protects my clan," Jamie said, his voice cold and steady. "For centuries. And for all I know, it's in the hands of strangers. Don't stand there and tell me it doesn't matter, for I'll not listen."

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Pursing his lips, Peter studied Jamie. If the words 'dog' and 'bone' flitted through his mind, he didn't dwell on them. Jamie's apparent change of heart was in his interests after all—and in Jamie's; Peter was certain that Jamie would have come to regret carrying through his plans, and the Clan would have found a multitude of ways to deal with him, none of them pleasant.

"Very well," Peter said. "Then I suggest we dress for the weather and begin our search." Jamie frowned and Peter pointed to the faint tracks leading away from the tree, barely visible with the fresh snow that filled them, but clear enough if you were looking for them. "One man, heading north along a track. Where does that path lead?"

Jamie strode to the footprints, kneeling beside them and touching them lightly with his fingers. "To the castle, where else?"

"It doesn't follow that the Luck was taken there, though," Peter said thoughtfully. "The thief could have turned aside."

"It doesn't matter," Jamie said. "I'll find him wherever he's gone with what's mine." He jerked his head at the cottage. "Get what you need, and hurry."

Something in Peter's face must have given him away because Jamie's eyes lost some of their anger. "Please?" Jamie said quietly, walking over to Peter and resting the back of his fingers fleetingly against Peter's cheek.

Peter nodded and turned away.

When he came out, his flying suit on as it was weatherproof and light enough that he could walk in it, Jamie

was in the middle of the clearing, bare-chested and half out of his jeans.

"What on earth are you doing?" Peter exclaimed.

Jamie grinned, tossing his jeans on top of the rest of his clothes, tucked neatly into a small bag, and shivering convulsively. "Well, I can't shift form wearing that lot, now can I? I'm not like you, shifting down small and able to shed my clothes as I do it."

"Oh!" Peter said. "I see." He glanced away. "I wouldn't—I hadn't really thought about it. With not being able to do it myself." He forestalled Jamie's next question. "No. I don't want to try. I've given up trying, if it's all the same to you."

Jamie stared at him, his face unreadable, but mercifully free from the pity or scorn that Peter had grown to expect, and then nodded. "As you like. But you can hold on, can you not?"

"To what?" Peter asked.

"Me," Jamie said, extending his arms and diving forward.

Peter watched time slow and stretch as the transformation rippled over Jamie, starting with his hands that, when they smacked against the ground, were hooves attached to graceful, powerful legs.

"A stag," he said aloud, watching the brown skin darken a shade as it changed to smooth, dense hair, and antlers spring from Jamie's head, branching out and ending in points, sharp and strong. "Of course..."

\*What else?\* said Jamie, his voice clear inside Peter's head even as the stag nickered softly and pawed at the ground. \*Come on, lad.\*

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Peter picked up the bag of clothing and followed Jamie over to a boulder, climbing up on it and scrambling, a little awkwardly, onto Jamie's back. There was nothing to hold onto, and the shape of the stag's back was subtly different from the horses he was used to riding, but as Jamie set off at a steady walk, Peter gripped with his knees and managed to stay in place, the bag balanced in front of him.

*I've got the scent of the trail, Jamie said. I'm going to go a little faster.*

With no more warning than that, Jamie sprang forward, tossing his head, leaving Peter yelping and just managing to get his arms around the stag's neck.

*You're choking me, Jamie complained, but there was no hiding his exhilaration. Peter sighed. He'd had people describe—or try to—what it was like to transform, and although they usually ended up staring into space with a look of dreamy contentment on their faces, he'd gathered that it was quite the experience.*

And one he'd never know.

"How far away is the castle?" he shouted over the rush of wind.

*Four miles, Jamie replied. And the trail's arrow-straight, curse him. My bloody family. I'd sooner it'd been strangers.*

Peter fell silent after that, most of his attention on clinging to the back of the stag, jolted painfully because Jamie was cantering now. With a small part of his mind he was working at the puzzle of the thief, discarding theories that were growing steadily wilder and less likely as he tried to balance motive with opportunity and failed.

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Had someone been watching Jamie's cottage and seen him hide the pouch? Or was it the Luck that had been tracked? And, given Jamie's open animosity towards the clan and his belief that he'd be chosen, had the clan acted to prevent Jamie's plan from coming to pass? Peter couldn't help feeling some sympathy for them, but not much. Jamie had told him how Jamie's mother had been ostracized when she'd fallen in love with the castle gardener whose cottage lay just outside the clan lands. She'd died ten years earlier, without a single member of her family attending her deathbed or her funeral, and Jamie, barely twenty, had abandoned his studies and moved back into the long-abandoned cottage, bound and determined to be a visible thorn in the clan's side.

Peter had no wish to see the castle fall, but he could see why Jamie would want to.

The trees began to thin and Jamie slowed to a trot and then a walk, tossing his antlers restlessly as he stared at the castle walls, mellow gray and thick with ivy, the brown vines winding around the stone.

*Get down, Jamie said abruptly. It's in there. The trail ends here.*

Peter slid down and stepped aside, staggering as the ground heaved beneath him. The muscles in his thighs ached, and a branch had slashed a gouge across his forehead, but they'd reached the castle far quicker than they could have managed walking in the snow, checking the trail by sight alone. As Jamie changed back to human form Peter took a quick look at his watch. Eleven, with sunset early at this time

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of the year; no later than four, most likely. Five hours wasn't long, but it might be long enough.

If the gem was in the castle ... if Jamie could convince his family that once handed over, he'd touch it ... Peter sighed. He wasn't even sure of that last part. Jamie's anger at the theft didn't necessarily mean that he'd given up his plan, after all. Just wanted to be the one to pull the trigger.

"If you get it back—"

"When," Jamie corrected him, reaching for his clothing.

"God, my feet are freezing!"

"You're standing in snow," Peter said reasonably. "When you get it back, then; what will you do?"

"You swore," Jamie said warningly.

"I know!" Peter snapped. "I'm just asking. Will you still—"

"I don't want to discuss it," Jamie said shortly, fastening his jeans and shoving his bare, wet feet into his boots without bothering to charm them dry.

"If you'll just let me—"

Jamie swung around, his eyes hard. "No! Leave it, will you?" He dragged a sweater over his head and began to walk toward the castle.

"Did anyone ever tell you that you're a complete, fucking pain in the arse?" Peter muttered as he followed.

"Aye," Jamie said. "Quite a few people. Want me to add you to the list, or was that by way of being rhetorical?"

"I don't want to discuss it," Peter said, taking very little satisfaction in sniping at Jamie but needing to do something to relieve his feelings.

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Jamie sighed. "When this day ends, remind me to apologize for whatever it is that I've done or said to upset you, but right now I don't have time, Peter."

The castle doors loomed in front of them, dark wood, forbidding and closed.

"I don't want an apology," Peter said. "And when this day ends, you won't have time to do anything but run as fast as you can, on two legs or four."

"From the hounds?" Jamie asked, sounding unconcerned. "I outran them once; I can do it again. And like you said, I doubt they'd take orders from anyone but me, so you needn't be worrying."

"Oh, so you'll use your position as Head when it suits you?" Peter said coldly. "And if you must know I was thinking of your Aunt Dolores."

Jamie gave a snort of laughter and then stopped in his tracks. The doors were opening and a figure, small at this distance but still recognizable, stepped out.

"Mr. Callum!" Peter said incredulously.

"Hmm?" Jamie said. "You're acquainted with my Uncle Alistair then, are you?"

Peter grabbed Jamie's arm, his thoughts in chaos. "Yes, he's my employer; I told you. Jamie, wait a moment, there's something wrong."

"You didn't say his first name," Jamie said, "and even then, I doubt I'd have known exactly who you meant; I've seventeen uncles." Jamie didn't sound as if he counted them amongst his blessings.

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"Yes, well," Peter said distractedly. "Look, this doesn't make sense."

Jamie sighed. "Aye, it does; they've got me here so that they can appeal to my better nature or some such; I've made no secret of my feelings, after all. Well, it won't work. In fact, I've a mind to go home now I know the Luck's not with strangers. Let it stay here and be buried in the rubble with the whole boiling lot of them."

Ahead of them, Mr. Callum gestured imperatively, and Jamie bit his lip. "Och," he muttered. "Might as well tell him it wasn't your fault, I suppose."

"He knows," Peter said as Jamie began to walk away.

"What?" Jamie turned, a frown on his face.

It was so simple that Peter couldn't believe that it'd taken him so long to grasp it. "The compass; I set it using the co-ordinates he gave me; he sent me to you, not to the castle. You said yourself that there was no need for me to fly; why didn't he just bring it himself as he planned on coming here?"

"That doesn't make sense," Jamie said. "Give me the Luck? He'd not risk it!"

"He knew that you wouldn't destroy it before dawn," Peter said slowly. "And perhaps he hoped that with it in your grasp you'd change your mind; I'm not sure. I just know that this is a trap of some sort."

"Then we'll spring it," Jamie said.

"No!" Peter exclaimed, but Jamie shook his head stubbornly and carried on walking towards the castle, leaving Peter no choice but to follow him.

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As they drew level with the castle door, Mr. Callum stepped forward to greet them, an acidic smile on his face.

"Ah, Peter," he said. "Took your time getting here, didn't you?" His gaze went to Jamie. "James."

"Uncle Alistair," Jamie said stiffly.

"Do I find you well?" Mr. Callum enquired, leading them into the courtyard beyond the door.

"What is all this?" Jamie demanded, his face darkening. "I've come for the Luck, and well you know it, so have done with your foolishness."

"Come to take your inheritance, have you?" Alistair Callum asked, his pale eyes hooded.

Peter felt the tension in the air and glanced up to see a dozen faces staring down at them from the windows of the castle.

"That's not at issue," Jamie replied. "I'm the Head of the Clan now, for my sins, and the Luck is mine to dispose of; what I do with it is for me to decide, but I'll not have my hand forced."

"Stubborn as your mother," Alistair Callum sneered.

Jamie stepped closer and folded his arms. "You'll not talk of her," he said. "You don't have the right."

"And you don't have the right to destroy us all out of spite," Alistair said dourly. "Aye, we treated her ill and it's regretting it we are now that you've been chosen, but that's past and gone. It's over, laddie. Take the Luck as your duty bids you, and most likely in two weeks you can pass it on." His voice dropped to a persuasive lilt. "Come now, Jamie, my

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boy. I have it safe, never fear; you've but to touch it, no more."

"You should have told me that you were going deaf, uncle," Jamie said. "I'd have spoken a wee bit louder when I told you I'd not be forced into anything."

"Mr. Callum," Peter said. "I must insist that you explain yourself."

"Not now, Peter," said his employer without sparing him a glance. "You've played your part well, and I'll see to it that you're rewarded, but this is Clan business."

"What?" Peter began, but Jamie's face was darkening with suspicion. "Jamie! I didn't—this wasn't—"

"Och, don't go thinking that the lad's betrayed you," Alistair said, with a chuckle disturbingly like his nephew's. "He's innocent as a new-born babe—well, after last night, maybe innocent's not quite the right word, but he was a pawn, not a player." He nodded at Peter. "There; don't go making me to be the villain; I could have let him think you false, and I didn't, so show your gratitude."

"You disgusting, conniving bastard!" Jamie said, his voice rising. "Grateful to you? What cause has he to be grateful? You could have killed him sending him out in that storm, and all for what?"

Alistair smirked. "Well, to get you here, for one, but you'll see, laddie. You'll see."

A flicker of movement caught Peter's eye, and he squinted up at one of the windows and then gasped as something came flying toward them, hissing through the air. "Jamie!" He hurled himself at Jamie's back, bringing them both down in a

tumbled heap. The arrow clattered harmlessly to the ground in front of Alistair, who bent and picked it up, turning it in his hand.

"You're very quick off the mark, young man," Alistair observed as Peter struggled to his feet. "But that was quite unnecessary." Alistair smiled. "You see, that arrow wasn't meant for Jamie."

"No?" Jamie growled, standing up and glaring at the windows as if he was daring anyone else to take a shot. "Someone else besides me doesn't like you overmuch, uncle?"

"Very likely," Alistair replied. "But it wasn't aimed at me, either."

The slash of the arrowhead across the back of his hand took Peter quite by surprise. Foolish of him, he supposed, but one really couldn't put Mr. Callum in the role of assassin somehow. Not even when one's head was beginning to spin and one had fallen to one's knees...

"What have you done to him?" Jamie sounded anguished, which was rather sweet, Peter thought, staring up at the two figures above him.

"Poison, of course," Mr. Callum said. His tongue flickered out from between his lips, longer than it should have been, and forked. "My own venom, so only I can cure him. Which I will as soon as you touch the Luck."

Something deep-red, blood-red sparkled in Mr. Callum's hand. It was important that Jamie not touch that. Peter held to that belief as he doubled over, fire and ice competing to race through his blood to his heart.

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"Peter, you must transform. You must." Gray eyes were wide and anxious, right there for Peter to fall into, drown inside, find peace ... "The poison won't go with you and when you transform back—"

"He can't, you silly boy; do you think I'd have chosen this method if he could?"

"You can, Peter; please? For me? Please?"

Jamie saying 'please' ... Peter got to his feet and stood there swaying, willing the change. He felt it hovering, there within his grasp, oddly close now that he was dying. He could feel the weight of feathers, the embrace of the air, thin and sweet.

And then it slipped from him because he was falling again, falling into darkness and he couldn't, still couldn't.

Summerson.

He turned his face up to the sunlight and took from it what little strength it had—not much, not in winter—and then snatched the Luck from Mr. Callum's hand, intending to throw it high and far.

It slipped from his numb fingers, skittering across the ice coating the courtyard, and Peter moaned, sinking to his knees, and then, as he lost all feeling in his legs, to his stomach.

The last thing he saw, as his eyes closed with a finality he couldn't fight, was a strong brown hand scooping up the garnet and hiding its fire as it curled into a fist.\*\*\*

Peter woke in a sea of pink and whimpered.

"It's horrendous, isn't it?" Jamie said cheerfully, walking through the door with a tray in his hands, his accent making

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'horrendous' twice as long as it needed to be. "Amanda seems to have gone in for pink; wait until you see the bathroom." He set the tray down on a bedside table and sat down on the bed, grimacing at the slippery rose satin spread.

Peter swallowed and then closed his eyes, lying back and wishing he'd had time to sort through his thoughts before having to deal with Jamie.

"Peter? Are you still in pain?"

There was too much concern in Jamie's voice for Peter to ignore. "I feel fine," he said, summoning up a smile as bright and as false as Jamie's had been. "I take it I've been cured?"

Jamie nodded slowly. "Aye. You slept the clock around, but you shouldn't feel any ill effects."

There was a faint throb from his hand, but when Peter glanced down at it, he saw no more than a faint, red line.

"Good," he said. "Then if you'll just tell me where my clothes are, and call me a taxi, I'll be on my way."

He wasn't sure what he expected Jamie's reaction to his request to be. He just knew that the artificiality of the conversation was making his stomach twist. Anger, he would have been able to understand, but this? No.

There was silence, and then Jamie stared down at the bedspread and began to pick at a loose thread in it. "Oh," Jamie said quietly. "I wasn't expecting you—well, I can see why you'd not want to stay here, although I swear to you that you're in no danger, but I was hoping—"

"I want to go."

"Why?" Jamie looked up as he said it, his gray eyes searching Peter's face. Jamie was already too close; Peter

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could have touched Jamie's leg or hand, by doing no more than shift his own hand an inch or two, and to have his gaze drawn to Jamie's face was too much.

"I'm sorry; am I a prisoner here?" Peter kept his voice cool and light. "Because I've spent quite enough time in the wilds; I'd really like to be getting back to civilization. I don't suppose I have a job, but—"

"You haven't been fired, if that's what's troubling you," Jamie said shortly. "Not but what I'd think twice about working under Uncle Alistair if I were you."

Peter didn't even have to think once. It didn't matter. He could find work. Looking like he did, people would always give him the benefit of the doubt and assume that he was powerful. And because they believed that, they tended to ignore any evidence to the contrary.

Which was why Scott Perlham always cheated at golf when he played Peter; he thought he wouldn't be able to win any other way.

"That's really not your concern, is it?"

"Are you going to stop this any time soon?" Jamie asked.

"I'm sorry?" Polite bemusement was an easy expression to attach to his face; a good one to hide behind.

"Your mouth's saying nothing worth listening to and your mind's screaming at me," Jamie said bluntly. He winced, rubbing his fingers across his eyes. "Giving me one hell of a headache, if you must know."

"It is?" Peter said involuntarily.

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"Aye," Jamie said. "It is. I've not known you long, Peter, but I've known you well, and you know me; d'you really think I'll be letting you walk away from me?"

"You have no choice," Peter insisted.

"I asked you why you were going and you haven't answered me," Jamie said. "Last time you were naked in my bed, you were honest with me. I'd be inclined to blame all the pink, but I'm too busy blaming myself to take the easy way out."

"Blaming—I don't understand."

Jamie glared at him, which was more what Peter had expected. "I almost got you killed! You can't have forgotten, lad; it was only yesterday."

"Your uncle did that," Peter corrected him. "You're the one who saved me." He swallowed. "I should—I should—"

"Thank me and I'll not be answerable for the consequences," Jamie interrupted. "I don't know what's going through your head—well, I do, but it's not making any fucking sense—but why in hell would I be angry with you?"

"Because I'm in your bed?" Peter said. "Your bed. The Head of the Clan's bed. In a castle that seems to be still standing?"

"Och, that." Jamie flushed. "Aye, well. For two weeks I suppose I can live with it. And you can't be thinking I'd rather you dead for the sake of fourteen nights sleeping in a rose garden."

"And if you get chosen again, you'll carry out your threat?" Peter asked.

"No."

"Why?"

"Oh, you get to ask the 'why' questions and get answers, do you?" Jamie enquired. "Well, you'll find out soon enough, and I don't want any secrets between us; my uncle made me swear I'd not do it before he saved you."

"I see," Peter said. "I'd like that taxi now, please."

"You can have a fleet of them if you'll just tell me what's bothering you."

Speech was impossible. Peter shook his head, stared across the room at a truly hideous rendition of the Lost Prince's execution, shuddered and averted his eyes.

"Then be on your way," Jamie said. Peter nodded and began to get out of bed, but Jamie's hand curled around his shoulder. "You're forgetting something."

"What?" Peter asked.

"I've given you bed and board again," Jamie said. "Even if you've not touched your breakfast and there's me carrying it up three flights of stairs."

"Thank you," Peter said. "But I don't see—"

"You don't want your kiss?" Jamie asked. "And I can't promise it's going to be just friendly."

Jamie leaned forward and Peter shook his head. "Don't—"

"Please?" Jamie whispered, his mouth right there to be kissed. "Peter, lad; please?"

Peter didn't remember deciding to do it, but his hands came up and cupped Jamie's face, bringing Jamie closer. Jamie let him control the kiss and let him end it, but Jamie's mouth was eager under Peter's and his hands were tight fists as he kept them by his sides, doing no more than kiss Peter.

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"Tell me?" Jamie said, not moving away.

"Why aren't you angry with me? Disgusted by my cowardice? Why are you being so damn nice to me?" Peter said.

The silence was jammed full of words that Peter could feel, pressing against him, but couldn't hear. Not with his ears, anyway.

"You're talking nonsense," Jamie said finally. "Dying, you took that bloody gem and tried to save me from having to touch it; how is that being a coward?"

"I couldn't do it," Peter said, pushing back the covers and struggling up to his knees, facing Jamie. "Even then, at the end.... I still couldn't transform. That proves it."

"Proves what?" Jamie asked angrily.

"That I'm not your equal. Less. Weak, a failure—" Peter shook his head. "God, just pick one. I won't mind which."

"One in a thousand can transform," Jamie said slowly. "Less than that can do it properly and hold the change for any length of time. You're choosing an odd way of defining a failure. If you can't do it, then you can't."

"I think we both know that I could," Peter said. "I'm just—scared."

"You think that you're scared," Jamie corrected him. "I don't think you are. Not really."

"Could we skip over the sympathy and get to the part where you let me—"

"Fly away?"

Peter felt the pain of that dig deep. "You didn't have to say that," he said, the words flat and bitter. "God, Jamie—"

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"Look at the window."

"What?" Bewildered, Peter glanced over at it; an unremarkable pane of glass shrouded in even more pink satin, dimming the sunlight. "What about it?"

"On the floor."

Peter stared at the carpet under the window and saw a scatter of—"Feathers?"

"Aye," Jamie said, nodding his head. "Yours."

"What?" Peter felt a wave of dizziness. He was remembering something now ... his hands tangled in something thick and heavy, the air calling to him from behind a barrier he couldn't break with beak or talon—with what? "I transformed? No; it's not possible!"

Jamie stood and went over to the window, returning with three feathers in his hand. He placed them on the quilt where they lay lightly, wild and fierce against the lush opulence of the silk, all golden-brown speckles with the blunt shaft an opaque ivory.

"You're breathtaking, you know that?" Jamie said, his fingertip stroking one of the feathers slowly, furling its rough edge smooth. "You cried out for freedom, with your eyes blazing, and I wanted to set you loose and watch you soar, but I couldn't risk it. Not with you not knowing what you were doing." Jamie rolled back his sleeve, exposing a deep gash. "You didn't like me capturing you, but I had no choice."

"I did that?" Peter whispered, reaching out to halt Jamie as he began to cover his wound. "I didn't mean to—but Jamie, I can't remember!"

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"Next time you will," Jamie said with a certainty Peter was far from feeling. "And next time we'll do it outside, the two of us, with the forest around us and the sky open and waiting for you."

"Jamie—"

"I want that. Just once, and then you can go if you've a mind to," Jamie said, his voice steady and his hand warm against Peter's face. "Running with the snow crunching under my hooves and the beat of your wings overhead. You'll know I'm there, and I'll bring you back, never fear."

Peter searched Jamie's face, seeing the strain he was hiding. "Something's still bothering you," Peter said.

Jamie threw back his head and growled, his calm facade shattering. "You've done nothing but talk about leaving since I walked in! Of course I'm bothered by something." He took a deep breath and scowled at Peter who was grinning. "What?"

"You're just so—" Peter shook his head. "You'd make a terrible lawyer, you know that?"

"Are you trying to sweet-talk me? Because there's better ways to do it than that."

"I'm trying to tell you that you're hopeless at hiding anything you feel," Peter said. He purposely made his smile smug. "Whereas I'm trained to be unfathomable and reserved."

"Are you hell," Jamie said indignantly. "Why, it's plain as day what you want."

Peter gazed at Jamie, his smile vanishing, his thoughts as focused as he could make them. "Then why aren't you giving it to me?"

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The feathers spun to the floor in lazy spirals as Jamie lunged across the bed and kissed Peter hard. "There," he panted a few minutes later when their mouths parted. "Now ask for something else while I'm in a generous mood."

"More kisses?" Peter murmured. "Less clothes?" He tugged hard at Jamie's sweater.

"I can do that, but, Peter—"

"I'll stay," Peter told him, knowing what he'd been about to ask.

Jamie closed his eyes and then opened them, staring at Peter. "I need to know why," he said. "If it's just because you know that you can transform now, well, that's plain foolishness."

"It's not that," Peter said. He reconsidered and amended it. "It's not just that."

"I'm not sure," Jamie said stubbornly. "You were all for packing your bags and leaving me before you found out. If you really wanted to stay, it shouldn't have mattered to you. It didn't to me."

"And that's why I'm staying," Peter said.

"Because it didn't matter?"

Peter nodded, eyeing Jamie cautiously.

Jamie groaned in surrender, pushing his hand through his hair. "You're one hell of a puzzle, you know that?"

"And do you like puzzles?" Peter asked.

Jamie grinned. "I cheat and look at the answers." His smile softened and his hand traced across Peter's forehead. "Does that bother you? That we're so open to each other?"

"I think I could get used to it in time," Peter said.

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The wind spilled from the curve of his wings, cool and sweet. Crying out in exultant triumph the hawk plummeted down, seeking his prey, keen eyes alert.

*You'll regret eating that when you change back, love*

Wings beating hard, the hawk swerved and landed on a tree trunk, a small mouse skittering through dead leaves to safety.

*I'm hungry*

The stag walked over to him, heavy muscles working to make every movement graceful.

*Change and we can eat*

Peter shook off the hawk form and smiled up at Jamie, naked in the spring sunlight. "It was glorious up there today."

"Aye," Jamie said, rubbing his hand affectionately over the slim trunk of a silver birch. "Everything's waking up."

"So I see," Peter said, staring at Jamie with a smile.

"You'll take anything I say in reply and use it to seduce me, won't you?" Jamie said.

"Oh, yes," Peter replied.

"Shall I save you the trouble and point out that the picnic blanket is spread out and waiting and I'd as soon fuck you on it as eat whatever's in the basket? Or am I too easy?"

Peter linked their hands and walked through the soft, new shoots of grass and bluebells to the blanket. "If you didn't want me, I'd be—oh, pick a word."

"Sad?" Jamie suggested, his mouth warm on Peter's shoulder as he kissed it.

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"Devastated," Peter corrected him.

"Well, we can't have that..."

They sank down onto the blanket, kissing with a slow urgency, love and need combining with the exhilaration of transforming and the restless stir of the season. Peter rolled to his back, staring up at the sunlight filtered through the unfurling leaves, watching it touch Jamie's hair with gold.

Not his season yet, but he reached out for the sunlight and spun it around them, making each brush of fingers on skin leave a tingle of heat and magic.

"I want you above me," Jamie said into Peter's ear, the words barely needing to be spoken after months together. "Want to watch you fly, my summer hawk."

"You in me?" Peter asked, smiling at Jamie's name for him, as he always did.

"Aye..." Jamie replied, turning to his side and letting Peter rise to his knees. "Ride me."

"The last time I did, I was bruised for days," Peter said teasingly, pushing Jamie to his back and moving between his legs. "Promise to stay human?"

As he bent his head and took Jamie's cock in his mouth, the only response was a moan, heartfelt and appreciative, but it was enough. Drawing him in deeply, Peter brought Jamie to the point of writhing, the blanket crumpled beneath him as his hands clenched around it and then passed over Peter's head and shoulders.

"Please..." Jamie whispered finally, the plea echoing inside Peter's head. "No more..."

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Releasing him, Peter smiled down at Jamie, a somewhat shaky smile, because he couldn't do that to Jamie without his own arousal intensifying to the point where he was as close to coming as Jamie.

"I'm not done with you yet," Peter said.

"Well, I'd hope not," Jamie murmured, recovering his composure a little. His cock glistened, wet and hard and Peter ran his finger down it, watching Jamie shudder.

"Watch," he said, cupping sunlight again. It was getting easier to do this every time, power he'd never thought to possess his for the taking. He spun the light into liquid and turned his hand over, letting it drip like honey onto Jamie's waiting, wanting cock.

"Ahh..." Jamie exhaled through gritted teeth. "That feels..."

"Good?" Peter smoothed his palm over the rigid heat and moved to straddle Jamie.

"Aye, but it'd feel better were I inside you."

Peter gave Jamie a mischievous grin, wriggling into position and pushing down just enough to allow Jamie to slip inside him a bare inch. "Say 'please'."

Jamie growled, soft and dangerous, and gripped Peter's hips, holding him still. "Say 'thank you,'" Jamie replied and arched upwards, sheathing himself in Peter in one swift thrust and sending Peter soaring.

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