

BOUNTY OF THE HEART

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The disgust that flitted across Jack's face as he holstered his pistol suggested otherwise. He took his seat again by the fire, dismissing the stranger. Tossing a small bundle of sticks into the flames, Jack growled, "What the hell do *you* want?"

The stranger shrugged easily. When he pushed the hat back from his face, he grinned wolfishly at Emmett, his thin, dark beard enhancing his lupine appearance. Tapping the hat firmly into place, he drawled, "Where'd you pick up the kid, Jack? He's too damn pretty to be your type."

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ALSO BY J. M. SNYDER

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BOUNTY OF THE HEART

BY

J. M. SNYDER

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BOUNTY OF THE HEART AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

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Dedicated to ... you know who.

BOUNTY OF THE HEART

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The last of the sun's dying rays stretched across the frozen land, tingeing the hard-packed snow a dusky rose. A few miles south of the small mining town called Aliak, the makings of a low campfire struggled to burn among the jagged foothills. A man sat hunched over the fire, his weathered face exposed to the elements beneath a fur-lined cap. He wore a black duster jacket, ragged and worn, over which was thrown the treated hide of a grizzly. When the wind blew in fitful gusts through the trees, the bear's fur stood up along the man's back, enhancing his already large bulk. Nearby, twenty-two-year-old Emmett Ward stood on a rugged outcropping and peered through an old set of binoculars at the quiet town nestled in the snow-covered valley below. He stood tall against the cold and the wind, a scarf pulled up over his mouth and nose to protect his face. Each gust tugged at his blond curls, tumbling them together atop his head in a disheveled manner, like a master petting a favorite dog. A patchwork of hides covered Emmett's thin frame, shielding the rest of him from the weather.

Weariness ached in his bones, and he grimaced at the unsavory thought of spending another night sleeping on the hard ground by the evening's meager fire. Alaska was a harsh land, he was discovering. One he didn't care for much. What ground wasn't covered in snow was frozen solid—the cold ate into a man's bones, stiffening his muscles and making sleep impossible. Any fire Jack managed to light would barely give enough warmth to cook by, let alone stave off the chill.

If the fire even took. In this wind? Emmett doubted it.

As he listened to his partner curse the low flames, Emmett raised the binoculars again and adjusted the sight to hone in on the warm glow of a tavern window down in Aliak. What he wouldn't give to sit by *that* fire. Keeping his voice light, he called out, "You get it going yet?"

"Shut the fuck up," Jack growled.

Emmett laughed at the malice curled in his partner's voice. Jack Robison might be one of the most feared bounty hunters in all the western territory, but Emmett had been with him long enough to be able to read his moods. Jack's bad attitude stemmed from their arduous journey—they'd spent most of the day trekking through desolate wilderness over rocky ground, heads bent against wind that cut through their clothing like a sharp boning knife. The morning's light had seen them disembark from a whaling ship that had agreed to take them north from Juneau; a week ago, they'd been at a logging camp in Oregon, trying not to kill each other after getting hampered down by a sudden blizzard. Jack hated the cold. Traveling so far north this late in the year pissed him off.

Emmett also suspected their reason for being in the frigid clime in the first place bothered Jack. In two days dog sleds would race through Aliak, and the town's narrow streets would be lined with spectators out to watch the mushers and their mutts. Local bookies took bets on the race—small change gambling, nothing that would normally interest the two men out on the ridge. But word had it the race was rigged this year, and the odds favored Lin Ji, a Korean gangster gouging a name for himself in Seward's Folly.

Where Lin Ji went, his cutthroat mother Kim couldn't be far behind.

Last week, Emmett had squeezed next to Jack in a wooden booth of a dodgy bar down in Oregon while across from them sat a nameless messenger, face hidden in a dark cowl. On the table between them had been placed a pouch straining with an obscene number of gold coins. Real gold; Jack bit into one to ensure its worth. The courier had given them instructions in writing, a nondescript block print on a page torn from the back of a Bible. No words had been spoken. No niceties exchanged. The note read simply, *Lin Ji*, and provided coordinates to Aliak and a date two days hence. The money was theirs upon return.

Though Jack hadn't said it, Emmett knew this bounty worried him. He could see it in the nervous way Jack chewed the inside of his lip as he stacked the wood for the fire, in the scowl furrowing his brow, in the anger blazing in his one icy eye. And if it worried Jack, Emmett thought maybe it should worry the hell out of him, too.

Lowering the binoculars a second time, Emmett ran a hand through his curls to corral them, but the moment he opened his fingers, the wind played with his hair again. He pulled up the hood of his coat, its fur lining protecting him from the worst of the gusts, and turned from Aliak. They'd enter the town tomorrow, sometime after dawn, when they could blend in with others traveling to enjoy the race. If they approached tonight, their appearance so late in the day would surely be noticed, and even in the wilds of Alaska, a countenance like Jack's would stand out.

Returning to their fire, Emmett watched Jack hunch over the pit he'd dug earlier as he tried to start a flame. Jack's movements were sharp and fast, angry, his lips drawn down in an ugly scowl that matched the white jagged scar low across his right cheek. Emmett approached from his right, unable to see his good eye from this angle. Jack wore a black patch over the right one, which Emmett caught sight of when the sound of his steps caused Jack to turn. One hand flew into Jack's coat, where Emmett knew he kept his gun. Seeing it was only him, Jack swore. "Jesus, boy. Sit the fuck down or I'll shoot you down."

Emmett tossed the binoculars onto his bedroll and skirted around their fire to sit on Jack's left. "Don't take it out on me." Despite the fifteen year gap in their ages, Emmett didn't scare easily. He'd been with Jack for too long. "Who took this damn job in the first place? You."

Jack glared at a small lick of flame struggling to curl into their tinder. "Shut it."

Wrapping his coat tighter around his thin frame, Emmett stared into the firewood and snuck glances at his partner. Not for the first time, he wondered what those thick arms might feel like around his narrow shoulders. He'd felt their strength before, when Jack had leaned through the open door of a railway car and scooped Emmett up beside him, or when a bounty opened fire and Jack pushed Emmett behind him, out of harm's way. He knew enough of Jack's brusque touch to want more, and most nights lay awake wishing for the courage to close the distance separating his bedroll from Jack's.

The quiet between them stretched out like the night sky above. Emmett dared to scoot toward Jack, only partly to avoid the wind. He'd take any little thing he could get of his partner, even if it were just being near the older man for a moment or two. If Jack could trust Emmett with his life—and he did, Emmett knew—why couldn't he entrust Emmett with his heart?

"Do you have to get right up on me?" Jack groused, elbowing Emmett for more room.

Emmett just moved closer still, until his hip bumped Jack's. "It's cold."

With a quick bark of laughter, Jack muttered, "No shit. Get used to it."

Silence descended again. Jack stared at their fire, which had finally taken hold among the tinder and now lapped at the logs. Emmett watched Jack's face—the slight frown on his narrow lips, the stubble of hair on his unshaven cheek that looked like dirt in the firelight, the pale blue eye that moved constantly in its socket. Jack kept a steady watch, glancing first at the flames, then at the hills beyond its meager light, then at Emmett, the fire, Emmett again.

When he saw Emmett staring, he huffed and shook his head. "What?"

His elbow rested against Emmett's belly, the touch hardly felt through the layers of clothing they wore. But Emmett welcomed the weight, and the press of Jack's arm draped over his leg. Leaning against Jack a little, Emmett lowered his voice so his partner would have to strain to hear it. "You're thinking about Kim Ji, aren't you?"

"Lin's our target." Jack pushed Emmett out of his personal space, voice hard and cold. "Get the fuck off me."

Emmett had only wanted to get Jack talking. When they sat together, he could feel Jack's gruff voice reverberate through his own body—it teased his libido, and made him want something more. Sometimes, when they were alone on a hunt or holed up together waiting for their next job, Emmett would catch glimpses of the man beneath Jack's tough exterior. When it was just the two of them, Jack might let him get close—physically, yes, the way they sat now, but emotionally as well. Sometimes, talk between them grew soft and intimate. No harsh words, no angry tones. Just two men, alone together. At those times, Emmett felt he stood on the cusp of friendship, and the right word, the right touch, would send them tumbling into one bedroll, lovers at last.

But he had to mention Kim Ji. If there were one person in all the world who could terrify Jack, it was the demure but deadly crime boss known as the Dragon Lady.

Undeterred, Emmett resumed his position, his knee pressing alongside Jack's. "What do you know of him?" he asked, meaning Lin.

Jack grunted, his standard response. "Much as you."

No, Emmett doubted that. Lin Ji was the reason the two men now traveled together. It'd been years ago, Emmett just a teenager and Jack already building the ruthless reputation that still preceded him. A hit had been out on Lin Ji at the time come to think of it, a hit was *always* out on the guy. Jack had tried to cash in on it but something had gone wrong, something he still refused to talk about, even to Emmett, and he'd wound up in Oregon, beaten and bound in one of Kim Ji's warehouses off the wharf.

Emmett shut his eyes against the painful memory of Jack's once rugged face bloodied from abuse. The scar on his cheek stemmed from that time, as did the patch covering the empty socket where his eye had been. With a sigh, Emmett rested his chin against Jack's arm and murmured, "We'll get him this time."

Another grunt, noncommittal. Jack shrugged but Emmett didn't allow himself to be moved. "Get off me," Jack said, his voice low. There was no malice in it, nothing mean, and Emmett chose to ignore him.

* * *

Later, when the world around them grew black as pitch, their fire the only light interrupting the night, Jack gutted and cleaned the rabbits he'd shot earlier. With a long stick, Emmett held the meat over the fire, turning it carefully so as not to burn it. Fat sizzled as the logs cracked, their scant warmth holding back the evening chill. When the meal was cooked, the men ate in a comfortable silence. Once or twice Jack elbowed Emmett over, hoping for more room, but Emmett didn't give another inch. After a while, Jack gave up.

As the fire gutted low among the tinder, Emmett leaned back, one hand on the ground behind Jack. His partner shrugged, as if that would somehow give him more space, but it didn't. For a long moment, Emmett stared into the flickering flames, gathering up his courage. It was cold, he'd reason, and the shelf on which they had camped was open to the elements. Perhaps they could push the bedrolls together, just for the night. Emmett thought if he could only close the gap between them, nature would take over and do the rest. He'd wake in Jack's embrace, his body still humming from the older man's attention. Maybe if Emmett said it was too cold; how could he argue with that? "Jack..." Out beyond their firelight, a twig snapped. Jack jerked his head, instantly alert. Emmett fisted his hand in the hide covering Jack's back. "What was that?" he whispered.

A small scurry of stones answered him. In one fluid motion, Jack stood and drew his pistol. Before Emmett could speak, Jack hissed, "Shh."

Emmett strained to hear something else, *anything*, over the quiet fire. He heard nothing, and wondered if it hadn't been an animal of some kind when Jack leveled his gun and fired.

The report was deafening. Jack aimed a second time. "Show yourself," he called, raising his voice. To Emmett, he muttered, "Bastard's been following us since Juneau."

"What?" Emmett clambered to his feet, ears ringing from the shot. Why hadn't Jack said something earlier?

In the silence, Jack cocked the pistol. "Get the fuck *out* here," he warned.

From the darkness came a man's voice, jovial and light. "All right already, Jack. Hold up, will you?"

"Who is it?" Emmett wanted to know. "And why didn't you tell me we were being followed?"

Jack's frown deepened. "You should've known."

Slowly a tall shape extracted itself from the shadows. As the stranger stepped into the circle of light thrown by their fire, a chill passed through Emmett. He took in the weathered cloak covering tight denim pants and a dark shirt, the long rifle slung over one shoulder, the ten-gallon Stetson pulled low over the stranger's face, and wondered how this man knew Jack by name. A fellow bounty hunter? An old friend? The disgust that flitted across Jack's face as he holstered his pistol suggested otherwise. He took his seat again by the fire, dismissing the stranger. Tossing a small bundle of sticks into the flames, Jack growled, "What the hell do *you* want?"

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Emmett blushed. The stranger couldn't be much older than he was himself. Clearing his throat, he said, "I'm not a kid."

"So I see." The stranger's gaze trailed down Emmett's body, audacious, before rising to meet Emmett's eyes. That look felt invasive almost, as if the man could see through the bulk Emmett wore and behold the body beneath. Emmett's cheeks burned furiously, more so when the stranger winked. "Can't imagine Jack will introduce us. Niceties have never been his strong suit. The name's Monty Becker. Pleasure's all mine. And you are...?"

"Emmett." He took the hand Monty offered. Its grip was strong and sure, but Monty didn't let go right away—his palm burned in Emmett's, his wicked grin never faltering. With difficulty, Emmett shook him off. "Do you know Jack?"

Monty laughed. "We go way back. You two mind if I join you?"

Without waiting for a response, he sank down to sit by their fire, folding his long legs Indian-style in front of him. Emmett, all too aware that he alone still stood, took his own seat again beside Jack. This time, the elbow in his side was quick and sharp, roughly pushing him away. "I didn't say sit," Jack muttered, his voice as cold as the night around them.

"I didn't really ask," Monty replied. When he saw Emmett scoot aside, an oily grin slid over his face. "So One-Eyed Jack has himself a boy..."

Before Emmett could blink, Jack's pistol flashed out from beneath the folds of his coat. Aiming at Monty, he glared down the barrel and swore softly, "Another word and you die tonight."

"We're partners," Emmett offered, hoping to diffuse the situation.

It didn't work. Monty's sly grin and insolent manner only made matters worse. Jack cocked the pistol a second time, his gaze steely across the fire. "Get out."

Emmett touched Jack's arm and tried to lower it, but Jack wouldn't budge. "Jack, please." He clenched his fist in Jack's coat, feeling bunched muscles under his hand. When he pushed against Jack's arm a second time, Jack gave a little, just an inch, but it was something at least. Softly, Emmett asked, "Do you think you can just blow him away up here? Half the town already heard your first shot. Another will raise suspicions and Lin will know we're here."

"Lin?" Monty asked, turning his attention to Emmett. His dark eyes were mesmerizing, and Emmett couldn't look away from the flames flickering in their depths. "As in Kim Ji's son? You guys are after him, too?"

Emmett started in surprise. "You mean you-"

"Shut up, Emmett." Jack glared at his partner as he lowered his pistol. "You don't have to tell him what the fuck we're doing here."

"I already figured it out." Monty tipped his hat and winked at Emmett as if thanking him for the information. Emmett blushed—that wink did it to him. "Why else would you be here, Jack? Since your run-in with Kim, everyone *knows* you hunt the Jis. If it's not Lin, it's one of the others. So who're you working for?"

Jack scowled and busied himself with reholstering his pistol. When it became obvious he wouldn't to reply, Emmett admitted, "We don't know."

"Emmett!" Jack cried, rage written across his face. "Keep your damn mouth shut."

Monty edged around the fire, scooting closer to Emmett. He leaned across the distance separating them, his voice low so Emmett had to lean forward to hear it. "You don't know, you say?" The intense way Monty stared made Emmett's stomach flutter, bringing an involuntary smile to his lips. "How's that work, exactly? How can you *not* know who hired you?"

"There was a courier," Emmett admitted.

Jack slapped the side of Emmett's head with the back of his hand. The blow stung but didn't hurt—it was meant to silence him, nothing more. But Emmett bit his lower lip to keep it from trembling because he knew Jack was angry, and now it *was* his fault. When the bounty hunter got into one of his moods, he was horrid for *days*. Emmett glanced at Monty, chastised. Why couldn't he keep his mouth shut like Jack had asked? Because he felt nervous and giddy, and couldn't help opening up when the sexy stranger stared at him so intensely. Those dark eyes, like pools of ink in his face, were just amazing. Monty sat so close, Emmett could feel breath flutter over his cheek, and that damnable grin made Emmett think he would just open his mouth and spill out his soul to this man. When Monty licked his lips with the tip of his tongue, Emmett swallowed thickly and turned away.

Only to find Jack staring at him with one hard, cold eye Emmett couldn't meet.

Now he thinks I'm an ass. Without a word, Emmett rose from the fire and skirted around behind Jack, out of his line of sight. At least the patch on his right eye couldn't glare at him so balefully. When he looked over, he wasn't the least surprised to find Monty sprawled across from him by the fire, that dark gaze watching Emmett's every move. Ignoring the stranger, Emmett knelt by his bedroll to smooth out the blankets across the hard ground. It seemed impossible to imagine a tender moment between himself and Jack, one not laced with suspicion and attitude, a minute or two ago when Emmett had actually started to ask if they could share a bed.

Hell, given Jack's current mood? He'd probably suggest Emmett take up with this Monty fellow instead. The thought made Emmett flush.

Emmett kept his back to the two men as he continued to busy himself with his bedroll. When Jack spoke, Emmett stiffened at the harsh sound of his partner's voice. "What the fuck do you want, Monty?"

Emmett glanced back and Monty shrugged. "A blazing fire, good company, a warm bed. Bet you sleep well at night, don't you, Jack?"

There came that wink again, the one that made Emmett grin foolishly. Jack muttered, "I could kill you and you know it."

"But you won't, or I'd be dead by now." Monty's voice was low like the flames of their fire.

Jack growled, "I can remedy that."

Monty laughed. Laughed. Emmett turned in amazement; he'd never met anyone with the guts to stand up to Jack. Just how well did these two men know each other? And why had Jack never mentioned the guy before? I'd thought we were close. He watched the shadows flicker across Jack's face. Partners, friends even. So who's this?

From across the fire, Monty's gaze pierced Emmett like a lepidopterist's pin, holding him in place. "I was just going to lurk in the shadows and see how things played until you routed me out."

God. Emmett ran a hand through his windswept hair. He'd been about to ask Jack if they could bunk together. Their closeness by the fire, Jack's arm in Emmett's lap...had Monty been watching even then?

Jack sat hunched into himself, staring into the fire. Emmett couldn't see Jack's good eye, but he didn't have to—he could read his partner's mood in the clenched hands and tense jaw.

If Monty had known Jack for so long, how could he not read the same dangerous signs? When that pistol came out again, Emmett knew Jack would fire without hesitation. He wasn't close enough to still Jack's hand a second time.

Ignoring Jack's silence, Monty shrugged. "Look, I just want some talk—some food, some company, that's it. This is a hard land. Shit, you think I'd rob you in the night? I know you're broke, or you'd never take on Lin again so soon. And maybe...hell, maybe we can help each other out. Maybe I'm after him myself, and we can go in together on it. You, me, the kid—we all get a cut of both bounties. What do you say?"

"I don't share bounties." Jack tossed a thin stick into the fire, frowning as it popped loudly in the flames. "I work with Emmett. There ain't a third cut."

"What's wrong with sharing something three ways?" Monty asked, boldly meeting Emmett's gaze.

Jack frowned. "I don't share. You'd do well to remember that."

* * *

The next morning Emmett opened his eyes to find Monty sitting by the smoldering remains of their fire, cleaning his dark nails with the edge of a wicked dagger and watching him closely. Pushing himself off the hard ground, Emmett wrapped his blankets tighter around his body and blinked the sleep from his eyes. "Where's Jack?"

Monty shrugged. "He'll be back."

Emmett yawned and ran a hand through his disheveled

curls. How long had Jack been gone? And, more importantly, how long had Monty sat there watching him sleep? For some reason, that thought made Emmett uneasy.

As if he sensed Emmett's discomfort, Monty chuckled. "You look like an angel when you sleep. Has Jack ever told you that?"

Emmett ducked his head to hide the blush creeping into his cheeks. "God, no. We're not..." He sighed, his breath billowing out in a white cloud from his cold lips, and hugged the blankets closer around him. "We aren't like that."

"Shame." Monty sheathed his dagger and gave Emmett his full attention, waiting for Emmett to look at him before he spoke again. "If I had a partner like you? We'd never sleep apart."

Despite the chilly morning air, Emmett's body burned at the suggestion in Monty's words. "Jack's not like that," he murmured.

Monty laughed. "Bullshit. I saw the way he looks at you. Don't tell me he's never..."

Emmett whispered, "No."

Stepping over the guttering fire, Monty crossed the space between them and eased down to sit beside Emmett. He leaned back, one hand resting behind Emmett, his arm pressed alongside Emmett's back. His touch was warm in the cold, and Emmett didn't pull away. "So how'd you get involved with this shit anyway, kid?" Monty's breath fanned the back of Emmett's neck, ruffling his curls. He felt gentle fingers smooth his hair away from his nape and brush behind his ear. "You don't strike me as the type out to rack up bounties. How do you know Jack?"

The touch and the memory made Emmett smile. How long had it been? Seven years... "My dad worked in a fishery," he explained, his voice soft in the early morning air. He stared into the dying fire and tried to remember his life before becoming a bounty hunter. "I never knew my mom. When I was old enough to pull my own weight, I hired on to a crab ship. We hunted king crab nine months out of the year. I made pretty good money, and the work wasn't bad. Until pirates attacked the ship, stealing our haul, killing our captain, and enslaving the rest of the crew."

"How old were you?" Monty's hand strayed from the ground to ease inside the blanket covering Emmett's back. His fingers rubbed gently through Emmett's thin shirt. The warmth from that touch spread through Emmett like wildfire, sparking his blood, invigorating his limbs, exciting his libido.

Emmett found himself leaning into the gentle touch. "Twelve."

At twelve years of age, Emmett had left the sea, forced into slavery for Kim Ji. In her warehouse where he worked, he had often caught glimpses of the Dragon Lady but hadn't been allowed to look at her directly—the one time he dared to make eye contact, she'd struck him so hard, he was out for two days and when he woke, it was with a hellish migraine. Emmett could still remember the shackles he'd been forced to constantly wear while enslaved, their leaden weight heavy on his wrists and ankles, and the choking collar kept chained around his neck. For three years he was held prisoner in a drafty building made of corrugated steel, shivering in soiled clothing, bound hand and foot. Kim Ji ran several different rackets, importing and exporting a variety of illegal items, helped by her youngest son, Lin.

In the warehouse Emmett called home, they ran counterfeit money hidden in the bellies of large salmon, which slaves processed before the cargo was shipped across the country. The foul stench of fish filled every moment of Emmett's life, awake or asleep, a nauseating miasma that permeated everything and destroyed whatever hope he might have had for escape. He forgot what the sun looked like, or how the wind felt against his face, or the way the sea roiled during a growing storm. The only things he had in life were the drudgery of constant toil and his chains dragging him down.

Then he'd met Jack.

To Monty, Emmett said, "Someone had a hit out on Lin Ji. I don't know the details, but when Jack tried to collect the bounty, something went wrong. I was on the floor that day, sweeping up scales, when they brought him in."

Emmett remembered a blinding flash of sunlight as the warehouse bay doors opened for what seemed like the first time since he'd been taken prisoner. He'd blinked against the light, unable to look at it full on, it was so bright. Three men dragged a fourth into the warehouse, the man between them unconscious and bloody. The cut on Jack's cheek came from that encounter, as did the gouge that had torn out his right eye. The men dropped him in a corner, then kicked and punched him, over and over again—each time their boots and fists connected with Jack's body, Emmett had flinched. By the time they were finished, there was no *way* the guy could still be alive. Emmett couldn't imagine living through such a beating, or recovering from such wounds.

Then the men left, leaving their victim in a pool of his own blood. The other workers in the warehouse didn't look at the man, didn't dare glance in his direction. A whisper started somewhere and raced through the slaves, a name that went with that bloodied face. *Jack Robison*.

Emmett recognized the name. Jack's fame as a bounty hunter preceded him—the men on Emmett's ship used to amuse themselves with tales of Jack's legendary prowess, each story more outlandish than the last. From the corner of his eye, Emmett watched the man as he worked, holding his breath, hoping for some sign of life...

When Jack finally drew a long, shuddery sigh, Emmett had abandoned his broom and raced to the man's side. Rumor had it Jack was bloodthirsty and evil, with a heart of stone, and when he turned that icy blue eye onto Emmett for the first time, Emmett wondered if the talk wasn't true.

"I cleaned him up as best I could," Emmett told Monty. He hugged himself at the painful memory of his partner, his friend, once beaten within an inch of his life. "Staunched the worst of the blood, stitched up his cheek and his...his eye. God, it was awful."

He shivered, and Monty's arm came up around Emmett's shoulders, encouraging him to continue. "What happened

then?"

Emmett leaned into Monty's embrace. When had the man begun to hold him? When had they grown so close? But the warmth was welcome, and the touch inviting. "When the men came back and saw Jack was still alive, they tied him up. We were forbidden to talk to him. I got a whip across my back for sewing his wounds, but it was worth every lash. Even though we'd never said a word to each other, I'd seen in his one good eye that he still had fight left in him. Despite everything he'd been through, everything he'd suffered, he refused to give up. And that made me think I couldn't either."

The next time Emmett worked the cleaning table, he'd pocketed the sharp, thin knife used to gut the salmon. Jack had hunkered in a corner, away from the workers, his arms bound behind his back. His ropes had been tied so tight, his fingers had turned blue. During a change in shift, when the warehouse floor was a cacophony of workers and guards, Emmett had broken away from the others to pass near where Jack was kept. "I had maybe three seconds to talk to him," he told Monty, "if that. No time for niceties or introductions. I flashed the knife at him and asked if he thought he could fight his way free with it. He saw the blade, looked into my eyes, and nodded. Then I asked if he'd take me with him. He said yes. We've been together ever since."

Monty nodded. His arm felt heavy across Emmett's shoulders, and his hand brushed Emmett's cheek tenderly. When Emmett pressed against it, Monty's other hand touched his chin, turning his face toward Monty's. "How can he not want you for that?" he asked. Suddenly his voice became throaty, his gaze burning, his breath tickling Emmett's neck. When had he gotten so close? "Don't tell me you're just partners. There's too much history between you, too much past. What's he mean to you, Emmett?"

The world, Emmett thought. But when he turned and looked into Monty's deep eyes, the words dissolved and he couldn't think of what to say. "We're just friends," he whispered, watching Monty's lips pull into a slick grin. "Partners. Nothing more."

"You sure?" Monty asked, shifting closer. His hip rested against Emmett's, the touch as vivid as a splash of water in the cold dawn. The touch reminded Emmett of Jack's leg pressed against his the night before, in front of the fire. With his thumb, Monty smoothed down faint hairs that shadowed Emmett's chin. "*Nothing* more?"

Before Emmett could answer, Monty turned his face slightly and leaned even closer. When Monty's lips brushed Emmett's mouth in a barely-there kiss, Emmett let his eyes slip closed. He reached out to touch Monty's thigh, his fist bunching in the loose fabric of Monty's pants, his mind a whirl of emotion and desire. So *this* was how it could be between two men. If only it were Jack instead...

Unconsciously, Emmett leaned into the kiss. But just as his mouth parted, Monty pulled back. When Emmett opened his eyes, Monty was smiling at him, that wolfish leer of his making Emmett's heart flutter. "Jack doesn't know what he's missing," he whispered. "I'm serious, if you were mine? You'd never sleep alone."

The words trilled through Emmett, making him giddy. "Maybe you could give Jack a few pointers."

Monty laughed. He let his hand drift down Emmett's chest to rest on the waistband of his jeans. The slight pressure of his wrist against Emmett's groin made him ache. If only Jack would touch him *there*. "Ah, Emmett." Monty traced the pattern etched into Emmett's belt with the tip of his finger. "Yesterday you said you were after Lin Ji. I guess Jack has a score to settle, no?"

"Yeah," Emmett sighed, watching Monty's lips closely. "Didn't you say you were after him, too?"

"Yeah," Monty breathed, nodding. His hand slipped lower to brush against the throbbing at Emmett's crotch. The touch was maddening, just enough that Emmett wanted to close his eyes again and savor the sensation—in his mind's eye, it could be Jack's hand on his body, not Monty's. But Emmett couldn't drop his gaze from Monty's fierce stare. "Why don't we work together on this, kid? We can split the bounties."

Emmett shook his head. "Jack said-"

"I know what he said," Monty whispered against Emmett's ear, his breath warming Emmett up inside. His hand slipped again until it pressed against the bulge in Emmett's pants. *Damn* if that didn't feel amazing—Emmett couldn't think, couldn't breathe, couldn't dare *hope* for more. Monty's words buzzed through him; what were they talking of again? "What's the harm in us teaming up, hmm? Would that be such a bad thing?"

"No," Emmett whispered. He didn't think so. Not in the least.

Monty smiled again, that Cheshire cat grin that lit up his eyes. Before Emmett knew it, Monty leaned closer for another kiss.

"What the *fuck* is going on here?" Jack asked, storming into the camp.

Emmett scurried out of Monty's arms, heart stuttering with fear. He glanced at Jack before looking away. When Jack tossed a pair of dead rabbits into the muttering remains of the fire, Emmett jumped.

"Well?" Jack demanded, waiting for an answer.

Emmett ducked his head in shame. Beside him Monty moved, and Emmett pulled his legs out of the other man's way as if to distance himself as much as he could from Monty. *Oh, hell.* What exactly had Jack seen? Their kiss, Monty's hand on Emmett's... *God.* In a choked voice, Emmett muttered, "I can explain."

But could he? No words came to mind to describe the heavenly feel of soft lips on his, or the pleasant ache left behind by Monty's fondling. What *could* he say, in all honesty? *I wish it'd been you*?

When it became obvious Emmett couldn't speak, Monty rose to his feet, arms spread in an innocent gesture. "Jack, it's not what you think."

"What I *think*," Jack growled, pushing Monty back, "is that you haven't changed one damn bit. You're still the same asshole you were before, aren't you?" He pushed Monty again. "Aren't you?"

"Jack, stop." Emmett scrambled to his feet and touched Jack's shoulder, pulling him back before he could shove Monty again. "Please. I didn't—"

"Shut up." Jack shrugged off Emmett's hand and turned to glare at his partner. "Get your shit together. We're leaving."

Emmett threw a look at Monty that Jack didn't miss. With a fierce growl, Jack elbowed Emmett aside to stomp through the dying ashes of their fire. Emmett followed, stepping around the embers in his sock-covered feet. When Jack bent to retrieve his bedroll, Emmett hunkered down beside him and, in a low voice, asked, "Jack? Can we talk a minute?"

Jack's movements were brusque and furious. "No."

"Jack, I really think-"

"No." Jack turned, meeting Emmett's troubled gaze with his one icy eye. His scowl deepened as if just looking at Emmett pissed him off. "Listen, I've known Monty a long time. He's a certified jackass bastard who'll sweet-talk you one minute and stab you in the back the next. He looks out for one person, and one person only. And here's an eye-opener, Emmett. It ain't you."

"He's after Lin, too." Emmett gave Jack a hopeful smile, as if that could ease the tension between them. "I didn't...Jack, what you saw just now? That was nothing, trust me. You *do* trust me, don't you? I didn't mean it."

Jack narrowed his eye at Monty. "He's playing you," he told Emmett. There was no room for argument in his voice. "You're a game to him, kid, and in the end, you mean *nothing*.

Maybe you can't see that now, but trust me. I know."

There was a sincerity in Jack's tone that gave Emmett a chill. He hugged the blanket he still wore around himself and shivered. "Jack, I do. I trust you with my life and you know it. So please, just this once, can you trust me?"

"Trust you with what?" Jack punched his bedroll into shape with hard fists. "What do you want from me?"

Another day and Emmett might have taken that opening and run with it. There was so much he wanted from Jack, so much more he didn't already have. But here, today, now, Monty stood nearby, listening to every word, and Emmett knew it wasn't the time or place to bare his soul. "I just thought maybe we could work together—"

"He's a prick," Jack spat, raising his voice for Monty to hear. "He's not what you think, Emmett. He's not what he wants you to think he is, whatever it is you want him to be. *Listen* to me. You don't mean *shit* to him."

Emmett sighed. "Jack."

"Can't you see?" Anger sharpened Jack's words, bringing an ignoble pout to Emmett's lips. Jack turned away in disgust. "You don't know him the way I do. He's scum. We don't need his help."

Softly, Emmett said, "I want him to come."

Jack looked up in surprise. When he spoke, his voice was shocked. "I thought you just said that was nothing. You said you didn't mean it."

"I didn't." Although Emmett blushed under Jack's scrutiny, he didn't back down. "But this is a partnership, isn't

it? If I want him to come, doesn't that mean anything?"

For a long moment, he didn't think Jack would answer. When he did, the hurt in his tone made Emmett want to cry. "It means you're a fool."

"Jack..."

"Fine." The word was succinct and clipped, the end of their discussion. When Emmett opened his mouth to speak, Jack shook his head and turned away. "Fine. You got your way, kid. I hope you're happy."

Before Emmett could answer, Jack stood and shouldered his bedroll. Turning toward Monty, he leveled one thick finger at the other man, who barely managed to wipe the insolent grin from his face. "You'll stay out of my way, you hear?"

"Well, well," Monty purred, crossing his arms. "One-Eyed Jack has a weak spot after all."

"You'll keep your fucking mouth shut." Jack threw a harsh glance at Emmett and warned, "And your hands to yourself. Both of you."

* * *

The trek through the rugged wilderness into Aliak took most of the day. Though the settlement hadn't seemed too distant through Emmett's binoculars while they had still been up on the ridge, it remained just out of reach, as if it moved farther away with each step. Below the foothills, the land was dense with firs, their evergreen branches blocking the horizon. Whenever Emmett managed to catch a glimpse of the town, thin lines of smoke from fireplaces and the far-off hint of rooftops shimmered through the trees like El Dorado in the sun.

The three men traveled in silence. Monty ventured ahead, his long legs easily crossing the distance at a fast pace, and more than once he had to stop, waiting for the others to catch up with him. Emmett kept a safe distance behind the newcomer, not quite trusting himself in the man's presence. Even with Jack at his back, bringing up the rear, Emmett couldn't keep his thoughts from straying to the few stolen moments he'd shared with Monty earlier that morning. His lips tingled with the memory of Monty's, and his body ached for Monty's touch. He felt like a man in a desert who had known nothing beyond dust and sand and emptiness until he stumbled upon an oasis, lush and vibrant, that made him realize just how thirsty and dry his life had been before.

But, much as he wanted—no, *needed*—the feel of another, he knew it wasn't Monty he truly desired. Sure, the man had charm, and there was no denying the way his smile and eyes made Emmett's stomach flutter nervously. But in the quiet of Emmett's heart, beneath the rush of adrenaline and blood that surged each time Monty glanced over his shoulder to flash Emmett another grin, Emmett knew the lust he felt was just nature's call. Touch him, kiss him, murmur sweetly in his ear, and his body responded like any animal aroused by a mate.

The man whose touch he craved, whose kisses he longed to taste, traveled stoically behind him.

Emmett lagged behind Monty, allowing the distance between them to widen. He took his time crossing treacherous

terrain, pausing a moment too long to balance himself whenever he could. He'd hear the heavy clomp of Jack's boots behind him, hear Jack's irritated sigh, then a strong hand would settle on his back, steadying him. That mere touch shattered through Emmett, worlds more intimate than any of Monty's eager grappling. "Keep moving," Jack would mutter, giving Emmett a gentle nudge.

With a nod, Emmett obeyed.

By late afternoon, plodding through undergrowth and low limbs had grown tiresome. Emmett's footsteps grew weary, and Jack's guiding touch became a constant pressure on his lower back. When the trees finally cleared and Emmett broke through thorny shrubs to splash into a wide stream, the only thing that kept him from tumbling headlong into the swift water was Jack's hand on his back. "Careful," his partner warned, lifting Emmett's feet off the soggy ground. "Watch where you're going."

On the opposite bank, Monty appeared through the trees. "It's just a little water," he called, that oily grin of his sliding into place. "Hop on over. Surely an old man like you can make it across, Jack."

Beside Emmett, Jack growled, a low sound in the back of his throat. One hand eased into the front of his coat for his pistol. "I could shoot you now."

Monty had the audacity to laugh. "You haven't done it yet. I think that boy there has turned you soft."

"Shut up," Emmett snapped, surprising himself. He'd had enough of Monty's snide comments. Why his partner *hadn't* shot the guy by now, Emmett couldn't begin to fathom. But Jack's reasons were his own, and as much as Emmett's hopes might soar at Monty's words, they simply weren't true. Hearing those constant barbs in that mocking tone of voice made Emmett realize just how badly he *wanted* what Monty suggested, he *wanted* Jack's affection, and the simple fact of the matter was, he didn't have it. So damn Monty for showing him what he might could have, and damn Jack for...well, for not wanting him.

When Monty started to speak, Emmett shook his head and turned away. "Just stop it, please. Give it a rest. I'm tired, and I'm hungry, and I'm not about to splash through that damn *river* and walk the rest of the way to Aliak with wet boots. I'm not."

Mirth shone in Monty's eyes. His laugh echoed around them—Emmett had half a mind to grab Jack's gun himself and silence it. "Take the bridge, then. It's just a few planks but it'll keep you dry. How'd you think I crossed?"

"Bridge?" Emmett frowned at Jack, whose closed face was hard to read. Jack's hand was still hidden in his coat, as if wrapped around the handle of his gun just *waiting* for a reason. "Where?"

Monty gestured to his right. "That way somewhere."

Emmett leaned forward to peer around Jack's bulk and felt himself slipping on unsteady ground. He pinwheeled his arms as Jack grabbed a fist full of Emmett's jacket. "I don't see a bridge."

"Down a ways." Monty shrugged as if it didn't matter

whether Emmett believed him or not. "Go on. Take a look. I'll wait here. The town's just another couple miles through these woods."

Still Emmett hesitated. He looked to Jack for guidance, but his partner's stern face held no answers. "Jack?" he prompted. "What do you think?"

With a grimace, Jack muttered, "He's telling the truth. Guy like him goes out of his way to avoid getting wet, I promise you. I'm not so sure he'll wait but if it were up to me, I'd just as soon he didn't. I *will* shoot him before long."

Emmett had no response to that. Placing a hand on Jack's arm, he gave his partner a push to get him moving in the direction of the bridge. Jack resisted, but only for a moment. Then he led the way, his large girth easily clearing a path through the cattails and high reeds for Emmett to follow.

"I'll wait here!" Monty called, his laughter chasing after them.

The bridge was nothing more than a fallen log, rotten in spots, which spanned the fast-moving stream. Ancient moss covered the wood—between the lichen and the spray from the water below, the log was slick to cross. They'd need to be quick.

Jack went first, pausing a moment once he was on the log to ensure his footing. Standing sideways, he slid his boot along the moss, scraping it as he went, arms out at his sides for balance. Emmett watched, his heart in his throat. If a large man like Jack could make it safely to the other side, Emmett knew he'd be able to follow. Halfway across, Jack pitched forward slightly. Emmett gasped, pressing his fists to his mouth to stifle a cry. "Jack! Careful!"

Somehow, miraculously, he made it. Jack jumped the last few feet and slid in the muck on the far bank, but he'd managed to cross. "Come on," he called to Emmett as he settled his bedroll and pack into a more comfortable position on his back. "That ass is probably halfway to town by now."

"He said he'd wait." Emmett knew he could cross—of the two men, he was lighter and more nimble. He didn't look down, and didn't hesitate. Instead, he kept his eyes on Jack as he shuffled along the log, out over the rushing water, to reach the other side. When he was close enough, he held out a hand that Jack grasped in both his own. With a strength that took Emmett's breath away, Jack pulled him toward shore.

As his feet left the log, Emmett stumbled into Jack. His partner caught him easily, arms coming up around Emmett to steady him. For one moment, time seemed to freeze—Emmett was right where he'd always wanted to be, in Jack's embrace. That brief touch erased all Monty's insistent fumbling earlier. He clutched at Jack's coat and closed his eyes as he breathed in the woodsy musk he'd grown to associate with his partner. "Jack," he sighed, face upturned. How had the kiss with Monty started in the first place? And what could Emmett say or do to encourage something similar from Jack?

"Get off me," Jack muttered.

His voice sounded gruff, unused, but he didn't push Emmett away immediately. In fact, for a second or two, his arms tensed, holding Emmett close. Please, Emmett prayed.

Then Jack stepped back, his arms falling from Emmett's back and shoulders. Emmett lowered his head and stared at the mud squelching around his boots. He wanted to say something to pin down his emotions, to tie himself to Jack here and now. But when he opened his mouth, the words that came out surprised him. "How do you know Monty?"

Jack recoiled as if slapped. His one good eye hardened with sudden distrust that Emmett hated to see directed his way. "Never you mind." Jack turned away, plowing a path through the high grass. "It's in the past."

Then why did Emmett think Monty was somehow to blame for the way Jack kept him at bay?

* * *

Aliak wasn't normally a busy town. A settlement consisting of nothing more than a handful of log homes ringed with tents, it served as a final outpost before crossing the Susitna River and delving deeper into the wilderness. The most excitement that came through Aliak was the dog-sleds, racing through the wintry landscape, over slush and snow. Race fans followed the mushers north along the trail, filling inns and camping out to follow their favorites. Bets were placed, fortunes made or lost, in the few days it took the dogs to cross the frozen landscape. The small town of Aliak found itself transformed from a sleepy burg to a bustling city for as long as the dogs ran through.

Emmett entered the town with Jack on his left, where his

partner could see him. Monty kept ahead of them, prowling through the crowd like a hungry wolf then circling back, a wicked grin never leaving his face. His dark eyes glistened with lust and greed. "Excited?" he asked Emmett with a wink.

Before Emmett could answer, Jack eased back the front of his coat, flashing his pistol. Monty rolled his eyes and draped an arm around Emmett's shoulder. "We should ditch him," he said, his voice loud enough for Jack to overhear. "Get a room at the inn, you and me. Pick up where we left off this morning. What do you say?"

When Monty tried to lead him away, Emmett ducked out from under his arm. "We're in this together," he said, glancing at Jack. His partner's dark scowl suggested otherwise. "An even share, three ways. Isn't that how it goes?"

Jack pinned Monty with a deadly glare. "I never agreed to that."

The town's one tavern was full. Inside, men caroused over plates of half-eaten food or leaned against the bar, mugs of ale in their hands. Emmett followed Monty as he pushed through the crowd, heading for one of the empty tables near the fireplace in the back. Despite the cold outside, the fire's warmth seemed suffocating among the press of unwashed bodies. Emmett pulled his scarf up over his nose and took thin breaths. When Monty dropped into a nearby chair, Emmett turned to look for Jack before following suit.

With a distrustful glance at Monty, Jack said, "Don't try to pull anything, Becker. I'm watching you."

Monty flashed his disarming grin. "Now what would I try

here, of all places? I thought we were working as a team, Jack." To Emmett, he asked, "Isn't that what you said outside? We're in this together?"

"Just keep your mouth shut," Jack growled, "and your hands to yourself. I'll be right back."

As Jack stormed off, heading for the bar, Monty leaned over the dusty table. "Is he always this bad?"

Emmett laughed. "No," he admitted. "Sometimes he's worse."

Was that a hand on Emmett's knee? Easing up the inside of his thigh, the touch barely felt through his denim pants... When he brushed it aside, Monty caught his fingers under the table and gave them a quick squeeze before taking Emmett's hand in his.

"Emmett." Monty lowered his voice; Emmett had to lean closer to hear him over the noise. He stared at Monty's beguiling smile as a soft thumb ran along the inside of his wrist. "You don't have to put up with him. You could, I don't know...you could always find another partner."

His voice trailed off, leaving the invitation open.

Emmett blushed but didn't pull his hand away. "I think a lot of Jack. I owe my life to him. I'm not going to just *leave*—"

"Oh," Monty said quickly, "I'm not asking you to do *that*. I'm just saying maybe you can give me a chance to show you what you're missing."

"I'm fine," Emmett told him. The lie came easily to him after all this time.

Beneath the table, Monty held Emmett's hand tight; his other hand eased along Emmett's thigh. "I know you're lonely. I see it in your eyes. I felt it when we kissed. You liked that, didn't you? I know you want me to do it again, Emmett. You want me to touch you..."

Emmett barely heard Monty's words—he was so distracted by the warmth of Monty's hand on his leg. Reaching under the table, Emmett tried unsuccessfully to push it away. When he glanced up again, he found Monty bending closer, his smile beguiling.

"Monty, no."

"Come on," Monty purred. "I know you want it."

But Emmett pulled his hands free from Monty's and shook his head, adamant. "I said—"

Movement behind Monty caught Emmett's attention. He glanced up, then scrambled back in his seat when he saw the barrel of a gun shoved against Monty's ear. Even with the noise of the crowd, he heard the insidious *click* of a hammer being cocked.

Behind Monty, Jack snarled, "What the hell do you think you're trying to pull?"

Monty kneaded Emmett's thigh one last time, then raised his hands above the table in a compliant gesture, a smile already sliding into place. "Jack," he drawled, giving Emmett a quick wink. "Can we put away the revolver? Aren't we working together here?"

"I don't know, are we?" Jack stepped around the table, gun still aimed at Monty's head, and dropped into the chair beside Emmett's. "I thought I heard you asking my partner to what, leave? With *you*, no less? So what, do you plan on taking out Lin Ji yourself and splitting the bounty only two ways? Is that the idea?"

Monty's smile threatened to split his face. "Just offering the boy something he might like. Something he doesn't get from you."

"Shut the hell up," Jack growled.

"Put away the gun," Monty cajoled. "C'mon, Jack, you know it's just the way I am—"

"Fuck that," Jack lowered the gun to the table but didn't holster the weapon. With a glance at Emmett, he said, "If you're planning to cut me out, kid, tell me now. I've been burned by cowardly partners before. It won't happen again."

Quickly Emmett shook his head. "No, Jack. I'm not leaving you." He scowled at Monty, angry he'd let the man get to him again. "I won't."

Monty nodded once, as if he'd expected that answer. To Jack, he asked, "So what have we got?"

For a wild moment, Emmett thought his words were an ultimatum—he wanted Emmett to choose sides, incredibly, as if there were any way in hell he'd best Jack in *that* contest. But he meant business, and Jack knew it.

"Lin's here," he said, eye roving as he assessed the room. "Staying with a caravan just outside town. He'll be at the race tomorrow, him and his entourage."

Turning his chair—and attention—to Jack, Emmett asked, "What do we have, do you know?"

Jack shrugged. "Three *kisaeng*, an elder advisor, a smattering of guards. Nothing much to worry about. He'll have a pavilion set up near the trail where it exits town. With the crowds, I'm thinking we might get close enough to get off a clean shot."

Clearing his throat, Emmett laced his fingers together and studiously avoided Monty's gaze. "Your pistol doesn't have much of a range."

Monty spoke up. "My rifle can handle it. What?" he asked as Jack's eye narrowed. "Don't you trust me to make the shot?"

"Truthfully?" Jack shook his head. "No."

Emmett touched the handle of Jack's gun where it rested on the table. The bone grip was worn smooth; it felt warm and almost alive beneath Emmett's fingertips. "Jack."

"If I get close enough," Jack promised Monty, "we won't need you. I want to take Lin out during the race, when he'll least expect it. But I want to be there at least an hour before the mushers arrive."

Emmett nodded. Glancing at Monty, he asked, "So what's the plan?"

Jack saw that glance and frowned. "I'm still thinking."

* * *

With the first dog-sled expected to rush over the snowcovered trail that ran through Aliak shortly after noon the next day, the town was filled to capacity. The inn had no free rooms for travelers—most pitched tents of their own in the makeshift colony just on the outskirts of town; others bartered for space in stables and spare bedrooms, anywhere to be in out of the cold. When Jack left their table a second time in search of lodging, Emmett trailed behind him, unwilling to be left alone in Monty's company for long. The man had a greasy way of getting too close too fast, and no matter how much he tried to steel his heart against Monty, Emmett knew that charming smile could distract him too easily.

The only room available was a small log shed at the edge of town. Jack paid a silent Indian woman for the room-the shed had been hastily constructed, probably with the thought of renting it out for the race. The low ceiling kept Monty from standing tall once inside, and Jack's bulk seemed to fill most of the interior, but at least the walls and roof held back the worst of the wind. The ground was swept clean, an improvement over the stony ground outside, even if it were still cold and hard. Jack spread out his bedroll across the doorway, a subtle reminder that he was in charge and no one left or entered without his consent. Emmett wondered if he wouldn't find himself woken in the night when Monty tried to sneak out-with the impending race, there were plenty of illegal activities carried on out in the town, gambling mostly, and Monty struck Emmett as the type who'd fall in with that crowd.

So it surprised him when Monty spread down his blankets against the opposite wall without comment. From within the folds of material, he extracted a battered deck of cards, which he held up to entice Emmett to play. "Are you any good?" he asked, that wink of his hinting he didn't mean at faro, either.

With a shrug, Emmett sat cross-legged on his own bedroll, laid out between the two men. "I can play. I'm just warning you, though. I'll probably lose my shirt."

Monty raised one eyebrow and smiled. "That sounds like a good place to start."

While Monty dealt the cards, Emmett glanced over at Jack, resting on his own blankets. The older bounty hunter still wore his heavy coat; despite the lack of wind, the interior of the shed was frigid, and not for the first time Emmett wished he were bold enough to suggest snuggling together. For warmth, he'd argue—he had the whole conversation mapped out in his head. It was a favorite daydream, one he'd turned to frequently over the years. *Jack, it's cold*, he'd say, letting the slightest whine creep into his voice. *Can't we just maybe pull the bedding together tonight? Keep warm that way? Unless, of course, you have something else in mind...*

Emmett never allowed himself to think much farther than that. It was comforting enough to imagine Jack holding him, those large hands thrust beneath Emmett's clothes. The few times he'd pictured going farther—Jack's weight above him in the darkness, his hard length thick between Emmett's legs, his deep voice harsh and breathless—Emmett broke out into a cold sweat, his hands clammy, his heart fluttering like a hummingbird in his chest. He wanted that, every *part* of that, but he wouldn't let himself dwell on what he couldn't have. If only Monty weren't there, Emmett thought. If only he and Jack were alone. You were alone for years, he told himself. He's never encouraged anything more between you, so don't blame your own cowardice on Monty's presence now.

A card flickered through Emmett's line of vision. "Hello?" Monty called, snagging Emmett's attention. "Am I dealing you in or what?"

Across the room Jack stared at Emmett, who blushed under the scrutiny of that one pale eye. Emmett felt his cheeks heat up, and he ran a hand through his blond curls to push them out of his face. "Are we playing for real? Because I don't have much money."

Monty's grin turned into a leer. "I'll think of some way you can pay me back if I win."

From the sheen in Monty's eyes, Emmett knew he wouldn't need a lousy excuse to get into *that* bedroll. If it could be so easy between men, then why wouldn't Jack let him in?

* * *

Emmett dreamed of the race. Crowds lined the single trail that cut through Aliak's cluster of buildings like a main street, and somehow Emmett had lost Jack among the throng. He pushed and shoved through people whose heavy coats and thick furs prevented them from moving out of his way. It felt like he fought through a closet full of clothing—people yielded when he leaned against them, but didn't make room for him to pass. "Jack!" he called out, fear racing his heart. The dog-sleds would run through town at any moment; he had to reach Lin Ji's pavilion. Jack *needed* him, Emmett knew it. So where the hell was he?

"Jack!" Emmett cried again. He held his arms out in front of him like a drowning man seeking help. His fingers brushed over fur coats and cold, damp jackets. Behind him, something warm and heavy leaned against his back. He tried to turn and couldn't—the mess of people kept him moving in one direction only, moving slowly along the street, trapped in their midst. "Jack!"

Suddenly a strong hand clasped his. Emmett couldn't see who held him, but by now he didn't care. He let the stranger pull him from the crowd. As the people around him began to thin out, Emmett saw a tall man before him, holding onto his hand. When he realized it wasn't Jack, he tried to extract his hand from the tight grip and couldn't. "Jack," he muttered. *No*, he wanted to say. *This isn't right, you aren't Jack. Stop.*

But the stranger didn't stop. He guided Emmett down the crowded street toward a large tent pitched at the far end. Two Asian thugs guarded the tent's flap, but as the stranger approached, they bowed low and pulled the material aside like an invitation. Emmett tried again to free himself to no avail. Things weren't right here—he'd been with Jack long enough to trust his instincts in a situation like this, and every fiber of his being screamed just one word. *Run!*

Inside the tent, opulent furnishings contrasted with the ragtag crowd outside. Oriental rugs covered the hard ground; strange and beautiful plants blossomed despite the winter chill. The air was thick with fragrant incense that made Emmett choke, and it was warm inside the tent, too damn warm. His coat hung heavy against his back; his pants felt too tight. Every step he took constricted the fabric at his crotch, until his cock throbbed and his balls ached. Where was Jack? And who held his hand?

As they passed a full-length gilded mirror, Emmett glanced at his companion and saw Lin Ji's enigmatic sneer reflected back. It was the same face that had haunted Emmett's dreams as a teen, an ugly snarl he remembered vividly from the day he'd been stripped of his childhood and forced to work for the Ji dynasty. Since he'd met Jack, he thought he had managed to put that terrifying visage behind him. "No," he whispered, tugging his hand again in an effort to get away. "No."

"Shh," a voice purred in his ear.

Warmth flooded Emmett, calming him. In the mirror, Lin's features disappeared, replaced by Monty's sly grin. "Shh," he said again, a word Emmett felt like a hand on his stomach, petting him through his clothing. "Be quiet, boy. You'll like this."

Suddenly the man in front of him turned. It *was* Monty, eyes piercing through the smoky haze in the tent. He circled behind Emmett, arms wrapping around Emmett's waist with a familiarity Emmett didn't like. "No," he said again, trying to move away.

"Shh." Monty pressed his body flush behind Emmett's. Damp lips left imprints along the back of Emmett's neck, just below his curls. The kisses felt so real, cooling on Emmett's flushed skin. So palpable. Why couldn't he dream of Jack in this way? Why did it have to be Monty?

Then Monty's tongue tickled behind one ear, and Emmett realized the soft warmth *was* real. He woke in an instant, eyes opening in the darkness. It took a moment to get his bearings—Alaska, Aliak, a native woman's shed. Then he felt Monty behind him, strong arms holding him tight, eager hands fumbling with the front of his pants...

"No." He struggled to get loose, but his blankets held him prisoner just as Monty did. Rolling onto his back, Emmett elbowed Monty in the chest and tried to keep him at bay. Not wanting to wake Jack, Emmett whispered, "Stop it. I said no."

"You want me," Monty whispered, the words spoken into the hollow of Emmett's throat. He eased onto Emmett, insistent kisses pinning Emmett to the ground. "Tell me you want me, Emmett. Say the words out loud. Tell me to kiss you. To love you—"

Emmett turned his face from Monty's. "No."

A firm leg parted both of Emmett's. The throb at his crotch blossomed into a sweet ache when Monty raised his knee into Emmett's groin. Every nerve felt afire, every inch of him clamoring for release. But Emmett didn't want a single tryst in the dark, and he didn't want Monty, no matter how beguiling the man could be. "Stop," he tried again, but Monty silenced him with a demanding kiss. His tongue forced Emmett's mouth open and dove inside—these were not the tender kisses the two had shared earlier. These were vicious and cruel. A hand fisted in Emmett's curls, pulling them roughly to raise Emmett's head so Monty could nip at his throat. "No," Emmett said again. The more he tried to struggle, the less his limbs wanted to work; the louder he wanted to shout, the quieter his voice grew. He didn't want this, neither the hand in his hair nor the one at his waist that tore at the front of his pants with a single purpose in mind. "No. Monty, stop. Please."

"You'll like it," Monty promised. If the bites he left ringed along Emmett's collarbone were supposed to pique his libido, they failed miserably. Each left pain in its wake, and Emmett bit back a sob when Monty moved lower to close his teeth over one hard nipple that strained the front of Emmett's shirt. "Trust me, kid. You want it, I know you do. I'll fuck you so hard, you'll be begging to leave Jack for me. Just relax."

"Monty—"

That damn mouth covered his again. "Shh," Monty purred, stroking Emmett's curls down as if he were nothing more than a pet to be pampered. "I've wanted you all day and damn it the hell, I'll have you. Just keep quiet and Jack will never know."

Jack.

A shadow moved in the darkness beside him—Emmett noticed it only because for a brief second, the faint line of light beneath the door disappeared. "No," he said again, his voice stronger this time. He pushed both arms against Monty's chest, trying to hold him back. "I don't want this. I don't want—"

In the darkness, Jack's voice growled like a grizzly's. "You heard him. He doesn't want you. So get your fucking hands off. *Now*."

The shadow descended. Emmett saw a flash of steel, then Monty disappeared, pulled away from him. Emmett took the opportunity to scramble out from under the man, his whole body on fire. Blindly he felt around for the oil lantern Jack kept by the head of his bedroll. A box of matches lay nearby, just where Emmett knew they'd be. He lit one, then set it to the lantern's wick. The flame danced with an orange blaze that seared his eyes.

"Turn that damn thing down," Jack muttered.

Emmett obeyed, reducing the wick to a mere sliver to conserve their oil. He tucked his legs up against his chest and leaned back against the wall of the shed, as far away from Monty as he could get. Wrapping his arms around his legs, he blinked a moment to clear his vision. "Jack?"

His partner stood behind Monty, straddling him. One hand gripped Monty's hair, pulling him back to expose his neck. Seeing him for the first time without his hat, Emmett noticed Monty's receding hairline, and the greasy brown locks that hung limply in Jack's fist. Monty was in a state of undress, his shirt unbuttoned to expose a narrow, hairless chest, the flap on his boxers open, a ruddy cockhead poking up from a thick patch of hair. Emmett glanced at Monty's erection, then raised his gaze to meet Jack's so he wouldn't stare.

Jack's other hand held a knife to Monty's throat.

"Jack?" Monty choked, fingers digging into Jack's wrist as if trying to pry it back. "Jack, I can't breathe—"

"You're going to *die*," Jack swore, drawing the knife deeper into his skin. The flesh purpled around the blade but

didn't bleed...yet. "I should've done this long ago."

"Jack, stop." Emmett ran a hand through his disheveled hair in a vain attempt to straighten it. His whole body shook and he could still feel the ghosts of Monty's hands on him, but this wasn't the answer. "I'm fine. He isn't—"

"Emmett," Jack spat, livid with rage. "You stop. You don't know who the fuck this bastard is. You want to know how I know him? We were partners once, that's how. And he played me the same way he's trying to play you. I thought it meant something to him, us working together. I thought *I* meant something. But when the shit hit the fan, he ran and left me to face Lin Ji by myself."

The knife dug deeper into Monty's neck. Monty leaned back against Jack in an effort to keep it from slitting into his skin. As Jack's words sunk in, Emmett bit his lower lip so he wouldn't cry out. Partners? Jack never mentioned he'd worked with others before Emmett. Given the man's solitary nature, Emmett had always assumed he was Jack's first. Emmett's persistence in tagging along with the older bounty hunter was the reason they even stayed together after escaping Kim Ji's warehouse. That, and the gentle way Emmett had nursed Jack back to health.

Another jerk of the knife, another bite of steel into flesh. "He ran like a coward, Emmett. From a bounty. From *me*." This time the knife drew across Monty's neck, leaving behind a thin line of blood. Monty's eyes were wide with fear. "He left me to *die* at the hands of the Dragon Lady, and he'll do the same to you. Can't you fucking *see* that?" Emmett frowned at Monty, his mind working through the implications of what Jack had said. *I thought I meant something*...

He ran from me.

Had they been *more* than partners?

"Wait." Emmett frowned, trying to work out Jack's words in his mind. "You mean—"

"Yes," Monty sobbed. "Jack, ease up, man. You're killing me."

Jack promised, "Not yet."

With a whimper, Monty explained, "Emmett, yes. He means what you think. We were...once, yes." He laughed, a scary sound he tamped down before it could get away from him. "The infamous Jack Robison. That's one bounty any hunter would prize."

Emmett's hands began to shake. Jack wasn't a bounty to claim, a man to be hunted, a prize to display proudly in a trophy case. How long had the two men known each other? How did Monty manage to break through Jack's hard-heart act when Emmett, who'd known the man for seven long years, had only recently begun to scrape the surface?

"I'm sorry," Monty blubbered. Tears streaked his face, and a tiny drop of dark blood trickled down his neck from Jack's blade. "I didn't mean...Jack, honest. I don't want any more trouble. I'm sorry."

"I'll kill you," Jack whispered. "I should've hunted you down long ago, Monty, but I'll fix that right here, right now."

But would that solve anything? Jack would still keep

Emmett at bay, and Emmett would still be alone. With a shaky sigh, Emmett ran a hand through his tousled curls. "Jack, no. That won't really help us any."

Jack frowned, perplexed. He clenched the knife tighter, eliciting a squeal from Monty. "Emmett, this *bastard*—"

"I know." The sound of Emmett's voice surprised him—it was calm, collected, nothing like the whirlwind of emotions that tore through his mind at the moment. *Resigned*, he thought. Yes, he was resigned. The man Emmett had grown to love had been betrayed by another and the wound carved across Jack's heart had cut so deep, he'd never been able to let Emmett in. Killing Monty might satisfy Jack's anger tonight, but what happened in the morning, when it was just the two of them again? When his hurt still cut into him? When he still couldn't open up to Emmett?

Did it matter? They had a job to do, a bounty to catch. One clean shot would fell Lin Ji, closing a chapter on Jack's past. They would return to that nameless tavern in Oregon, claim their reward, and *then* they could begin to move on. Right now wasn't the time to dwell on individual pain. They had a job to do. They had to stick to the plan.

"The race is tomorrow," Emmett said, his voice low. He met Jack's bitter gaze and refused to look at Monty. That man no longer meant anything to him. "We're still after Lin Ji, aren't we?"

"Emmett." The knife eased up slightly, but Jack didn't loosen his grip on Monty's neck.

"Jack, please." Emmett pushed away from the wall and

squatted by the head of his bedroll. Slowly, he pulled the blankets toward him, tugging to get them out from under Monty's legs. "It's late, and honestly? There's nothing we can do right now. Let's just get some sleep. Tomorrow we'll bring down Lin. We don't even have to split the bounties any more. It's just money, I don't care. But we get Lin, and we'll never have to see this jerk again, okay?"

Monty gasped. "Emmett, please."

Emmett ignored him. Gathering his bedroll in both hands, he stood and carried the blankets to the door of the shed. With one foot he nudged Jack's bedroll aside and spread his own out between his partner and the door, putting Jack between them so Monty couldn't come to him in the night. Without saying a word, Emmett was telling him no.

After a tense moment, Jack let Monty fall to the floor. "I'm not warning you again. Next time, you die."

* * *

The next morning Emmett was packing up his bedroll in the frosty dawn when Monty hunkered down beside him. Jack sat a few feet away, busy with his own blankets, but watched the two carefully, ready to step in if needed. Monty placed a hand on Emmett's arm. "Hey, Emmett. Listen."

Emmett shrugged him away. He still couldn't believe Jack had once been electrified by Monty's touch, enamored with the man's close attentions. How easy it must've been for Monty to break through defenses not fully in place yet. But how could he have just run away? Left Jack for dead when confronted with Lin Ji's goons, only to show up years later as if nothing had happened?

And Jack had simply...what? Hardened his heart and given up hope? That explained a lot—all those times Jack had looked away when Emmett got too close, or pulled back when Emmett's touch lingered too long. All the awkward moments between the two men flashed through Emmett's mind, highlighted by the intimate evenings spent in each other's company, the nights things could have maybe gone farther between them but had not.

Monty was to blame. Jack kept Emmett at arm's length, unwilling or unable to fully trust another. Whatever chance Emmett might have had with him was gone before they'd even met. Because of Monty, nothing Emmett said or did would *ever* change Jack's mind or turn his heart.

"No, *you* listen." Emmett said. "I don't want to deal with you right now."

A whine crept into Monty's voice. "Kid, look. I'm sorry."

Emmett wondered if his apology was sincere or just rote words he spouted after the fact. How many times had something similar happened to the rogue? How often had he come to someone the next morning and said these same words?

"I doubt it," Emmett said, tying his pack together.

When he stood, Monty rose with him. "Please. I didn't mean it."

Anger flared through Emmett, and he glared at Monty with all the strength and hatred he could muster. The surprised look

in Monty's eyes was worth the pounding of Emmett's heart in his throat—he *had* spent seven years with Jack; he knew the effect a contemptuous glance could have, particularly when it was least expected.

"This is the deal," Emmett said, keeping his voice low so Monty wouldn't hear the fear lacing his words. Jack looked up from his own bedroll, a slight frown on his face, but didn't say anything. "We're being paid to bring down Lin. At this point, I don't even care about splitting the bounties. When we're done, you'll leave." He poked at Monty's chest with one finger, and Monty was too unnerved to brush it away. "I don't care where. I don't care how. I just don't want to see your face ever again. Don't touch me. Don't even *talk* to me unless you must. Do you understand?"

Monty closed his eyes, but not before Emmett saw the pain flitter across them. "I just wanted to show you how good it could be between men," Monty whispered. "It doesn't have to be lonely all the time. I thought maybe you needed to know that. It's something Jack would never tell you."

"Because of *you*." Emmett jabbed his finger at Monty's chest again. "Because *you* fucked with him, Monty, and now he'll never trust again. And it's too late to correct that now. Toying with me won't ease your conscience. It won't make things right."

Monty reached out to catch Emmett's hand but Emmett slipped out of his grip. Turning, he shoved the rest of his blankets into his pack, his gaze flickering to meet Jack's. He saw the hint of a smile cross Jack's face before the older man went back to his packing.

* * *

Aliak overflowed with people, natives and Asians and white men, all jostling for position up and down the street that ran through town. Young men climbed onto awnings for better views, and women crowded the windows fronting the street. Excitement tinged the air, racing through the spectators gathered. Vendors hawked their wares—trinkets made from gold and polished rock, feathers for caps and hairpins, intricate carvings in whalebone, hot skewers of roasted meat. A fresh fall of snow covered the street, its pristine carpet already churned a muddy gray in spots. Once the sleds ran through, it would be as dingy as it had the day before.

Jack wrapped Emmett's scarf around his head like a babushka, obscuring the patch on his right eye. His plan was simple—using the crowd for cover, they'd approach Lin Ji's pavilion, get the lay of the land, then figure out what to do next. One shot was all Jack would need, but his pistol's limited range required close quarters. Emmett, the smallest of the three, was quiet and nondescript—his years as a slave had given him the odd ability to blend into the scenery, if necessary, and he could usually get into places Jack would have fought to enter. He'd slip into Lin Ji's pavilion, see what he could, and report back. A simple enough task.

Then why did it feel as though his heart wanted to leap from his chest?

The pavilion was nothing like the one in Emmett's

dream—merely a canopy, no tent. Women with powdered faces and elaborate wigs lounged in thick furs on wooden benches—the *kisaeng* Jack had mentioned. Burly men stood guard around the pavilion, backs straight against the poles supporting the canopy. Though they looked unarmed, Emmett suspected otherwise, and sure enough, he spotted double *ssangdo* blades tucked into their belts. In the shadows draped beneath the canopy, he could see huddled officials, a tall, thin man among them. Lin Ji.

At the crowd's edge, Jack ducked behind the inn where the men had dined the previous evening. Betting tables had been set up at the mouth of an alleyway, gamblers already laying money down on what order the dogs would arrive. Jack slunk down the alley, Emmett on his heels, Monty bringing up the rear. At the far end of the building, Jack stopped short. Emmett ran into his broad back and fought the urge to catch him in a quick embrace. Instead he stepped onto Monty's foot. Monty's hands touched Emmett's waist and he jumped away as if goosed. "Don't," he snapped.

Monty's touch disappeared. "Sorry."

Jack scowled as he surveyed the area. They were alone, out of the crowd, but too far from the pavilion to think about getting off a clean shot. "We'll wait here," he said, straightening the pack on his shoulders. The look he gave emboldened Emmett—it spoke volumes of the trust he held in his partner, even if he never spoke of it aloud. "You know what I'm looking for."

With a nod, Emmett promised, "I'll be right back."

He didn't glance at Monty as he slipped from the alley. Behind the inn, around the corner, back into the crowd. Emmett blended seamlessly—he'd learned long ago the subtle art of becoming one with a group of others. It was a mindset, downcast eyes, hunched shoulders, nothing to make him noticeable or let him stand out. He moved with clustered spectators, not against the flow, brushing between people like a shadow and letting their paths guide his own as he kept Lin's pavilion in his sights.

The layout was simple—the guards held the only weapons. The women, most likely unarmed, were inconsequential. They tittered among themselves and chattered in a clipped, foreign tongue Emmett couldn't understand. The guards were silent, their gazes roving the crowd, looking for anyone who lingered or stared too long. Emmett kept his eyes lowered and assessed the pavilion from the corners of his vision as he measured his pace, never too slow or too fast. Around the first post, trailing behind a pair of vendors competing with each other for customers.

Then he got a good look at the pavilion's interior. Lin Ji sat in a large chair that appeared to be carved from antlers. Two women fawned over him, one massaging scented oil into his temples, the other rubbing one fur-clad arm. A variety of men vied for Lin's attention—couriers and advisors, perhaps, a step up from the common gamblers at the betting tables but speculators nonetheless. Emmett easily recognized the narrowed eyes and pinched faces of money-grubbers when he saw them. He skirted the pavilion completely. A small section was partitioned off with what looked like curtains of fine silk. Shadows danced upon the finely crafted fabric, more people, but Emmett didn't think they'd be any problem. More *kisaeng* perhaps, or concubines. Unless...

No. He wouldn't think it. Kim Ji wouldn't be at the race. She just *wouldn't*.

Other than the guards posted around the pavilion, Emmett saw no others, and no one inside seemed to be armed, though Lin probably carried a small knife on him. That, or he had complete faith in the two guards standing behind his chair. On closer inspection, however, Emmett didn't see any short swords in *their* belts, which made him think they had pistols hidden in their coats. He glanced at them, turned away, then risked another look as he came around the side of the pavilion.

One of the men met his gaze. Shit.

Abandoning his surveillance, Emmett cut through the crowd at an angle that would take him back to the street as quickly as possible. He checked to ensure he wasn't followed, but those dark eyes haunted him and he took a convoluted route to return to Jack. Only when he was sure no one trailed him did he head for the alley. He leaned against the back wall of the inn to catch his breath and take one last look around—no one. But when he went to step around the corner, he heard Monty's soft voice just on the other side.

"You're an ass, Jack Robison."

Emmett caught his breath. They were *right there*, immediately around the turn. Should he step out, show them

he was there? Or wait and listen?

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Jack asked, unconsciously mirroring Emmett's thoughts.

Monty laughed. The sound still made Emmett's heart skip a beat. "Don't tell me you never thought of him like that."

Now Emmett knew. They were talking about *him*. He should come out before things went any further, before anything else was said, but his feet were rooted in place. What would Jack say?

Monty continued. "He's innocence and boyishness and raw sensuality rolled into one perfect package. I know you ache for that. You have to. Can't you see he wants you? Can't you see—"

His words dissolved beneath a sudden shuffle. Something hit the wall, hard—Emmett winced to think Jack had slammed Monty against the brick. He could easily picture his partner's fists bunched in Monty's cloak, face inches from Monty's as he snarled, "Don't tell me what I want. Don't fucking dare *presume* to know. You *never* knew."

What had transpired between the men? Emmett wondered. How had Monty's hands and lips once aroused Jack? Who started it? It must've taken a world of patience to wear Jack down, to break through his defenses. How could Monty just give that up so easily? When Emmett wanted it so bad?

"Jack." Monty's voice sounded choked. "I'm just saying don't let it be this way. I might have I fucked you over but he's not going to do that. He's not like me."

"He's nothing like you," Jack spat. "Don't even think

about comparing yourself to him, because you can't."

"Then why can't you love him?" Monty whispered.

Emmett bit his lip, waiting for Jack's answer. His blood roared in his ears, his heart beat in his chest. *Yes, why?*

Jack didn't respond.

Monty continued. "You say he's not like me. But you won't let him in because you're afraid he'll turn on you like I did. Is that it? Jesus, can't you see you're killing him?"

"Shut up," Jack growled.

Monty ignored him. "He wants you, you know. But if you won't have him, eventually he's going to find someone else. Do you want to lose him because you never let me go?"

"I got over you long ago," Jack muttered.

"Did you?" Monty asked softly.

Emmett could take no more. With a deep breath to steady himself, he ducked into the alley. Jack's hands were clenched into fists at his side; Monty leaned against the wall, arms crossed before his chest. Emmett met his gaze before turning to grin at Jack. "I saw him."

"Lin Ji?" Monty pushed away from the wall, one hand straying to Emmett's arm, but he stopped before he could take it.

Mirroring the move, Jack didn't bother to check himself and grasped Emmett's other arm. "Well? What did you see?"

Quickly Emmett summed up the situation, then hesitated. With a glance at Monty, Jack turned his attention to his partner. "But?"

"But it feels like a set-up. It's just too perfect, Jack. I don't

like it." Emmett met Jack's steady stare with his own troubled gaze and finally put into words what troubled him most. "And I think Kim Ji is here."

Jack's fingers tightened around Emmett's elbow. "What? You saw her?"

Shaking his head, Emmett explained, "No. But there's a curtained area I couldn't see through. Women were inside."

"A *kisaeng* room," Monty said, waving one hand dismissively. "That's all."

Emmett didn't think so. "Those women were outside, like dolls on display. This was something hidden, something secret." He looked at Jack, beseeching his partner to believe him. "It just feels wrong to me. I think Kim's there."

"Maybe," Jack conceded.

Emmett took a step closer. "Jack," he said, his voice low. "She kept me chained in that prison of hers for years. I—I can't..."

Jack hunkered down, locking Emmett's gaze with his own. His hand was a vise on Emmett's arm. "Don't lose yourself, Emmett. You helped me escape, remember? You saved my life, and I swore I'd set you free. I promised to keep you safe, didn't I?"

Quickly Emmett nodded. Yes, that was the first thing Jack had said to him, once they were free from Kim Ji's warehouse. It took weeks for Emmett to nurse the wounded bounty hunter back to health, a fact Jack vowed never to forget. *It's me and you, kid, from here on out. I won't let anyone hurt you, ever again.* "So she's here," Jack whispered. "Fuck her. I'll kill her, too, if she gets in the way. You don't have to worry about her. Trust me."

"Okay," Emmett whispered. With a glance at Monty, he nodded again. "I do, I trust you. I just don't like this."

Jack grinned. "I don't like it anymore than you. After we take out Lin, we'll head back down the coast, what do you say? Maybe a little farther south, down into wine country. We could use a break."

If we get out of here alive, Emmett thought sourly, but he kept that bottled up inside.

* * *

Jack's was a simple plan. They'd wait until after the frontrunners mushed through. In the lull following the sleds' passage, the crowd would be rowdy. Monty would cause a distraction near the guards—he didn't know what yet, exactly, but he assured Emmett and Jack he'd put on a good show. If anyone could turn heads, Emmett knew it was Monty Becker. Jack would use that opportunity to sneak around the pavilion, positioning himself behind the curtained area, out of sight from Lin's chair. That was the closest he could get and still hope to aim true, but unfortunately it put him at a slight disadvantage—he wouldn't be able to see Lin to line up his shot.

That's where Emmett came in. He'd stay to the back of the pavilion, within Jack's sight, exactly where he'd been when the guard behind Lin had noticed him earlier. He would watch, and wait. The moment Jack's shot was clear, a signal from Emmett would send him around the curtain, pistol drawn as he fired.

The whole thing came down to Emmett, really—it was his call. If his timing were off, if he misjudged the moment, if anything went wrong, Emmett knew he could get them all killed. Or worse.

Trust yourself, he thought, taking a deep breath as he headed around the pavilion. *Jack does.*

That thought alone strengthened his resolve.

Monty did his part beautifully—without missing a step, he bumped into a scrimshaw vendor, scattering bits of whalebone and various trinkets all over the ground. "Oh, jeez," he cried, his loud voice instantly snagging the guards' attention. "Oh, man, I'm *so* sorry. Here, let me help…"

He bent to retrieve the wares and backed into a food vendor carrying an unsteady tray covered with bowls of hot soup. Earthenware clattered to the ground as watery broth splashed out, soaking spectators and guards alike. "Sorry," Monty said again, sounding anything but.

A gasp ran through the crowd as another sled approached from the south. Heads turned, necks craning to catch a glimpse of the new musher. The guards stopped wiping the soup that stained their pants and turned to follow the crowd. Emmett stood on his toes but the sled was still too far away to see. This might be the perfect opportunity for Jack's shot. He stepped into position, casually assessing the situation. They could do this, he *knew* it. Inside the pavilion the *kisaeng* huddled together, giggling; the two pawing at Lin were waved away as the crime lord rose from his chair, binoculars in hand, to get a close look at the approaching sled. Everyone watched the race, heads turned, breaths held...

One of the guards behind Lin's chair paid no attention to the dogs or their cargo. He surveyed the crowd then turned to look directly at Emmett. It was the same one who had noticed him before, and recognition flashed in his eyes.

Without thinking, Emmett glanced at Jack. The guard followed that look...*shit*.

He gave a quick shake of his head, *no*. Across the way, Jack frowned, his face creasing in confusion. "What?" he mouthed.

"No," Emmett breathed. He glanced back at the guard, who had turned from Lin now, one hand easing into the front of his jacket. The man stared at Emmett, but when he drew his pistol, he aimed for the curtain and Jack, who was just on the other side of the flimsy material. Who didn't see the gun leveled at him. Who wouldn't feel the shot until the bullet tore into him.

Who trusted Emmett with his life.

"Jack!" Emmett's cry echoed through the pavilion, distracting the guard. As he turned, Emmett launched himself at the man, knocking the gun from his hand. One single shot fired harmlessly into the air, tearing a hole through the canopy above. Women screamed, scattering, and the crowd rushed in sudden panic. A few people ran into the street, directly in the path of the dogs, who yelped as their leads tangled together. Some raced under the pavilion as if seeking protection, others trampled those who fell as they hurried to clear the area.

The guard who had fired lunged for Emmett, snarling like a wild dog. His teeth caught Emmett's cheek, and bright pain erupted along Emmett's face. Emmett forced an arm between them, pushing the man away, but those vicious teeth bit into his forearm, sinking into the thick fabric of his coat. "Jack!" Emmett kicked out, hoping to dislodge the man, only to find himself pinned against the back of Lin Ji's chair. "Jack!"

Another gunshot pierced the air, followed by more shrieks. Suddenly a sharp pain erupted across Emmett's thigh like fire licking into his flesh. His legs fell out under him, dropping him to the ground. A spot of blood seeped through a small hole torn in his pants; as Emmett watched, it spread rapidly, opening like a rose in bloom.

The other guard, no longer distracted by the race, elbowed his partner aside to stand before Emmett, a Colt .45 in both hands. His shot had struck Emmett, and his next would finish the job. He grinned as he aimed the weapon. *This is it*, Emmett thought wildly. *I'm going to die.* And Jack—

Jack.

Emmett glanced over at the curtained area, where his partner had been last. He saw the flash of a barrel, heard the rapport of a gun, and he winced, sure it was over. Something heavy landed on him, jarring his wound.

A well aimed shot had caught the guard in the chest; he fell forward onto Emmett. Fumbling, Emmett pushed him off,

kicking the body away. Then strong hands grabbed him, pulled him close, and he leaned back against a hard body as warm arms enveloped him. He looked up into Jack's angry face as his partner leaned over him protectively. "Fuck," he breathed, wiping blood from Emmett's cheek. "What the hell were you thinking?"

"He saw me look over at you," Emmett choked. "He was going to shoot, Jack, right through the curtain. I couldn't let him get you. I couldn't—"

"Shut up," Jack commanded, cocking his pistol as one of the perimeter guards headed their way, twin *ssangdo* blades in hand.

For once Emmett obeyed. He struggled to sit up but Jack's arm was a steel bar across his chest, keeping him down out of the way. Above him, Jack fired his pistol seemingly without aiming, but each shot struck true. None of the knife-wielding guards reached them—they fell before Jack's bullets like tin soldiers. When the ammunition ran out, he reloaded with clockwork precision, his hands a blur above Emmett. Spent cartridges rained down around Emmett. In the brief minute it took Jack to reload, Emmett took the opportunity to shift into a sitting position.

He didn't get far. Once the pistol was back in action, Jack's arm caught Emmett around the shoulders, holding him back against Jack's broad chest. Emmett clasped that arm with both hands and turned to bury his face into the crook of Jack's elbow. The loud rapport of the gun deafened him—he no longer heard the terrified crowd or the shrieking *kisaeng*. All

that existed was the sound of gunfire, ringing out like judgment, and Jack's strong arm keeping him safe.

A lull in the fight caused him to look up. Behind Jack was the curtained area, the silk now hanging in ribbons where bullets had shredded it. Inside was an ornate chaise lounge, also riddled with bullets. How many were Jack's, Emmett didn't know. A dead guard lay across the chaise lounge, his blood staining the expensive fabric. As Jack reloaded a second time, Emmett watched a lone woman crawl from between the guard's legs, exiting the safety beneath the chair. She rose amid a rustle of silk skirts—an older woman, face powdered, eyes painted, black hair one long braid that wound around her head like a snake. From within the fur draped around her upper body, she extracted a small *jang do*, hand fisted around the knife's ivory handle.

Kim Ji.

"Jack!" Emmett bit at Jack's arm in his terror—the Dragon Lady herself, *here*. As she stepped closer, years of torture flooded Emmett's mind, moments he'd tried so hard to forget. A hot brand held to the bottoms of his feet when he didn't move fast enough. The chains on his ankles and hands that were tightened until he thought his bones would shatter beneath the weight. The whip that cracked over him, constantly spurring him and the other workers on.

Now she crossed the pavilion, eyes narrowed. Did she recognize him? Would she punish him for rescuing Jack? For running away? For daring to *dream*? Dear God... "Jack!"

Emmett tore at Jack's arm, struggling to break free.

"Please," he mumbled, his mind a haze of fear. "Please, she's coming. Let me go. Just let me go, please."

Jack's grip didn't loosen; if anything, it tightened as he pulled Emmett close. "Shh," he whispered, his voice soothing in Emmett's ear. His other arm came around, gun in hand, to aim at Kim Ji. "I promised, Emmett. She won't hurt you again."

When she saw the gun, she dropped to the ground, her knife skittering away. She reached for it, but a weathered boot clamped down on the blade. Emmett recognized that boot, and followed the leg up, up, just in time to see Monty give him a salacious wink. His rifle aimed at Kim, who scooted back when she saw it. "Don't think so, lovely," he drawled. "You're not on my list but I think you'll fetch a pretty penny nonetheless."

She cursed him in Korean as she scrambled to her feet, then called out for her son. Emmett looked around wildly—where *was* Lin? Had Jack shot him? Was it over?

No...he stood from behind an overturned chair, where he'd huddled with the *kisaeng* during the fight. When he saw Jack's pistol seek him out, he grabbed the nearest woman and held her in front of him like a shield. Tears streaked her white makeup as she blabbered incoherently. "Coward," Jack spat, lowering his gun.

"Can't you get the shot?" Emmett asked. "Jack!"

But neither he nor Monty fired. Lin edged through the pavilion, keeping his hostage facing them at all times. When his foot nudged a discarded gun from one of his guards, he bent to retrieve it, eliciting shrieks from the girl he dragged down with him. Pistol in hand, he trained it on Monty, then Jack, then Monty again because he was closer.

When he came close enough, Kim Ji ran to hide behind her son. They backed out of the pavilion; Monty followed, rifle resting in both hands, waiting for a shot. Over his shoulder, he asked Jack, "Was the boy hit?"

Emmett felt firm hands on his body, positioning him so Jack could get a good look at his leg. "Christ," Jack swore. "Emmett...shit."

He glanced down—his pants were dark with his own blood. The sight made him swoon. Jack stood, cradling Emmett in his arms like a child. "No," Emmett told him. "Lin's getting away."

"I've got them," Monty said. He cocked his rifle, sliding the bolt into place.

Lin Ji pushed the *kisaeng* at Monty and turned, following his mother as she disappeared into the crowd. Monty gave chase.

Pressing his face to Jack's shoulder, Emmett passed out.

* * *

"Just hang in there," Jack whispered. The words sank into Emmett's unconsciousness like a rock tossed into a still pond—they pierced his clouded thoughts, then dropped slowly into his heart. "I've got you, Emmett. You'll be fine. Hold on for me. Can you do that? Just hold on."

Emmett could try.

He heard gunshots—Jack fending off more guards, perhaps, or shooting into the air to scatter the crowds. Every ounce of strength left him; he lay like a baby in his partner's arms, unable to move or speak. His leg felt impossibly cold, as if he'd rolled into a bank of snow. He shivered, unable to get warm. Jack held him tight, warming him with his own body heat, and Emmett began to sweat despite the chills. "Jack," he tried to say, again and again, but the word wouldn't escape his throat. Instead it echoed inside him, *Jack, Jack*, a lonely sound.

He felt so alone.

At some point he became aware of warmth. Soft furs cushioned him now—Jack's touch was gone. He started in alarm. "Jack!"

"Right here," came the gruff reply.

A hand took his, squeezing it tight, as gentle fingers brushed sweaty hair back from his brow. Pain tore through his leg; no longer cold, it felt like a million needles were poking and prodding his wound, stitching it up. He could feel the tightening of flesh around sutures and his whole body flushed with fever. He tried opening his eyes but couldn't, so he gave up and lay back. When he turned his face toward the sound of Jack's voice, his temple rested against Jack's knee. That small touch comforted him more than any other. "Jack," he sighed. "Don't leave me."

Jack told him, "Don't worry."

With that assurance, Emmett dropped into a fitful sleep.

* * *

There was no passing of time. If dreams disturbed Emmett's sleep, he didn't remember them. When he woke from time to time, shadows obscured the room around him and scant firelight flickered in a hearth nearby. He lay on a carpet of fur before the fire, a worsted blanket covering his naked body. Sometimes an old woman sat beside him, dark hair in long braids, face and hands worn smooth like leather. She tended his wound and spoke no words.

The only other person in the room was Jack. Whenever Emmett opened his eyes, his partner was there, hand in Emmett's, concern etched into every feature. "You'll be all right," he promised. His deep voice was the only sound Emmett heard, waking or asleep. It sounded like the voice of God, watching over him, assuring him everything would be fine.

At some point his breathing eased and his fever broke, leaving him pale and weak, but at least he was alive. The pain in his leg flowed like the tide, washing over him when he least expected it, but for the moment, it was calm. Both Jack's large hands held one of Emmett's own. Before he even roused himself, he knew he had pulled through. The worst was over—he was on the mend, and he knew he only had one man to thank for that. His fingers curled around Jack's as he opened his eyes and he smiled at his partner. "Hey."

"Emmett," Jack sighed.

Emmett watched in disbelief as Jack raised the hand in his and pressed it to his lips. They felt impossibly soft for so rough a man. They'd lost Lin, and Monty, too—any money he made off the bounty was his alone, by all rights. Emmett didn't hope to see one dime. "Jack," Emmett whispered. He squeezed Jack's hand in his and sighed. "I'm sorry. I blew it—"

"No." Jack touched Emmett's shoulder when he tried to rise. "Let Monty have the damn money. I'm just glad I still have you."

Emmett choked back a surprised sob. "Please," he whispered. "I know he hurt you and I'm sorry. But don't you know by now I'd never leave you?"

Jack pressed his lips together to keep them from trembling. Softly, he said, "Come here."

Easing an arm around Emmett, he helped his partner sit up. Jack stretched a leg out behind Emmett and shifted him a bit so he could lean on Jack. One calloused hand strummed through Emmett's cottony curls. Resting his head against Jack's chest, Emmett told him, "How can I prove to you I'm not like him?"

"You're nothing like him," Jack replied. He wrapped his arms around Emmett, hugging him close. The blanket had shifted, pooling at Emmett's waist and exposing his smooth chest, but the warmth of Jack's embrace warded off any chill. One hand slipped beneath the blanket to brush over Emmett's bandaged leg, the gentlest of touches.

There would be time enough after he healed for something more, but for the moment Emmett savored their sudden intimacy. Jack's hands rested comfortably on Emmett's waist and leg, and Emmett wrapped his arms around one of Jack's own. He had imagined this tenderness, but all his daydreams and fantasies paled in comparison.

Jack buried his face in Emmett's tousled hair. "It's me who should apologize," he murmured. "I've been a jackass. I don't know why you bothered with an old bastard like me for so long."

With a pleasant sigh, Emmett teased, "Shut up."

Leaning down, Jack kissed Emmett's forehead. The brief contact made Emmett's heart flutter and his blood soar. None of Monty's touches had been as satisfying. If Jack did nothing more, Emmett could live on such moments alone.

But he went further. Taking Emmett's chin in his hand, Jack turned his partner's face toward his and pressed his lips to Emmett's in a long overdue kiss that tasted as sweet and promising as freshly fallen snow.

J. M. SNYDER

An author of gay erotic/romantic fiction, J. M. Snyder began self-publishing gay erotic fiction in 2002. Since then, Snyder has released several books in trade paperback format and has begun exploring the world of e-publishing, working with Amber Quill Press and other e-publishers. Snyder's highly erotic short gay fiction has been published online at *Ruthie's Club*, *Tit-Elation*, *Sticky Pen*, and Amazon Shorts, as well as in anthologies by Aspen Mountain Press and Cleis Press. A full bibliography, as well as free fiction, book excerpts, purchasing information, and exclusive contests, can be found at:

http://jmsnyder.net

* * *

Don't miss A Heart Divided by J. M. Snyder, available at AmberAllure.com!

Confederate Lieutenant Anderson Blanks has grown weary of the War Between the States. He is all too aware of the tenuous thread that ties him to this earth—as he writes a letter home to his sister, he realizes he may be among the dead by the time she receives the missive. His melancholy mood is shared by other soldiers in the campsite; in the cool Virginia night, the pickets claim to hear ghosts in the woods, and their own talk spooks them.

Andy knows the "ghost" is nothing more than a wounded soldier left on the battlefield, dying in the darkness. With compassion, Andy takes the picket's lantern and canteen in the hopes of easing the soldier's pain. After a tense confrontation with the soldier, Andy is shocked to discover none other than Samuel Talley, a young man Andy's father had chased from their plantation when the romantic relationship between the two boys came to light. The last time the two had seen each other, Sam had been heading west to seek his fortune, and had promised to send for Andy when he could.

Then the war broke out, and Andy had enlisted in the Confederate Army to help ease the financial burden at home. Apparently Sam had similar ideas—he now wears the blue coat of a Union solider.

Sam is severely wounded and infection has begun to set in. Andy can't sneak him into his own camp for treatment because all Union soldiers are taken prisoner. But Andy's Confederate uniform prevents him from seeking help from the nearby Union camp, as well. It's up to Andy to tend his lover's wound and get Sam the help he needs before it's too late...and before Andy's compatriots discover Sam's presence...

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