

Single Shots



Taming the Mountain Mist
by KC Warwick

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It was nearly dusk and the mist was so thick now that Justin could barely see where he was going at all. He was no longer sure whether he was traveling down from the moors or back up onto them again, nor where the Wall was, nor the location of the fort of which he was—assuming that he could ever find it again—Garrison Commander. He was tired, hungry, cold and dispirited. He had set out that morning with two native guides to hunt deer on the moors. The sun had been shining, his second-in-command had seemed happy to be left in charge, the gods were smiling on him. Or so he had thought.

As they returned home with a young buck that would supplement army rations very nicely, the mist had started to come down, swirling like cobwebs around the stunted trees and gorse bushes that dotted the rough turf. He had paused to remove a stone from his boot, and in that short time the mist had become a fog, cutting him off from his escort as effectively as if it had been a palisade fence. He had shouted, but the noise was muffled by the mist; once he thought he had heard a faint reply, but it could have been the call of a bird. He had pressed on, convinced that he would run into his two companions at any moment, and now he was utterly and completely lost.

The autumn sunlight had gone, it was growing cold, and he was glad that he had worn native dress—the woolen breeks and thick tunic being considerably warmer than scanty Roman garb. Up here on the frontier they tended to dispense with such formalities; it just wasn't practical to be a conventional

soldier of the Roman empire on one of its farthest borders. The Wall itself was a thin line between a modicum of civilization and the lawless wastes were tribal country. He liked the informality, the freedom, and the responsibility which went with it, even though the prestige was less than in one of the regular legions. He'd been up on the Wall for a month now and was starting to feel at home; maybe this was the Fates' way of reminding him that nothing was certain.

He needed shelter, somewhere he could wait for a while until the mist cleared, and then maybe he could find his way down to the fort. Or at worst, the inevitable search party would be able to track him down, humiliating though that would be. A cave would be ideal, though he'd settle for a decent clump of bushes if needs be, anywhere that he could conserve a little warmth. He was shivering now and he could not move fast enough to keep himself warm, lest he should twist an ankle on the uneven turf and be left in a worse state. If only the mist would lift!

He stared up into the grayness above him, wishing he could at least see the stars, though it was hardly dark enough for that yet. When he looked back down to earth, there was a wolf standing a few spear's lengths in front of him.

His first reaction was to freeze. He had his spear, but he knew that killing a wolf was a very different proposition from hunting deer, and he doubted he was up to it. Besides, the locals had told him that killing wolves was unlucky, that they never hunted them and that in return, the wolves never attacked their sheep. He was not sure whether he believed that. He was not even sure whether a wolf would attack a

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man in such a situation—maybe they only did so if they were hungry, or frightened. This wolf did not look frightened, quite the reverse. It regarded him with clear grey eyes, looking him up and down as if assessing whether it would be worth going for him or not, evidently recognizing him as an intruder here on its own territory. Justin knew that he ought to be trying to scare the animal away or make his own escape, or something, but all that occupied his thoughts was the fact that the wolf was spell-bindingly beautiful. He had never seen one this close before, but he was sure that they did not all have a pelt which shone like burnished metal even in the dim light, fading to silver around the head and tail. It looked as if it would be soft to the touch too, and he had an illogical desire to reach out a hand and stroke the thick fur. Instead, he said softly, "It would almost be an honor to be torn to pieces, because you are the most beautiful animal I have ever seen."

There was a strange shimmering in the mist and where the wolf had been standing, there was now a man, tall, slender and wrapped in a long cloak, with grey eyes and hair the same silver as the wolf's hanging down over his shoulders. Justin took an involuntary step back, his heart thumping, and the man said thoughtfully, "You have good taste, Commander. I'm glad to see that."

"What are you?" Justin demanded, staring at him. "A god or a demon?"

The man regarded him with the same assessing look as the wolf had done. "I'm certainly not a god," he replied, speaking good Latin with the lilt of the tribes. "And I don't

consider myself to be a demon. I'm simply a man with special talents. Come, you must be cold."

He turned to walk down the hillside but Justin called out, "Wait!" The stranger turned unhurriedly. "I don't know who or what you are, nor what you want with me. Why should I follow you?"

"It's the only way you're going to get back to the fort," was the reply, delivered with some amusement. "Unless you're going to sit here all night and wait for the rescue party, but that would be very uncomfortable. As for your other questions, I can answer them just as well by a warm fire. Wouldn't that be preferable to standing here?"

Warmth of any kind was what Justin most wanted; all he had to decide was whether he was prepared to find it in the company of a man who could presumably turn into a wolf at any moment. How much choice did he have in the matter? It occurred to him that he was just as likely to get his throat ripped out either way. He set off after the stranger.

"Is it far?" he asked. "The warm fire, I mean?"

"No distance at all." His guide strode confidently across the rough ground, not even bothering to look back at Justin. Stumbling after, the soldier was vaguely irritated by this assumption of his co-operation, but as he had already decided, he had little choice. It would be foolish to risk a night on the hills when an alternative was being offered.

"I need to get back to the fort," Justin stated. "They'll be frantic if I don't come back. If you could just show me the way."

The grey-eyed man said over his shoulder, "You're cold and tired; let me put that right before you go on. It's the least I can do, in the circumstances, since it's my fault that you're lost. Your guides were hurrying because they know this is my territory, and they were afraid."

"Did they need to be?" Justin asked, still trying to adjust to this new development.

"No. But the tribes are very superstitious. However, the point I'm trying to make is that I owe you some hospitality. And to set your heart at rest, I've already sent a message down the valley, saying that I'll bring you in."

Justin stared at him. "How—" then he broke off. He had just seen a wolf change into a man, why should he query an invisible messenger? "Another of your special talents?" he guessed.

"I'm afraid so. Difficult to explain, particularly to the Roman army," and he flicked a quick glance over his shoulder.

Justin let it go; he thought this was probably wiser.

They traveled on in silence for a few minutes, then his companion gestured ahead of them and out of the mist the shape of a low one-story hut appeared. Justin had never seen it before, but he was not familiar with much of the local country—that was one reason for going out hunting in it, in order to get to know it better. He could be anywhere for all he knew. There was the sound of a stream nearby, but that was the only clue to his whereabouts. The hut was built of stone with a thatched roof from which a column of smoke was rising into the darkening sky. He followed the stranger into a single

room, with a large fireplace in which a log fire was burning. The floor was strewn with bracken and smelt of wood smoke and herbs, the latter hanging in bunches from the rafters.

"Sit by the fire, Commander, and get warm." This was a suggestion that Justin was only too willing to comply with. He took the carved wooden chair that he was offered, reflecting briefly that it was a fine piece of furniture, and held his hands out to the warmth. Glancing around curiously, he saw that there were cupboards against one wall and a wide bed, covered with bright blankets, against another. Cooking pots were stacked on a wooden table and everything was neat and orderly. His host, or captor, brought him a wooden goblet with some hot sweet-smelling liquid steaming within it, and a plate with honey cakes and raisins on it.

"No woman of the house?" Justin queried, sniffing the drink and wondering whether it was safe to drink it.

"I get on very well without women, on the whole," the stranger replied. He pulled up a wooden stool to the fire and sat down, cradling his own goblet in his hands. "And I doubt a woman would accept what I am, not without a great deal of persuasion."

"So what are you?" Justin asked, taking the opportunity to study his companion closely for the first time. He saw a man of his own age, tall, lean, with a fine-boned face and that silver hair falling down his back, as beautiful as the wolf had been but in a different way. Probably as dangerous as the wolf too, he decided. "I don't even know your name."

"The villagers call me Falan," was the reply. "What do they call you, Commander?"

"Justin."

"Hmm. All the other Romans I've known have been called Marcus or Quintus. But then you're British-born, aren't you?"

Justin stared at him. "How did you know? Surely I don't have that much of an accent?"

That garnered him a faint smile. "Oh yes, you do. You look British too, fair hair and blue eyes. But the reason I'm sure is that a Roman would not have accepted the change from wolf to man as you did. That being so, you probably know the answer to your own question."

"My mother used to tell stories about shape-changers," Justin admitted. "That doesn't mean that I was prepared to meet one in the flesh. Why did you change? You could have vanished as a wolf and I would never have known."

"I wanted to meet you," Falan told him calmly. "You're the new garrison commander. I have to weigh up the enemy."

Justin was strangely disappointed at these words. "Am I the enemy then?" he asked.

"I'm part of the conquered race," Falan pointed out. "You can hardly expect to be regarded as anything else." There was a hint of challenge in his tone and Justin was quick to take it up.

"I don't remember Rome conquering the wolves," he said. "In fact, Romulus and Remus were raised by wolves, if I remember my history correctly."

Suddenly he found Falan smiling at him in the firelight. It was a good smile, full of warmth and charm. "Excellent logic, Commander. I think you and I might perhaps be friends after

all." He added with a nod at the untasted cup that Justin was still holding "You can drink it. It's not poisoned."

Justin sipped the hot liquid cautiously. It was sweet and slightly thicker in texture than wine, but it tasted pleasant and it certainly warmed him. "What is it?" he asked.

"Honey mead. Too much of it can be disastrous, but a little is good when you're cold and wet. It's a gift from the villagers, as are the honey cakes. People bring them to me as good luck offerings." He flicked Justin an amused glance. "I don't know how much good it does them."

"Are they really afraid of you?" Justin asked curiously. He tried to find something of the wolf in the man sitting across the fire from him but did not succeed. Falan was more like a cat, graceful and sinuous, claws drawn in.

"Some of them. Don't think badly of your escorts, they would have come back for you, but they were going for reinforcements first." The amused look flickered again. "Your pride will be hurt less if I bring you in, in fact, there might even be some kudos in it for you..."

"There might indeed," Justin agreed, taking a bite of honey cake. "Well, I could do with all the kudos I can get. I'm still very much the new commander, untested and unknown."

The grey eyes fixed on his. "You're very young for such a position. The other commander was ancient."

Justin gave a rueful smile. "This is not a sought-after promotion. The last man stayed here for years because he was too fond of the local barley spirit. I hope to move on eventually."

"And here am I, leading you astray along the same path," Falan said wryly, indicating the mead. "I'm ashamed of myself." He didn't sound ashamed at all.

As it happened, Justin was beginning to feel rather light-headed. The mead slipped down his throat easily and he hastily nibbled a honey cake to counteract the effect on an empty stomach. It was probably the alcohol that made him ask, "What do you do, other than frighten people and bring them luck?"

"Oh, I have some healing powers too," was the reply. "Not much, but enough to help from time to time. I grow herbs—or rather, I try to grow them. I fear I don't have much aptitude for tilling the soil, too much animal in me."

"What does it feel like?" Justin asked curiously, finishing his mead and putting down the cup.

"Like being a wolf," said Falan, with another faint smile. "If you mean, do I retain my mind, then yes. I'm told werewolves don't, but I've never met one so I couldn't say. But I acquire the wolf's senses and instincts, though I don't always follow them. I didn't tonight."

Justin thought back to that encounter. After a moment, he said hesitantly, "I'd like to see the wolf again, if it were ever possible."

Falan looked at him sharply, surprise evident in his face, then he stood up. In a second, the animal was standing in the firelight, staring at him, its head much nearer his own because he was sitting down. It occurred to him that he was in an extremely vulnerable position, but he was also very taken again with the creature's appearance. Cautiously he

held out a hand and the wolf stretched its neck and sniffed at it. Then he did what he had been longing to do and ran his fingers through the long thick fur of the animal's shoulder and back. It was as silky and smooth as he had imagined it would be.

The wolf stood still under his caress but its eyes followed his movements, and he was aware of the hard muscles under the skin and the power poised ready for action at any moment. He sat back reluctantly and in another heartbeat Falan was standing there, looking down at him with an odd expression on his face. "No one has ever asked me to change before," he said. "And no one has dared to stroke me like that. You're not at all my idea of a soldier, commander."

"Did you mind?" Justin asked.

Falan shook his head. "No. But—" He stopped abruptly and turned away. "It's time I got you back to the fort. Here, put this cloak on or you'll be wet again by the time you get down there." He picked up a thick woven cloak from the end of the bed and handed it to Justin. Their fingers brushed, and Justin felt a shiver of some indefinable emotion run through him. Falan's grey eyes met his, and it was only with an effort that he looked away and threw the cloak round his shoulders.

Outside the mist was thicker, and they went at a slow pace down the hillside. Falan walked by Justin's side but said nothing until the tall, dark shape of the Wall rose up before them suddenly, and Justin realized that he was on the hillside just above the fort.

"You'll know the way from here," his companion told him. "I'll leave you then. Don't get lost."

"Will I see you again?" Justin asked, trying to keep the urgency out of his voice.

Falan glanced at him, his head tilted consideringly. "Do you want to?"

"Yes." He was sure of that at least.

"Then I expect you will." His hand closed for a moment round Justin's arm, then he turned back up the hill.

"Thank you," Justin called after him, and the rapidly vanishing figure lifted a hand in acknowledgement. Then suddenly the wolf was there, loping off to be swallowed up by the mist. With a sigh, Justin made his own way down to the gatehouse.

* * * *

A week later he was trying to decide what was the appropriate dress for the feast of the New Warriors, to which he had been invited by the local chieftain. He knew that this was a courtesy to the incoming commander and wondered if he should respond by wearing all his finery, but the thought of putting on parade armor made him shudder. In desperation, he turned to his orderly, an elderly man who had been with the garrison since he joined the army.

"What am I expected to wear, Gaius? I don't want to offend the chieftain, but I don't want to appear discourteous either. How formal do I have to be? You know far more about these occasions than I do."

Gaius was engaged in pouring hot water into a bowl on the washstand. He was a stocky, silent individual, but did not appear unfriendly. Now he said over his shoulder, "Wear

native dress, sir. Parade armor won't impress them. That fine wool tunic will do nicely, and the woven cloak."

The cloak that Falan had lent him...

Justin had seen nothing of the other man in the past seven days and was hoping that he might be at the feast. He was not sure what the shape-changer's status was in the local community; maybe they were too afraid of him to invite him to such functions.

But when Justin arrived at the feast hall, a lofty wooden building standing in the centre of the settlement which lay just below the fort, he found Falan seated at the chieftain's left hand while he himself was given the place of honor at the right. Falan was talking to the son of the chief, a handsome young man, who did not seem overly pleased to see Justin and his small escort. Falan's grey eyes flicked over to the party from the fort and met Justin's; he smiled quickly and then turned back to his conversation.

Kentigern, the chief, was a talkative host, particularly once the drinking had begun. He was proud of his village, which prospered in its symbiotic relationship with the fort, and proud also of his heritage and ancestors, most of whom had fought vigorously against the might of Rome. Any danger nowadays, he assured Justin, came from the sea raiders, the Northern warriors who were constantly seeking new lands to plunder. Against them, Roman and native must be united.

This was a fair assessment, and Justin found Kentigern to be a shrewd, if somewhat calculating, leader. The chieftain was anxious to remain on good terms with Rome, since the fort provided a reliable market for the goods his people

produced, and a safeguard in times of trouble. It was apparent also that Justin was being judged for his likely competence and reliability, which was what he had expected. At that moment, he was not sure of the outcome. However, the meal was excellent, being roast venison of which Justin was not yet tired, with fresh bread and goat's cheese, washed down by the local beer. It was served by the women of the place, some of whom showed a great deal of interest in the new commander, much to his embarrassment. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Falan looking amused.

The initiation ceremonies for the warriors had been gone through in secret; the feast was a celebration of their new status, but there was one more tradition to be observed, as Kentigern explained. After the feast was over and the mead jars had been passed around, the whole village would climb up to the peak of a nearby hill, which was crowned by a standing stone around which they would circle. Justin and his companions were most welcome to join them in this, or to climb as far as they wished, the chieftain added politely.

Justin glanced down the table to where his three escorts, more ceremonial than practical, were happily engaged in out-drinking their neighbors, and decided that a brisk walk up the hill might do them all good. It might also give him a chance to speak to Falan, with whom he had exchanged no more than a polite word or two all night.

A little while later, when the whole company swayed to its feet and followed Kentigern out into the darkness, he was not surprised when a teasing voice in his ear said, "I hope you

didn't drink too much mead," and he glanced round to find Falan beside him in the dim light.

"No, I remembered what you said," he replied with a smile. "It would not do for the new commander to be carried home incapable."

"No, indeed."

The people of the village surged around them, sweeping them up the hill, but it seemed to him that Falan was edging them away from the crowd and into the shadows. "Won't we be missed?" he asked, as a hand on his arm guided him away through the trees and across the short turf towards the ridge.

"Not 'til much later," was the reply, "and maybe not even then. Your escort will think you've gone after a woman—it's traditional on occasions such as this, and that red-haired minx was certainly giving you enough encouragement."

Falan's hand was warm and firm through the soft wool of his tunic. Justin didn't ask where they were going, nor suggest that perhaps he might like to follow tradition. He knew well enough that he was not interested in the red-haired girl, nor any like her. "What about you?" he asked, his tongue loosened by the mead. "Don't you have your eye on a woman—or someone else?"

Falan glanced at him sideways in the dark. "Oh yes, I certainly have my eye on someone ... Dirg, the chieftain's son, has been very attentive, but alas, he is going to be unlucky, as far as I am concerned."

The long low shape of Falan's house rose up before them, with the scent of wood smoke vying with the damp grass and the smell of bracken. Distantly he could hear the noise of the

tribe ascending the hill, but it no longer had any relevance to him. Falan pushed the door open and the warm glow of firelight leaped out to meet them. The single room, with its aromatic herbs and solid furniture, already seemed strangely familiar, yet as they faced one another across the flames, Justin felt a moment of panic. He knew nothing about this man except that he could turn into a wolf at a moment's notice. Was that any recommendation for—whatever they were going to do?

Falan said, "You look cold," and stepped forward and slid his hands under the folds of the cloak, his arms wrapping around Justin and pulling him close as if they had done this a hundred times before. Their bodies fitted together as if they were two halves of a nut. Justin found himself returning the embrace without even pausing to consider what he was doing.

However, after a moment he asked softly, "Is this wise?"

His companion snorted. "No, of course it's not. But you're a soldier, you should be used to taking risks."

"What risks am I taking?" He leaned his cheek against the silver hair, smooth and soft as the wolf's pelt.

"The risk of consorting with a known wizard and shape-changer. There's bound to be some army regulation which forbids that."

"Nothing else?"

"Only the risks that we all take, in leaving ourselves open to someone else." He took Justin's face between his slender fingers. "But you can trust me to look after your heart. I won't knowingly hurt you." Then he leaned forward so that

their lips met, and Justin felt the warmth that had been in him blaze up into a great fire, that could only be quenched by getting much closer to Falan than he was at that moment. He sighed and forgot the fort and his responsibilities, and instead slid his hand into Falan's hair and his tongue into the other man's mouth, tasting the honey mead and feeling the answering fire that licked around him like flames.

When they got to the bed, there was a brief, intense struggle to determine who was to be on top, before Falan lay back with a smile and said, "I submit to the might of Rome—this time."

"Rome is merciful," Justin murmured against his neck.

Falan was skillfully removing what clothes they still had on. "Not too merciful, I hope. I was rather looking forward to you claiming the privileges of the victor."

Justin had had lovers of both sexes and was no stranger to what was possible between two men, but all the same he paused in his conquest, wondering whether Falan knew this too and what his wishes were. "How far exactly were you expecting my claim to extend?" he asked cautiously.

Falan smiled at him and reached under the pillow. "As far as it is possible to go," he replied, handing Justin a small bottle, which appeared to contain some aromatic oil. "I'm sure the commander has his weapons at the ready..."

Justin wondered fleetingly whether bringing soldiers back to his bed was such a regular occurrence that Falan kept the necessary items close to hand, and his face must have shown this because the shape-changer told him quickly, "No, it's not how you think. I was just hopeful that you felt the same." He

gave Justin a concerned look. "Maybe I'm rushing ahead too much."

Justin, reassured, pulled him close into another kiss. "Rush away," he murmured. "You won't escape."

The feel of Falan's bare skin against his own was enough to quicken his breathing and set his heart beating faster. It was some while since he'd done this with anyone and his body was ready to make up for time lost, especially with someone as beautiful as Falan. They writhed together on the rough blankets, Justin's hands mapping out the body beneath him, moving over lean ribs and hard muscle while his tongue twined with Falan's. They were both too eager for this to last long, he decided, letting his hand slide down over the other man's hip and close round the hardness that was pressing against his own. Falan made a small sound of pleasure, his fingers brushing Justin's nipples in a way which provoked an immediate response elsewhere.

Justin pushed between strong, slender thighs and Falan obligingly drew up a leg and hooked it over Justin's hip, wriggling to find a position that was both comfortable and convenient. Justin slid one hand under the small of his companion's back and worked it downwards, his fingers drifting into the cleft and gentling as hard muscle turned to softer more vulnerable flesh. Falan murmured encouragingly, and Justin groped round with his other hand for the bottle. In the end, Falan uncorked it and held it for him, then shifted and spread wider. The oil had a pleasant herbal scent and Justin breathed deeply as he worked his fingers carefully, one by one, into the willing body beneath him, while Falan's

cupped hand rubbed the liquid into Justin's cock with firm strokes.

"Your troops are ready for action, commander," he suggested, pulling Justin down onto him and positioning the soldier where his fingers had been a moment before. Justin pressed forward cautiously, but Falan was easy to enter and showed no discomfort as the hard length filled him.

"The Britons' defenses are easy to breach," Justin remarked, trying hard to control himself as tight warmth closed around him.

"I doubt you'll encounter much resistance," Falan agreed, beginning to sound breathless. "But bring on your weaponry, I'm ready for it."

He began the slow slide in and out, feeling pleasure building immediately. It had been too long since he had done this. "I intend to penetrate your furthest defenses, and then I shall take what I want from you." He punctuated the words with appropriate action, reaching further into Falan with each stroke.

The shape-changer was panting, his hands clutching at Justin's shoulders as he arched up. "It seems that you will over-run all my citadels, even to the most secret places."

"When I conquer, there is nothing that I do not possess." He was moving faster now and they were both breathing heavily, close to climax. "Yield to me now, and let my forces in."

He thrust hard, withdrew and thrust again, and Falan gasped, "I surrender!" It was enough to break the little control he had, and he felt his seed spilling from him and

making a wet, dark haven, within which he quivered and jerked. As he collapsed onto Falan, he closed his hand round the other man's erection, and felt it thrust in its turn until Falan shuddered with pleasure, and some of that same hot wetness coated his skin. He pulled out and rolled over onto his side, trying to get his breathing under control again.

Falan said breathlessly, "I didn't realize you were going to mount a military campaign." He sounded amused.

"Have you never slept with a soldier before then?" Justin countered. He pulled the slim body against his and rubbed his cheek against the silky hair.

"Ah now, that would be telling." He lay still for a minute, his hands stroking Justin's ribs, then he said, "Let go of me," and sat up. Justin heard him pad softly across the room, then he was back on the bed, washing Justin gently with a warm cloth. When they were both clean again, he lay down and pulled one of the blankets over them. "It would be pleasant to sleep and wake up in the morning and make love again, but I don't suppose that is going to be practical."

"I wish we could do that too, but I need to get back to the fort. Maybe some other night..."

Falan hugged him tightly. "There will be other nights, then?"

"If you're agreeable."

"I am agreeable." He sounded as content as Justin felt and they lay in silence for a while, savoring it. Justin ran his fingers through the other man's hair again and thought about stroking the wolf. "Most people want me to be like the wolf in

bed," Falan said, speaking against his shoulder. "I don't like that. I prefer what we did."

"I admire the wolf very much," Justin replied, "but I don't want him between the sheets with me." It was true. He had not thought of the animal while they were making love; it was some separate part of Falan, which he accepted readily in its own place.

The moon moved round and shone through the window. Justin said reluctantly, "I must go. My escort will be looking for me."

"Your escort will be busy with other things," said Falan, leaning over to kiss him. "Let me see you home."

* * * *

In fact, his escort told him cheerfully "We assumed you were safe, sir, and it seemed best not to enquire where," for which he was thankful. Back at the fort, he resumed his duties, keeping his thoughts of Falan in the back of his mind, like a small fire to warm his hands at when he had the time. He was still trying to impose his own kind of order on the daily routine of the fort, without appearing too dictatorial, and this occupied a great deal of his time and thoughts. He had been worried that he might have problems with discipline, being, as Falan had pointed out, rather young for the post, but so far there had been no problems. It was three days later that he had his first crisis to deal with.

A foot patrol came back with an injured man amongst them. He had fallen whilst scaling some rocks and broken his arm badly, and looking at the injury, Justin knew that it was

beyond his meager skills. The fort did not have its own physician and it was a good three hours ride to the nearest one, most of which would have to be done in the dark, but he decided that was what was needed. He gave the order to his centurion but the man hesitated. "With respect, sir, we usually send for the village healer in these cases. He's as good as the army man, and much closer."

Justin had not even known there was such a person. "Very well," he agreed. "Send someone for him."

He saw the injured man taken to the infirmary and was wondering if anything could be given to him to ease the pain, when there was a swift, light step behind him and a familiar voice asked, "Is this the patient?"

He turned swiftly and Falan gave him a quick smile before turning to the legionary. In a short time the shape-changer had everything organized—poppy syrup for the wounded man, splints and padding, clean cloth to bind the wound, then he requested to be left alone to get on with his work. He kept only Justin's orderly to assist him.

Justin was checking through the supply lists in his quarters some time later when he heard voices outside. He had just lit a lamp and its glow showed him Falan and Gaius engaged in conversation outside in the courtyard. The orderly was saying, "So if you'll go in to the commander, I'll bring you some wine, sir. I daresay he's waiting for you."

Falan looked tired, but pleased to see him. "Will he be all right?" Justin asked anxiously as the healer came in.

"As far as I can tell. It's a nasty break, but it should heal, given time. I'll need to check on him for a few days." He

strolled over to the brazier, touching Justin's shoulder in passing, and held out his hands to it. "Your orderly says you will entertain me with wine."

"If that's what Gaius says, then I expect that's what I shall do," Justin agreed with a smile, pushing the lists away and stretching stiffly. "I didn't know you were the village healer."

"I told you I had some healing powers. It's useful—more useful than my other talents."

They sat by the brazier and drank their wine, while Falan told him the gossip of the village, most of which was completely incomprehensible to him. Later on, Gaius brought them bread and cheese, and then later still, he put his head round the door and said, "Goodnight, sir. I'll see that you're not disturbed."

Justin stared at his retreating back and then frowned at Falan. "He knows. How does he know?"

"He's your orderly. He probably knows everything about you." Falan didn't seem disturbed.

"If you stay, it will be all around the fort by morning."

"Probably. Would that be so bad?" He smiled at Justin but his eyes were wary. "I'm sure they don't expect you to remain celibate, and as members of the Roman army, the concept of two men together can hardly be new to them."

That was true enough. It was just that he wasn't sure he was ready for this.

Falan told him, "I don't have to stay. Maybe it's better if I don't." He sounded unsure for the first time since they'd met, and Justin told himself sternly not to be so weak. After all, the first commander he'd served under had fucked most of the

legion during his term of office, and still managed to put the fear of the gods into them when he gave an order.

"I'd like you to stay," he said firmly. "I'm sure you can fade away discretely in the morning."

Falan's grey eyes met his with a smile in their depths. "They won't know I was ever here."

* * * *

If it was all around the fort, then the men gave no sign of it. Justin made sure that he performed all his duties to the letter and that everyone else did too, and things seemed to go well enough. He settled down into a routine, both as a commander and as a lover. A couple of nights a week, Falan would walk down to the fort and they would play chess before retiring to Justin's bed. One night a week he would walk up to the house on the hill, knowing that Gaius would find him if there was trouble, returning before breakfast. He had the odd day's hunting, and the odd day striding the rough hillside with the wolf at his side, getting to know the country. Once he sent out a mounted party to head off a late band of marauding Northmen, who must have been making a final strike before returning home for the winter. The news of this threat had come to him through Falan, whose wolf friends brought him tidings from all over the surrounding countryside.

The winter days grew shorter and colder, and when the day of the Midwinter feast came, he was glad to think that at last they were moving towards spring. He said as much to

Kentigern as the mead jugs were passed around after another fine meal.

"Yes, it is good to think of the spring," the chieftain agreed. "Not that it has been a hard winter here, commander. We have weathered much worse. The harvest was good and there has been good hunting, so at least we have full bellies. Speaking of hunting, one told me that the governor will be favoring us with his presence before long." He cocked an enquiring eyebrow at Justin.

"I've heard nothing of that," Justin replied, somewhat surprised. "But you know you always get the news before I do, Kentigern. I'm only a poor legionary, after all."

He was secure enough in his position by now to tease the chieftain, but in fact there was a lot of truth in what he had said. Kentigern did seem to be able to get wind of forthcoming events before Justin learned of them through official channels. In this, Falan and his wolves were no use to him. But the chieftain was not smiling at this complaint, instead his voice was grave as he toyed with a crust of bread. "One told me that the governor wishes to hunt wolf and that this place is the place that he has chosen." His eyes slid across Justin, to Falan who was sitting on his other side.

Justin felt a sudden stab of cold fear in his heart. Surely that could not be true? Why would the governor, a man who to his knowledge had never set foot on the Wall, suddenly decide that he needed to go hunting, and furthermore hunting wolf? He said steadily, "No such news has come to us. I can't believe the governor would want to hunt here. Let's hope you're wrong."

Kentigern shrugged but his face was worried. "I hope so too, Commander. It would be most unfortunate. As you know, we do not hunt the wolf here. To do so would bring us great bad luck."

Justin had felt Falan stiffen at the mention of wolf hunting, but now he said easily, "It's probably just a rumor, Kentigern. Don't concern yourself with it."

Later on, when they were safely in bed in the stone house, Justin said angrily, "My Lord Governor need not think that he can storm in here and demand hunting whenever he wants it!"

Falan, who had been wrapped round him like ivy round a tree, now untangled himself enough to give him a brief smile. "That sounds like fighting talk, Commander."

"It is." Justin was surprised at how aggressive he felt. "He never comes near the Wall except when he wants something. Well, he can want away if it's hunting he's after!"

"You don't know if it's true yet," Falan pointed out.

"No, but you know how often Kentigern is right. I swear the man has more magical powers than you have."

That got him a snort of laughter. "There's no point in getting angry until you know it's true. And I'm not sure what you're going to be able to do if it does turn out to be correct. You have to obey orders, don't you?"

"That depends on the order," Justin replied darkly.

"Then try this one. Get ready to mount an assault, Commander..."

He knew that Falan was purposefully distracting him from his concerns and at first he was tempted to be angry about

that too, but it was difficult to resist his lover when he wanted satisfaction. "I thought you wanted to be on top tonight?" he said gruffly, remembering a conversation they had had earlier.

Falan rolled over onto his back and pulled Justin between his thighs. "I wouldn't dream of wasting all that energy," he murmured. "Put it to good use, please. I'm sure I'll appreciate it far more than the governor will."

Justin grumbled a bit, but by now he was used to trusting Falan's judgment in such matters. He tried to control his anger, but part of it was fear for Falan, and the two combined to make him rather more aggressive than he usually was. He pinned Falan to the bed with very little foreplay and began preparing him straight away, ruthlessly seeking out that place within that provoked such pleasure when it was stimulated. He was vaguely aware of the small noises of pleasure that Falan was making, and concentrated on increasing these. That was easily enough done and he knew when his lover was ready for entry because he felt his own cock being slicked with strong, oil-coated fingers, which lightly teased the head as they did so.

With a grunt of frustration, he pushed the hand away, positioned himself and thrust, hard and fast into the warm place below him. Falan let out a hiss, which could have been pain or pleasure, and remarked mildly, "It's not the governor you've got in bed with you, remember."

Justin growled at him, rocking back and forth, his mind on pleasure, and was somewhat startled to feel a strange vibration in the pliant body below him. He glanced down into

Falan's face and saw that he was laughing. "What's so amusing?"

"You. I'm the one who's supposed to behave like a wolf. I'm not used to being growled at by a human being."

"Was I?" He hadn't realized.

"Yes, you were." His fingers stroked Justin's arm. "I don't mind, but just a little more gently, Commander. You're not subduing enemy country here."

Justin heeded the advice, somewhat ashamed that he had needed it, and reached deep into Falan to assuage whatever longings were unacknowledged in his mind. He enjoyed being the dominant one, the one on top, though he yielded this position to Falan if his lover seemed to want it. More often than not the shape-changer was content to let Justin be in charge, and there was something exciting in the mere fact of mastering that strong personality. Tonight he needed that to take away the anger.

Falan arched up, lifting his hips so that Justin sank even further into him, welcoming the invasion, as if by taking the legionary into himself he was completing some pattern that had hitherto been unfinished.

Justin supported himself on his forearms, gripping the blanket to gain greater leverage as he drove into Falan.

It was the shape-changer who anchored them together, one leg twisted round Justin's back and his hands on Justin's back pulling the other man down, onto and into his body.

Justin felt tension and pleasure building together, every part of him seemed over-sensitized, his skin tingled where it rubbed against Falan's. His movements quickened, caressing

the body clinging to his so that a shudder of pleasure rippled through Falan. He felt the shape-changer's muscles tighten around his own and that was enough to send him over the edge into his climax. He came hard, letting out a gasp of satisfaction, but remembering to grasp Falan's erection and hold him until he reached his own completion. When he felt the hot liquid against his belly, he let himself sink down, his lips finding Falan's, stifling the moan of ecstasy against his own.

After a while, Falan pushed him off as usual and cleaned up, then settled himself against Justin's body. "Maybe Kentigern is wrong," he suggested, yawning.

"Maybe." He didn't want to think about it now, so he pushed away the fear into the back of his mind and held his lover close in the darkness.

* * * *

Just after Midwinter a rider arrived with dispatches, and Justin with a sinking heart opened a scroll with the official seal of the governor on it. A few minutes later, he strode from his quarters and told Gaius, "I shall be down in the village. I need to speak to Kentigern. Please tell Centurion Marcus Aquila that he is in charge until I get back."

Kentigern was in the horse pastures with his eldest son, looking at a colt that was being trotted up for him. Dirg, as usual, drew down his brows when he saw the soldier, whom he had never warmed to, but Kentigern gestured to Justin to follow him back into the shelter of the stables and it was there, in the warm, horse-scented air that Justin told him,

"You were right. The governor wishes to hunt wolf, and he wishes to do it here."

Kentigern frowned, reaching out a hand absently to pat the neck of a chestnut mare who pushed up against the partition, hoping for food. "Why here?" he wondered aloud. "We have no reputation for wolf hunting—quite the reverse. As you know, we do not hunt the creatures and, in return, they do not trouble us."

A sudden thought struck Justin. "You don't think that somehow he has heard rumors—" He broke off. "No, how could he? It must just be an awkward coincidence."

"And what is to be done about it?" Kentigern asked, his eyes on the mare.

Justin had already decided on his plan. "I shall reply to the governor and tell him that regretfully there is sickness in the village and it would be most unwise for him to risk his valuable person here at present." He paused, then added, "It is correct, is it not, that you have sickness?"

"A couple of cases of fever," Kentigern replied, still frowning. "Commander, you are taking a great risk by doing this. If the governor finds out that you have deceived him—"

"He will not find out."

"There may be another solution. What if the governor came but there were no wolves? That could probably be arranged..."

"No!" Justin had thought of that already. "My plan is better."

Kentigern shook his head. "At least talk to Falan," he suggested. "I think you are placing yourself in too much peril

for us, Commander..." Two sets of eyes followed the soldier as he walked away, one pair anxious, the other with calculation in their depths.

Falan agreed with the chieftain. Up in the stone house on the hillside, with the rain beating against the roof, he argued, "I can easily take my people and go higher up into the hills, until the danger is over. Let me do that, rather than putting your own position at risk."

"No." Justin stood warming his hands at the fire. "There is no need. Who knows what risks you will run in strange territory. You've told me yourself that wolves protect their own hunting grounds, even from other wolves." He stared at the flames, wishing the governor and all his staff were roasting in them.

He heard Falan's footstep behind him and felt warm arms slide round his waist. He stiffened, determined not to be swayed from his decision. "Is that the only reason why you don't want me to go?" the shape-changer asked softly.

"That and the fact that I should miss you excruciatingly," Justin replied with a sigh.

"Anything else?"

"Isn't that enough?" Sometimes he suspected that Falan could read his mind.

He felt Falan's cheek against his shoulder. "I think you're afraid that I won't come back."

Justin kept quiet. It was bad enough to feel that way without having it dragged out into the open. "There's no need to fear that. As long as you're here, I will be too. I swear it to you."

"You don't have to—" Justin began roughly.

"No, I don't have to," Falan agreed. "I choose to tell you this. Do you believe it?"

Justin swallowed. "Yes."

"Well, then." The hands that were on his waist slid upwards and into the front of his tunic.

"All the same, we will follow my plan. It's better that way."

He expected Falan to argue, but though he was still for a moment, in the end he simply said, "Whatever the commander orders," and turned Justin's thoughts to other things.

* * * *

So the letter was written and sent, and Justin heard no more of wolf hunting, for which he was deeply thankful. The spring was on its way, though the days were still cold and there was often snow on the ground. The fort was draughty, but the house on the hillside was pleasantly warm and difficult to leave in the stark early morning. As the weather improved, Justin began to increase the frequency of the patrols which he sent out towards the sea-coast, for now the Northmen would be readying their ships and thinking of plunder.

One cold, clear morning he was supervising the repair of a piece of the Wall where the rainfall of winter had brought down some of the stones, when the soldier on look-out called down to him "Horsemen approaching, sir."

He narrowed his eyes to gaze out over the open moorland stretching north of them, but the man pointed the other way.

Justin rubbed his hands on his tunic and climbed up the steps onto the watchtower. Sure enough, there were three horsemen riding along the road from Eboracum, the sun glinting on their armor and their horses' bridles. Not dispatch riders, not a supply train, nor scouts from another fort; he began to have a bad feeling about this. "I'd better go down and see who they are," he said.

They were Tribune Tertius Maximus and his escort, looking for a private interview with Justin.

The Tribune came straight to the point. "I am secretary to His Excellence the Governor. I'm here to question you on your reply to his letter requesting your hospitality while he hunted wolf."

"What exactly is the problem?" Justin asked, thinking quickly.

The tribune leaned back in his chair and took a sip of the wine Gaius had brought for him. Justin's cup remained untouched. "You wrote that there was sickness in the village. We have reason to believe that this was not true."

"Who says that it was not?" He wanted very much to know where the Governor got his information from.

"That need not concern you," was the smooth reply. "What I need is to know why you lied. It is not the conduct Rome expects of her officers."

"Have you proof that I lied? I believe that if you consult Kentigern the chieftain, he will tell you that there was indeed sickness at that time."

"Not such sickness as would have endangered the governor in any way." The tribune's hard dark eyes fixed on

Justin's face. "You deceived a government official, with a view to preventing him from coming here. What reason did you have for that? Was there something you did not wish him to discover? Some conduct of your own perhaps of which he would not have approved? What were you covering up?"

This was worse than Justin had expected. "Is this a formal charge of misconduct?" he asked, keeping his voice calm with difficulty.

"Not yet. But it would be much better for you to tell the truth to me now, rather than to face trial, as will be the case if you do not."

Justin took a deep breath. "I prefer to face trial," he stated quietly.

The tribune shrugged. He held out a hand, and one of his escort put into it a rolled sheet of parchment. "This is your summons to court martial, Commander, in seven days time, in Eboracum. I suggest you think well between now and then." He put the parchment down on the desk between them.

"Am I relieved of my command?" He felt cold, despite the warmth of the brazier at his back.

"An officer will be sent out from the city to take over from you. In the meantime, investigation will be made into the administration of this fort and the conduct—"

He broke off at the sound of rapid footsteps outside. Gaius appeared in the doorway, his face grim. "Excuse me interrupting, sir, but the centurion has just received word of a raiding party heading this way."

Justin stood up, feeling strangely relieved. "If you will excuse me," he told the tribune formally, "whilst I am still in command here, I have a duty to deal with such incidents." To Gaius he added, "Ask the centurion to have an assault force ready and tell him I will be with him shortly."

As Gaius disappeared, the tribune put down his wine and stood up. "This is a military matter and as you say, is in your hands—for the moment. I will relieve you of the burden of my presence." He picked up his cloak.

Justin gave him a brief nod, his mind already busy with tactics. "I'll send for reinforcements if I need them. Good day to you, Tribune." He left them to find their own way out.

As he flung on his armor and reached for his sword, a familiar voice from behind him asked, "What was the tribune's business?"

Justin glanced over his shoulder. Falan looked tense and apprehensive, his hair tangled as though he had come here in a great hurry. Justin longed to run his fingers through it and smooth it out, but now was not the time. "I'm to stand trial in seven days," he said shortly. "If I'm still alive, that is. How big is this raiding party? I assume the news came from you?"

"About forty men." He took a step closer. "Come away with me, now, Justin, while there's confusion. We'll find somewhere else to live, where the Romans can't get you."

Justin spared a moment to be surprised, but none to consider his answer. "I'm an officer of the Roman army. I don't turn away from my duty, and my duty is to lead my men against the enemy."

"Even if Rome won't thank you for it when it's done?"

"Even then." He was struggling with a strap that was just out of reach—Gaius should be here to help him, but he was probably busy elsewhere. Falan took the buckle and fastened it, then handed him his sword belt. He looked desperately unhappy and Justin struggled with the urge to pull him into his arms and comfort him. "Falan, you know what I am. I can't run away; it's not in my nature. Whatever happens, I have to go now. When I come back, we'll deal with whatever has to be done." If I come back, but he didn't add that. Falan knew the dangers already.

He was ready to go now, but Falan stood between him and the door, reproaching him without words. He stopped fighting his instincts and stepped forward to embrace his lover, holding him tightly while his lips sought the shape-changer's cold ones. For a moment he thought Falan was going to resist, then he felt him soften and return the embrace. "I knew it was a mistake to sleep with a soldier," Falan murmured. Then, "Take care, my love. Come back safely."

Justin kissed him again, then left him standing there alone and went out to his men.

* * * *

For a long while, all he was conscious of was pain. It was as though someone had thrust a red-hot skewer through his leg and left it there, and no matter what he did, he could not get away from it. Sometimes there was a sweet, heavy taste in his mouth and then he slept, but his dreams were full of fear and confusion. He dreamed that he was fighting the Northmen, that they were in a wooded valley down which the

smoke of a burning village drifted. Gaius had fallen and he was standing over the man, fending off the wild, bearded warriors who poured in a seemingly endless stream over the brow of the hill. Then he was sitting opposite the tribune in his neat parade armor, with his summons to trial lying between them; then he was in the stone house with Falan, but outside the windows were fighting men and wolves, attacking the door. Through it all was the constant pain that wracked his whole body.

Eventually it grew less, and for short intervals he became aware that he was lying in the whitewashed room of the infirmary at the fort, before he drifted back into the dreams again. But the times in the fort began to get longer and eventually he woke to find a tall, thin man with a grizzled beard bending over him and saying, "That's better. Back with us, commander?"

He tried to answer but his throat was too dry, and someone, who proved to be Gaius, lifted him up with an arm round his shoulders and held a wooden cup to his lips so that he could drink. "We won the fight?" he croaked and Gaius nodded, laying him down again.

"We won," Gaius agreed, and Justin drifted off into sleep again.

The next time he awoke, the sun was streaming through the window above his head and Gaius was dozing on a stool beside the bed, with his head propped against the wall. He felt tired and weak, but at least the pain had receded to a manageable level. "Gaius?" he said hoarsely, and tried to sit up.

His orderly woke with a start and hurried to assist him, pushing pillows behind his back. "How do you feel, sir?" he asked anxiously. "Thought we'd lost you for a while. You had the wound fever pretty bad. The physician says you'll do now, though."

"My leg—" Justin began.

"Pretty bad, sir, but you'll keep it. You won't march again though." Then he clapped a hand over his mouth. "There, wasn't supposed to say that."

"I guessed as much," Justin said wearily. "What about the men? How many did we lose?"

"Two, sir. Would have been three, but you stood over me and saved my life. I shan't forget that, Commander, and woe betide any that speaks ill of you." He added, "Incidentally, the chieftain's son is currently looking rather battered ... It wouldn't surprise me if he wasn't the one who shopped you to the governor. Somebody evidently thinks so."

This information roused very little reaction in Justin. The whole wolf-hunting business seemed far away now, in the face of his current problems.

Gaius brought him another drink, and then the soldier asked the question that had been bothering him since he awoke. "Where's Falan? I thought he'd be here with me?"

"They wouldn't let him in, sir." Gaius's mouth hardened. "The physician has looked after you very well, I grant, but I think you'd have done better if they'd let him tend you. Still, that's the army." He glanced at his commanding officer, brows drawn down. "Don't worry, sir, I've got bulletins out to him. He knows as much about you as I do."

Justin leaned back against the pillows with a sigh. He wanted Falan more than anything else, but the gods knew when he'd be able to see him again. Gaius said, "I'd better call the physician to see you, sir. He can answer any questions you have."

The physician was the tall thin man, and he looked Justin over carefully. "It was touch and go," he told Justin frankly. "You'll be lame on that leg, I'm afraid, but you're lucky to keep it. Could have been much worse. Can you eat anything?"

He sent in soup that Justin managed to consume without much enthusiasm, before sleeping again. He woke in the early evening. Marcus, his centurion, was his next visitor. "It was a good fight, commander, but they outnumbered us and it was just as well Kentigern turned up with his warriors when he did. He was very concerned about you." He added, "I don't know how he knew that we were in trouble."

Justin thought he could guess, but said nothing except, "Give him my thanks."

Marcus hesitated, then went on. "I understand any charges against you are to be dropped, sir, in the light of your leadership. There's talk of a good conduct bracelet, and of course, there'll be a comfortable pension, enough to live off."

Of course, Justin thought numbly. They were probably only too glad to get rid of him so easily, without the trouble of a court martial. But where was he to live, and how? What future was there for him if the army didn't want him?

* * * *

It was a week before they let him out of bed, two before he could walk any distance, even with a crutch. He was wild to see Falan, but had to content himself with messages via Gaius, and it was impossible to express what he felt. "Tell him—" Justin broke off in frustration. Tell him what? That I love him? What good will that do?

"Don't worry, sir," said Gaius reassuringly. "He knows."

Justin's replacement, a brisk energetic man with copper colored hair that stood on end, visited him briefly in the course of his own duties. "We'll keep you as long as is necessary," he told Justin, perching on a wooden stool as if he were poised to rush into action at any moment.

It was intended to be reassuring, but it only emphasized to Justin the need to make some sort of decision about his future.

"I'll probably stay in the village for a while," he told the new commander. "They know me there and will give me shelter." Kentigern would not turn him away, he felt sure.

"Good idea," the new commander agreed. "Not too far to go. You can always think again when you're feeling stronger."

So it was that, one morning in late spring, he hobbled down the ramp from the main gates, a bag with his worldly possessions slung over his shoulder, feeling numb and disorientated. He had been assured officially that the charges were dropped, but the army, having healed him and given him a pension, now washed its hands of him and got on with its own work. Crippled ex-soldiers were not its concern.

"Give me that," said a familiar voice, and he felt his bag being lifted off his shoulder. Falan looked tired and thin, but

he was smiling, and his eyes swept over Justin with hungry longing in them.

"Falan," was all he said, but he allowed himself to be half-guided and half-supported up the track to the stone house. It took a long, long time with many rests and on the last stretch Falan, to his intense indignation, picked him up bodily and carried him. He was too weak to protest. The smell of herbs and wood smoke did him more good than any medicine, and when Falan dropped him carefully on the bed and covered him with a blanket, he fell asleep almost immediately.

He woke a few hours later to the comforting feel of a warm body pressed beside his. Reaching out without opening his eyes, he felt silky hair under his fingers and sighed with content. "Are you hungry?" Falan asked, knowing that he was awake.

He shook his head, turned and pulled the shape-changer into his arms. "All I want is what I have here," he muttered.

"Good. Perhaps this time you'll stay then."

He opened his eyes and found himself staring into Falan's grey ones. He looked for blame in them, but did not find it. All the same, he needed to apologize. "I'm sorry, but you know I had to go."

"Yes. But now you have no such duties and I intend to keep you here with me, even if I have to tie you up." He wriggled closer to Justin. "As a matter of fact, that's quite an interesting idea..."

"I think you only want me for my body, and I'm not sure how much use that is to anybody now. Are you certain that you want a cripple with a lame leg?"

"I don't think your leg is going to be of prime importance in what I intend to do."

Falan was already expertly removing their clothing and Justin didn't resist. When the scars on his thigh were exposed, the shape-changer leaned over and pressed his lips to them. "Marks of honor," he said softly. "You know I wouldn't have you any different."

"Be that as it may," Justin reminded, "I can't put much weight on that leg at present, even in these circumstances."

"Leave it to me," Falan told him, crawling on top of him. His hair fell over Justin's face and the soldier ran his fingers through it, enjoying the feel of it against his skin. It seemed half a lifetime since they had been like this. "I'll be careful," Falan promised, stroking a line down Justin's ribs to his belly. His knees were either side of Justin's thighs, supporting his weight, and now his fingers closed around the hard length already pressing up against him.

"That's good," Justin told him softly. "Don't stop."

He wondered what Falan had in mind, but before long the shape-changer reached for the little bottle of oil and ran slick fingers up and down Justin's shaft. Justin gave a moan of pleasure, relishing the touch after so long, but when Falan reached between his own thighs and began to prepare himself he said, "Let me. I'm not a helpless invalid."

"Good." His companion smiled down at him. "You do it so much better."

Falan's body was as familiar to him as his own by now, and he worked his fingers in gently, enjoying the ease with which they were accommodated. But it was only a short while

before Falan removed his hand and crouched over him, positioning him in the slick entrance and then wriggling down onto him. "Just lie there and let me," Falan ordered.

It was an odd sensation, because Justin was used to taking control, but there was something very arousing about having Falan decide the pace and depth for once. It amounted to much the same thing in the end, Justin reflected, since his partner knew exactly how he liked it and at what speed things should progress. Shortly after this, coherent thought of any kind became difficult and all he was conscious of was the tight warmth gripping him and sliding around him, caressing him in ways which caused the tension in his groin to build unbearably, so that he was panting and trying to buck up into Falan to get to climax. This time there was no attempt to prolong the pleasure, because release was what they both needed, the quick and thorough slaking of those appetites that had gone untended for weeks.

He reached up and caressed Falan's nipples roughly, running his thumbs over the taut skin, and then sparing a hand to grasp the erection that was brushing his belly. Falan thrust down on him with a gasp, and he drove up and felt his seed leaving him, in a burst of sensation that left him weak and shaking. He was scarcely conscious of Falan coming into his hand, before lowering carefully onto Justin's good side and rolling over.

"That procedure has distinct possibilities," the shape-changer told him breathlessly. "We'll have to work on it."

Justin, spent and satisfied, was still a prey to doubts. "Are you sure you want to?" he asked diffidently. What could

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by KC Warwick

anyone want from him now? "I'm a soldier. I don't know anything else. I have no other skills."

"Then it's time to learn," Falan told him firmly. "Read Pliny on gardening and you can look after my herb garden. Learn to cook. Write letters for people. Anything, if only you stay here with me."

"Suppose the governor comes wolf-hunting?"

"Then we'll move out of his way for a while. I wish you wouldn't argue with me."

"And you think I'll settle down to this gardening and letter-writing and whatever else it was?" He had no doubt that he would, if it made Falan happy. His world appeared to have contracted to the desire to do that.

"Yes," was the firm reply. "Because in between doing those things, you can roam the hills with the wolf-pack, which should be risky enough for anyone." He settled into the crook of Justin's arm. "It will be like taming the mountain mist, but even mist has to settle somewhere."

Justin put a hand under Falan's chin and turned his face so that they could kiss.

He knew that Falan understood him without words, so he didn't bother with them. In any case, within a few minutes, he was asleep.

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