



In the Company of Men:
Silent Lodge

Lynn Lorenz



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Dedication

To all my readers who asked for more of my medieval men; to my husband, Ian, who continues to encourage me to reach all my writing goals; to my editor, Georgia, and her unfailing faith in me; and to Sid, my beta reader, for helping to make this a better book.

Chapter One

“You should speak to Peter.” Logan's quiet voice roused Drake from his thoughts. He stared down the road from Marden Castle to the lone figure walking toward them.

Peter. His second in command, friend, and onetime lover.

Head down, steps slow and measured, as if he'd walked that path to and from so many times before, like an old mare tethered to a grindstone, plodding a tight circle to nowhere.

Drake sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “Must I?”

“Aye. This has gone on too long. I know of what I speak, Drake. He's caught in a spider's web of pain with no way to break free.”

“So I must break him free?” Drake winced. He didn't want to go into this with Peter. The man had been through so much over the last six months; to pile even more on top of it would surely break him.

“He's lost something precious.” Logan frowned, perhaps remembering his near loss of the two most beloved things in the world—his son, Tomas, and his lover, Drake. Drake couldn't forget his own loss, his first lover Ansel, who'd died almost three years before, and the state he'd been in before coming to Marden and finding a home, family, and Logan.

“I know.” He did; he just didn't have any ideas about what to do for Peter. How to breach the walls the man had thrown up around him or even whether he should. But he owed Peter much and he should do what he could.

Peter advanced like a puppet whose strings were being pulled and twisted, but without life to his step or vigor in his movements.

"I fear to change his duties, Logan. Peter insists he is capable of retaining his rank, and he is. It's just..." Drake didn't know how to describe it. "He's just not there."

"No, he's not." Logan pointed down the road to the village in the distance. The spire of the church rose above the smaller buildings and cottages, marking the small graveyard. "He's trapped there, beside his wife and his child, buried under pain, sorrow, and guilt."

"There was nothing he could do; surely he knows that." Drake pounded his fist on the stone wall.

"And I knew it also when my wife died of the fever. Still that didn't stop the thoughts, questions, and doubts from circling in my mind. And you? Could you have saved Ansel on the battlefield that day?" Logan put his hand on Drake's shoulder. "Peter needs our help if he is to survive this."

Drake sighed and nodded. "Peter is a good man and a fine soldier." He closed his eyes and thought. If Peter needed to break free, perhaps he also needed to fly far away to escape the path, the spire, and the graves. "I'll send him on a mission." He nodded, his mind made up.

Logan turned to him, resting his chin on his fist as he leaned his elbow on the wall. "Well thought of, Master Drake. A mission might take his mind from all this sorrow."

"But where and what?"

Logan smiled, then straightened. "I have just the thing!" He slapped the stones with his hands. "Come, let's away. I must write a letter for Peter. Have him brought to me in one hour's time, Drake."

Drake nodded. "I'll do so, Your Grace."

Standing side by side, Logan nudged Drake's leg with his own in a silent signal. Drake smiled, knowing in that glancing touch his lover had said much, yet no one would know what had passed between the men.

Logan trotted down the steps from the battlement to the courtyard below, crossed it to the keep, and disappeared inside.

Drake turned back, watching Peter reach the gates and pass through them. As he appeared on the other side, Drake called out, "Peter!"

Peter halted, raised his head up, and shielded his eyes from the sun's glare. "Aye?"

"Logan commands you to attend him. One hour. In his rooms," Drake shouted.

Peter frowned, then saluted, and hurried off toward the barracks.

Drake strode around the battlement walk as he inspected the men on duty until the time arrived to meet with Peter and Logan.

* * *

Peter checked his tunic and sword a final time as he stood outside his duke's door. He had no idea why he'd been summoned. Logan usually spoke to him down in the hall when he, Logan, and Drake discussed matters of the guard.

With a tinge of regret, Peter thought of the last time he'd entered Drake's room and found Logan waiting, stretched on the chair, stroking himself. A shudder ran through Peter, just skirting his cock. Seemed not even the thought of that night, the night he'd succumbed to Logan and Drake, the night they'd shown him the pleasures of love between men, could bring him hard.

His rod was a dead thing, and he had no hopes of it returning to life.

He knocked.

The door swung open and he stepped inside.

Drake shut the door behind him and gave a small nod of recognition. Logan sat behind his desk, a parchment in front of him, quill in hand. He finished writing, blotted it, and folded it.

"Peter. Good. You're here. Sit." He pointed to one of the chairs in front of his desk. Peter took it, and Drake sat next to him.

“How may I serve you, Your Grace?” A trace of worry licked at him, but he pushed it aside. Being brought before the duke didn't happen often, and an uncertain feeling passed over him.

“I have a mission for you, Peter.” Logan sat back, watching him, searching for something. Peter had no idea what he looked for but hoped he wouldn't be found lacking. He'd lacked so much of late and had hoped evidence of his weakness had been hidden.

“I'm at your command.” Peter gave him the best firm nod he could, presenting a facade of confidence and surety to his duke and to his commander, Drake.

“I have heard that Duke Weathers moves toward our far northern district. Seems we've blocked his access to Marden with our outposts along the river and now he seeks a new entrance.”

Peter stiffened at the mention of Bors Weathers's name. The bastard had been turned away often from their borders but couldn't seem to shake the need to take Marden lands. He glanced at Drake. “I had not heard.”

“We have only just heard ourselves. And it may be nothing more than hearsay.” Drake waved a hand as if swatting a fly. “But even rumor must be attended when it comes to that bastard.”

“Aye.” Peter nodded and looked back at his duke.

“I want you to go to Marden Lodge. It's in the wild wood in the north. Scout around and if you find any sign of him, report back to me.”

“Of course.”

“Drake and I have been discussing placing an outpost there. The lodge is small but would make an excellent post. And if we go ahead with the plans, we can build a barracks like the ones along the river to hold a few men.”

“And the stable, Your Grace,” Drake added.

Logan smiled and nodded. “Right. We'd also need to stable horses along the way to cover the distance, as we did for the others.”

“Exactly.” Drake grinned.

“So, I go to scout for Weathers's men. For how long?” Peter knew he could travel all that way, find nothing, and leave, and their enemy could appear the next day.

“I want you to travel in disguise. No one should know your true mission. Do not wear your colors, and have your horse outfitted in plain livery.” Logan leaned forward. “This may take time, Peter. I want to know the truth of it, and it could take months.”

“Months?” Peter sat straight up. “But won't I be needed here?”

“I've been hard pressed to think of another of my men who could do this mission, Peter.” Drake shrugged. “We'll have to make do without you.” He leaned back and crossed his legs, placing his ankle over his knee. “Have you a suggestion to replace you?”

Peter thought about the men under him. His first choice would be Seamus, but he was untried in command.

“Seamus.”

“He's young.” Drake narrowed his eyes and frowned.

“No younger than I when I first tried my hand at command.” Peter, at thirty, wasn't young, but he certainly didn't have the age or experience of Drake. Seamus neared twenty and five. Old enough.

“True.” Drake chuckled. “Good, then. You'll tell Seamus he's in training, but not why you're leaving. Understand?”

“No one must know.” Logan tapped his quill on his desk. He dropped it and picked up the folded letter. “Here. Read this. You must give it to the caretaker of Marden Lodge. His name is Arvel, I believe. He lives there and tends the place. Don't tell him either, Peter.”

“As you wish, Your Grace.” Peter took the letter, opened it, and read. Only a few sentences spread across the parchment, giving Peter charge of the lodge, ending

with the duke's flourish and seal. He carefully refolded it and stuck it under his shirt for safekeeping.

"Take this purse. It holds more than enough coin for your expenses." Logan handed it to him, and he put it with the letter.

"You leave as soon as you're packed and a horse can be saddled," Drake ordered. He and Logan stood, almost as one.

"Aye, sir." Peter nodded, got to his feet, and waited to be dismissed.

Logan came around the desk, pulled Peter to his chest, and wrapped his arms around him. "Take care, Peter. You will be missed." Then his duke placed a tender kiss on Peter's cheek and stood back. Were those tears in his eyes?

"Your Grace!" Peter blinked. "I won't be gone for long." He had no thought of what words he could say or why Logan's face held so much sadness.

Drake clapped Peter on his back. "We'll all miss you, second." Then he laughed, grabbed Peter by the hair, and yanked him forward, into a hard kiss.

Stunned, Peter fell into Drake's embrace. Then as fast as it had happened, Drake released him and pushed him away.

Peter turned, his mind spinning, and strode to the door. He opened it, stepped out, and shut it behind him.

He touched the cheek where his duke had kissed him and wiped the back of his hand over his lips. Two of the most handsome men he'd ever seen had just kissed him. He should feel something, shouldn't he? Disgust? Anger? Arousal?

But there was nothing.

Peter sighed and made for the barracks. He had much to do before he could leave—pack his saddlebags, find some food for now and for the journey, and have his horse readied.

He may not be the man he once had been, but he swore he wouldn't fail his duke in this mission. No matter how long it took, he'd find the truth about Weathers.

* * *

Logan and Drake stared at each other as the door shut behind Peter. Logan exhaled and shrugged.

"I never knew your ability to think on your feet would serve us so well, Your Grace." Drake grinned. "Weathers? A stroke of brilliance."

Logan gave him a small smile. "It came to me on the castle's wall. And your addition of the stables rang true."

"I've never heard you speak of the lodge."

"My father's old hunting lodge? We'd go every season when he lived. I haven't been there in long years."

Drake walked to the window and stared out. "It's not a bad plan at all. I think we should go through with it, whatever Peter finds."

"Do you?"

"Aye. It might take Weathers longer to think of it than it took us, but think of it he will."

Logan came to his side and placed a hand on Drake's arm. "Do you think we sent Peter into trouble?"

"Perhaps. But Peter is a good soldier, quick on his feet, and well skilled with his sword. If Weathers is making such advances, Peter will find out and bring word to us."

Logan exhaled. "And if he doesn't, I have a feeling some time at Marden Lodge may be what he needs." A faint upturn to his lips gave away his thoughts.

"What about Marden Lodge would be so interesting?" Drake's eyebrow rose.

"Its caretaker." Logan turned away and strode to the bed.

Drake turned and watched his lover loosen the strings of his breeches.

"We have some time before the noon meal, my love. Come, declare your love and allegiance to me." Logan's lips turned up on one side as his eyelids half lowered.

Drake's cock stirred, as it always did, when Logan gave him that look.

“On my knees?”

“Of course. Where else should such a declaration be given?”

Drake strode to his lover, dropped to his knees, and batted Logan's hands away.

“This will be quick,” he warned as he pulled Logan's rod out, angling it toward his mouth.

Logan wrapped his hands in Drake's hair. “Fast and hard, Lord Drake.” Logan knew how Drake disliked being called by his former title.

“For that slight, I may take longer, Duke Marden.” Drake canted his tone into a threat.

“Oh God, I hope so.” Logan groaned as Drake took his cock deep into his mouth and sucked hard.

Drake closed his eyes, forgot about Peter, and thought of how he would fuck Logan later that night, after their sons had gone to bed. With one hand, he untied his own strings, pulled out his prick, and stroked it.

Right now he'd settle for his own hand.

Tonight, he'd press Logan's sweet mouth into service.

Chapter Two

Peter dismounted, his feet hitting the ground. Just as he had every day for the last six months, he put one foot in front of the other and weaved his way through the small graveyard next to the village church to where his wife and unborn child lay buried.

A small stone cross marked the spot.

He knelt next to it, touched his fingers to his lips and then to the cold stone.

"I have to go away for a while, Mary. Logan's sent me on a mission. It's very important and secret." He paused. "To the northern part of his lands. I'm not supposed to talk about it, but I'm sure I can tell you."

No tears filled his eyes. He'd cried them all out months ago and nothing was left. Not tears, not anger, not even sadness. Inside, he was dead, just like them. And it was only fair, wasn't it? It had been his fault. If he hadn't married her, given her a child, done something, anything, to help her as she lay in the birthing bed struggling for hours to have his baby until she'd bled to death, she would still live.

He'd gladly return every moment of his time with her to bring her back.

Until yesterday, all he had was his position as second in command, and this emptiness. Today, he had a mission. Logan, his duke, had called on him, and he wouldn't fail, not like he'd failed his wife and child.

He didn't even know if it had been a son or daughter.

"I have to go now. It's a long ride. Two days at least, if I hurry. Logan wants me there as soon as I can manage, but I had to stop and tell you where I'd be, so you wouldn't miss me."

He stood. "I'll miss you." He touched the stone again and turned away.

Gathering the reins of his mare, he swung into the saddle and settled with a sigh.

He kicked the sides of the animal, and they moved on, down the hard-packed street through the village, past the shops, to the great wide carriage road leading north.

* * *

Peter pulled his mare to a halt where the road forked, and checked his map. The last village he passed should have been the one. The lane to the lodge should be just ahead on the left.

He rolled up the sheepskin drawing and tucked it into the saddlebag behind him. His mare shifted and snorted, letting him know she was tired. He'd pushed her hard the day before in hopes of arriving sooner, but this morning he'd taken it easy, fearing she'd lame herself.

He stroked her neck under her mane. "Not long, girl."

The fork to the left disappeared around a copse of trees, the one on the right headed straight, through flat fields.

From a distance, a shout echoed. He snapped his head up, turning so he could hear the direction. For a long moment, silence. Then another shout, this time louder.

The road ahead was empty for miles. It had to come from the left, toward the lodge.

He kicked his heels into the mare and urged her down the narrow lane. She broke into a trot, and they rounded the curve.

Ahead, a group of young men had another man surrounded.

Thieves? Villains?

They looked clean enough, but the hatred and disgust on their faces couldn't hide their intent. All of them were large young men, but the man they'd turned

their anger on was only half their size in height and weight. Truly an unfair fight if he'd ever seen one.

One of the men stepped out of the circle and kicked the legs out from under the man. He fell onto his back, his hands going up to protect his face. His attacker moved in, fists clenched, as the others goaded him on with shouts and curses.

Peter shouted, "Ho! What's this?" and jerked his steed to a stop. He leaped off and strode forward as he pulled his sword.

"None of your business, now, is it?" one of the men called over his shoulder. The others shifted to one side, opening the circle and exposing the man on the ground.

"Get away from him!" Peter advanced. "Is this fair? Six men against one?"

Their faces flashed shame, except for the one still standing over the downed man. His look of hatred and anger hadn't changed.

"You! Step away from him." Peter stepped into the middle of the group.

The man blocked his way, red faced and frowning. "Who are you?" he barked. "This is none of your affair."

"Who I am is none of your affair, but I won't allow such villainy."

At the flourish of Peter's sword, the man backed down.

"Now, get along with you. Go on. I don't know what this man has done, nor do I care. If it's a matter for your village elders, let's bring him before them. If not, then be on your way."

The crowd moved farther away, leaving a gap between the attacker and themselves. Clearly, they were only following their leader. The man looked from them to Peter as if deciding his next course of action.

He pointed at the man on the ground. "Next time I catch you, no one will be around to save you." He spat at the man, then strode to his companions.

They circled around him, absorbing him in their midst, and then without another look at Peter they fled.

“Cowards,” Peter mumbled and returned his sword to its sheath.

He turned to the man on the ground and extended his hand. The young man lay curled in the dirt, gulping air, wheezing, arms wrapped around his head, eyes squeezed shut.

Long red hair, tangled with leaves and sticks, fell around his face, blocking it from Peter's view.

“Here now. It's all right. I won't hurt you. The others are gone.” Peter frowned.

The man didn't move. Perhaps they'd hurt him after all.

Peter squatted next to him and touched his shoulder.

The man lashed out with his hand, striking blindly at the air, and grunted as if he were a wild animal.

“Hold, man! Careful. I'm here to help.” Peter caught his hand and pulled it down. The other came up, still fighting.

Could the man not understand his language?

“You're safe!” Peter yelled. He grabbed the arm still slung over the man's face and held it down.

The fool kicked out with his legs, catching Peter in the knee.

“Ow!” Peter fell back on his ass. “What did you do that for?” Now the man, eyes clamped shut, fought him. His body bucked and legs kicked as he struggled against Peter's hold.

Peter groaned. He got back on his knees, then threw one leg over the man and sat, pinning the younger and slighter man under him. He pushed both arms down on either side of the man's head and leaned forward.

Chest heaving, the man opened his eyes and looked up into Peter's. Eyes the color of heather met his. Full pink lips, skin the color of fresh milk, and a light sprinkling of freckles danced across his nose.

Beautiful.

Peter and the young man gasped at the same time.

Then the man went limp. Surrendering.

Caught in his stare, Peter couldn't look away. Couldn't breathe. Deep inside his chest, his heart thudded. Just once.

"I won't hurt you."

A pink tongue licked pinker lips. He blew a great breath, and strands of red hair flew up and away from his face.

He nodded.

"I'm going to get off now. Are you well?"

Another nod.

Peter shifted, got to his feet, and offered his hand.

The man took it, and Peter pulled him to his feet. He came up to Peter's shoulder. Peter fought the urge to push the man's hair from his face and pick the leaves from it.

Strange.

"What's your name?" He softened his tone.

Arvel tilted his head, inspecting the man's face with the intensity of a hawk. It warmed him all over to look at this man, just like his Heart did.

But was he a friend? Would he be safe?

Something about the man made Arvel trust him.

He pushed the hair out of his face, then squatted and wrote his name in the dirt with his finger, as he'd been taught long ago.

"Arvel? Is that your name?" Something about that name sounded familiar.

The man nodded and gave him a shy smile.

"I'm Peter." He pointed to his chest and squatted down to write his name just as the younger man had, in the dirt of the road.

Arvel watched him, then nodded.

“Are you hurt?”

Arvel got to his feet and brushed off his breeches and tunic. He extended his hand toward Peter, those lavender eyes glancing up and down Peter's body.

Peter took the offered hand in his. Small, delicate. If he didn't know this was a man, he'd have sworn the hand belonged to a woman. Everything about Arvel spoke of gentleness, delicacy, and grace.

But he still hadn't said a word, just stared hard at Peter as if absorbing every word he'd spoken.

“Well. Can I escort you to your home in case the others come back?” Peter moved away and gathered his horse's reins as she grazed along the side of the lane.

Arvel cocked his head and twisted his lips to the side.

Too many words at once and his lips moved too fast.

Arvel waited for the man to speak again.

Peter shrugged. It seemed the young man didn't want his help. He climbed into the saddle as his mare grunted and tossed her head at the tightening of her bit. He gave Arvel a wave and turned the horse back to the lane. He needed to find the lodge before dark fell.

The young man ran forward and caught his boot. Peter looked down into Arvel's upturned face, and his memory snapped into place. *The caretaker of Marden Lodge?*

Arvel mouthed his thanks as his hand clenched tightly on to Peter's leg, pulling at him, willing him not to go. To stay.

He glanced down the road. The others might come back again to hurt him. They rarely gave up. He should never have left the safety of the lodge, his home, not even for the supplies he'd needed.

Not without someone to protect him.

Like this man.

“What is it? Can't you speak?”

He shook his head and touched his fingers to his mouth, then to his ear and shook his head.

“You can't speak or hear?” Peter's eyes widened; then anger flooded him. Those bastards had not only attacked a man alone, unarmed, and outnumbered, they'd attacked someone deaf and mute. Had they no honor?

He took out his map, opened it, and showed it to Arvel, pointing to Marden Lodge. “Are you the caretaker of Marden Lodge? Do you know the way?”

Arvel opened his mouth in what should have been a laugh, and nodded. He released his hold on Peter's boot and motioned with his hand to wait. Then he ran back and snatched up a sack, its contents spilled and strewn about the ground. He gathered them up, stuffed them back into the cloth carryall, and trotted ahead, down the lane, waving over his shoulder for Peter to follow.

Peter shoved the map away and urged his horse forward.

Chapter Three

Arvel stopped and looked back at Peter. He pointed into the dense woods where the faintest lane showed beneath the thick lower branches of the oaks. Peter dismounted. There was no way he'd be able to ride without being scratched raw by them.

If Logan had expected him to find this path and the lodge, he must not have been here for long years. It looked completely unused, and if Peter hadn't been shown its location, he never would have found it. Someone had to be watching out for him and his mission.

Peter glanced to the heavens, now darkening with storm clouds. He reached inside his tunic and fingered the soft linen handkerchief Mary had embroidered with his name the first month they'd been married. Perhaps she had put him on the path to the lodge.

His guide ducked, stepped into the thick growth, and disappeared.

Guiding his mare, Peter pushed through and followed. As he lifted branches to make way for the horse, he lost sight of his guide. Ahead, the path widened and the branches rose high enough for him to ride under, if he wished.

He stayed on his feet, hoping it wouldn't be far.

The woods thinned, but the path never widened. Arvel continued, with only an occasional glance over his shoulder at Peter. Where did he think Peter would go? So far, they hadn't passed a single place where he could have turned his horse.

Overhead, through the canopy of the trees, the skies darkened. The wind rose, sure sign the rain would start before long. Peter looked toward Arvel, who'd moved farther ahead, picking up his pace as if he too were concerned about the storm.

Peter moved faster. The woods opened around him. Through the trunks of the trees, he spotted deer. They froze, tails flicking, then bounded away deeper into the wood.

A hunting lodge indeed. The deer at least were plentiful, so he wouldn't go hungry. He just hoped the young caretaker had taken care of the lodge and he wouldn't find it filled with vermin and forest creatures, or leaking rain, damp, and cold.

Arvel stepped into a glade, a natural opening in the forest, and halted. Peter came up behind him and the horse bumped into him, pushing him into his guide. Arvel reached back and caught Peter's hip, steadying himself and Peter but not moving forward.

Peter felt the steady rise and fall of Arvel's breathing against his chest. The man's head stood just under Peter's nose and he inhaled. A sweet, earthy odor rose from the long red tresses. Leaves stuck out at various places, and he reached up and plucked one free.

Arvel spun around, his hand clapped to his head, brows furrowed.

"Pardon, Arvel." Peter held the leaf up to show Arvel.

Arvel took the golden leaf from him, glancing up into Peter's face. Their gazes met, locked, and Peter's mouth went very, very dry.

His gaze dropped to that expressive mouth, lingered on full pink lips, and then he tore it from Arvel and looked over his head.

The lodge.

It stood on the other side of the glade, tucked into the woods. The trees seemed to protect it, hold it in thick, bark-covered sheltering arms. Built from thick stones and covered in a thatch roof, the building looked well tended.

"Marden Lodge?"

Arvel, still staring up at him, nodded. Peter felt his exhale. Then Arvel turned and strode across the glen to the door of the dwelling.

Peter waited no more than a second, then followed.

Arvel turned to the side and pointed. A small stable had been built adjacent to the lodge, and in front of it an iron stake rose from the ground to tether Peter's horse. Then he moved to the door and waited.

"Let me tend my mount, and I'll join you inside."

Arvel nodded, smiled, lifted the latch, and stepped inside, closing the door behind him. As he leaned against it, his heart beat as fast as a small bird's wings.

Had he done wrong to bring him here? The man had come to his home for a reason. But why? How long before his Heart returned?

Well, it was done. He was here. Arvel could start a fire now.

He pushed off the door, went to the hearth, and knelt, selecting four good, dry logs. He prepared the kindling, struck the spark, and watched it blaze.

Peter exhaled. He led his mount to the stable and into one of two stalls, their floors laid with fresh straw. A bag of oats sat outside the stall and a bucket of water sat in the corner as if waiting for him to arrive.

Had Logan sent word ahead? Peter shrugged, not caring, just thankful the lodge had been well prepared. Working swiftly, he removed the saddle, wiped down the mare, and gave her a scoop of oats. He left her munching, content, and after hanging up her bridle he closed the stable door and left, his saddlebags over his shoulder.

Once at the door to the lodge, he hesitated, hand raised, then knocked.

No one answered.

Peter frowned. Arvel knew he would be coming inside. Why not answer?

He groaned, remembering the man's deafness. He couldn't hear the knocking, and wouldn't no matter how hard or long he beat on the door.

He opened the door and stepped inside.

Arvel knelt at the hearth, putting the last log on the fire. Peter moved farther into the great room, surveying it. The roof soared overhead, great logs forming its bones, the thatch thick and sturdy looking. On one side, a table and benches to eat at; on the other, a large bed, covered in quilts and furs. In front of the hearth, as if waiting for Peter to sit, stood two large stuffed chairs.

He dropped his bags on the table with a thud. Arvel gave the fire a last poke, then stood, put away the iron, and brushed off his hands. He turned and spotted Peter.

Arvel smiled, shy yet wary.

"I won't hurt you." Peter held out his hands, away from his sword or blade.

Arvel nodded and pointed to a chair. Peter sat and stuck his legs out toward the fire. Warmth crept closer, filling the room and Peter with ease. Arvel went to the table and began unpacking Peter's saddlebags. He placed the clothes in a pile, then carried them to a small trunk next to the bed, opened it, and put them inside.

Then he returned and sorted out the food that Peter had brought, tucking each item into a spot on the shelves above a pantry press that stood against the wall. Once that was done, he took a knife from a drawer and rummaged in a sack, bringing out several turnips and carrots.

He began what Peter hoped would be their dinner. Now that he'd sat, his belly let him know its need. He frowned and rubbed it.

"What are you preparing?"

Arvel continued working, chopping up the vegetables into thick pieces and adding them to an iron pot.

Peter sighed. Arvel couldn't hear him. Peter rubbed his eyes and sank back into the soft chair. He'd just close his eyes for a time, just to rest, that's all.

* * *

Peter woke to the clanging of a wooden spoon against a pot. Arvel bent over the pot, stirring, then brought the spoon to his lips for a taste. He slurped the gravy,

then tapped the spoon again, put the lid on, and pushed the metal arm holding the pot back over the fire.

Peter prayed the meal was near done; his belly ached sorely. His last meal had been quite early in the morn, and he'd eaten only some cheese and bread. Not much to hold a man his size.

Arvel ignored him, going about his work, with only a quick glance in his direction and a short nod of his head in greeting.

Peter wished Arvel could speak. He'd counted on learning much from the caretaker about the possibility of Duke Weathers's men being seen in the area. So much for that idea.

Arvel might know, but how would they ever be able to exchange information?

It seemed quite hopeless. He'd have to speak with the local villagers and forget asking Arvel about Weathers.

Damn.

Peter growled. Impatient to get started on his mission, he'd have to take his ease until morning, when he could go to the village. He'd start at the church, speak to the priest, and see where that might lead him.

Arvel placed chargers on the table, then a jug of water, and went to the hearth. Using a thick cloth, he pulled the pot off the fire and removed it. The little caretaker motioned to the sideboard and a washbowl and ewer. Peter stood, went to it, and poured some water. He washed the road's dirt from his face and hands, then dried them with a cloth left neatly folded next to the bowl.

Peter sat, pulling a wooden charger in front of him. Arvel removed the lid, and the aroma of the stew filled the room.

"It smells wonderful!" Peter grinned, inhaling deeply.

Arvel cocked his head to the side, then grinned back. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, signaling he too appreciated the smells.

Peter laughed.

Arvel's mouth opened, miming a silent laugh. His eyes twinkled, the odd color capturing Peter's attention.

"You think it smells good also?"

Arvel nodded and ladled stew onto Peter's plate, then poured water into a pewter goblet and sat opposite Peter. Each man selected a piece and began eating. Peter dabbed some bread into the gravy and took a bite. It tasted as good as it smelled.

They ate in silence, broken only by the scraping of their spoons and their chewing. Peter longed to speak with Arvel, to ask about Weathers's men, to ask if Logan had him prepare the lodge, but mostly to hear the sound of the man's voice.

This was very odd since he'd gone these last six months wishing to hear only Mary's voice call to him. Tell him of her day, ask him about his day's duties, and tell him of the gossip in the castle.

When they had finished their meal, Arvel cleaned the plates away, rinsed them in a bucket of water, and then dried them off with a cloth. Peter sat at the table, watching. Arvel moved gracefully, his motions smooth, silent. A spoon dropped to the floor and Arvel bent over to pick it up, and Peter could barely pull his eyes from the firm globes presented to him beneath those breeches.

He swallowed and looked away, but his eyes fell on the bed.

It was a large bed, built to hold more than one.

He scanned the room again. Just the one bed. Well, he'd brought his bedroll, and the fire looked warm enough. If he wanted, he could sleep in one of the chairs, should the floor prove too hard.

Peter stood, went to his saddlebags, and pulled out his blanket. He took it over to the hearth, dropped it onto one of the chairs, and dragged the other chair out of the way.

Arvel stared at him, head cocked. When Peter unrolled the blanket, snapped it open, and let it float to the floor, Arvel rushed over to him, shaking his head.

Arvel snatched up the blanket and pointed to the bed. The guest must always take the bed. He replaced the chair and turned back to Peter, motioning him to sit.

He stomped his foot. This was his work, what the duke paid him to do, to care for the lodge, fix the meals, and tend the guests.

And he did it well. The duke had told him so the last time he'd visited, had been pleased to find the old lodge so well kept. And Gareth told him often he'd never been tended so well. Or as well fed.

And so would Peter, if he'd just let Arvel do his work.

Peter sat. After folding the blanket, Arvel dropped to his knees and patted his thigh for Peter's boot. Peter placed his boot on Arvel, and the caretaker pulled it off. Peter switched feet, and the other was removed.

Arvel looked up into Peter's face, smiling, his hand wrapped around Peter's ankle. Peter held his breath as he gazed at the beautiful younger man. Arvel blushed. Then he rubbed Peter's leg, massaging away the tightness.

When Peter didn't protest, Arvel used both hands to work the muscles. Heaven. How long had it been since he'd felt such a touch? The pressure increased, moving up his leg. Arvel's hands worked the muscles around his knees.

Peter let his head fall back, relaxing into the kneading of muscles he hadn't realized were sore until touched. The warmth of the fire, the steady rubbing, his full belly, all added to the feeling of contentment.

A feeling he hadn't felt in long months. Since before...

His eyes shot open, and he pushed to his feet. Startled, Arvel fell back to the floor and gaped up at him.

"I meant no harm." Peter held out his hands to the man. "It's just...just..." He couldn't get the words out; they burned in his throat, threatening to choke him.

Arvel nodded, pushed back to sitting, and pointed to the bed.

Aye, that's what he needed, to climb into bed. But all these months and he'd chased sleep, rarely catching it and then regretting that he had. Because with sleep came the dreams.

But Arvel had offered, after all. Peter moved to the bed and drew back the quilts. The mattress looked thick and soft, the quilts no doubt warm.

He sat on the edge of the bed and undressed, ignoring Arvel's presence but aware that the man had moved to a chair and curled up in it.

Did he mean to spend the night there? Peter knew the man didn't sleep in the chair when he was alone. This bed was Arvel's. By all rights, the man should lie in his own bed, shouldn't he?

Where did the caretaker rank next to the second in command on a secret mission? About the same, Peter wagered. So, he could not demand the right to the bed, but he could accept the generous offer.

Arvel, arms wrapped around his drawn up knees, watched Peter. He wasn't very like his Heart, but near enough. Strong in body and with kind eyes. Pleasing to gaze upon.

He wished to join him in the bed. But perhaps Peter didn't wish it. Not many men did; he wasn't a fool. He knew the dangers of trying with the wrong man.

He missed his Heart. Missed his warm, hard body and his soft, gentle touch.

Peter's body looked warm also. Would his touch be as gentle? Would his kiss be as sweet?

Perhaps tomorrow night.

Arvel sighed and closed his eyes to sleep.

Peter removed his tunic, baring his chest, but still refusing to look up. His fingers shook as he stood and untied the laces of his leather riding breeches. Why? He'd undressed before countless soldiers in the barracks and in the field. There,

bodies paraded past in various stages of undress, and there had never been even the slightest quiver. After taking a deep breath, he pushed them down and stepped out of them, naked except for his woolen trews.

He slipped under the quilts and lay back, resting his head on a large pillow filled with feathers. It cradled his head, comfortable and lulling. His eyes drooped at his sudden weariness.

He ran his hand over the top quilt. Such a fine bed and linens for a caretaker. He thought back to the last time Logan had been here and couldn't recall either him or Drake traveling to the lodge.

Arvel had cared for the place well. He'd mention it in his first report to Drake.

Peter sighed, melting into the bed. Warm. Content.

He'd forgotten something. Arvel.

Pushing up on his elbow, he stared at the younger man curled in the chair, eyes closed.

"Arvel?"

No answer. What had he expected? The fellow was deaf and mute. Gods, he shouldn't force the man out of his own bed, should he? Peter extended his hand out to the other side of the bed. There was room enough, and he was no better ranked man than the caretaker. Both were in the duke's employ, both his sworn men.

With a sigh, he tossed back the quilts and got out of bed. He padded over to Arvel and squatted down, touching him on the shoulder.

Arvel woke, blinked, and smiled. His brow furrowed in question.

"Come to bed." Peter motioned at it and stood.

Arvel unwound, his gaze dancing between Peter and the bed, searching to see something. Peter smiled.

"No reason you can't sleep in your own bed, is there?" He held out his hand, an invitation to join him. Arvel's gaze dropped to it, then flicked back up to Peter's face.

Peter's mouth went dry as Arvel reached out and slid his hand, soft and small and gentle, into Peter's. Peter pulled him up, and they walked to the bed, Arvel trailing behind, still clinging to Peter's hand.

At the bed, Peter released him and Arvel went around to the other side of the bed.

Peter climbed into the side of the bed nearest the door and pulled the covers over himself.

Arvel sat on the edge of the bed with his back to Peter. He toed off his boots and the *thud* as they dropped to the floor sounded distant. Peter's exhaustion overtook him and his eyes slitted, fighting to stay open. He watched Arvel pull his tunic off over his head and shake those long tresses of red hair loose. Golden highlights danced on them from the fire's glow, deep reds, soft oranges, amber, and fire, like the leaves of a tree in autumn's full beauty.

The young man slipped out of his breeches and under the covers. He rolled over to face Peter and smiled. Gave him a nod of thanks.

Peter nodded back.

Under half lids, Arvel gazed at him. Licked his lips. Peter followed the pink tongue on its journey around those lush lips. If he kept looking at Arvel and Arvel kept licking his lips...

Peter rolled over, faced the door, and closed his eyes.

Arvel shifted deeper into the bed. For a moment, he'd thought Peter would kiss him. His gaze had grown heated, but he'd turned away, and Arvel had been disappointed. Arvel had seen that look in the eyes of many men. He knew they found him pleasing. Some of them he had let be with him, some he hadn't.

Until he'd found Gareth, wounded, and took him in, saved him, much as Peter had saved Arvel. He'd only been with Gareth for a long time now and had wanted no other.

Until now.

He'd wanted to be kissed by Peter.

He felt confused. His heart belonged to Gareth, but now, tonight, his heart and body yearned for Peter.

He longed for his Heart to come home.

His body had ached with need these long days since his Heart left to find work. There would be no warmth and no soft touches this night.

Sleep then. Tomorrow. Perhaps tomorrow.

Chapter Four

Peter held Mary against his chest, his nose buried in her long hair. Her body molded to his, caught in his arms, warm and soft, and smelling so good, yet not quite the way he remembered. He stroked over her hip as he moaned, his lips pressed against the back of her neck.

She shifted, pressing back into him, rubbing her soft bottom against his thickness.

Sweet dream. It'd been a long time since he'd dreamed of pleasure, longer since he'd felt it harden him. Of her. Without hearing the screaming, without seeing the terror in her eyes, without seeing the blood leak from her body, soaking the bed she lay on.

No blood here, only warmth and comfort.

He prayed this would never end. That he'd never awaken. *God, take me now. Let this be the last thing I know in this world.*

He clutched her tighter to him as a sob broke from chest.

She pulled away from him, slipping through his hands, leaving him again...alone...

Peter gasped and lunged across the bed. He grabbed her arm and yanked her back, pulled her on top of him, ran his hands over her face, pushing her hair from it, moaning and crying and begging her not to go. To stay. To live.

She stilled, her light weight pressing on him. Solid. Warm. *Real.*

He opened his eyes.

The eyes looking back at him weren't brown.

Lavender.

He frowned. That wasn't right.

Red hair, not brown.

Not...

Arvel stared back into his eyes.

"Fuck!" Peter pushed him off so hard the man rolled off the bed.

Arvel slammed to the floor, jarring his teeth together. He rubbed his ass, and tears filled his eyes as he glared at Peter.

What had he done wrong? Peter had grabbed him. He'd pulled him on top, pushed his hard cock into Arvel's belly.

He wants me but doesn't want me.

Arvel sighed. He knew that look on Peter's face. Remembered it the first time with Gareth. The older man had fought his attraction to Arvel but gave in at last.

Gareth had needed him, and now Peter needed him also.

Gasping, choking on his own tears, Peter scrubbed his hands over his face, then sat up, his face in his hands, and shuddered.

The bed shifted. A hand touched his shoulder.

Arvel.

Peter jerked away. Stood. Tried to think what to do.

Clothes. He needed to dress.

Where the hell had the caretaker put his things? Right. The trunk. He strode to the chest, threw it open, and pulled out fresh clothing. He danced into his breeches, tied the strings, and threw on a tunic. Stomped into his boots.

Refused to look at that bed. At Arvel.

Refused to think of what he'd done. Almost done.

Betrayed her.

Held another body to his, touched another. A man's body.

Pushed his manhood against Arvel's soft ass. A man's ass.

No, he didn't want to think about that. Not at all. That way led to danger, and he understood the hazards of that bonding, had seen Drake and Logan struggle to survive their secret. He had no taste for suffering the same way.

He had a mission and he'd best get to it.

Peter strode to the door, opened it, and left, closing it behind him.

Still trembling, he went to the stable to see to his mare.

Arvel fell back on the bed and sighed. Men were so foolish. Gareth, Arvel, and Peter. Was it this bothersome between men and women? If so, there wouldn't ever be babes, but there were, so it must not be so hard.

Hard? He smiled. Peter had been so hard.

It had felt good. He'd wanted Peter's touch. Wanted his cock rubbing against him.

He wanted Peter inside him.

And he wanted his Heart also.

He wanted both?

He shook his head to clear his mind of foolish, greedy thoughts.

Neither Peter nor Gareth would agree to such a sharing.

* * *

Peter led the horse through the woods to the road. Today, his first action would be to go to the village and speak to the local priest. He would have to be careful not to reveal himself to the good father. Not even the priest could know his mission.

At the road, he swung up into the saddle, gave the location of the path a hard look, and then spun the mare around and kicked her into a trot. He passed the fork

in the road and saw the village in the distance. Smoke rose from a dozen or more chimneys, and the gathering of thatched roofs surrounded the stone bell tower of the church.

By the time he rode in, the village had come to life. The villagers went about their morning duties, hawking wares, loading wagons, unloading barrels, shouting welcomes and hails and even giving the stranger who rode through their midst a nod.

He nodded back, followed the hard-packed lane to the church, and dismounted, tying his reins to the gray wooden fence. Next to the stone building a small cottage sat, probably the priest's home.

Peter went to the door and knocked, then stepped back.

The door opened and a small, round man greeted him. He wore a brown robe and held a crust of bread in his hand. Crumbs sprinkled across his belly and his beard, caught on their way to the ground.

"Pardon my intrusion. I see you're still breaking your fast, Father."

"Do I know you, my lord?" The man peered at him, then took another bite, crumbs flying.

"No, Father. I'm a stranger, only passing through. I seek information, and I'm hoping you can provide it."

"Well, if it's about the inn and which ale to choose, take the stout." He laughed, then stared hard at Peter. "Anything else, and I'm hard pressed to tell anything of value."

"May we speak inside?" Peter motioned to the cottage.

"Aye. Come in, come in." The priest stepped aside and Peter entered. Not as small as it looked on the outside, the cottage held a main room and another room behind it. Peter could see through a doorway to the small cot in the other room.

He made his way to the fire and stood in front of it, warming his behind.

“Now, what information do you seek and why do you think I might hold it?” The priest sat at the table, where a bowl and spoon rested. He dipped the spoon into the bowl and ladled the porridge into his mouth.

Peter didn't care for porridge, but he'd run off without breaking fast and his belly rumbled.

“I'm interested in any strangers that might have been seen lately. Any that have come and gone. Any unexplained troubles, thievery, or mayhem.”

“That covers quite a bit, young man.” He smiled. “Only stranger is you to these many weeks. However, mayhem and thievery have occurred of late.”

A rush of excitement raced through Peter. “Tell me, if you can, of the mayhem.”

“Well, the butcher's wife claimed someone broke into her coop and stole four of her prized hens. Ripe and ready for the blade, they were.”

“Stolen, eh?”

“That is her claim.” The priest shrugged.

“And you think not?”

“Who can say what happened, but the chickens are missing.”

“Anything else?” Peter leaned forward. A hungry band of scouts could turn to stealing if hungry enough; however, with the plentiful game in the woods, why risk being caught? Most likely, some hungry villager.

“Well, to tell truth, I don't meet many strangers. You'd be better served speaking with the innkeeper.”

“I plan on that, Father. I was hoping you'd heard any stories, tales, that sort of thing.”

“Oh.” He nodded. “Gossip, eh?”

Peter blushed. “Aye. In the village where I live, the priest there always knew the troubles and trials of the villagers. I thought, perhaps, it was common among your ilk.”

The priest laughed and slapped his leg. "Indeed it is. I can tell you many things, and all of them interesting, but none of the kind you seek."

Peter stood. "Thank you, Father, for speaking with me at so early an hour."

"Not a trouble, my lord." He walked Peter to the door and opened it.

"And Father? I'd appreciate it if you kept this to yourself, eh?" Peter held out his hand, flashed the silver coin, and then dropped it into the priest's hastily proffered palm.

"Not a word." He inclined his head, Peter stepped out, and the door shut behind him.

Peter sighed, then headed to his horse. "Inn next."

His mare snorted, tossed her head, and Peter mounted. It was a short ride to the inn, a place called the Ram and Boar. He dismounted and tossed the reins around the hitching post.

Peter pushed open the door and entered. In the air hung the familiar scents of an inn house, ale, bread, roasted meats, burned wood, and sweat.

He sat at a table and motioned to the keep. "What have you to break my fast with?"

"Porridge, bread, cheese, and some fine ham."

"I'll have the bread and ham. And an ale."

The man nodded and shuffled over to a sideboard where a large ham sat. The man sliced off two thick slabs and placed them on a trencher. Next, he added a half a loaf of bread—fresh, Peter hoped—poured the ale, and brought it all over.

"Many thanks," Peter said as he paid the keep his coins.

With the innkeeper, he'd wait awhile, observe the man and the place before asking any questions. Depending on what he saw, he might not even ask them today or the day after.

As he lingered over his meal, he watched the villagers come and go, greet the keep, talk of various matters, but not one word of talk about strangers or scouts or troops.

It looked to Peter as if he'd have to do as Logan said and stay longer. Wait it out and see what came of it. But that meant staying at the lodge, with Arvel, and he wasn't sure that was wise.

He stared into the fire. Perhaps if Arvel slept on the chair, or the floor. But how to move him out? In truth, Peter should give up the bed, despite the caretaker's offer. Surely that had only been meant if they shared it.

Peter closed his eyes and drifted. He longed to talk to Mary. Missed his visits to the graveyard, sitting by her stone cross, telling her of what he was doing each day. Just like he'd done the nearly six hundred days of their life together when he returned from duty.

She'd sit and listen to him speak of the men, of Drake and Logan, smiling up at him as if he were telling the most interesting stories she'd ever heard. Never their secret, though, because in truth it had become his secret the night he joined them in Drake's room. That he could never speak of, for fear of losing her.

He'd succumbed to his need, his curiosity, but once tasted, he hadn't wanted it again. He'd loved her, loved the way she loved him. The way she'd been so happy to tell him there would be a babe, and they would be a family.

Well, it was over now. No wife, no child, no family.

She'd taken everything when she died—his hopes and dreams, his heart, his soul, his life.

Peter finished the last heel of the bread, downed the ale, and stood.

Midday would be upon him soon. Time to take a ride around the district, see the lands and the woods, decide where the most likely place for an advance might be, in Weathers's viewpoint.

He left, got on his mare, and headed north out of the village. At the fork in the road, he took the right path, leading over flat fields into the distance. The very edge of Marden ran farther ahead, ten miles or so, at the low mountains in the distance.

Perhaps there he'd find some sign.

Anything to keep from going back to the lodge too soon.

Chapter Five

Smoke curled from the chimney of the lodge, giving it a warm, secure, and content feeling. Peter led his horse to the stable and removed her saddle, slinging it over the side of the stall. He removed her bridle and put on a rope halter that hung on a hook.

Looking around, he noticed both stalls had been cleaned and dressed with fresh straw and hay as if Arvel expected someone besides Peter. He wondered if the caretaker kept it this way on the chance that the duke would arrive. But to do so for months, years, even?

Not likely.

He should ask Arvel. But how? And even if Arvel understood him, how would he understand Arvel?

He put the brush away, slapped the mare on her rump, and shut the gate to the stall. He'd wasted enough time. Now he needed to face the lodge and its inhabitant.

At the front door, he tried the latch and it opened. Arvel sat at the fire, curled up in a chair, dozing. Peter shut the door without making a sound, then realized Arvel couldn't hear him even if he slammed it.

Peter sat on the other chair, laid his head back, and watched the man sleep.

Gods, Peter didn't think he'd seen such a beautiful man, besides Logan, who was perhaps the greatest beauty he'd ever seen. Arvel had an almost feminine beauty, a grace and delicacy that made Peter want to reach out, touch him, to discover if he were real or just a figment of his imagination.

How had he come to the lodge? And what had led to his loss of hearing and speech? And why had the stables been kept ready? For whom?

So many questions.

Arvel slept on.

"I went into the village today." Peter glanced at the sleeping man. No movement. "I saw the priest, asked him if he'd seen anyone or heard of any rumors about strangers. Nothing." Peter sighed, shifted, and stared into the fire. "The inn was next on my list. I broke my fast there. I'd run from here so fast, I'd forgotten to eat." Peter chuckled.

"Afraid of you, I suppose. Sat and listened for information, but again, none to be had." Peter sighed. "I'll have to stay longer. I need that information, Arvel, for the duke. Much depends on it."

Arvel sighed, turned, and snuggled deeper into the corner of the chair back.

Peter smiled. Arvel's hair shone in the firelight, shooting off sparks of gold and amber. Quite lovely.

"The duke and Drake sent me on this mission. Do you know Drake? He's master of arms at Marden. The duke's right-hand man. I'm his second. I could have been the master, if I'd pressed for it, but I haven't got the experience, not like Drake has."

Arvel sighed, stretched, and opened his eyes. He looked around, saw Peter, and smiled. It lit his face and went to his eyes, a sincere joy that took Peter's breath away.

Peter had returned to him.

Again, the little bird's wings danced in his belly and sent a warm rush of happiness through Arvel.

He hushed them and told himself to not be a fool.

Of course Peter came back. He had to come back, but not for Arvel. He'd returned to sleep in the bed, to keep his horse, to eat his meals.

Time to get to work and stop his wild thoughts.

"Ho, Arvel."

Arvel brought his hand to his mouth, head tilted.

"Aye, I'm hungry."

Nodding, he hurried to the sideboard and began pulling vegetables and dried meat from the larder. He swept down a knife from the shelf and began chopping. Once done, he came back to the hearth, pushed the logs around with the poker, arranging the fire to cook over, then swung out the iron cook pot and took it to the table. Peter sat mesmerized by the dance, the lithe form swaying and gliding, moving to some unseen rhythm.

All the pieces were added to the pot, and then brought back to the fire, hung on the hook, and pushed over the flames.

Arvel went back to the table, brought out flour, and started making bread.

Peter relaxed, watching the younger man prepare the evening meal. Lost himself in the push and pull of Arvel's hands on the dough, working it into the right consistency, twisting it and then kneading again. Peter lost track of the time; the lodge had no windows, only the front door and a side door that led to the stables.

Arvel finished kneading the bread, formed it into a loaf, and placed it on a wide, flat wooden paddle with a handle. Then he carried it to the side of the hearth. An oven had been built just to the side. He opened the door with the metal poker, slid the bread in, and jerked the paddle out. After shutting the door, he returned to the table to finish cleaning.

In no time, the bread's smell and the aroma of the stew blended to fill the lodge and make Peter's mouth water.

Arvel could cook, no doubt about that. And bake. And keep the lodge tidy, the stables clean and ready. Was there nothing the young caretaker couldn't do?

Peter laughed. Arvel turned and caught him. His brow furrowed and head tilted.

"Pardon." Peter stood and clapped Arvel on the shoulder. "You're a right treat, Arvel."

Arvel smiled, staring at Peter's mouth.

Peter sobered and leaned in closer. "Is that how you do it? Do you see the words on my lips?" He reached out and touched Arvel's mouth.

Arvel placed his hand over Peter's, trapping it against Arvel's lips, and nodded.

"So in a way, you can hear me." Peter's lips moved against Arvel's fingers as he spoke. Arvel chuckled soundlessly and dropped his hand.

Peter let his hand linger for just a moment on those soft, pink lips, then removed it.

They stared at each other.

Little birds danced every time he looked into Peter's eyes, just as with his Heart.

Arvel waited. It was best to wait; less painful also.

Peter leaned forward as Arvel's lips parted. The birds took to the sky, rising up from his belly, through his throat.

Arvel swayed toward Peter, his lips parting, ready for the kiss.

Peter pulled back.

"My wife died."

Arvel frowned and motioned at his mouth, making a circle that landed on his lips. Perhaps this was the signal for repeat the words.

Slower, he said, "My wife died."

Dead? Ah, there's the source of his pain. So much pain in his bark-colored eyes. They matched his bark-colored hair. Peter reminded Arvel of a tree, strong limbs that would hold him safe and secure.

Arvel wanted to help Peter by taking away the pain. Wanted to make him feel happy and see him smile again. He liked when Peter smiled.

No doubt about it, Peter needed Arvel.

Arvel's mouth formed a large circle, and his brows shot up. Then he frowned and stepped forward, encircling Peter's waist. He leaned into Peter and squeezed, resting his head on Peter's shoulder.

Peter's breath caught, and he wrapped his arms around Arvel, holding the smaller man tight to him.

"I miss her so much," Peter whispered. "So, so much." His voice trembled, and he shook with the effort to keep the pain inside.

Arvel leaned back, looked up at him with tear-filled eyes as if he felt the same pain Peter felt, then nodded and buried his face against Peter again. He moved his arm up to Peter's neck and clung to him.

Peter broke, coughing up great sobs, tremors shaking his body, as he held tight to the caretaker.

Arvel kneaded Peter's shoulders, his neck, easing him, bringing him down from the tension-filled shudders, until Peter inhaled, exhaled, and steadied. He stepped back, releasing Peter, giving a shy smile, and wiping away his own tears.

Peter cupped Arvel's face, ran his thumb over that plump bottom lip, then let him go.

"Shall we eat?" Peter gave the same signal he'd seen Arvel make before, fingers to his mouth.

Arvel grinned and nodded, then rushed to the table.

Peter pulled out the bench and sat, drying his face on his sleeve. He poured a goblet of water, drank it down, and poured another. Arvel placed the simmering pot of stew on the table and went back for the bread.

The hot loaf danced in his hands as he juggled it to the table, then speared it with the knife. Peter sliced it for them and took one piece as Arvel dished out the meal.

They ate with only a few glances at each other. Peter watched Arvel, taken with his talents and looks, and Arvel stole looks at Peter, perhaps fearing Peter would break again.

After they'd finished dinner, cleaned up the crockery, and put it all away, they sat in the chairs by the fire. Peter dreaded the night, the bed, and what had passed between them that morning.

How could he ask Arvel to leave the bed? No, he should be the one to go; after all, it was his problem.

He leaned over and tapped Arvel on the hand. He looked up into Peter's face, brows up.

"I shall sleep on the floor tonight."

Arvel frowned, glanced to the bed and back to Peter. Shook his head and pointed to Peter then the bed, then himself and down to the floor.

"No." Peter shook his head. He pointed to himself and then the floor. "I'll take the floor."

Arvel stood, mouth in a hard straight line, eyes darkening. He jabbed his finger at Peter's chest, then pointed to the bed. To himself, then the floor. Arvel's anger, his declaration, came through to Peter louder than any words.

Peter sighed and closed his eyes. This silent battle of wills, this war of hands, would get him nowhere. That much he knew. Arvel rushed to the bed, pulled off a

quilt, and laid it out on the floor near the fire, his jaw jutting out, his eyes daring Peter as he sat with a great huff.

“I concede.” Peter sat on the chair and pulled off his boots, placing them next to the chair. He tapped Arvel on the shoulder and jerked his head to the bed.

Arvel didn't move.

Peter stood and held out his hand. “Come to bed, Arvel.”

The caretaker glanced from his hand to the bed, back to the offered hand. With a nod, he slipped his hand in Peter's and let himself be pulled to his feet. Peter let his hand go, and went to one side of the bed, where he sat and began undressing.

The bed shifted as Arvel sat, undressing as well.

Peter slipped under the covers first and Arvel followed. Each man lay on the edge of the bed, a gulf between them. He sighed. Better to get used to it. He had a mission to fulfill and it might take a month or more. Perhaps several, and with only one bed and two men, concessions had to be made.

That's what this was, a concession. Nothing more.

They'd share the bed, just as they shared the lodge.

Peter rolled over, faced the door, and listened for Arvel's breathing to change, signaling sleep. He lay for a long time waiting. Thinking of her. Of the mission. Of that night in Drake's room. The night Logan and Drake took him. He'd let them do it, let them pleasure him with their mouths, hands, and cocks.

And it had been pleasure, no denying that. His cock couldn't have denied them, and it didn't. He'd spilled and shuddered and whimpered as if he were some untried virgin. As if he didn't have a wife waiting for him.

At last, a soft snore, a shift, and Arvel slipped into slumber.

Now he could let himself go. Relax and fall asleep. Perhaps the dreams wouldn't come, same as last night. Perhaps tonight he'd sleep deep enough not to wake with Arvel clutched to his body, warm, and soft, and not Mary.

Chapter Six

Even before Peter opened his eyes, he knew the body pressed against his wasn't hers but Arvel's. The young man's scent filled his nose, and for a moment, Peter inhaled, treasured it, then exhaled.

He should move away, back to his side of the bed.

Arvel knew he should move away. Peter would wake soon and push him away again. His ass hurt enough already; he didn't need his pride injured also.

He should move away, to the far side of the bed.

But he needs me. His cock tells me so. My cock tells me I want him. I need him.

Wings beat in Arvel's belly and his stones ached mightily. Perhaps this time Peter wouldn't push him away. Perhaps this time Peter would take his pleasure with him.

Perhaps Peter just needed some encouragement.

Arvel sighed and pressed his bottom against Peter's groin. Peter's body responded with a gentle flush of heat, the slow hardening of his cock, a small shifting of hips.

Arvel ground into Peter's length. Peter groaned.

His body had betrayed him these long months since she'd died, had refused to work robbed of her presence in his life. Why had it chosen now to reawaken? Peter closed his eyes and thought.

Why couldn't this happen when he looked at the women at Marden Castle? At the ladies, the servants, even the town's wenches? No, it had to begin here, at the lodge, with a man's body exciting him. If Peter didn't see the dark humor in this, he knew Drake and Logan would laugh at it.

Peter pushed forward, rubbing his cock against that sweet bottom, soft and yet firm. Arvel pushed back. Peter's rod stiffened as the need took him. The long-dead embers of his desire caught, burned, then with the gentle coaxing of Arvel's ass against his rod, burst into flame.

Peter wrapped his arms around the younger man, pushed his leg between those slender thighs, and wedged himself against Arvel's body. Arvel trembled in Peter's arms. Did the caretaker want this, or had Peter taken advantage of the morning's evidence of a healthy male? Only one way to know for certain.

Peter rolled Arvel over onto his back and stared down into his face. Sank into those lavender eyes. Open. Willing. Ready.

Arvel reached up and touched Peter's mouth with his fingertips, rubbing Peter's bottom lip, then brought them to his mouth to taste. He smiled, looked back up into Peter's gaze, and took Peter's hand in his and pulled it to his thickness.

What more invitation did Peter need? Arvel wanted it. Wanted him. But did he want this and Arvel?

For the first time since his wife had died, Peter felt his heart beating, felt his need and hunger rise, and had an appetite. He *wanted*.

He closed his hand around the slender shaft, and he stroked the soft-skinned length. At the head, he pushed back the foreskin and swirled his thumb over, dragging wetness with it, bathing the tip and then the shaft as he pushed down.

Arvel shuddered silently against Peter. So good. So good. So good.

Peter's rough, hard hand, a hand that knew how to bring him pleasure.

Arvel needed more. More touches, more strokes, harder and faster.

Peter smelled just as a man who wants should smell. Arvel knew that smell well; his Heart smelled the same when he desired Arvel.

Did Arvel smell like that to Peter?

Peter leaned down, burying his face in the space between Arvel's shoulder and neck. Inhaling in the scent of man. Musk, sweat, smoke from the fire, and the tang of what leaked from his rod.

Peter pumped up and down, over the tip with a quick swirl, then back down, taking his time as if he had nothing else to do all night but handle Arvel's cock.

Arvel's body arched upward as he threw his head back, mouth open with what must have been an escaping moan of pleasure. His gaze met Peter's, hot and intense and needing. So needing what Peter had to give him.

And Peter needed to give it. Needed to feel alive. Not dead. Not torn and shredded and ripped into a thousand strands as if he'd been a scrap of fabric rent in a storm. A pennant flying from some abandoned castle's towers. A sad and lonely sign of what had once been. A whole man.

No more.

Peter needed. Wanted. Desired.

Arvel closed his eyes and thrust up into Peter's grip. Peter tightened the circle of his hand, letting Arvel fuck himself on it. Watching the younger man writhe on the bed, Peter felt his own erection grow thick and strong, pulsing with each thrust as his stones ached for their own release.

Gods, it had been so long since he'd felt that sweet explosion.

He needed to feel it now, to tell him, assure him he still lived. Was still a man.

Arvel pushed Peter's hand off, then straddled him, pushing his ass down on Peter's cock, signaling his own need. Bending over Peter, his long hair falling all around his face, Arvel rose up, trapped Peter's cock beneath his sac, and pressed down.

“Arvel!” Peter arched up, hands flying to Arvel's hips to guide him. Pulling him back and forth over his cock, the pressure intense and sweet and so close. So damn close.

Arvel took Peter's nipple in his mouth and bit down.

Peter's cry and his release exploded at the same time, painting his belly and chest with his cream as it spurted in never-ending ribbons. Shuddering, he gasped, then dragged Arvel down into a hard kiss.

His body felt. He felt.

And now he felt Arvel's mouth open to him. Just as he knew Arvel's body would open to him. Peter's cock stayed hard as the floodgate to his desire remained open, demanding more.

Peter grabbed Arvel's arms, wrapped a leg around him, and threw him over, onto his back. He plundered Arvel's mouth, pushing past his lips and teeth to take possession of his tongue.

Arvel clawed at his back. Not to push away, but to pull closer, to bring Peter tighter into him. He wiggled beneath Peter, rubbing their cocks together.

Peter rose to his knees, took Arvel's legs, pushed them wide and up and ran his hand over the man's entry. Arvel arched up, nipples hard and tight, head nodding consent.

Shoving two fingers in his mouth, Peter wet them thoroughly, then ran them over the soft skin behind Arvel's sac, up to the hole. He'd never touched a man this way, only women. Their openings were wet, warm, inviting.

Arvel's opening was tight, hot, locked to him. If he wanted in, he'd have to breach the fortress. Force his way past the outer defenses. Burst through the doorway and take possession.

He shoved his finger in, sinking into impossible heat and pressure and tightness.

"You're so tight. So hot inside." Peter gasped as he worked another finger inside the caretaker.

Arvel grabbed Peter's arm, pushing it, guiding it, asking for more, deeper, harder. He'd never taken a man before. Been taken, aye, by Drake, and God that had been heaven. Logan's mouth on his cock, Drake's cock in his ass.

He wanted to fuck Arvel. Now.

Peter's cock strained. His stones pulled tight to his body, ready to empty. If he wanted Arvel's ass, he needed to do this now. Now.

He removed his fingers and positioned his cock at the tight entry. Arvel grabbed his hips and dragged him forward, his eyes begging for it. Begging to be taken, and oh damn, didn't that just make Peter want it even more, if that was possible.

Peter speared Arvel, sinking deep into that glorious heat.

His chest heaved as he froze. He was in a man. Fully in. Buried to the hilt, his spear surrounded by the body of a man, Arvel's warm sac flush against his body.

Oh God, it was glorious.

Peter pulled back and thrust home. Arvel arched. Peter sank in and pulled out. Arvel thrashed. Peter's pace quickened as he lost himself in the fucking.

Slamming into the body beneath him, Peter growled. "This is mine!" Arvel stared up at him, bottom lip caught between his teeth, and nodded.

Had he known what Peter had said? Could he read Peter's tortured cry?

Peter's body rubbed against Arvel's and he felt his desire climb, like a soaring falcon, ever higher. And like the falcon, Arvel yearned for the impending dive, the final fall that would bring him to his release.

Only one other man had given him such pleasure, had pleased him among all the others who'd taken what they'd wanted with no care for Arvel's needs or wants.

Gareth had been that man, and now, as Arvel had known all along, Peter would join Gareth in Arvel's heart.

Arvel touched his chest, over his heart, and then placed his hand on Peter's chest, just as he did for his Heart. Now Peter was his Heart also.

Two Hearts? Could there be two? Arvel's heart told him aye.

Peter would be his second Heart. His second lover.

Arvel's fingers curled and he pointed with one finger, changing his sign for his Heart, his Gareth. First in his heart.

He added another finger. Two fingers would be Peter's sign. Second in his heart, but no less dear.

Peter let go, gave himself to the man. Thrusting. Taking. Riding the desire and the need and the longing as if Arvel were a fine steed and Peter was there to tame him.

Arvel grabbed his own cock and pumped, working his hand quick and hard over the swollen flesh.

Peter watched and thrust and Arvel writhed and it was so beautiful.

He gasped, startled as Arvel's release burst from him, hitting Peter's chest, dripping over his hand, landing on Arvel's belly. Inside Arvel's muscles rippled as the wind through the crops in the field, bowing, tight, and insistent.

Peter came with a shout, painting the inner channel that held him so tight in its grasp.

He collapsed to the side, dragging Arvel over to lie spread out over Peter's body. Peter's hand worked gentle circles on Arvel's back.

Arvel snuggled into him. His chest rose, held, then released. A silent, soft sigh.

Peter sighed aloud for both of them.

Chapter Seven

Peter rode down the lane toward the village. He'd planned to spend another day of riding the outskirts of the area, posing as a traveler but observing all he could. If Weathers had sent a scouting party, it would be small, one man perhaps.

And in the large northern territory, one man could easily avoid being seen.

The entire day had been spent plodding along, watching the surrounding woods and fields, but all he had seen were farmers and villagers going about their daily work. No spies skulked about, lurking behind trees or bushes.

This was getting him nowhere. Perhaps, like Logan had said, this would take longer. Months, not weeks, and certainly not days.

He settled into his saddle and thought. Tomorrow he'd ride the far north boundary and see if he could pick up any signs of a crossing. He'd stay off the roads and cut through the forest and ride along the foothills.

The sun sank in the sky over his shoulder. Time to head back to the lodge. To Arvel. Peter's cock stiffened at the thought of the younger man, and a pang of guilt shot through him.

He shouldn't feel anything for Arvel. It wasn't love, just desire. Just lust and the need for his body to relieve the intense pressure of being denied for so long. That's all.

Lust.

Not love, because he'd never love anyone as much as he'd loved Mary. And to feel that loss again? He couldn't imagine letting it happen again. Ever.

He'd loved once, deep and hard, and he'd thought it would be forever. But God had decided it wasn't to be, and he still couldn't understand why. What had he done to earn such a punishment? Such damnation?

All he could think of was that one night with Drake and Logan. He'd betrayed his wife, let his physical desires take over his will, and gave in. Had that been enough? Just that one act?

He'd prayed about it in church but hadn't confessed it to the priest. A confession like that would have been dangerous to more than just his soul. Logan and Drake and even his wife stood to lose all if it were known.

She would have survived his death, but the shame would have lingered on her like the stench of something dead, ruining any second chance for happiness.

There was one thing he was absolutely sure of, and that was that her death had been no fault of hers. She'd been a virgin when she'd come to him, so sweet and loving. The thought that she'd done something so awful that God would punish her for it was inconceivable to Peter.

No, the doing had been his. His sin. His punishment.

And so it had been his fault she'd died.

He'd learned his lesson, or so he thought. But here he was, going back to the lodge, eager to spend his seed in another man. To touch his smooth skin, kiss his full lips, and thrust his rod into that tight hole.

Peter jerked the reins and his horse halted.

Had he just damned poor Arvel? What if God decided to punish him again and take Arvel?

But he didn't love Arvel. Cared for him, aye. But Peter knew it wasn't love he felt, but lust.

He'd never feel love again, so perhaps Arvel was safe. And it wasn't as if he'd seduced Arvel. The man had been more than eager and willing. He'd been no stranger to the forbidden love between men.

But was God so fickle? So unsteady in his temperament? His decisions to punish mere whims? If so, how had Drake and Logan escaped God's wrath? They'd found love, Drake now had a son in Joss, and Logan had recovered his son Tomas from Weathers's men.

No punishments there.

Peter kicked his horse forward, and they trotted down the road toward the lodge. If he hurried he'd be there before dark.

* * *

Dark fell, and Peter had just found the entrance to the path. He checked if the road was clear, dismounted, and led the mare through the bushes, down the faint path. The woods darkened as they closed in around him.

He made the glade just as the light faded. Across it the lodge sat draped in shadows, gray smoke curling from the chimney. The door opened and Arvel stepped out, holding a lantern in his hand.

He stepped to an iron post and hung the lantern on it, then turned and went back inside.

A light to guide him home.

Peter smiled and, pulling the mare behind him, made his way to the stable. He unsaddled her, tossed her blanket and saddle over the stall wall, and brushed her down. Then after feeding her, he shut the stall door and went to the front of the lodge.

He picked up the lantern as he walked past and came to the door. No need to knock. He opened the door and stepped inside.

Arvel leaned over the pot, stirring whatever he'd filled it with. The aroma of the food filled Peter's nostrils as he inhaled and smacked his lips. Hunger clawed at his belly.

The caretaker straightened, turned, and flinched at seeing him.

Peter laughed. "Beg pardon, Arvel. But there doesn't seem anyway to let you know I'm here."

Arvel placed his hand over his heart, gasping, then laughed.

Peter had come home. Wings fluttered in his belly, and his cock stirred to life.

He flew across the room to Peter, took the lantern from him, and gave him a quick kiss on his cheek. He looked well. Tired. But good. So good.

Was he hungry? Of course. He'd been riding all day. Working makes a man hungry. Perhaps tonight, Peter's hunger would be for more than food.

He motioned to Peter, "are you hungry?"

"I am." Peter nodded and tapped his mouth with his fingers.

Arvel nodded back and motioned to the table. Peter removed his cloak, hung it on a peg near the door, and then took a seat at the table. The rest of the bread sat on a wooden tray, and he cut several slices with his knife.

Within moments, the pot of stew arrived at the table. Arvel dished it out and poured out their water. He sat and they ate.

"I rode around a bit today," Peter said as Arvel looked down at his plate. "No signs of any scouting party or any strangers."

Arvel looked up, chewing and smiled, his eyebrows raised. He patted his belly and cocked his head to the side, like a beautiful little bird.

"Aye. It's good." Peter mimicked him, patting his stomach.

Arvel grinned and returned to eating. Peter took a drink and cleared his throat, the dust from the road washed away by the cool clear water.

"I'm on a secret mission. Can't tell a soul."

Arvel glanced up and took a bite of bread. Peter smiled, tore off a hunk, and popped it into his mouth.

They finished dinner and cleaned up, then sat by the fire until it grew late. Arvel banked the logs, adding a small one to the others, and brushed his hands off on his trousers.

Peter yawned. "Time for bed, Arvel." He leaned down to pull off his boots, but Arvel fell to his knees and brushed his hands away. Peter sat back and let Arvel take care of him. The caretaker looked happy and content.

And why not? He had a warm lodge and a large bed with covers enough to keep the coldest night at bay.

And he has me.

Barefoot, Peter pushed himself out of the chair and started for the bed. He halted, turned, and offered his hand to Arvel, still sitting on the floor holding Peter's boot.

"Bed."

Arvel put the boot next to the other one, stood, followed Peter to the far side of the room, and took his place opposite Peter on the bed.

"Take your clothes off." Peter began removing his clothing, and after a heartbeat or so, Arvel undressed.

Naked, they slipped into bed and under the thick quilts.

Arvel slid over to Peter, his arms wrapping around Peter's waist and shoulders, pulling him close. Peter took Arvel in his arms and kissed him, slow and soft. His rod stiffened with the touch of those lips, and he longed to feel them on his cock.

At last, he had Peter in his arms again. He longed for a taste of the man, a deeper taste, more primal than just a kiss. Arvel longed for a taste of Peter's cock.

It always pleased Gareth when Arvel took him in his mouth, and he enjoyed it also. The feel of soft, smooth skin covering that powerful hardness, all held safe.

Gareth trusted Arvel not to hurt him, only to nip with teasing intent and to suck the very essence from him.

Tonight, Arvel would please his new Heart and withhold no pleasure he could bring to Peter. Just as he would for Gareth.

Gareth belonged to Arvel, and Arvel would have Peter also.

Both men would claim him. Both men would be his.

His cock stiffened as he made up his mind. He'd have both, and neither would deny him.

As Arvel slid his hand down Peter's body, he disappeared under the quilt. It felt so warm and relaxing the way the younger man's hands caressed Peter's body—soft yet firm, gentle yet demanding.

The covers tented over Peter's body, the high V of them moving lower as Arvel chased downward toward what Peter hoped was his aching rod. Oh God, to feel that mouth on his rod, sucking him.

And then there it was, what he'd hoped for. Arvel's mouth on his cock, wet and hot and all tongue and lips and so very, very good. Peter arched, his back coming off the bed, his hand reaching down to grab a handful of Arvel's long red hair. He buried his fingers in it, pushing Arvel closer, encouraging him to take his rod deeper, suck harder, nip and bite him.

It was heaven. Arvel's mouth and the beauty of it ran through Peter's body, made him shudder and buck and hiss, and then he was coming, exploding, shooting under the cover into Arvel's mouth.

Peter lay quivering as his breath returned to normal. Arvel came out from under the quilts and snuggled next to Peter, his head resting on Peter's shoulder. Against Peter's leg, a warm, wet trail marked where Arvel's leaking cock pressed against him.

Weariness crept up on Peter, but he wouldn't leave his young lover unfinished.

He reached down, hunting and rooting for what he knew would be there—Arvel's slender, beautiful cock, dripping with his excitement.

Peter swiped his hand over the tip, picking up the wet to make the glide of his hand easy on Arvel's tender flesh. Arvel twitched next to him, mouth open. Peter kissed him, his tongue teasing the roof of the man's mouth, tangling with his tongue as he stroked Arvel's rod.

Arvel trembled, eyes closed, mouth agape. Quite beautiful. And all his. For now at least. And for now, Peter wouldn't question it; he'd just enjoy what Arvel had to give.

There would be time enough for regrets later. Perhaps in the morn.

He increased the tightness of his grasp, the quickness of his motion up and down, and with a violent shudder, Arvel came, splashing his cream over Peter's hand and Peter's hip.

Arvel fell backward, his hand on his chest as his heart fluttered, and grinned. That had been so good, so well done. He pushed himself up and leaned over Peter, giving him a loud, wet kiss. He smiled, closed his eyes, and fell back to the bed.

Peter had proved again he was a worthy lover, worthy of being Arvel's Heart, his beloved. A lover well matched to Gareth, Arvel believed.

A lover who pleased Arvel and exhausted him also.

Within moments, he was asleep.

Peter chuckled.

Arvel was right. Time to sleep.

Morning and regret would come soon enough.

Chapter Eight

Peter searched for regret in Arvel's sleep-filled eyes but found none. The young man just snuggled closer to him, burying his face between Peter's side and his arm. Peter patted his shoulder, gave the caretaker a squeeze, then got out of bed.

"I must away, Arvel." Peter stared into his lover's face to be certain he understood. "I'll return in the eve. If I'm not back before nightfall, I'll return in the morn." Today he'd planned to ride along the border, and it could take more than one day.

Arvel frowned and sat up, pushing his hair from his face. He hated mornings.

He had felt so good wrapped in Peter's arms. So warm. And he felt so safe. Just like with his Heart. Both Hearts cared for him. Both Hearts kept him safe and warm.

He was a most fortunate young man to have two such lovers. Happiness washed over him, just as the warm rushing water in the creek behind the lodge did during the summer when he swam.

But he'd known Peter must go away. He didn't know what Peter did, where he went, or who he saw when he left. He'd only been gone one night, and a man on horse could only get so far.

It made him sad that Peter would go, but he'd see Peter again, and that thought cheered him.

Arvel nodded. He slipped from bed, pulled on a pair of loose trousers, and tied them. Then he went to the hearth, stoked the fire, and prepared a quick meal.

By the time Peter had eaten, Arvel had filled a sack with bread, cheese, and a few pieces of dried venison. He waited at the door as Peter gathered his maps and shoved them under his tunic, just as he'd done so often for Gareth.

Over the last year, he'd learned well how to bid a man farewell, but it never eased the hurt.

"Don't forget I'll return late, if not tomorrow."

Arvel nodded. He handed Peter the sack, then stood on his toes to plant a kiss on Peter's cheek. Peter laughed, took Arvel by the back of the neck, and dragged him up for a hard, openmouthed kiss. Arvel shuddered against him, surrendering as one hand twisted in Peter's tunic.

Gods, it made Peter's cock hard. But he had a mission and couldn't linger any longer or face not returning until the next day. And for reasons Peter didn't want to think about, he wanted to be lying in that bed tonight, sharing it with the caretaker of Marden Lodge.

After letting Arvel go, Peter smacked him on the rump and left, striding around the lodge to the stable to where his horse waited. He saddled her and led her from the stall, across the glade, and into the woods.

Arvel closed the door, rubbing his ass. He chuckled silently. It hurt, but as not much as a true hit would. He knew that. Peter hadn't meant to hurt; he'd meant it with his heart. With caring. That was good.

Peter liked Arvel, perhaps even cared. He didn't expect love. Peter's eyes held too much pain for that to happen so soon.

Arvel smiled and curled up in the bed. He inhaled. Peter's smell filled the air. He pulled the quilt over his body and smiled.

Two Hearts.

He frowned, his fists tightening on the edge of the blanket.

Would his Heart like Peter? Would he chase Peter away?

Would Peter and Gareth fight over him?

He could lose both. Arvel worried his lip and decided he wouldn't let that happen.

Gareth had to know how Arvel felt about Peter and Peter about Gareth. They had to let it be, had to agree to both be his.

Arvel would see to it.

* * *

Peter looked up at the foothills. From a distance they'd seemed gray and soft purple as if shrouded in mists. Now he could see the barren rocks, gravel, and scrubs that covered the sides of the low hills.

Not much to track along there. But where he rode, the grass and ground were still soft and lush, and he twisted in his saddle. Behind him, the hoof prints of his horse were clearly visible.

The sun had just climbed to its highest point, and he still had miles to go before making his way back to the lodge. He'd have to admit it—there was no way he'd return before nightfall.

Best to travel on, find a place to camp, and make his bed for the night. Then he could arise early, and make for home.

Home.

Not Marden Castle, but Marden Lodge. How odd that a place he'd come to so recently felt more like his home than the place he'd lived at for over eight years. The place where he'd met his young wife and the place he'd planned to raise a family.

In that moment, Peter knew Marden Castle would never feel right to him again. He frowned and nudged his mare forward. When this mission grew to a close, he'd leave the lodge and return to the castle, to Logan and Drake, to his normal duties, and to the small grave in the churchyard.

Guilt, hot and hard and heavy, weighed on his chest, and he gasped. Had he thought of leaving her? Of never returning to her? Could he live not speaking to her ever again?

It had been so much a part of his life, as much as waking each day to go about his soldier's duties. Now it seemed a distant thing, living in the past, not a part of his life.

Perhaps this was his heart healing?

No, he still felt the guilt, the sadness, and anger at being the cause of her death. He still grieved for her and his child.

Peter shook his head and focused his gaze on the ground, looking for any sign of another horse, or the trampling of the grasses, or a dried footprint in the mud.

He rode for hours, until he came to the northern river. He sat on his horse as it stood on the banks and stared across the water's great width. Crossing was impossible, not here or for twenty miles above and below. The current moved too swiftly, the span too wide, the river too deep.

He turned and headed back, retracing his trail, following his own horse's prints back toward the village and the lodge.

The sun sank, setting the sky ablaze in oranges and golds, reds and crimsons. He spotted a small break of trees and bushes and pointed the mare toward them. He'd be able to tie her to the trees, and use the bushes as a windbreak and cover.

Peter dismounted, set up his camp, then gathered enough firewood to keep him warm through the long night.

Tonight, Arvel wouldn't be there to warm Peter's body. Or pull off his boots as he sat in front of the hearth. Or prepare the evening's meal. Or smile at him in that beckoning way he had, nervous and shy but so arousing, as he allowed Peter to handle him and use his body for their mutual pleasure.

Peter missed Arvel.

With a half snort, half laugh at his thoughts, Peter rolled over, facing away from the fire and watched his horse grazing nearby. Her head came up, she shifted, blew out through wide nostrils, and settled, one rear hoof lifted in repose.

Peter closed his eyes and prayed not to dream of Mary. He couldn't face her now, not with thoughts of Arvel floating in his mind. Another in a long line of betrayals he'd built since coming to Marden Lodge.

* * *

Arvel went to the door again, opened it, and looked out.

No Peter. No Gareth.

Arvel hated being alone. The bed would be cold, and he couldn't light the fire.

It wouldn't be safe.

He wrapped the quilt tighter around his shoulders and stared into the darkness that surrounded his home. He sneezed and wiped his nose on the quilt. Sniffed the night air.

No strange smells. That boded well.

When Gareth left, he wasn't safe. He tried not to leave home, tried to stay still and quiet, like a fawn hiding in the bushes.

Time to be a fawn. Time to stay safe.

No fires until his Hearts came home.

* * *

Peter woke in the middle of the night, sitting upright, looking around the camp for a sign of her. Or him. Someone. He'd been searching for someone in his dream.

He'd hunted through the castle, the woods, down roads familiar and unfamiliar, for someone, but he didn't know whom. Each place he recognized, each hall, each wall, the hearths, the timbers of the buildings all blended as he trooped through them, lost in a thick fog, calling out for....

"Arvel," Peter whispered.

He had a feeling something was wrong. It crawled up his spine like a centipede, hundreds of legs dancing across his skin, raising the hairs on the back of his neck and the bumps on his skin.

“Bad dream. That's all.”

Peter lay back and pulled his blanket tighter, unsettled about the dream and the feeling that Arvel needed him.

He didn't know when he finally fell asleep; he just knew that when he woke, the sun had risen and his horse whinnied, looking for her feed.

“I know, I know,” Peter said with a chuckle. “You're as anxious to get to your warm stall as I am to my warm bed.” He rolled to his feet, kicked out his campfire, and saddled the horse.

Then without any thought but to go home, he mounted and returned to the road.

Chapter Nine

Caelin stood with his hands behind his back, fingers interlocked, head down, and stared at the floor of the abbot's office. Fighting the urge to collapse, shame burning his face as if his soul were on fire, he knew there was nothing he could do to have stopped this action.

His father, Bryon Holdess, sat in the chair opposite the abbot's desk, his complexion dark as thunderclouds, hands fisted into weapons as the abbot leaned forward to continue speaking.

"Your son has become"—the abbot paused and frowned—"quite a distraction here at the abbey. I'm afraid for the good of the pious men here and the very abbey itself, we have no choice but to ask that you take him back."

"I don't understand." His father struggled with the truth. Caelin held back a snort of his own. His father knew the truth of Caelin; he'd just refused to put name to it, to see it plain before his face.

"As I said before, Caelin has proved a good student in all his learning and an excellent scribe." At least the abbot made Caelin's last year studying with the priests worth something. The old man was at least fair.

"Then what is the problem?"

"Caelin"—the abbot glanced at Caelin then back to his father—"is not suited to life among men. Especially those men who seek quiet and calm. Men who have renounced the ways of the flesh." The abbot's speech danced around the truth.

Why didn't he just come out and say it? Caelin drove the men to distraction. Not all, of course, but enough. The last straw for the abbot had been when two of the priests had fought each other over the right to Caelin's body, because Caelin

had refused to choose between them. The abbot had to restrain both men and from that moment on had sent Caelin into solitary confinement in his small room with only his meals brought to him.

As if he were some sort of plague.

A plague of the flesh.

Bryon swung his head to stare at his son, scanning him as if seeing him for the first time. Perhaps he did. But Caelin knew that look and knew that Bryon understood just what the old abbot meant.

"Well, what do I do with him now?" Bryon ran his hand over his face.

The abbot's shoulders rose and fell in a shrug. "Perhaps a trade? He's a fair scrivener. A town of good size might need such a man, or perhaps a noble household where he could teach the children.

Bryon rose. "I thank you, Father." He gave the abbot a nod, then turned to Caelin.

Caelin kept himself from jerking back at the look of disgust in his father's eyes. He'd failed once again to be the man his father had spent most of Caelin's life trying to turn him into.

"Thank you for understanding." The abbot rose. "Caelin, I wish you well and God's blessing on you." He signed the cross, then motioned for them to leave.

Caelin's knees trembled at the thought of what would come next. His father reached out, grabbed him by the arm, and pulled him to the door. In his heart, Caelin didn't want to leave the abbey. Despite his troubles with the men, he'd felt safer here than anywhere he'd ever been, including his own home.

Bryon dragged him down the hall to the abbey's entrance. Nothing waited for him there; he'd given up his clothing, weapons, boots, everything, when he joined the order.

His father strode past the monk holding open the door, and before Caelin could take another breath, he'd crossed the threshold and stepped back into a world he'd thought he'd never see again.

The door to the abbey shut behind him.

His father swung around to face him, curled his hand into a fist, and knocked Caelin to the ground with a blow to the side of his face.

“Bastard!”

Caelin hugged the earth, warm rich dirt cushioning his face, and curled into a ball to protect himself, knowing how his father would spend out his rage. The blows came before he'd taken his next breath, boots and fists, falling, kicking, beating, until all the venom in his father's heart had been worked from him. Or so Caelin thought.

Gasping, Bryon straddled Caelin and gave a final blow to his face, breaking Caelin's nose with a sickening crack. Caelin moaned as the warm rush of blood flowed over his chin and lips.

“Now see if the men find you so pretty, boy. No one will want to touch you when I'm finished with you.”

Caelin's eyes popped open as his father grabbed his face in one hand, steadying it, fingers pressing into his jaw and throat.

Above him, his father, his da, gripped his dagger in the other hand—the blade passed down to Bryon by his father, the one Bryon would pass down to Caelin's older brother, Balwin.

Their eyes locked, and the terrible truth dawned in Caelin's heart.

“Father!”

His father's grip tightened. “Hold still. The cuts won't be as deep.”

Caelin closed his eyes and held his breath as the blade's cold touch turned his cheek to fire.

Once.

Twice.

The third time Caelin screamed and fainted.

* * *

At midmorning Peter came to a small village and halted in front of the inn. Small, cramped, but smelling of delicious aromas, the place had lured a few others in. Several horses had been tied to the posts, including a fine black animal dressed in good tack.

The horse piqued Peter's interest in its rider. Not from around here, that was certain. He'd passed no homes of quality and knew of no lesser nobles living this far north.

The thought of Weathers crossed his mind. Perhaps the man he'd been searching for sat in this very inn drinking and eating. Peter tamped down his excitement, dismounted, tied off his mare, and went inside.

The room was indeed small and dark. He waited until his eyes adjusted, then took it all in. Only four tables with chairs and several benches lined the walls, leaving barely enough room to maneuver in.

Two men sat at the nearest table. From their clothing, he knew neither of them was the man he sought. One man sat at a table, back to the wall at the far end of the room.

Even if Peter hadn't seen the quality of the man's clothing or arms, he'd have known this was a man to be reckoned with. His very attitude poured off him in waves, and Peter felt his heat from across the room.

The stranger's chin lifted, and he pinned Peter in place as if he were nothing more than a gnat, with eyes so clear and icy blue they could have been made from the glaciers of the farthest north. As Peter basked in the man's cool, appraising stare, a ripple of awareness and desire passed over him like a softly drawn silk veil. His cock stiffened, and Peter barely held the shock of his body's reaction in check.

He moved to the counter. The innkeeper gave him welcome, and Peter ordered ham and ale, his back to the stranger, as he willed his body to cool and his hands to steady. The keep returned and placed the ale and slab of ham on a platter in front of him.

Peter paid him, took them, and turned to find a table. The man's gaze followed him as he chose a table and sat facing the man. Whatever it was, Peter decided better to face it than act a coward. After all, if this were Weathers's man, he'd have to either capture him and force out the truth or kill him.

Something about the man made Peter question who would be victorious in that struggle. He reminded Peter of one of the Norsemen, if his thick blond mane gave proof. Peter placed his tankard and platter down, pulled out a chair, and sat, putting all his bravado into the movements, just as he'd seen Lord Drake do a hundred times. He looked up into the man's gaze and sent his own fiery stare back.

One blond eyebrow rose. Then the man's mouth rose in the smallest curl.

Peter wanted to lick that corner.

Gods, had he just given into the new unfamiliar desires of his body with thoughts of this man? Arvel was one thing. Peter's feelings for the younger, smaller, more vulnerable man could be reasoned away, but this strong, rich desire for a man just as large as he, if not larger, older, and surely more experienced than he, could not.

Peter took out his dagger and sliced off a piece of ham, brought it to his mouth, and ate. He took his time chewing, gaze sweeping over the stranger, taking even more of the man's appearance in.

Tall, he could tell in the stretch of the man's legs. Wide shoulders, strong, muscular arms. A fighter's arms, as the broadsword worn across his back proved. Dressed in warm brown leathers from his boots to his chest, the man looked every inch a dangerous adversary.

Peter recognized the attitude; he'd seen it in Drake many times. That sureness, that certain knowledge that he was the match for any man foolish enough to try him.

And like Drake, could he have the same heart? The same longings for the forbidden? The same desire in his kiss? And what did Peter care if he did or did not?

Peter snatched up his tankard and drank deep from it, the ale soothing his throat of road dust and calming his nerves. The man was far more dangerous to Peter than just as a mercenary or soldier.

The danger lay in the thoughts the man instigated in his mind.

Thoughts that, if acted upon openly, would get Peter killed.

And that thought, that danger, sent Peter's body humming.

He'd found comfort in Arvel. In his silence, in his soft touch and his sweet willingness to give his body.

But this man stirred heat, danger, and desire the like of which Peter had never experienced, except perhaps with Drake.

Instead of being the taker, with this man, Peter wanted to be taken. Wanted to feel his rough hands against his skin, holding him down, pressing the weight of his body against Peter's.

Peter brought the drink to his lips again and looked over the rim of the tankard at the man as he gulped down the soothing ale, wishing it would erase the wicked thoughts from his mind. He had one man waiting for him at the lodge. What did he need of another?

The stranger licked his lips, his gaze locked with Peter's, then pushed back his chair and stood, moving as if he had all the time in the world. Letting Peter drink his fill of his body, of the way he moved, of the promise in those startling blue eyes.

He walked past Peter's table and out the door.

Peter exhaled, and his hands steadied.

What should he do now?

Stay or follow?

Peter downed his ale, shoved the last piece of ham into his mouth, and chewed. Then he stood and, nodding to the keep, approached him.

“Who was that man?” Peter asked, leaning on the counter.

The man shrugged. “Don't know.”

“Have you seen him before?”

The man frowned and tapped the counter with his fingertip.

Peter slid a coin onto the counter and raised his eyebrow. The keep put his finger on the coin and slid it off the counter into his other hand.

“Aye. He's been in a fair few times before. Every few months. Why?”

“No reason. He looked familiar to me, that's all.” Peter smiled at the keep and pushed off the counter. The man might have known more, but if he did he didn't press for more coins Peter wasn't going to offer any to loosen his tongue.

So the man was no stranger to these parts. That could be good or bad. Good in that he could just be some mercenary passing through on his way to his home.

Bad that he might be one of Weathers's men and had been scouting this side of the border for a long time. Perhaps preparations to invade were farther along than anyone had thought.

Peter gave the innkeeper a wave of his hand and left.

Chapter Ten

Peter stood next to his horse and searched the street, but the man had disappeared. Peter strode to where the stranger's horse had been tied, knelt, and studied the tracks.

One of the horse's hoofs had a shoe different from the rest, two markings on the very ends of the iron, perhaps the maker's mark. He memorized it, took his horse by the reins, and began to follow the tracks down the road.

By the time Peter had reached the end of the small village, he could now track the horse and rider without fail. He threw himself into the saddle and set off at a quick trot. His quarry would be just ahead of him. No need to rush. Peter was positive he could catch up to the man if and when he wanted.

It would only be a matter of time before the man revealed himself and his mission. If he was one of Weathers's men, he would surely canvass the lands, then return to report to Weathers. Peter would follow until he knew for certain, then capture him and bring him back to Marden to be dealt with by Logan and Drake.

If the man were just some traveling mercenary, Peter would learn that soon enough.

The road wound through the forest, then broke onto an open plain. Fields lined either side of the road, and Peter passed small farms. The track of the horse with the one odd shoe proved easy to follow. One thing for certain—the man wasn't worried about being followed for he'd taken no caution to hide his tracks.

Peter relaxed into his saddle and made his way south, deeper into Marden lands, and toward the lodge.

Where Arvel waited for him to return.

Peter groaned. He'd forgotten about Arvel in his excitement and interest in the stranger. Another sharp pang of guilt stabbed at him. He'd promised Arvel he'd return today, but he knew his first duty was to find evidence of Weathers's plans to invade across the northern border.

Perhaps if the mercenary continued on his way, Peter could stop at the lodge, tell Arvel he had to be gone for a few more days, and then resume his hunt. If his quarry veered from the road south, then Peter would have to follow him, and Arvel would have to wait for Peter's return.

There was nothing Peter could do about it but see which road the mercenary would ride.

* * *

Caelin stared at his reflection in the stream as he washed the blood from his damaged face. He'd never thought himself handsome, not like other men he'd seen, but men still found him, still pressed at him, still demanded of him.

His father was right—no man or woman would give him a second look now with such damage. The blade's tip had scratched down his face in three parallel lines from cheek to jaw. They bled still but had reduced down to just seepage. He pressed the cool wet cloth against his face and stood.

Amazed at how little he felt after the beating. Not the pain; he felt that in every movement of his body and in each breath in and out. God help him if he tried to open his mouth or move his lips. He should hate his father for doing this, for marking him, for hating his own son. Caelin searched for it but found only emptiness and chilled numbness.

He felt no shame for what he'd done with the priests, not then and not now. It was who he was, how he felt, and as long as he'd been aware of other men, he'd known they were the ones that excited his body.

"Come along, Caelin. I have to decide what to do with you." His father climbed back on his horse and waited as Caelin cleaned up.

He turned to his da. "You don't have to do anything. Just let me go."

Bryon snorted. "Let you go? Have you lost your mind? Do you know the penalty for being caught with another man?" His eyes narrowed at Caelin and for a fleeting moment, they'd flashed with fear.

Perhaps his father did care, after all. Perhaps, in his own way, he'd been protecting Caelin by using the knife. Were thanks to be given?

"I know the penalty." But being free would be worth it. Even if he only lived a few months more, perhaps a year, it would be a year on his own terms.

"And the shame? For your family's name?" Ah, that was it, wasn't it? His father didn't want any speck of shame to taint him or his older brother.

"I know well of that also, Father."

His father stared at him for a long time, then slapped his thigh. "Come on then. You'll have to walk. I had no reason to bring a horse when the abbot summoned me."

"Aye, Father." Caelin fell into step beside his father's mount as they headed down the road to what had once been his home.

Caelin pressed the cloth to his face, letting the sting numb his feelings and darken his heart. It wasn't far to their small manor, and Caelin set his resolve to walk it in silence. He was good at keeping silent; he'd learned it at the abbey. Once or twice feeling the bite of the lash across his shoulders, a lash he himself wielded, had been all it took to teach Caelin not to open his mouth and speak.

As his father rode and Caelin, long monk's robe flapping around his legs, trudged the long distance toward their manor, Caelin wondered how his father would explain his being sent home to his brother. His mouth twisted and pulled at his wounds, and Caelin stumbled with the pain.

No, he didn't think his father would have to say much to his brother. They'd just share another look between them that said, "*fool boy*," nod at each other, and then glare at him.

Caelin resigned himself to another beating by his brother once he arrived home.

* * *

Peter followed the mercenary down the road toward the village. He'd continued on past several lanes that could have circled him back toward the foothills.

He kicked his horse into a trot to catch up and came over the rise in the hill. Fields ran along one side, the forest on the other. Ahead, Peter would take the hidden path to the lodge, tell Arvel he had to leave, gather some supplies, and move on.

Perhaps if he rushed, they would have just enough time left to spend in a quick tumble into the bed. Peter smiled at that thought.

Ahead, the lone rider halted. Peter reined his horse off the road and into the woods to watch. The man dismounted, took his horse by the reins, and stepped into the trees.

"Holy mother of God!" Peter gasped, knowing the very path the mercenary went down. To Arvel and the lodge. Arvel would be unprotected, and being deaf, he wouldn't even hear the mercenary until it was too late.

There was no time to waste if he were to save Arvel.

He frowned as he jerked the reins of his horse to get it back onto the road, and then he kicked her hard. The horse's trot wasn't fast enough, and Peter leaned forward and swatted her on the rump with the leather rein.

She broke into a cantor down the hill to the path leading to the hidden lodge. In his mind, Peter promised Arvel he'd get there, stand between him and this man, and do whatever it took to protect his lover.

At the path, Peter pulled back on the reins and leaped from the saddle. As he panted and his heart thudded in his chest, he searched for some control or else the mercenary would hear him coming. Forcing himself to move slower, act calmer, Peter led the horse as slow as he dared down the path to the lodge.

At the entrance to the glade, Peter hung back in the shadows.

The mercenary had crossed it and had almost reached the lodge. Instead of rushing in, or sneaking around it, he brought his horse to the stable and entered.

Peter frowned. The man acted as if he'd been here before, knew the path, knew of the stable. Knew it would be kept ready?

Logan hadn't mentioned anyone other than the caretaker. Perhaps he'd forgotten this man? He might have, but not Drake. If Drake had known, he never would have forgotten to mention a man such as this.

Peter's mouth went dry, and his tongue seemed to grow twice its size as he waited for the man. He tied off his horse and crept around the edge of the glen to get closer to the lodge. Almost there, the man reappeared, whistling a familiar ditty and striding along as if he had all the right to be there.

"Arvel?" Peter whispered. Did Arvel know this man?

Did Arvel let this man...? Peter broke off that thought, gritted his teeth, and stepped from the bushes.

"Hold!" he shouted and drew his sword

The man turned, cocked his head to the side, eyes narrowed, as he pulled his sword from its back scabbard and presented it to Peter.

"I know you. From the inn."

"But I don't know you. What business do you have at Marden Lodge?" Peter advanced but kept a wary eye on the man.

"My business is my own. Who are you to ask?"

They glared at each other, taking in their weapons, sizing each other up, looking for the opportunity to strike if needed.

Peter opened his mouth to speak but closed it. He couldn't tell of his mission; he had no idea if this man was one of Weathers's men. But he could say that the duke had given him permission to use the lodge.

"I'm a guest of the Duke of Marden. And you?" Peter pointed his sword for emphasis.

"The duke, eh?" His eyes narrowed again. "I've never met him. How do I know you're telling the truth?"

"I have a letter from the duke himself, not that I have to prove anything to you. But you need to explain your presence to me."

The man lowered his sword just a little. "I have no right, it's true. But the caretaker here is my friend."

"You know Arvel?" Peter stepped forward.

"Aye." The man took another step toward the door, and Peter countered it.

"He didn't mention you to me."

The man gave Peter a smile that said much. "That's odd. I certainly thought I was worth a mention, at least." His amused gaze burned over Peter's body, setting it to tingling.

"I'm afraid not."

"Perhaps he was too busy? With you?" The man's eyebrow rose at the suggestion.

Peter stepped back. "What do you mean?"

"You know my meaning. Arvel is a beautiful, rare creature. Don't lie and say you didn't take notice of him." He chuckled. "Or did he take notice of you?"

"What?" Peter's voice squeaked like a mouse. He cleared his throat and resumed his glaring. "I came here to visit. Arvel had been set upon by a group of men determined to beat him."

The man's face darkened and his grip on this sword tightened. "Did they?"

"No, I stopped them before they got too far."

"Then you have earned my gratitude, my lord." He swept a low bow. "And I'm sure you earned much from Arvel."

Why did the man speak of this so openly? As if he knew what Peter and Arvel had done and found it...amusing. But Peter refused to admit anything to the mercenary.

“Let us go inside and greet our pet, then.” The man laughed, returned his sword to its home, and stepped to the door.

“Pet?” Peter cocked his head.

The man shook his head, opened the door, and stepped inside. Peter rushed in behind him, sword still drawn, determined to protect Arvel.

Chapter Eleven

Arvel sat at the table facing the door. From Peter's vantage point, he could see the joy breaking over Arvel's face at the sight of this man. The young man leaped to his feet, knocking over his chair, and flew across the room, throwing himself into the mercenary's open arms.

"Arvel, my pet—" His words were swallowed by Arvel's mouth crashing down on his. Arvel wrapped his arms around his neck, his legs around his waist, and nearly toppled the man.

Peter stared.

Unable to take his eyes off the pair of lovers, he watched as Arvel threw his head back and allowed the man to have at his neck. Eyes closed, mouth open in pleasure, he was thing of beauty.

As well as the mercenary. Peter couldn't decide which one of them stirred his cock more, the elder man, or the younger. Or perhaps it was watching them both?

"So you do know Arvel." Peter's voice didn't tremble; for that he was glad.

The mercenary broke Arvel's kiss and laughed. "Aye. We know each other well, don't we, love?" Love and pure affection blasted through in his voice.

He strode across the room and dropped Arvel on the bed with a bounce. Arvel scrambled to his knees and reached for him, but the man playfully dodged away.

Peter edged closer. "Arvel?"

Arvel glanced at Peter as if seeing him for the first time. His mouth opened. Then the color rose in his pale cheeks, tipping his ears a deep rose. He got off the bed and came to Peter, taking his hand and staring up into his eyes.

“I...” Peter stammered. “I should leave.”

Arvel saw the look of pain in Peter's eyes and shook his head. He placed his hand over his heart and then put it over Peter's heart. Then he motioned with the flat of his hand, palm down, at the floor.

Stay.

Peter shook his head. Gareth watched.

Arvel went to Gareth, held out his hand, and curled his fingers, leaving one out. He pressed it to Gareth's chest, then to his own.

Arvel moved to Peter and repeated the motion of hand to heart, two fingers out.

He touched his own heart.

How could he make them understand?

Peter stared at the stranger.

“What's your name?” he asked.

“I'm called Gareth. And you?”

“Peter.”

“Well, Peter. It seems little Arvel has claimed us both.” His eyes twinkled in amusement.

“You find this amusing?” Peter found it...odd.

“Indeed, I do.”

“And you're not mad? Furious?” Peter named only a few of the emotions rolling through his body. “Jealous?”

“Nay. I love Arvel and only want what makes him happy.” He shrugged. “You seem to have made him happy while I was away. Enough for him to ask you to stay.”

Peter and Gareth stared at each other as Arvel looked back and forth between them, waiting for some decision or the tension to ease.

Peter dropped his gaze to the young man. Arvel's beseeching look swayed him, but it was Gareth's look of what could only be loving indulgence that convinced him.

"I'll stay." Peter nodded.

Arvel exhaled and grinned.

Gareth laughed. "Good! Now, my pet, I'm hungry." He motioned with his hand to his mouth.

Arvel nodded and looked to Peter, brows raised in question. Peter motioned also, and Arvel took off to the hearth to tend the meal. Gareth strolled to the hearth and plopped down in a chair. Peter followed suit.

"So, what brings you to Marden Lodge?" Gareth glanced at Arvel as if checking to see he were well.

"Hunting. I've come to hunt for the duke's larders." Peter surprised himself with the story and the quickness of its creation.

"The woods are full of deer and fowl, and this is the time of year for it." Gareth eased back in the chair and stuck his feet toward the fire.

"And you? What is your story?" Peter glanced at the Gareth's profile. Strong, handsome, virile. A prize of a man, to be sure.

"I'm a mercenary. I met Arvel over year ago. He'd been here at the lodge, caring for it. I was passing through the village, wounded from my last battle. I rescued him and he took me in, healed me, and"—he shrugged—"I've been visiting every chance I can." Arvel stood and went back to the meal.

"So you don't stay here all the year?"

"No. My work takes me all over the land, hiring as I can. I earn my money, then return here to him. I suppose one day I won't be able to return." His loving gaze shot over to Arvel, then back to Peter. "I worry about him when he's alone.

Those men you dealt with... It's not the first time he's been set upon." He growled and he tightened his grip on the arms of the chair.

"I understand. Is that why the way to the lodge has grown over, become a secret?"

"Aye. I thought it best. Safer. He understands."

"The duke doesn't know. He knows of Arvel, aye, but not of the secrecy of the path or the lodge."

"I'm sure some of the older villagers know of it, but I think they keep quiet to protect Arvel also. He doesn't go there often. I wonder why he was out on the road." Gareth rubbed his chin.

"He had a sack of food with him."

"Damn! I'd hoped to return before his stores ran out. I've been buying the food, bringing it here for him so he's not so exposed."

Peter nodded. "Does he mind? Being alone?"

"Alone?" Gareth chuckled. "He's locked in silence day and night. How more alone can he be?" His eyes darkened. "I call this place Silent Lodge, for as long as Arvel is here, it remains silent, without sound."

"How did he become deaf and mute? Do you know?"

"Aye. It was an illness when he was a child. One of the old women in the village told me. He's prone to illness, you see. Fevers and such." He shrugged. "I know not of such sicknesses; my experience is in battlefield wounds, but I do know that if he's not kept warm, he tends to fall ill."

"Then we must chop more wood. Enough to last the rest of the season, at least." Peter began thinking of how they'd insure Arvel's well-being.

"Indeed. I noticed the lack of wood and of hay and feed. I'll go into the village in the morn and purchase some grain."

"Do you want me to come with you?" Peter offered.

“Nay. Best if we're not seen together, isn't it?” Gareth cocked an eyebrow at him, a sly smile on his face.

So he didn't believe Peter's story about hunting, eh?

“Aye.” Peter nodded and leaned back against the chair. “I have money also, for food and such needs. Let me give you some to pay for what you buy. My horse is eating your hay and oats.”

“Fair enough.”

Arvel came to the hearth, swung out the pot, tasted the stew, and then banged the wooden spoon on its side. He used a rag to gather up the pot by the handle and move it to the table.

“Time to eat.” Gareth slapped his thighs and stood.

Peter rose, and together they went to the table. Gareth sat on one side, Peter on the other, and Arvel at the end, between them. He served the meal and they ate.

Peter's mind raced with a hundred questions, but only one loomed above all. What would they do about sleeping? Although the lodge held only one bed, it was a large one. They could all fit, but it would be cramped. Still, Peter preferred the bed better than the cold floor. And what would they do about...Arvel?

Should Peter offer to tend the horses and let Gareth and Arvel be alone?

Should he give up on ever touching Arvel again, now that his true lover had arrived? Why did that bother him? He knew he didn't love Arvel. Cared deeply, worried about him, enjoyed his company and his body, of course. But it wasn't love.

He glanced at Gareth, and that same rush came over him, coursing through his body as it did earlier in the day. Strong arms and hands, broad shoulders, thick legs. Was his cock as thick? Was it silky softness over iron hard flesh?

Peter shifted as his cock grew with his thoughts.

He didn't intend on asking his questions, so he'd just wait and see what progressed. That was safest. Less embarrassing for all involved. And really, why

was he so put off? He'd shared before, hadn't he? And Logan and Drake had been lovers even then.

No difference.

He exhaled and tried to relax.

Then the meal was over. Arvel gathered their plates and Gareth stood, giving Peter a look that said all and nothing.

"The bed is large enough for three. Arvel's small and doesn't take much room."

Peter's mouth went dry. So it had been decided. He nodded.

Arvel worked washing off the platters, unaware of what words passed between his old and new lovers.

"Perhaps I should tend the horses?" Peter swallowed as his gaze flicked to the bed and back to Arvel's back as he worked.

"I'll help you. Faster that way." Gareth seemed to be amused again. Damn the man, but he was making light of Peter's attempts to be chivalrous.

"As you wish." Peter nodded.

Gareth moved to Arvel and touched his shoulder. Arvel turned and smiled as his lover's hands moved in quick motions, telling him that he and Peter would go outside, to the horses, as he also spoke in low tones.

"Let's go." Gareth pointed to the door and led the way out, and Peter followed.

Once outside, Peter exhaled. "You speak to him well with your hands."

"Aye. He's taught me much, our little pet."

Our little pet? "Why do you call him pet?"

"Pet. Sweetling. Lover. What would you have me call him?" He grinned at Peter. "What shall I call you?" His voice lowered and teased.

Peter halted in his tracks. "Me?" Damn, did his voice sound more like a mouse than a man?

"Aye. You." Gareth reached the stables and disappeared inside.

Peter rushed to catch up. "Peter. My name is Peter," he said, perhaps a bit too forcefully.

"Well, Peter. I shall have to think upon that."

The arrogance of the man angered Peter. *He'd think upon it?* Who did he think he was?

"And what shall I call you?" Peter fired back.

Gareth spun, took two large steps toward him, and had Peter pinned against the stall boards with his larger body. "You can call me..." He leaned close enough for Peter to feel his breath on his lips. God help him, he couldn't keep from leaning closer. "*Master* Gareth."

The arrogance of the man boiled Peter's blood. He reached up and shoved the man away. "The hell I will!"

Gareth threw back his head and laughed, the sound echoing around the stable, stirring Peter's erection back to life. How did the man do it? Make Peter want to fuck him and kill him at the same time?

He grabbed the pitchfork and used it to move hay to the horses' mangers. Peter doled out the grains and filled the water troughs. When they'd finished, the air still hung thick and heavy between them.

Peter didn't want to think about it at all. But the chores were done, and he couldn't put off bedtime any longer. When they went back inside the lodge, he'd have to share the bed with Gareth and Arvel.

And the uncertainty of what would, what might, what he wanted to happen, scared him more than anything he'd faced in some time.

Chapter Twelve

Gareth chuckled at the man in front of him. A very handsome man. A soldier, well built, strong. A man much like himself. Not the sort of man who usually caught his eye, but there had been something about him, even at the inn where he'd first seen him, that intrigued Gareth.

It was the look in Peter's eyes. Haunted. Hurt. Perhaps as damaged as Arvel, but the nature of the pain he bore, Gareth couldn't tell.

Oh well. Peter would be an interesting dalliance, to say the least. A man to test Gareth's skills, his strength of will and seduction. A man who might not fall so easily to a more dominant man. That had been plain to see, since he'd protected Arvel.

Gareth grinned. What would it be like to overpower such a man? To make him submit to his desires?

Probably as good as it felt to tease him as he had earlier.

He followed Peter inside, shut the door, and dropped the bar into place.

"I sleep on the side nearest the door," he said as he removed his scabbard and sword.

Peter halted and looked at him, then nodded. "As you wish." They sat in the chairs again. Arvel wiped off his hands and came to them. He fell to his knees and first pulled off Gareth's boots, then Peter's, seeming as happy as a lark to care for the two men.

Gareth caught Arvel's chin in his hand. "You'll sleep in the middle?"

Arvel smiled and nodded. He leaned forward and offered his lips to his lover.

“Ah, pet, I never get my fill.” Gareth took Arvel's mouth and drank from it. His member stirred in his breeches, filling, shifting, aching for his lover. He broke away and sat back.

Arvel leaned over to Peter, offering him a kiss also. Gareth's belly tightened as he watched his pet encourage Peter. For his part, Peter glanced at Gareth as if to ask permission, so he gave the man a nod.

Peter wrapped his hand in Arvel's hair, pulled him close, and they met, openmouthed, tongues tangling, in a kiss that made Gareth's cock swell. Kissing Arvel had always stirred him, but seeing Arvel being kissed was something more, a new excitement he'd never experienced before.

He rubbed his hand over his rod as he watched.

Arvel was a beauty, how he gave himself to be loved and perfect in his submission. The way his body melted and his hands fluttered until they found purchase either in the sheets of the bed or the grass on the ground or even on Gareth's body.

He loved Arvel and could deny him nothing. Not even another lover.

Arvel sat back, smiling. He placed a hand over his heart with his first finger held out and touched first Gareth.

“That is his sign for me,” Gareth told Peter. “First in his heart.”

Arvel repeated the motion, and this time his hand came to rest on Peter's chest, with two fingers extended.

“Ah, Peter. That is for you. Second in his love.” Gareth nodded, looking pleased that Arvel had given Peter his own sign.

Gareth slapped his palm against his chest and then laid it on Arvel's.

Peter did the same.

Arvel grinned, then took Peter's hand and placed it on Gareth's chest. Gareth put his hand over Peter's heart.

Peter frowned, shook his head, and tried to pull away, but Arvel held him tight, staring with utmost concentration into Peter's eyes, insistent and demanding.

Gareth laughed and pushed hard on Peter's chest. He could feel the rapid pounding of the younger man's heart, the sharp intake of breath, the muscles that flexed beneath his fingers, and knew he wanted more of Peter.

How much more would be up to Peter, Gareth's skills at seduction, and time.

"Let's to bed." Gareth stood as Arvel let them go free. Peter remained seated, a look of confusion on his face. Gareth slapped him on the shoulder. "Come, man. Surely you're not afraid of a bed?"

"It's what's in the bed..." Peter mumbled as he stood.

Arvel raced ahead of them, stripping off clothing, and naked, threw himself on the bed. He rolled onto his back, moving his body like a snake up the bed until his head rested on the pillow. Then he licked his lips and took his cock in hand and gave it a few strokes. Arvel innocent was heady; Arvel wanton was intoxicating.

Gareth roared, hands on hips, head back, at the deaf-mute's behavior.

"Oh my pet. You tempt me sorely." Getting out of his clothing proved quicker with such motivation. He crawled onto the bed and flopped on his back next to his lover.

Peter stood at the foot of the bed, shirt in his hand, breeches down around his ankles, staring at them both but lingering over Gareth's body.

"Well, Peter. See anything you like?" Gareth cocked an eyebrow.

Peter blushed. "I can't deny Arvel's beauty." He stepped out of his trousers and treads and dropped his shirt in the same pile, then came around the bed to his side.

"And what of me?" Gareth teased. Oh, he would enjoy this man, making him stutter and blush.

Peter rolled his eyes. "What of you? Think yourself so pretty?"

"Oh aye. I'm a right pleasant sight, so I've been told."

Peter got in bed and lay back on the pillow. "By who? The local farmhands?" He snorted.

"Nay, nay. By better men than you, Peter the hunter." He chuckled.

Peter rolled onto his side and stared at the wall. Arvel sat up, crossed his arms, and frowned at him. He gave Gareth a wink, full of mischief and humor, and then leaned down and bit Peter on the ass.

The ensuing yelp just made Gareth burst into laughter, filling the rafters.

Peter glared at Arvel, then him, then rubbed the bite. Arvel pushed his hand away and soothed it with his tongue. Peter groaned and pushed into what had now become a kiss.

Arvel kissed his way around Peter's hip, pushing him until he lay flat on his back. Now Gareth had a perfect view of the man's cock. Thick, straight as a rod, it peeked from its hood, leaking a string from tip to belly.

A belly covered in a soft trail of dark hair, unlike Arvel's smoothness. Gareth's fingers would tangle in that softness if Peter allowed it. But something told Gareth that Peter wouldn't allow such a touch. Not now. Not yet.

He had time and he was a very patient man when he set his mind to it.

And his mind was set on Peter.

* * *

Good God, how did he get himself into this situation? In a large bed with two of the most desirable men he'd ever laid eyes on.

Peter had no clear answers, just a string of events that led him, like the most winding road, to this time and place.

One of the men made his skin feel warm and wet and—*Oh hell, was that a nip?* A shiver ran through Peter as Arvel nibbled him, catching skin between teeth, then licking the sting away. With each kiss, he moved closer to Peter's rod, standing straight up as if pointing to heaven.

Only Peter knew that way led to hell, but God forgive him, he didn't care. Not right now. Not with Arvel's mouth on him, edging closer, Arvel's soft hand threading through the nest of curls at the base of his cock. Not with Arvel's nose snuffling along as determined as any hunting dog to seek out a bird in a bush.

Peter didn't dare open his eyes. He knew what he'd find. Gareth staring at him. At them. And he refused to admit how much that excited him. Those clear blue eyes taking it all in, watching, darkening.

Arvel's mouth surrounded Peter's cock and sucked it down. Peter cried out, arching off the bed, but he couldn't keep the thought of the other man observing his pleasure out of his mind.

To hell with him. Let him watch. Let Gareth know how Arvel pleased him. Aye, *his* pet pleased Peter. So, so much.

"Goddamn!" Peter groaned as Arvel cupped and rolled his stones in their tight sac. Pleasure shot through Peter as if he'd been struck by an arrow.

Arvel worked him up and down, his lips sliding over the skin of his rod with loud slurping noises, his own heavy panting and a soft moan from... *Oh hell, was that Gareth?*

Peter opened his eyes and turned his head. Gareth indeed watched them, his eyes dark blue and slitted, his hand pumping along his shaft, enjoying, nay, reveling in Arvel's attack on Peter's cock.

Under Gareth's gaze, Peter's release burst from him in a shocking series of pulses swallowed down by Arvel, forcing Peter's eyes to shut, his back to arch, and his body to shudder.

"That was pure sweetness, Peter," Gareth whispered.

Arvel moved to Gareth, pulled his hand away, and swallowed Gareth's rod to the root. Gareth hissed, eyes rolling in his head. He reached out, wrapped his hand in Arvel's tresses, and fucked into his mouth.

“God, aye, suck me. I've missed you so much, pet,” he whispered as he tenderly stroked Arvel's shoulder.

Now it was Peter's turn to watch, and although he felt a glimmer of embarrassment, it soon changed into arousal. No matter that he'd just spent himself, his cock revived as he took in the sight of Arvel servicing Gareth and the big man's unmistakable pleasure.

Arvel stroked Gareth's hip with one hand. The other played with his own cock as he licked up and down the long thick length of Gareth's manhood. And Peter had to admit it was a fine, beautiful manhood.

Their lover sped up, his red head bobbing up and down Gareth's shaft until the big man cried out, hoarse and raw, with his completion. He relaxed into the bed, panting.

Arvel snuggled between them, his own cock still hard and stiff and so beautiful.

Gareth and Peter rolled toward him as if they were soldiers given an order.

“Now it's time for you, eh pet?” Gareth cupped Arvel's cheek, turned his face toward him, and took his mouth in a gentle kiss.

That left Peter to tend to Arvel's rod, and he didn't shirk at his duty. He spit into his hand, wrapped it around the younger man's slender cock, and worked him.

Arvel groaned, a soundless rumble in his chest, and he grasped both Peter and Gareth's arms. Gareth deepened his kisses, plundering the man's mouth, controlling and taking, drinking from Arvel's lips his nectar while Peter drove him on with his hand.

This is what he'd wanted from the first moment he'd thought of both Peter and Gareth together, pleasing him. Both his Hearts, using their mouths and hands and cocks to bring him to release.

Arvel's body throbbed with need. He'd given to his men, and now he enjoyed them, as was only fair.

Peter stroked him, driving him on toward the cliffs of release as Gareth's sweet kisses teased him. Almost too good to bear, this double pleasure.

He was the most fortunate of men. He had two lovers who wanted to share him without making him choose between them or fighting each other.

He'd seen how Gareth had looked at Peter and knew his Heart desired the other man, and he'd seen the glances from Peter to Gareth. Both men wanted each other but hesitated.

It would be up to Arvel to bring them together.

By the gods, it was a thing of beauty, Gareth on Arvel. Every nerve in Peter's body burned with the heat of desire and lust. He'd never known that just watching could be so arousing, could draw him up tight and make him yearn for release again.

Who would win the race to Arvel's completion? Gareth's mouth and tongue or Peter's skilled hands?

His grip tightened, flew faster, slick and quick over the velvet of Arvel's rod.

Gareth licked and sucked and tongued the man's mouth in a relentless drive.

Each of them demanded Arvel's release.

With a strangled gurgle against Gareth's mouth, Arvel came, and his cock spewed white lines over his belly, dripping down Peter's hand. Gareth pulled away, and their lover fell back, limp, chest heaving. His cock shrank as Peter eased his pressure off, slowed down, and then at last, released him.

He curled onto his side, facing Gareth, and snuggled under the big man's arm.

Peter rose, went to the washbowl, rinsed off his hands and then dried them. He gathered the quilt from the floor where it had slid, crawled into bed, and covered them all, moving tight to Arvel's back. He wrapped an arm over his waist.

Gareth sighed, and Peter heard all it told him. Contentment, satisfaction, and happiness. He'd recognized it in his own sigh.

Chapter Thirteen

The next morning, Gareth saddled his horse and rode into town for the things they'd need. Arvel and Peter stayed behind, Arvel to bake and Peter to chop wood to rebuild what had been used. Since Gareth had eaten at the lodge, once he reached the village, his only task would be to purchase what they needed at the shops and return home.

At the granary, he purchased two sacks of grain mixture for the horses that he tied over the back of his saddle, then added a small sack of oats and a larger one of ground flour for Arvel's breads. Just the thought of those crusty delights made him smile.

Gareth stopped at a greengrocer, nothing more than a barrow filled with vegetables sitting outside a small cottage. There he selected enough potatoes, turnips, carrots, and beans to last a long while, even with two large men eating. Arvel had a way with a stew, and there was game enough in the woods.

The villagers greeted him in welcome recognition, but no one asked about his business any longer. He'd been in and out of the village for nearly a year and early on had explained his comings and goings with half-truths. Aye, he was indeed a mercenary. Aye, he was passing through on his way to a new hiring. And no, he preferred to sleep in the woods under the stars than in a bed.

After he'd gathered the goods, he mounted his horse, the day's shopping strapped behind his saddle, and made his way back down the road. He passed the butcher's and, lured by the thought of fresh chicken, he reined his mount to the side of the road but decided the price too dear. They'd have to make do with hares and deer for now.

He and Peter would need to bring down a deer and dress it. There'd be enough meat to last the winter if they managed to find a large buck. If they were fortunate, they'd add another rack of antlers for the lodge's walls.

Taking his time, he searched the road in front and behind him, to ensure no one followed or watched him when he reached the path to the lodge. As the horse plodded along, his thoughts turned to Peter.

It had been just like Arvel to take to the man who'd rescued him. After all, he'd done the same with Gareth, hadn't he?

And there was no doubt about Peter's good looks or the strength of his body. Not tall but well built and broad shouldered, Peter had drawn Arvel to him like a bear to honey.

Now he wondered if Peter were the answer to his problem about leaving Arvel to earn his coin.

If Peter stayed with Arvel during his absence, then his sweet lover would have protection. Peter could go into the village, bypassing that gang of youths whose only pleasure came in bullying those weaker than them.

But if Peter stayed, it meant sharing his pet with another man. Not that it would be a hardship to share with Peter. Gareth liked the man and he couldn't deny his enjoyment in watching Peter with Arvel. No, that had been evident to Peter and to Arvel.

At first he'd been surprised about Peter and Arvel, but then intrigued by the man.

His intrigue seemed to be growing, just as Peter's attachment to Arvel seemed to grow, which set him to wondering about his own affections.

Fascination, interest, didn't equal love.

Gareth loved Arvel.

Peter was another matter.

* * *

Peter stacked the last of the wood on the pile. They'd have to find another downed tree or chop one down, but it had to be done. Arvel needed it, and for Peter that was enough of a reason. They could use one of the horses to drag it back, and with both men working, it wouldn't take much time.

Because Peter didn't really have much more time. The mission he'd been sent on should come above all else, even a lover's needs. He'd have to slip away soon, do another search of the area, and patrol the border again in search of Weathers's men.

He'd been thinking about their circumstances all morning as he swung the large ax. Gareth paid for certain goods, grain, hay, flour, and such, and hunted to bring in meat. But what if Gareth's fears came true and he didn't return from battle?

How would Arvel survive then?

What Arvel needed was to be self-sufficient. To grow his own food, perhaps a small vegetable garden and a coop of chickens for eggs and meat. He could even raise a pig or two, sell one, and slaughter the other.

Peter walked around the back of the lodge. The space between the woods and the building was large enough for chickens or a pen for a pig. He strode around it, taking in the surrounding glen.

More than enough room for a few rows of greens, and the opening of the glade would let in enough sun to help them grow. Surely Arvel had some experience with farm work, since he'd come from such a rural village.

Tonight, he'd speak with Gareth about his plans, see if the big man thought Arvel would be willing to do the work. It seemed that whatever Gareth said, Arvel agreed to.

Had Gareth told Arvel to give up Peter, Peter knew the young caretaker would have done so without question. Gareth loved, nay, adored Arvel, and he had no doubts that Arvel returned those feelings.

Peter sighed. To be loved by such a man as Gareth? It must be a comfort and one that Peter would never know. He'd found love once with his wife; he couldn't expect to find it again.

He found Arvel in the stables, tending his horse. For a little while, Peter watched as Arvel ran the brush over his mare's flank, his hand following, smoothing and petting as he worked.

With Arvel's back to him, Peter enjoyed watching the muscles of the man move under his thin shirt, his ass flex and shift, the quick toss of his head to move his hair from his face. A creature of beauty. A delicate thing Arvel was. A true treasure.

But not his.

Arvel belonged to Gareth, and Peter knew it. Knew that if Gareth hadn't been of the mind to indulge his pet, Peter would be long gone. Gareth was a paid mercenary, used to having his own way, used to being just as much a soldier as Peter, and God knew, if Arvel had been his, Peter wouldn't have been so generous toward Gareth.

Arvel stopped brushing and turned around. His face broke into a shy smile when he saw Peter leaning in the doorway. Dropping the brush to the ground, he moved toward Peter, hunger in his eyes.

Peter stepped inside, pulled the door closed, and shut out the bright light of day, bathing the quiet stable in shades of dark. Still, as he advanced, the light caught Arvel's hair, giving the illusion of throwing off red embers.

He reached Peter, and Peter exhaled. He'd been holding his breath as he watched his lover advance. *His* lover for now. *Their* lover later.

Ah, he's sought me out, has he?

His new lover, Peter, so shy and yet everything he desired he displayed on his handsome countenance. He looked up into Peter's eyes, trying to tell him with a look he had no reason to hold back.

Perhaps he needed encouragement? Perhaps with Gareth gone he feared to take what he wanted?

No fear. He'd make sure that Peter got his heart's desire, or at least his body's, if that large bulge in Peter's breeches gave him away. And such a delicious bulge it had been, and Arvel knew it would be just as good now.

He'd taken many a tumble in the hay of this stable with Gareth. His Heart could be taken with need anywhere, he'd learned, and he'd always answered that call. Now, it seemed, Peter called to him, and it was Arvel's turn to answer this new lover of his.

Arvel stopped in front of Peter, looked up from under fiery lashes, and questions lurked in his lavender eyes. Peter reached out, wrapped his hand around Arvel's neck, and pulled him in for a devouring kiss.

The younger man opened for him without request, submitting, inviting, and so delicious. Peter searched his mouth with his tongue, sweeping over Arvel's tongue, claiming and mining that dark cavern.

Peter pushed and Arvel stepped back until he came flush against the wall of the stable. Pressing his arousal into Arvel's belly, he made his desires known. Arvel did not deny him but reached between them to loosen his strings and drop the loose linens he'd worn to work in.

Underneath, he was naked.

God, it sent shivers down Peter's body from crown to toe and back again, a ripple of excitement and pleasure and anticipation. Then Arvel attacked Peter's strings, pushed the leather open and out of the way, and before Peter could take a breath, Arvel had his hand wrapped around Peter's cock.

Peter groaned. "Fuck, Arvel."

Arvel spit into his hand twice, then ran it over Peter's cock, slicking it, preparing it to enter his body. Then, as if he weighed no more than a feather, he

climbed Peter, wrapped his legs around Peter's waist, guided Peter's throbbing cock to his entrance, and sank down onto it.

Head flung back, Arvel shuddered soundlessly.

Peter nearly came, it was so beautiful.

But he held off, grabbed Arvel's ass in both hands, and began to thrust, pushing his lover against the wall, using it to keep them both upright. Arvel took Peter's head in both his hands and stared into his eyes, searching, hunting for something deep inside.

"So good, pet."

Arvel smiled and closed his eyes and offered Peter his throat. It was a slender column, much like his cock, light skinned, so transparent Peter could see the faint veins underneath and the large one that carried his life's blood.

Peter lowered his head and bit, nipping at Arvel's throat. Clinging to it, he sucked up a mark for Gareth to see. He'd know Peter had fucked Arvel while he was gone, know that Arvel had come to him, not waited for Gareth.

That thought made Peter slam hard into Arvel's ass, pumping his cock in again and again, each time deeper than the next, searching for that sweet bump that would send Arvel over the edge of the chasm and take Peter with him.

Peter angled his hips and thrust, impaling Arvel. Arvel bucked, arched, and sucked in a huge breath, telling Peter with his body that Peter had found the spot.

Another shudder took Arvel's body, and he spouted, white ropes painting his belly, smearing between them as their bodies rocked and pressed. God, it was so breathtaking.

Peter's stones rose tight to his body, and with a cry Peter erupted, filling Arvel's tight channel. They clung to each other as their breath returned, and Peter slid from Arvel's hot inner grasp. Peter lowered him to the ground as Arvel held on, arms snaked around Peter's neck.

He nuzzled, his lips pressing kisses on Peter's throat. He stepped away and smiled as he placed his hand, two fingers out, on his heart, then covered Peter's. Peter returned the gesture as they gazed at each other in the dim light of the closed stable.

"Gareth should return soon," Peter said.

Arvel grinned and nodded. He quickly found his linens, wiped off his belly, pulled them on, and tied them. He put the brush back on the ledge of the stall. Peter fastened his clothing, setting it all to right.

Taking Arvel's hand, Peter slid open the door and came face-to-face with Gareth.

And he didn't look happy.

Chapter Fourteen

“Arvel, pet, go inside.” Gareth's gaze never left Peter's. Arvel frowned, but he motioned to the horse. “Nay, I'll see to him. Go on, go.” With a gentle push, he ushered Arvel out of the door and then shut it.

Peter refused to back down from this contest of wills. He'd done nothing wrong. Arvel had offered himself willingly.

“Did your journey to the village go well?” Peter asked.

“Aye, it did.” He motioned to the sacks strapped to the back of his saddle. “Help me with these.”

Peter moved to the other side of the horse, and as the leather thongs were released, he caught the sacks and lowered them to the ground.

“Flour and grains.” Peter leaned against the horse's flank, never breaking eye contact with Gareth. The man might be larger than he, but he was a soldier also, and well skilled in the ways of a warrior.

If it came to a fight, he'd give a good showing.

Gareth loosened the last strap and heaved the sack to the ground. As he straightened, he narrowed his eyes at Peter.

“If you have something to say, say it.” Peter cocked an eyebrow at him.

Gareth's jaw worked. “I can't be concerned about Arvel each time I leave him with you.”

“You don't have to be. He's in good hands with me. I promise.”

“Too good, I fear.” For a moment, fear flashed across Gareth's face and it took Peter aback.

"You fear me?" Peter snorted. "You, who holds Arvel's heart in his hand?"

"Do I?" Gareth broke their connection as he turned away. "You took him while I was gone, didn't you?"

"Aye. He offered." Peter saw no reason to lie. "Are we not to share? I understood it to be so. If not, just let me know and I will make my bed elsewhere."

Gareth shook his head as if he didn't believe Peter.

"You would give him up?" Now Gareth pinned him again with a hard glare as if trying to see the truth buried deep inside Peter.

"Arvel doesn't own my heart, Gareth." Peter smiled. "He is lovely, aye. But I do not love him, nor does he love me."

"He wants you." Gareth jerked at the cinch to loosen it.

"Aye. But wanting isn't loving. That much I do know."

"Aye, it's not." He pulled off the saddle and slung it over the side of the stall. "I shouldn't be jealous, I know it, but I fear to lose him." His eyes darkened as he ran the brush over his mount's side. "It would be a loss too great to bear."

"I know well of such a loss." Peter picked up another brush and worked his side of the animal. "My wife died recently."

"Your wife?" Gareth froze, brush in the air. "A marriage of convenience?"

"No, I loved her. She died in childbirth." Peter continued brushing, this time avoiding Gareth's gaze.

"Indeed. I'm sorry for your loss, both the wife and child." He worked for a few minutes, then broke what had become a comfortable silence. "You haven't always felt an attraction to men?"

"Nay. Aye. I'm not sure." Peter shook his head and smiled. "As a youth, I had often thought about men but never took action. And when I met my wife, those thoughts vanished."

"Love, eh?"

"Love at first sight, just as all the poets and singers tell of."

“Was she beautiful?”

“Beautiful and kind. I could speak to her about anything.” Peter gazed into the dark corner of the stable. “We'd discuss matters for hours in the evening before going to our bed.”

“I'm not much for conversation.” Gareth shrugged.

“No surprise. You've chosen a deaf-mute for a lover.” Peter chuckled.

“Oh, but Arvel can talk! You should see him when he has much to say. All hands and arms and those eyes.” Gareth laughed, and Peter could see the warmth, the love the big man felt for their caretaker.

“Aye, I have seen him in such a way.” Peter put down the brush and stepped back as Gareth led the animal to its stall. After securing the gate, he returned to Peter's side.

“Peter, if Arvel is willing, I will abide by his choice. He is free to be with who he wants. If it's you or me or both.”

“Well and good.” Peter headed to the door of the stable. “And if you wish to be alone with him, let me know. I'm sure there is something I can find to occupy my time.” Peter paused. “For a few minutes.”

“A few minutes!” Gareth roared and advanced on Peter. “I'll have you know, you pup, I was fucking men against a wall long before you'd had your first maiden.”

Peter backed away. “Just so. You're older than me by many years, then. I'll be sure to give an old man time to rest and recover.” Now Peter teased.

Gareth's eyes glittered in the faint light and Peter's heart stuttered at the sight. He took another step back and hit the wall. There was nowhere left to go. And in two great strides, Gareth was on him, taking Peter by the wrists and pushing them against the wooden slats, using his body to pin Peter down. Peter's heart hammered in his chest, and he could feel Gareth's pounding just as hard.

“So I'm an old man, am I?” Gareth whispered as he pressed into Peter's body. There could be no denying Gareth's arousal; the evidence poked into Peter's belly.

Peter raised his chin to look the man in the eyes. "Aye, by your own admittance."

"And you but a pup?" Gareth's whisper washed over Peter, arousing him.

"I'm no pup, Gareth." The words should anger him, but Gareth's playful manner only incited Peter's lust. Fighting back, he ground his half-hard cock into Gareth, drawing a moan from the man.

So, he wasn't the only one whose blood burned.

Then Gareth pushed back, and Peter thought he would release into his breeches, but he managed to keep his wits and his orgasm from escaping. Gareth excited him in a way no man, except perhaps Drake, had done in a long time.

Peter wanted Gareth. Wanted his mouth, wanted to know his taste and how it felt to have the man take him, much as he took Arvel.

Master Gareth, indeed. That thought was too dangerous to be let known. It would give Gareth the advantage, and for now, Peter needed to stand on a level field with him.

If Peter wasn't careful, he'd be begging Gareth to fuck him, and if Peter could prevent it, he'd never let that happen. Share Arvel, aye. But to give himself to such a man, with Peter's growing feelings about him, would be too dangerous and feel far too good.

When his mission was completed, he'd return to Marden and his position as second, and it would be the last he'd see of Marden Lodge, Arvel, and the man he might fall in love with if he weren't careful.

Gareth looked down into dark eyes, and a hard tug ran from his chest to his cock. He wanted Peter. Wanted to watch Peter and Arvel together, making love. Wanted to take Peter as he took Arvel. Wanted both Peter and Arvel to pleasure him at the same time.

Good God, what was he thinking?

He loved his pet, and for Arvel's sake he'd share if it would please his love, but he'd never thought to take Peter for his own.

Could he? Have both Peter and Arvel?

Two men?

Gareth's heart thudded at the perverse and greedy thought. And although he had no idea why, he knew in his belly it would be good and right. The three of them a perfect triangle, bound together by their desires and love.

Yet Peter had admitted he didn't love Arvel. That was understandable. Peter had lost his wife and was not willing or not ready to give himself to another.

But what did Peter feel about Gareth? He'd only shown any interest in Arvel, made no advances to Gareth, nor encouraged any.

Until now.

Now that Gareth had Peter pinned beneath him, feeling his erection digging into Peter, and Peter's cock's answer.

A hint of Peter's beard showed dark along his rugged jaw. How very unlike Arvel's smooth complexion, pale skin, and delicate features. Traits he'd always admired.

No mistaking, Peter looked a man, in every sense of the word. Even the scent that rose from the man's body gave off a masculine mix of sweat and musk.

Peter's eyes burned with desire and lust, dark and wide, asking him to go farther in his advances. Pressing his advantage, his greater weight and strength, Gareth leaned down to take a kiss from those perfect male lips.

Peter turned his head, denying him a taste.

Gareth tried again, and Peter moved away. With both of his hands holding Peter down, he couldn't let go and steady Peter's head, clamp down on it, and take his kiss.

With a growl of frustration, Gareth tried again, but Peter raised his chin, and instead, Gareth's lips found his throat.

Warm and soft and...Gareth licked a line up to Peter's ear. Delicious. The man shuddered beneath him, hands clenched and straining against his hold.

“You marked my pet, and now I shall mark you as mine.”

Gareth lowered his head and bit down on Peter, just where neck and shoulder met, and sucked up a mark that had Peter whimpering and rubbing his cock against Gareth. The man held such power in his hands, and Peter felt it where they connected, a surge of lust that sent his body on edge.

He might deny it with his words, but his body couldn't deny its reaction. The sac around his stones pulled tight, and the tingling began, signaling his imminent release.

As if he knew how close Peter had come, Gareth laughed, pushed off, and let Peter's hands go. Peter slumped back against the wall, chest heaving, eyes half-closed, and cock throbbing.

“From now on, I think I shall call you sweetling.” Gareth flung open the door and strode out, his laughter echoing off the trees that surrounded the lodge.

Peter clapped a hand to his throat. It was still wet and hot where Gareth's mouth had attacked him. His knees weakened, threatening to drop him to the floor, but he stiffened them, and after several gulps of air, he left the stable, trailing after the man who'd nearly made him shoot with a rough handling and a near kiss.

And if he had let Gareth kiss him and he'd come, how would he ever live it down?

Sweetling?

It would be a cold day in hell when Peter let that happen.

No matter how badly he wanted it.

Chapter Fifteen

Peter carried the sack of flour and oats inside and placed it on the table.

Gareth lounged in the chair by the fire, Arvel's head on his thigh as he stroked his lover's long red hair. They seemed to be having a quiet moment together, no words or hands, just a tender petting and...a belonging.

Peter wondered if he'd ever belong to anyone again as he'd once belonged to his beloved wife. That kind of belonging rarely came at all, much less twice.

He belonged to Marden and its lands as long as Logan held his oath. That would have to be good enough for him. Longing for more was pointless and wishing a waste.

Giving the men more time, Peter busied himself with storing the flour in the cupboard with the other supplies. Perhaps tonight he'd speak to Gareth about his ideas for Arvel. He glanced at the small stack of wood by the hearth and went outside to bring in more.

Gareth heard the door shut as he ran his fingers through his love's silky hair and knew Peter had left to give him the opportunity to be with Arvel. Kind of Peter, really. And he wasn't sure if he'd have done the same had their roles been switched.

But he was alone with Arvel now, and there was nothing he loved more than just being with this sweet, kind person. Someone he surely didn't deserve, if his past were taken into account.

He'd not known much happiness in his life. Most of it he'd spent just trying to stay alive, fighting on the battlefields, tending wounds and such. Until he'd met

Arvel, protecting him from those stupid villagers who thought just because a man couldn't speak or hear he was useless, a creature to be scorned and pitied.

Gareth had never pitied Arvel. He'd seen the incredible beauty of the young man just barely out of his youth, and latched on to it as a babe clings on to its mother's breast.

He knew what good fortune looked like, and that day it had looked like a slender, young red-headed man lying in the dirt in the village square, being pummeled by mud, muck, and stones.

Arvel ran his hand over Gareth's thigh, the pressure turning hard and insistent, pulling Gareth from his thoughts. Arvel's reach grew nearer and nearer his crotch, where Gareth's once flaccid member now strained to be free.

With deft and eager fingers, Arvel loosened the strings of Gareth's breeches, splaying back the opening. He leaned forward and licked a line up the underside of Gareth's cock, igniting a wave of pleasure. Gareth groaned and leaned back in the chair, spreading his legs wider. Arvel moved closer as he worked the shaft with his clever tongue.

Arvel looked up at him, smiled, then swallowed the head, sucking on it until Gareth could barely stay still or keep his moans inside.

"Aye, my pet, that's it. Take me." His grip tightened in Arvel's tresses as he pushed him farther down his cock. And his lover responded by taking him deeper into his throat.

Now he watched as Arvel bobbed up and down like a cork on the end of a fishing string, taking Gareth to the heights of pleasure and ecstasy. No one had ever pleased him as Arvel did; no one had ever loved him so completely. And for that, he would give Arvel anything he wanted, even another man.

Peter. With the dark eyes and hair. He understood Arvel's interest, and the more time he spent in Peter's presence, the more his own interest in the man grew. What mission drew him here to the lodge? Gareth knew, despite Peter's tale about hunting for the duke, if the duke wanted to hunt, he'd be here himself.

As if Arvel knew his mind wandered, he cupped Gareth's stones and rolled them in his hand, bringing Gareth back to the present and his focus on the man kneeling between his legs.

Gareth closed his eyes and let Arvel's mouth work his rod, his tongue tickle and tease, the hard sucking bringing him closer to his release. The working of his sac with featherlight touches, building his arousal.

What if it were Peter on his knees, taking Gareth's cock in his mouth?

He groaned. Oh aye, that would be fine. And despite Peter's obvious reluctance, Gareth would have him. Gareth's stones pulled tighter at the thought, giving him warning his release would come far too soon.

"Peter," he whispered as he rose off the chair, hips thrusting into that warm, sweet mouth, dark eyes staring up at him, his hands wrapped in Peter's dark hair.

Gareth's release over took him, and he shouted as his cream pumped in hard spurts down the waiting throat. He gave a final sigh, opened his eyes, and stared into the face of the man who wasn't Peter.

Sweet Arvel, his pet, licked him clean, tucked him back in his breeches, and tied his strings. Gareth nearly choked on the guilt that rose in his throat.

Good God, he'd come thinking of Peter, not Arvel, and it had been so good.

Now Arvel slid onto his lap and gave him a kiss. Gareth tasted his own seed mixed with his lover's flavor.

Arvel leaned back and put his hand on Gareth's heart. Gareth drew him close and deepened the kiss. When they broke apart, Arvel stood and moved to the table to prepare their meal.

Gareth slumped back, closed his eyes, and wondered if Arvel had known, could tell, that he'd been thinking of Peter.

Arvel smiled. His plan was working. Gareth had returned from the stable with Peter's scent all over him. They'd had some encounter, but it hadn't ended in either man's release, that much he knew by the lack of the heady scent of cream.

But his Heart had sat on the chair by the fire, his hand rubbing the thickening of his member, and Arvel hadn't missed that.

What state had Peter been left in? Hard and wanting, if Arvel knew his Gareth.

Each step, each moment the men spent together, building their desire for each other, would lead to what Arvel had wanted—Peter, Gareth, and himself sharing one another completely.

When Peter returned, Arvel worked at preparing their evening meal, and Gareth had pulled off his boots, stretching his bare feet toward the fire. Good idea. Peter went to the chair, sat, and toed off his own boots.

He sat back with a sigh, sinking into the cushions of the chair.

"I've been thinking, Gareth."

"Dangerous, that."

"Aye, but this is about Arvel."

"Oh?"

"There is enough time before I leave to build a coop. Do you think Arvel would tend chickens?"

"Leave?" Gareth leaned forward, brows furrowed, then cleared his throat. "Chickens? Good thinking. He'd have eggs and meat."

"In time, I must return to Marden. We could get a small garden going. Just a few rows for him to work should be enough. He wouldn't have to go into the village so often when you're gone."

Gareth rubbed his chin. "Good ideas."

"Can you ask him?"

“Aye.”

Peter nodded and stared into the fire. Arvel cooked, moving back and forth between the hearth and the table. Gareth frowned.

“I suppose you'll be leaving once you've finished your...hunting, is it?”

“Aye.”

“And do you know when that will be? I've yet to see any of this game the duke has sent you for.”

“Perhaps I'll find my quarry soon. Perhaps more time will be needed.” He shrugged. “But I will have to go out again on the morrow. I may be gone a day or two.”

“On the same road I met you on?”

“Possibly.” Peter didn't want to give the man too much information. Logan had told him to keep his secret, and he meant to keep his promise to do so.

Gareth chuckled. “Then if you are to leave, we shouldn't waste much time tonight lingering over our meal.”

Peter turned from the fire and met Gareth's gaze. At the look, Peter's body burned, and his stomach fluttered with yearning and anticipation. Instead of dreading it, tonight Peter couldn't get to their bed soon enough. Peter smiled, flicking his gaze to Arvel, then back to Gareth.

Arvel pretended not to notice the way his lovers teased each other.

Perhaps tonight would be the night.

His cock stiffened at the thought of both his men. Of Gareth taking Peter.

That he would dearly love to watch, just as he watched them now, strutting before each other like two roosters.

He hid the smile on his face as he turned back to his work.

Gareth spread his legs wider, evidence of his growing arousal outlined in his leather breeches, and he leaned back against the chair, the very picture of assuredness and confidence.

Peter almost reached out and touched his knee, but instead he held on tight to the arms of the chair, refusing to let Gareth have the victory. To his great relief, Arvel motioned them to the table to take the evening meal.

They spoke of little until Gareth cleared his throat, touched Arvel on the shoulder, and got his attention.

“Do you know about chickens?” Arvel focused on Gareth's mouth forming the words he'd never hear. Arvel's mouth turned down. Then he made a motion with his hands to repeat.

“Chickens? Do you know about taking care of chickens?” Gareth spoke slower and clearer.

Arvel nodded once.

Gareth pointed to him. “Peter thought he might build you a coop, and you could raise some chickens. Would you like that?”

Arvel broke into a wide grin, and nodding, looked at Peter. He reached out, took Peter's arm, and gave it a squeeze.

“I think he's pleased,” Gareth said.

“I'll start the coop when I return.” Peter smiled at Arvel's happy face.

They ate their meal and spoke of starting the garden. Arvel seemed pleased about it, and Peter felt as if he'd done some good, giving Arvel these means of surviving.

One look at Gareth's face, and Arvel knew his lover hungered for him. Let him hunger. Arvel could tease Gareth just as much as Gareth teased Arvel. He'd taught him much this past year together.

Arvel took his time cleaning up the plates and the stew pot, wiping down the table, drawing out going to their bed. With each new task his Heart grew more impatient.

Arvel knew he could push only so far before Gareth would break and demand Arvel's services. Then would come the hard loving Arvel desired, being taken again and again until his lover, completely spent, fell into a deep sleep.

He picked up a boot and rubbed his cloth over the toe, to give it a proper shine, ignoring his lover's growing aggravation.

At last, Gareth roared, grabbed him, slung him over his shoulder, and carried him away. Arvel pretended he was upset as he beat on Gareth's back and motioned back to the work he'd left undone.

Peter followed, laughing at them both.

When Gareth tossed him onto the bed, Arvel worked quickly to remove his clothing, and all traces of his Heart's irritation had fled. Arvel's heart soared just as the falcon did, swooping and diving on the breeze.

Peter and Gareth moved just as swiftly to divest themselves of clothing, both of them anxious to join him.

Chapter Sixteen

Caelin stumbled past the stone marker. *Marden?* His father veered left at the crossroads, the opposite direction of their manor, and headed toward his liege lord's village. Caelin hurried to catch up with his father's mount.

"Father? We go to Marden?" He panted as he held steady with the horse.

His father made a face and nodded but refused to speak. Caelin ran through the possibilities for this change in their journey home. Not that he was looking forward to arriving or the beating his brother would give him, but what plan could his father have? Certainly, whatever it was, it would be to rid himself of Caelin.

There was a church at Marden but no abbey, so it couldn't be to place him again in a holy order. The village was large enough, so perhaps his father sought to find him employment.

After all, he was a fair scribe.

But they passed through the village and turned toward Marden Castle.

Caelin looked up at the tall gray walls that rose in the near distance.

The castle? What business could his father have there? It wasn't the time to make his liege payment to the duke, and besides, his father had brought neither the coin nor the goods to pay his yearly debt.

Well, if it meant halting this trek, getting off his sore feet and out of the hot cassock he wore, he welcomed the castle.

Once they reached the gates, his father asked to enter and was allowed in. Caelin followed. By now, he was in complete disarray. The hem of his robe had been splattered and dragged through mud and muck, his hair had plastered to his head,

and sweat burned in the wounds on his face. He could feel the caked blood on his chin and neck.

An armsman led the way into the keep and announced them to the duke's man.

Before Caelin could catch his breath, they were brought in front of the duke as he sat by his hearth.

Caelin's father bowed, fell to his knee, and introduced himself but not Caelin.

"What brings you to Marden, Lord Holdess? It's been many months since you've graced our keep." The duke smiled, eyes expectant and piercing.

"I come on a matter most delicate, Your Grace." His father turned slightly to acknowledge Caelin. "About my son."

The duke's gaze fell on Caelin, and he couldn't breathe. The duke was one of the most handsome men he'd ever seen. Long blond hair, green eyes, well formed. And as he observed the duke, those green eyes narrowed, his mouth turned down, and a hard, cold look came over him.

Caelin swallowed.

Oh God, he knew. Somehow the duke knew. His father had brought him here to be thrown to the duke, to expose his sins and have him killed. The bones in Caelin's legs turned to soft clay, and he staggered backward, throwing his arms up over his face to hide his shame.

"What evil is this? Why is this man so marked?" The duke pushed out of his chair and strode toward Caelin.

Caelin cast glances at his father, begging him wordlessly to help him. Not to do this. His shame was great, but did it warrant death?

He fell to his knees and clasped his hands together and did the only thing he knew to do, and that was pray.

"The priests at the abbey put him out, Your Grace."

“Did they do this?” The duke caught Caelin's chin in his hand and pulled it up as he stared down at the wounds and his broken face.

His father stuttered. “He's not fit to serve God, Your Grace.”

“Not fit? Is he a devil? Demon?” Duke Marden stared at Bryon Holdess and demanded an answer.

“Nay, none of those. But he is a sinner, Your Grace.” His father's voice went soft and quiet as if whispering the shame would make it better.

“Sinner?” The duke studied Caelin's face again. “What sin?”

His father's jaw worked as he waited for Caelin to speak the coarse truth.

“Men,” Caelin whispered. “I...” He choked and let the tears he'd been holding back flow.

“Leave him with me, then, Lord Holdess. I'll see to him.” The duke dropped Caelin's chin as if to touch it burned him, and he strode back to his chair.

His father glanced at Caelin, then away. He bowed. “Thank you, Your Grace. May God bless you.”

“And you, Lord Holdess.” The duke waved him off, and without a look back, Caelin's father exited the hall, leaving Caelin behind to whatever fate the duke saw fit.

He would be killed. Flung off the walls of the castle perhaps? His belly sliced open, his genitals cut away? Burned, even? All known punishments for a man lying with another man.

Caelin mashed his eyelids together and continued to pray for his damned soul.

A hand fell on his shoulder.

“What is your name, young Holdess?” a soft, gentle voice asked.

He opened his eyes, still praying, lips still forming the words, and looked up at his duke. Although he'd never sworn allegiance, he was bound to the duke through his father. If he had been a first son, he'd have given oath a few years ago, when his brother did.

“Caelin,” he whispered.

“Fear not, Caelin Holdess. You are safe here.” The duke smiled down at him.

“Your Grace?” What could this mean? “Safe? But, my father said... I told you... You said...” he sputtered into silence.

“I know of the evil your father fears, and for my part, I do not count it so.” He shook his head and offered Caelin his hand. “Rise, Caelin. Come join me by the fire, and we shall speak.”

“Aye, Your Grace.” Caelin gathered his robe up and stood to follow the duke. The duke pointed to a chair, and Caelin sat. Perhaps the duke didn't fully understand his sin.

“Now. What skills have you? Surely the holy fathers taught you something during your time there.” The duke wore an odd smile.

“They taught me many things. I am a fair scrivener, Your Grace. The abbot said I had a steady and clear hand,” he mumbled without moving his lips. To speak too broad pulled at his wounds.

“Good. And do you have knowledge of history?”

“I do.” Caelin had no idea where these questions were leading and still couldn't understand why he wasn't being locked away in some tower or dungeon.

“Well and good.” The duke nodded. “Then you shall stay here and teach my boys, Tomas and Joss. They have need of a tutor; too long have they run the castle in idle pursuits.”

“Tutor?” Caelin sat back, blinking at the duke. Had he heard wrong?

“Aye. For now. We'll see what other services you can offer later, young Holdess.” The duke called for a servant.

A young woman came to them. “Aye, Your Grace.”

“See to young Caelin. Have the healer look at those wounds, have him fed and given clean clothes, and prepare him a room.”

“Aye, Your Grace.” She curtsied and jerked her head at Caelin to follow her.

“Thank you, Duke Marden.” Caelin had better words right then, but they were from deep inside his heart. “Thank you.”

The duke nodded, smiling, and waved them away with his hand.

Stunned, Caelin trailed after the servant with only one or two looks over his shoulder at the duke, sitting in his chair, legs stretched to the fire, chin resting in his hand. The duke had surprised him, both in reaction and action. Why would the duke be so generous with him?

Had his father been wrong? Could the duke see past the scars on his face and his broken nose? If he had, then he was a most remarkable man and one who fascinated Caelin deeply.

* * *

Peter pulled Arvel to him, and his lover offered up his mouth to be kissed. Sweet, warm, and willing, Arvel opened to Peter and allowed him to sweep his tongue around. Their tongues touched and caressed. Then Arvel sucked Peter's tongue hard, keeping it in his possession.

On the other side of Arvel, Gareth caressed Arvel's hip, his hand gliding over soft, pale skin, coming to rest on his slender, erect cock. Arvel groaned into Peter's mouth as Gareth stroked him and Peter deepened his kiss.

Gareth wrapped his arm around Arvel and pulled him tight to his chest, bringing Peter with him as they kissed. His cock lodged in Arvel's valley, his hand worked Arvel's rod, and he had a perfect view of Peter and Arvel kissing.

God, Arvel was beautiful. Was this what he looked like when Gareth kissed him? Is this what Peter would look like? Gareth thrust slow and steady against Arvel's ass, rubbing his cock up and down the silky cleft.

Arvel moaned, broke the kiss, and turned his head to offer his mouth to Gareth.

Peter leaned back, giving Gareth room, and Gareth took his advantage, plunging his tongue into Arvel's mouth to claim his lover. He kept pumping Arvel's rod, loving the feel of smooth, hot skin in his hand.

"Beautiful," Peter whispered.

Gareth broke the kiss and smiled. "Aye, our little pet is a beauty."

"He's ours?" Peter gazed into Gareth's eyes.

"Aye, ours. Yours and mine for as long as he wishes it so."

Arvel looked from man to man, then reached up and took each of them by the back of the neck and pulled them together. Gareth's breath puffed across Peter's face, his lips just a short span away, tempting and sly and ready.

Peter drew closer, unable to resist, unable to fight against Arvel's demand that his two lovers be lovers. Could he? Could he share with Gareth as he'd shared with Arvel?

Gareth waited, afraid to move lest he frighten Peter off. Despite Arvel's insistence, it was Peter who would rule the way this night went. If they would become, here and now, all three lovers, not just two men sharing a third.

He wanted Peter, but did Peter want him?

His gaze dropped to Peter's mouth, then flicked up to Peter's eyes. They burned with such a passion, it took Gareth aback. He'd handled Arvel's innocent lust, but could he quench Peter's more experienced desires?

There was only one way to find out.

Gareth surged forward, taking Peter in a hard kiss. Expecting Peter to pull away, Gareth enjoyed it as Peter leaned deeper into the kiss. Firm lips, similar yet unlike Arvel's, cushioned his lips, and he brushed his tongue over them to beg admission.

Peter opened with a soft moan, and Gareth entered, all the while still stroking Arvel's cock. The two larger men, strong and bold soldiers, let the younger, weaker

guide and command them. It excited Gareth to know that Peter had given in to what had to be.

Gareth and Peter would be lovers. His heart sang at the knowledge, yet he knew by the stiffening of Peter's body that if he pressed too hard, too far, too soon, he'd lose Peter. So he broke the kiss and returned to Arvel as if nothing had happened.

Peter gasped as Gareth pulled away. Such a kiss he'd never experienced. Gareth had taken him, sure and swift, and he had been helpless to resist. Hadn't wanted to resist it, hadn't wanted to miss learning how the man tasted.

Delicious.

Peter wanted more but refused to be seen as needy or less of a man in Gareth's eyes. Peter was Gareth's match in rank, skill, and manhood, and if they were to be lovers, it would be on equal ground. There was no other way for it to be.

But now, the two men focused on pleasuring their pet, their Arvel. As Gareth stroked, Peter licked a path from Arvel's neck down to his nipple and lapped at it. Arvel arched his back and pushed his hardened nub into Peter's mouth, demanding more.

Peter chuckled. "Our pet demands."

"I see. He is like that, I have to warn you. He knows what he wants and isn't afraid to tell you." Gareth bit down on Arvel's shoulder and sucked up a large mark.

Arvel pushed Peter over, found Peter's cock, and swallowed it. Peter cried out in surprise and pleasure at the bold move. Gareth moved with Arvel, hand still wrapped around his rod, and leaned over Arvel's back.

God, it was the most exciting thing to watch Arvel and Gareth.

"Fuck him, Gareth. I want to watch." Peter's voice rasped. He knew if anything could make him reach release, it would that glorious sight.

Gareth dropped his hand and moved around to kneel behind Arvel, who was on his knees, servicing Peter's cock.

"Let me watch him suck you first. Just awhile." Gareth shuddered as he sat back on his haunches and stroked his own prick. It leaked, signaling its readiness and eagerness to find its home deep inside his lover.

But watching Arvel bob up and down on Peter's cock? Goddamn, he'd never seen anything better. Arvel pulled up, leaving Peter's shaft wet and moist from his saliva, then plunged back down making it disappear only to pull up again, his bared teeth sliding over the mushroom head.

Arvel wiggled his ass at his Heart, trying to incite him. This is what he'd waited and longed for—both men at the same time. He reached behind and slapped his own ass, telling Gareth this was what he wanted. Arvel pulled one cheek aside to show him just where to put his rod and was rewarded by Gareth's hand smoothing over his other cheek, then a sharp pinch.

Sucking on Peter's cock had sent his stones all hard and tight to his body, and now the thought of being fucked by his Heart brought his member to full ache. He pulled even harder on that slicked rod, its plump head and soft skin sliding over and over his lips.

If Gareth didn't fuck him soon, he'd explode, spill his cream all over the bed, and would miss the feel of his channel all around his lover's rod. He didn't want that to happen.

With a last look, Gareth spit into his hand, smeared it over his cock, and placed his cock against Arvel's ass. He pushed in as Arvel pushed back in that hungry way of his.

Just the way Gareth loved.

“Christ, he's so tight.” Gareth stared across Arvel's back, into Peter's eyes.

“Aye, he is that, I give you.” Peter nodded, his gaze flicking between Arvel sucking his cock and Gareth behind Arvel, fucking him. Gareth's arousal built to dizzying heights, as if he stood at the very top of a mountain and looked over the edge.

The world spun.

Chapter Seventeen

He closed his eyes as his fingers dug into Arvel's hips. He ground his cock deeper, feeling the first spasm of Arvel's tunnel squeeze him. He stroked his hand down Arvel's spine as the man shuddered his release.

"Ah fuck, pet," Gareth cooed and opened his eyes in time to watch his partners fall over the same edge.

Peter groaned, his head falling back, exposing his throat, pulse pounding along the thick vein as Arvel brought him to completion.

Gareth thought him quite handsome in the throes of lust and satisfaction. How would he look if it were Gareth who took him there? But Peter wouldn't allow that. He'd barely allowed the kiss, and that had only been with Arvel's urging.

Peter slid down against the head of the bed, Arvel collapsed between his legs, pulling away from Gareth, who let the younger man escape his grasp. With a playful slap on Arvel's ass, Gareth flopped on his side, next to the two men.

"Well done, my pet, well done." Gareth stroked Arvel's hair as it cascaded over his shoulders and back. Arvel turned his head to look up at him and smiled.

Peter joined in the petting. His fingers grazed Gareth's. Moments dragged by as they worked in unison, combing Arvel's long red hair, fingers tangling with each other until, before Peter knew it, they were touching, caressing each other.

Tentative at first, he ran his hand over Gareth's arm, up to his shoulder, then back again, feeling the strength of his muscles, so unlike Arvel's. Gareth's body was a man's body, firm of flesh, battle hardened, so much like his own. Even the man's

skin felt different to Peter's touch. Where Arvel's was soft and smooth, Gareth's was rough, covered in fine hairs, contoured with muscle and sinew.

Gareth allowed the touch, and Peter wondered if the man held his breath. Perhaps he feared a wrong move. Peter would not be frightened off.

Arvel slept with Peter's legs surrounding him.

Peter looked up into Gareth's steady blue gaze.

"Your touch is comforting."

"Good. I wish nothing more." Peter nodded, continuing the stroke, moving over Gareth's shoulder, and then sweeping down his chest.

"Do you now?" Gareth sighed and rolled onto his back, presenting his body for Peter's ministrations. Although it had just been sated, Gareth's cock stirred and thickened while Peter's remained flaccid.

"Indeed. However, I fear I do more." Peter cocked an eyebrow at the growing erection coming to life amid Gareth's blond curls.

Peter let his fingertips flutter over a hard nipple, circle it, and then move on, as Gareth arched into the touch.

"I fear you mean to, sweetling." The big man gasped.

"Shall I stop?"

"Nay. Amuse yourself." Gareth waved his hand at Peter.

Peter smiled and traced the path of blond hair that spread across Gareth's chest, down his center, to his belly, then skirted the thick member laying to the side of his navel.

Gareth groaned softly in a deep inhale and exhale as he closed his eyes. His enjoyment caused Peter to linger awhile longer as he mapped the mercenary's body.

A drop of clear fluid swelled, dropped, and stretched from slit to skin, drawing Peter's attention back to the cock. Thick, not overly long but well veined, it was a thing of beauty, much like his own rod.

His was longer and about the same thickness. Not as veined, perhaps, but just as well formed. Nothing to be ashamed of, as they all lay naked.

Peter lifted his hand, breaking contact with Gareth, and lay back on the pillow. He'd opened the door. Now to see if Gareth would step through.

Gareth missed Peter's touch. He'd drowsed, letting the feel of skin on skin lull him into relaxation as deep as any hard massage. Now he longed for it back.

Aroused, yet he'd almost fallen asleep. And that wouldn't do. Not for Peter the brave, who'd gone a few steps toward the place they'd both sworn not to go.

Would Peter be the braver man? Would Gareth prove himself the coward?

Peter gazed at him, waiting, with one arm thrown over his head.

Gareth ran a fingertip down Peter's limp member, and it came to life, filling and growing as if it were a flower opening to the world.

Peter moaned, so, so soft. Gareth stroked his way up and down the shaft, teased the slit, dabbing his fingertip into the pearl that hung there.

"I see you are not immune to such a touch, sweetling." Gareth winked and held up the finger as proof.

"A body reacts. Nothing more." Peter shrugged.

"Does it now?" Gareth leaned closer, closing the distance between them, eyes intent on the dark ones watching his every move.

Peter wrapped his hand around Gareth's neck, his fingers massaging the muscles there. Soothing yet exciting.

He pulled Gareth to him, and Gareth let himself be drawn into the kiss.

Peter's lips, not as full as Arvel's, still cushioned his. He ran his tongue over them, begging entry.

Peter opened with a moan.

Gareth plunged in but moved in slow, deliberate strokes, showing Peter just what he'd do with his cock if given a chance.

Peter buried his fingers in Gareth's hair as his other hand splayed across Gareth's chest, trapping his nipple beneath it.

Arvel shifted, rolled over, and forced them apart.

Peter panted, eyes dark and wide and lips reddened.

Gareth swore softly, glancing down at their lover, who now climbed over Peter's leg and snuggled between the two of them. He looked across at Peter, but he'd already fallen back onto the bed and pulled the quilts over them.

The light of the hearth flickered, sending dancing shadows on the walls of the lodge. Arvel's soft snore filled the night air.

Peter sighed.

Gareth thought two days might just be a very long time.

* * *

Caelin looked up from the book and watched as Logan and Drake crossed the great hall. He'd tracked the duke's movements every opportunity he'd had, intent on learning all he could about the man who'd saved him.

All he'd found out was that where he found the duke, Drake, master of arms, was sure to be near. They were always together.

He'd never get a moment alone with the duke. And even if he did, what would the duke want with a scarred man such as himself? A man who'd been removed from the abbey for being a distraction. Well, he was no distraction now.

He sighed as he watched the men climb the stairs to the second floor. Perhaps to finish business in the duke's office. He'd never been in the room, but he'd seen inside once when he'd passed in the hall to retrieve the boys for their lesson.

And the boys? What of them? Joss belonged to Drake and Tomas to the duke, but they acted as if they were brothers and the closest of friends. Inseparable except when Joss tagged after his father or they worked with him on their sword work.

Drake was a large man, scarred and dangerous looking. Caelin had feared him at first, but that had worn off little by little as he'd watched the man speaking with

the duke. His easy laugh and his obvious devotion to the duke drew Caelin in and had him wondering if his visage frightened anyone. It hadn't the boys, but then they were used to Drake.

Neither of the men had women. At least none that he'd seen.

"Caelin? Was that correct?" Joss asked, bringing Caelin's attention back to the book and the boys.

"Say again." He tried to sound like the monks who'd taught him.

Joss sighed and leaned over the book, his finger tracing the words. "The capitol of France is Paris." He looked up for approval.

"Very good, Joss." Caelin nodded.

The boys smiled back and elbowed Tomas. "See. I knew I'd gotten it right."

Tomas stuck out his tongue, making a face. "I can still read better than you."

"But you already knew how. I'm new at it."

"Well, I learned faster than you." Tomas crossed his arms.

Joss opened his mouth, then closed it and nodded. "I'll wager you did, Tomas. You're very smart."

Tomas's face burst into a huge grin, and both boys bent over the book again, each eager to outread the other.

Caelin counted himself most fortunate to land in such a place with two apt students and a duke he couldn't stop thinking of.

Chapter Eighteen

Peter said good-bye again to the two men of the lodge. This time he hugged and kissed Arvel, then faced Gareth, a wry smile on his lips.

"So, God speed your hunting." Gareth smirked as he looked over the horse's tack.

"Thank you. I'm sure he will."

"Bring us back something for Arvel to cook this time. A tasty hare, perhaps." Gareth gave Peter's cinch a final tug to check it and stepped aside.

"And what will you do while I'm away?"

"Thought I might break ground on the garden."

Arvel, eyes trained on them men as he read their lips, smiled and clapped his hands.

"Perhaps I'll bring back a chicken or two to start the flock."

"They'll need a rooster, I think." Gareth smiled.

"Nay, with all the strutting around you do, a rooster would be pointless," Peter teased. He halted, one hand on the saddle, one on the reins, and looked into Gareth's eyes.

"You have strutted about the lodge yourself, sweetling." Gareth stepped so close their chests touched. Out of the corner of his eyes, Peter caught Arvel fading back, giving them space.

Peter dropped his hand from the saddle, Gareth threw his arms around Peter, and they clasped each other tight, heads resting on shoulders. "Keep safe, Gareth. You and our pet," Peter whispered.

Then they parted. Gareth brushed his lips over Peter's and stepped back to join Arvel. Arvel slipped under his arm and nestled there.

Peter led his mare to the break in the woods and down the path to the road.

Another patrol of the foothills. Another two days of solitude and quiet. No one to tease him, no one to try his patience. No sweet Arvel to cook his meals and tend his horse and boots.

No Gareth.

* * *

Arvel busied himself about the lodge while Gareth spent the morning sitting in the chair, frowning. He didn't know what had come over his lover, but he grew tired of it.

Gareth needed work. He'd seen this melancholy behavior before and knew him to be a man of action. Fighting, riding, and physical work were needed.

And what Arvel needed was a garden. Gareth and Peter had promised.

They ate their meal, and to Arvel's irritation, Gareth headed back to the chair.

Arvel shook his head, grabbed his lover's hand, and dragged him outside. There, he pointed to the ground, then ran off to the stables and returned with two shovels.

"It's the garden, is it?"

Arvel nodded and looked up at the sky, finding the sun. His mouth quirked along with his eyebrow at their location. He pushed the shovel into Gareth's hands and wandered off to the other side of the lodge to search for the best spot to site the garden patch.

Just there, on the sunny side of the lodge, would do well. Lots of sun for most of the day, and away from the horses.

He halted, pushed his shovel into the ground, and grinned.

Gareth followed, dragging the spade in the dirt. "There? That's where you want the garden?"

With a nod, Arvel stood back, arms crossed, and leaned on the shovel.

"We'll have to turn the soil first, I think."

Gareth marked off the bed, then broke the ground. Arvel joined him, and together they worked on the plot until the sky darkened.

"It can't be night," Gareth muttered as he halted and looked upward.

The clouds were dark gray, and a gust of wind picked that exact moment to blast down on them. Arvel rubbed his arms, his hair whipping in the wind.

"Best we get inside, pet. Storm's coming." Gareth shepherded the younger man inside the lodge just as the first great drops of rain marked their fall from heaven in the dirt.

They'd reached the front door, when Arvel halted, turned back, and dashed to the tools they'd left behind.

"Come back, pet!" Gareth yelled, knowing he couldn't be heard. He shrugged, and ran out to help Arvel pick up the shovels and take them to the stables. They were soaked to the skin but spent the time to wipe down the metal tools so they wouldn't rust, then stood in the doorway, watching the rain fall.

"It's not going to let up soon."

Arvel stared out at the gray glade and wrapped his arms around himself. He glanced up at Gareth and winked, then jerked his head toward an empty stall. Fresh hay lined it, and Gareth didn't need any more than that suggestion.

"Take off your clothes or you'll catch your death." He reached for his lover and began peeling the wet clothing off him. Not until he'd gotten Arvel naked did he remove his own clothes.

Arvel opened the door to the stall, pulled a blanket off the rail, and tossed it on the hay. Then he fell down on it, arms over his head, and smiled up at Gareth.

“God, pet, you know just how to tempt me.” Gareth growled, then fell to his hands and knees and crawled over Arvel's prone body, his cock dragging along his lover's thigh.

Arvel reached up, locked his arms around Gareth's neck, and pulled him down into a kiss. Oh, he loved his pet's eagerness, his desire, and his love. Aye, Arvel loved him. Despite the fact that he shared his body with Peter, Arvel held Gareth most dear, and Gareth never doubted that.

Gareth gazed into Arvel's lavender eyes, and every ounce of love the man sent his way struck him through the heart. Gareth placed his hand over his heart, then moved it to Arvel's chest. Beneath it, the smaller heart beat strong and steady.

“My pet. I love you,” Gareth whispered. No need to proclaim in loud voices, to shout or declare it. Arvel's gaze never left his face, and he read each of the words.

Arvel mimed the words back to him, pointing to himself, then to Gareth.

Gareth gathered him into his arms and pulled him close. Their bodies, still damp, warmed against each other as skin met skin and hands whisked away the drops of rain still clinging to them.

Arvel pressed up, his cock poking Gareth's thigh. Gareth chuckled. “Aye, I know. You're needing.”

Arvel nodded, a delightfully wicked grin on his face, charming Gareth as always. He rolled off Arvel but leaned over to run his tongue over his lover's chest, swirled it around one nipple, then the next, as Arvel buried his hands in Gareth's hair, urging him, guiding him to the next place on his body that needed slaking.

And Gareth allowed him to lead, as his tongue made short work of tracking down that smooth, hairless belly tasting of salt and rainwater and Arvel's own scent. He was the most delicious man Gareth's had ever tasted, and so he wanted more.

Arvel's hands pushed him lower, to the slender rod waiting for his touch. It leaked, and pearls of excitement dotted Arvel's belly. Gareth licked one, then

another, tasting a sweet saltiness, inhaling Arvel's musk as he inched closer to the fat head that beckoned him.

Gareth ran his tongue over the cap, licking up all the drops he could find, and Arvel arched, fingers clenching, nipples so hard they appeared sharp to the touch.

His pale body flushed, and Gareth swore he could hear the pounding of his lover's heart. Perhaps the sound came from the rush of blood filling Arvel's cock; he didn't know.

But he knew if he took it in his mouth, he'd feel the pulse, the steady beat of Arvel's heart in the most intimate of places. He'd done this a few times when he'd been so driven by lust he lost his reserve and his reticence.

This would be another of those rare times.

He wrapped his hand around the base of Arvel's shaft and felt the sharp intake of breath. Glancing up, he looked into his pet's wide eyes, filled with hope and desire. Then he lowered his head, opened his mouth, and took him in.

Arvel bucked, his mouth open in a soundless cry, his fingers twisting the coarse wool horse blanket as Gareth sucked, bobbing up and down on that sweet, slender cock. It didn't fill his mouth, but it reached the back of his throat, and he nearly choked. He pulled up a little and continued taking him, enjoying the way Arvel's body told him everything his voice couldn't.

Gareth had never let Arvel release while in his mouth, but now, unexplained, the desire for it coursed through Gareth. He had to taste his lover's cream, know it, memorize it as if it were the last time he'd have the chance to do so.

He cupped Arvel's tight sac, rolling the stones in his fingers, tugging and caressing them until they pulled tight to Arvel's body. Arvel arched, froze, and emptied.

Gareth's mouth filled with warm, bitter fluid, and for a moment he thought he might spit it out or choke. Then he closed his eyes and swallowed it down. It seemed as if his lover would never stop shooting, but Gareth continued to swallow, taking all the man had to offer him.

Once Arvel slumped to the ground, his cock softening and retreating within its sheath, Gareth let him go. The big man fell back as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Both men lay panting and naked on the blanket.

Gareth stroked his own cock, seeking some relief in the touch. He'd been incredibly aroused but hadn't gone to completion. Now he ached for it. Ached to be in Arvel's body. Inside his tight channel. To take was what his.

Arvel sighed, a slow rise of his chest, then a slower sinking, and rolled over on his belly. He placed his head on his arms, pushed his ass upward until he was on his knees, and presented himself. Ready.

Gareth watched.

Arvel reached around, took one of his cheeks in hand, and pulled it aside, showing Gareth he was more than ready. He ran his finger over his own hole and bit his bottom lip as he slipped the tip inside.

"Need me in there, do you?" Gareth growled.

Arvel's eyes begged him, shuttering in pleasure as he fucked himself. He didn't need to say, "Need you. Now. Fuck me," for Gareth to know what his pet wanted.

Gareth knelt behind him, spit into his hand a few times to coat his cock, then pressed his hard, swollen rod to the warmth of Arvel's opening and pushed inside with a grunt.

Arvel pushed back, wiggling in pleasure.

Gareth smiled. His pet was no better than a slut, always wanting to be fucked. Always ready, eager, willing. It excited Gareth greatly, and there was nothing left to do but give Arvel what he wanted.

A good, hard fucking.

Holding tight to Arvel's hips, Gareth thrust into him. No grace or tenderness, just pure animal lust took over Gareth on this pleasure ride. Arvel was his steed and he the master, and he'd ride Arvel until he could ride no more.

Their bodies sang, slap of skin on skin, moist sounds of cock coming and going. Gareth's grunts, heavy breathing, rang through the stable.

"That's it, pet. Take me."

Gareth panted and pumped.

"Fuck, you're so damn tight. So hot. God, I love fucking you."

Slamming into his lover's tunnel, he showed no mercy.

"Love that you love it."

Arvel rose up on all fours and met each of his thrusts with his entire body. It drove Gareth beyond his limit, and he groaned as he held back his release, wanting it to be so powerful he'd think he might just die from it.

"Love watching you being taken by Peter. You're so beautiful. So lovely." He stroked Arvel's back. "That excited me, pet. Makes me hard and aching."

Gareth lost himself in their rutting, crying out, talking to himself, unable to stop the flow of words or his arousal.

"I want to watch Peter fuck you. I want to fuck Peter while he takes you."

At last, he let it go, let the sensation building in his body, along his spine, deep in his stones, explode from him in a series of frantic, wild thrusts, all rhythm lost as he emptied and shook and cried out Arvel's name.

Chest heaving, he pushed Arvel down, leaving his cock dripping, and pushed apart the cheeks of his lover's ass. White cream dripped from the opening, proof of his filling that sweet, tight channel to overflowing.

Taken with an uncontrollable urge that welled up from deep inside, Gareth leaned down between those globes of flesh and licked his own cum from Arvel's ass.

Arvel rose up on his elbows, turned to look at him, and shuddered as Gareth cleaned him.

When Gareth finished, Arvel dropped his face to his hands and wept.

Chapter Nineteen

Peter plodded along the road. Tired, saddle sore, he'd spent another two days of pointless searching. He ran through his options, or actually Duke Weathers's options.

If he were the duke and he wanted a way in, what would he do?

Peter chewed the inside of his cheek.

He'd send a spy, not a troop. One man traveling as a merchant, perhaps, someone who came and went without suspicion, could learn much and report all he'd seen. If he were such a man, he could travel the main roads, scouting fortifications, troop movements, even make maps.

In a flash of enlightenment, it was clear what Peter had to do.

He must cross into Weathers's lands and find out firsthand what the bastard was up to. Only then could he know for sure what the plans to invade were and where they would be carried out.

He'd have to prepare, decide on his new identity. A merchant? He'd need something to sell, and he had nothing. A pilgrim, perhaps? What shrines lay in Weathers's territory? None that he knew of.

For now he'd think on it, once he arrived back at the lodge and had a good meal and a comfortable night's sleep in their warm bed. He rubbed his back, stretched, and settled back into the saddle.

Without a nudge from him, his mare picked up her pace as they neared the path for the lodge. She knew home now, where food, water, and a warm stall waited for her.

And she wasn't the only one anxious. Peter's heart beat faster as he trotted down the road, around the curve, and spotted the entry. He twisted in the saddle, checking behind him. All clear. In front of him, the road stood open.

He reined in, leaped from the saddle, and pulled his mare into the woods. When he reached the glade, he paused, taking in the lodge and the two men who worked to the side of it, digging where the new garden would be.

"Ho!" Peter cried, raising his hand in greeting.

Gareth looked up, grinned, then stove his shovel into the ground and waved back. "Peter!"

Arvel halted, stared at Gareth, then in the direction he looked. When he spotted Peter, he tossed his spade to the ground and broke into a full run across the glade.

Gareth, laughing, started after him in a trot.

Peter let go of his reins just as Arvel reached him, launching himself into Peter's arms. Peter barely had the time to brace himself, but he managed to stay on his feet as the weight of the smaller man hit him full force.

"Ho, Arvel! Glad to see you also." Arvel cut off Peter's words with a hard kiss on the mouth. Then just as fast, he released Peter and dropped to his feet.

Gareth strode up as Arvel stepped back, letting his lover in. Gareth held out his hand. Peter clasped his arm, then pulled the big man into an embrace. They slapped backs, then parted.

"Good to have you back safe and sound, sweetling." Gareth's eyes twinkled in amusement.

"Good to be back. My ass is sore from the saddle."

Gareth leaned in and winked. "I could make it sore from—" But Peter cut him off.

"Nay, Gareth, nay. The saddle is enough." He rubbed his bottom.

"How went your hunt?" Gareth's words held much meaning. The mercenary knew Peter hunted something other than game for the duke's table. Perhaps it was time to trust in this man, and with more than just his body. His mission.

"We'll speak of it later tonight." Peter clapped him on the back, then retrieved his bag from the horse. Arvel had gathered the reins and led the mare to the stable. "I see you've started work on the garden."

"Aye, we've been working a little each day. But it's hot, thirsty work, even in this weather. Arvel can't do much; he tires." Gareth lowered his voice as if Arvel could hear him. "We were caught in the rain the other day, and I've been watching him for any signs of sickness."

"Keeping him warm, have you?"

"Oh aye." Gareth chuckled. "My pet wants for nothing I can give him."

"And I'm sure you gave much. And often."

"Indeed." Gareth opened the door to the lodge, and they entered.

Peter dropped his saddlebag on the table, then staggered over to his chair and dropped into it.

"God, I'm tired." Peter exhaled and leaned back.

"Your hunt goes badly?" Gareth sat in the other chair and held out a tankard of wine.

Peter nodded his thanks, sipped, then put his head back and closed his eyes. "Aye. But I think I'm going about it all wrong. I need your advice, Gareth."

"Oh ho! So, you trust me?"

"Aye, for better or worse, I trust you." Peter took a breath. "I'm on a mission from the Duke of Marden himself."

"I thought as much. After all, you have his letter of recommendation."

"Aye." Peter opened his eyes and leaned forward, closing the distance between them. "Know you of Duke Weathers?"

"Bors Weathers?" Gareth's face twisted as if he'd smelled a rotting corpse. "What of him?"

"For long years he's tried to take Marden lands. We've thwarted him in the central and south, but now Logan fears he may try to gain access through the northern territory."

"Here? Cross the foothills or the river?"

"The river is too wide, deep, and fast. It would have to be over the hills."

"They're not easy to cross. Broken and dangerous, the footing won't suit one horse, much less many."

"Exactly. But a man on foot could make it. Do some scouting and get the lay of the land."

"Aye. I've crossed them myself a time back. If he's sending spies, do you have evidence?"

"Nay. But to think he'd just send a party across the border, down the main road?" Peter shrugged. "I've been riding the foothills from the river to the mountains, but no such evidence have I found."

"That way is hard and, to tell truth, unnecessary." Gareth grunted. "A man alone, a traveler, could take the main road and be done with it."

"My thoughts also. Unfortunately, this brilliance came too late to me. I've been a fool and wasted much time wearing out the seat of my breeches." Peter slapped his thigh and growled.

"No fool. You are many things, but not a fool." Gareth reached out and placed his hand over Peter's. "A soldier of some account, by my reckoning. Nay, Peter, you are not used to thinking like a spy."

Peter looked up into Gareth's eyes. "And you are?"

He shifted in his chair. "I have worn that cloak once or twice."

“For Weathers?” Peter pushed the chair away as he bolted from it, his hand flying to his sword. His heart pounded at the thought of having to confront the man he'd come to trust. How had he been so fooled?

Gareth stood. “Never! I'd had enough of his filthy ways years ago when I signed up with him. He's a heartless, cold bastard, and without honor.” He never placed a hand on his weapon but stared into Peter's eyes.

Peter dropped his hand. “But you have worked for him before?”

“Aye. But never again. If you had told me of your mission at first, I might have been of some assistance.”

“I could not speak of it.” Peter shook his head. “I was sworn by Logan and my master Drake. Only failure has driven me to tell you now.”

“I understand.” Gareth sat down and motioned for Peter to sit also.

Peter exhaled, then sat. Had he really been prepared to strike Gareth? For lack of better words, his lover?

“I'm thinking patrolling our side is not enough. We need someone deep in his territory to watch and learn what we need to know.”

“Someone who's been there before, who his men know and perhaps trust?” Gareth rubbed his chin.

“Aye. But where does such a man exist?” Peter cocked an eyebrow at Gareth and smiled.

“Who's paying?” Gareth rubbed his fingers together, signaling for coins.

“The duke.”

“Then I might know of such a man.”

“I thought you might.” Peter smiled.

“Did you?”

“Well, I hoped.”

Gareth's gaze dropped to Peter's sword, then rose to his face. “Did you really think you could take me?”

"I hoped to take you by surprise." Peter shrugged.

"Why not just cut my throat in my sleep?" Gareth's eyes lost their humor as he stared into Peter's.

Peter rose from his chair, fell to his knees in front of Gareth, and ran his hand over Gareth's leg. Gareth slid his hand behind Peter's head, his fingers burrowing in Peter's curls, then pulled him to meet his lips.

Peter sank into the kiss, opening for Gareth's tongue. Moaning, the larger man thrust deep into Peter's mouth, taking control of the kiss. They lingered until Gareth's grip lessened and Peter pulled away.

"Know I am not such a coward."

"I never thought it of you, sweetling." Gareth smiled. "But I like this, Peter. You on your knees for me." He laughed, tossing back his head.

Peter rose. "For a kiss, perhaps, nothing more."

"So you say, sweetling, so you say." Gareth chuckled, and Peter's cheeks burned at the hint Gareth made.

Arvel entered and nodded to Peter, then came to the men and stood behind Gareth's chair. He motioned to his mouth.

"Aye, pet, I'm hungry."

Their caretaker moved to the table to prepare the food, and Peter settled back in his chair, toed off his boots, and closed his eyes.

Chapter Twenty

That night, Arvel welcomed Peter home. They'd undressed and gotten into bed, Arvel in the middle as usual, but this time Gareth held back, letting his pet turn to Peter first.

Peter accepted the kiss Arvel laid sweetly on his lips. Then he ran his hands over Arvel's smooth back, pulling him closer. Arvel lay on his side kissing Peter as their legs entwined and their hands stroked bare skin.

Arvel wiggled closer, pressing his body against Peter's as if seeking warmth. He licked at Peter's mouth, his neck, his chest, making sharp points of his nipples and a hard blunt spear of Peter's cock.

Behind Arvel, Gareth watched, a small smile playing on his lips.

Peter's lover reached down and took Peter's shaft in his hand, and Peter thrust into the tight grip with a moan. Arvel reached behind him, grabbed Gareth's hand, and pulled him into their pile.

Gareth murmured something soft and rolled closer, resting his body against Arvel's back. His hand caressed the thin hip and slid over and down to grab Arvel's cock.

Arvel bucked in Gareth's grip and pulled harder on Peter's prick, inciting him to greater heights of arousal. Hell, just knowing Gareth joined them sent a ripple of pleasure through his already excited body.

What would it be like to take Arvel, here and now, in front of Gareth? Would it please the big man or anger him? Peter had no way of knowing unless he either asked or acted.

He chose action.

Peter rolled Arvel onto his back, away from Gareth, then pushed Arvel's legs apart, his intentions clear to Arvel and to Gareth. Gareth rolled off the bed, and for a moment Peter thought him angered, but he soon returned.

"Here, if you're going to fuck him, you might have need of some oil." Gareth showed Peter a small vial. He pulled its cork, poured some into his palm, and climbed into the bed. "Let me ready both you and our pet."

Peter nodded, his cock eager for Gareth's touch. Gareth nudged Arvel's legs wider, and the younger man brought his knees to his chest, splitting himself for the benefit of both men.

"Gods, he's beautiful," Gareth crooned as he painted Arvel's skin from sac to hole, his fingers tracing the well-known path. As Peter knelt between Arvel's legs, he stroked himself, keeping his cock hard and rigid.

After Gareth finished preparing Arvel, he poured another puddle into his hand and to Peter's surprise, took his shaft by the hand.

"What are you doing?" Peter gasped as the first shock of pleasure rolled through him. Gareth stroked him sure and steady and slow, covering the soft skin in slippery oil.

"Getting you ready."

"If you keep that pace, I shall be finished before I've breached the wall."

Gareth's chuckled, squeezed his hand tighter around Peter's cock, and pumped. "Indeed. Do I please you so?" He leaned in and took Peter's mouth in a gentle kiss. Peter fell into it, mouth open, moaning as his lover worked his shaft, building his arousal.

Arvel watched, his eyes glittering in the soft firelight. Each time his lovers came together, Arvel's heart leaped in his chest. Each time they came one step closer to crossing that boundary both wanted to cross—taking each other.

For his part, Arvel thought it would be Gareth taking Peter. His first Heart would not be taken, not at first, if he knew him.

But for them to be so close to the joy of this sharing, the joy that filled Arvel when both men took him, pained him.

They needed to know he wanted this, wanted them to share each other. That it would arouse and excite him also.

But for now, he would have to wait. It was still too soon.

Tonight, he'd revel in what each of them gave to him.

He placed his hand first on Gareth's heart, then on Peter's.

"I know. You want us to join, but that isn't going to happen, pet." Gareth winked at Peter. "Peter's too much of a man to be fucked."

"As are you, mercenary." Peter gave a sharp laugh. "Unless you want me to ride you?"

"Nay, I'm not a beast to be ridden by the likes of you, soldier. I do the riding."

"Then I fear neither of us will give in to a joining." Peter shook his head. "Enough. There is enough oil on my cock." He pushed Gareth's hand away.

"As it pleases you, sweetling." Gareth chuckled and sat back.

Peter ignored him and concentrated on Arvel. The younger man lay on his back, legs spread, his cock stretched straight against his belly, and his eyes showing all his eagerness and longing.

Peter guided the head of his member to Arvel's opening and pressed against it. It gave way and let him in. Tight heat enveloped him, and he sank even deeper as he leaned into the thrust.

Arvel arched up to meet him, locking his legs around Peter's waist, and rested his hands on Peter's shoulders. Peter swooped down, claimed his mouth in a hard kiss, and pulled out, then back in. He set a leisurely pace as if he had all night to

spend in this pleasure. It felt fine to be in so tight an ass, and for Arvel he'd make it last as long as possible.

Gareth took his own cock in hand, spreading the oil still clinging to it over his sensitive skin, and stroked as he watched. His pet so enjoyed being taken. He might not be able to speak, but Gareth could see all Arvel had to say in the expression on his lover's face. Pleasure, pain, arousal, lust, all danced in his eyes and in the silent movements of his mouth as he reacted to Peter's attentions.

But his gaze strayed to Peter's body. God, the man was well formed. His broad shoulders, muscled back, and the hard, rounded globes of his ass flexed as he fucked Arvel.

A thing of beauty.

He reached out with his free hand and ran it over Peter's back, caressing, soothing, inciting. Peter moaned, leaning into his touch. Gareth slipped farther down Peter's spine, his fingers dancing over the small hills on their way to Peter's secret valley.

Reaching his destination, Gareth lingered, letting Peter become accustomed to him touching in this once forbidden territory. Gareth massaged one side of Peter's ass, his fingers just scraping over the cleft, the tips of them dipping into the dark slit that split Peter's body. For Peter's part, he neither shied away nor offered complaint.

Gareth pressed onward.

He ran them down the divide and on the return trip dipped deeper. Peter pushed back against him, showing only his willingness to Gareth's touch. A sharp hiss of breath signaled Gareth that Peter enjoyed his explorations.

Taking it as a welcome, he delved deep and was rewarded with the feel of a tightly wrinkled pucker against the tip of his questing finger. He played with it as Peter groaned, his body lost in fucking Arvel beneath him and Gareth's finger probing the opening to his tunnel.

Had anyone ever been here before with Peter?

From the easy acceptance, Gareth would wager aye, Peter had partaken of this delight before in some previous encounter. With whom, he wondered? Peter had spoken of a wife; surely not she.

These forbidden touches were the realm of man, not woman.

Gareth sorely wished he knew more about his counterpart. Perhaps in time.

For now, he only needed to know what pleased Peter, and that would be easy enough to discover for himself.

His fingertip breached Peter's rose, and Peter lost his rhythm, jerked and hissed and thrust harder into Arvel, who took all his lover gave him with his own wildness.

Still no word from Peter to halt his exploration.

Gareth sank his finger in deeper still, as the tight ring of muscles clamped down on his digit, almost drawing it inside, as if Peter's body needed his touch inside this dark tunnel.

Gareth shifted around behind Peter, and began the slow slip and slide of his finger, seeking the spot that would give Peter the most enjoyment. He twisted his finger, found the bump, and rubbed it.

"Holy fuck!" Peter cried out. He staggered in his pumping, then recovered and doubled his efforts.

"Shall I touch it again?" Gareth pressed closer to Peter, his voice low and rasping with his own desire and lust. Oh, to sink inside the channel that held his finger so tightly.

"Aye." Peter grunted. Sweat beaded on his back, dampened his hair, making it cling to the nape of his neck and along his shoulders.

Beneath him, Arvel watched from half-lidded eyes. His gaze met Gareth's, locked, and much passed between them. Arvel's eyes flicked up to Peter, then to Gareth, and with a small nod, he let Gareth know he was willing.

That was his pet. Always willing, eager, ready.

Would Peter be as willing? As eager or ready for what Gareth and Arvel had in mind?

Arvel reached up, took Peter's head in his hands, and pulled him down into an openmouthed kiss as Gareth removed his finger and replaced it with the blunt head of his cock.

Peter worked his tongue deeper into Arvel's mouth, then pulled away.

"Damn it, mercenary, if you're going to do it, get on with it," Peter ordered.

Gareth grinned, then pressed home, his hand wrapped around Peter's hip to hold him in place. For a moment all three men froze, giving Gareth time to work his cock deeper into Peter's incredibly tight ass.

"Oh God!" Gareth laid his forehead on Peter's back and huffed out a breath. "So tight. Christ, this is good, sweetling."

Peter groaned.

With a last push, Gareth seated himself fully, his shaft buried to the hilt inside Peter. Peter's body tensed, then relaxed, signaling Gareth of his readiness.

Gareth took his first stroke, canting his hip, and raked over Peter's sweet spot.

"Oh fuck, you bastard!" Peter cried out.

Gareth held Peter tight, kept him from moving for a few quick strokes, then released him.

"Fuck our pet, soldier." Now it was Gareth's time to order.

Oh God. Gareth was inside him, and it felt better than he'd remembered. Too good. He feared he'd want this again and again, never tire of having Gareth's cock shoved up his ass, riding him, sending him into spasms of ecstasy.

Peter shook his head, beads of sweat flying from his soaked hair. He took a deep breath and resumed plunging into Arvel.

Lying against Peter's back, Gareth rode him. When Peter thrust in, so did Gareth; on the draw out, Gareth slid nearly to the tip, then followed him back down. As if they were part of the same creature, they rutted like some mythological beast.

Peter had never, in his limited experience, done this before, been fucked while fucking. It was intense, tinged with a shade of erotic and forbidden, and so wonderfully wrong.

This rivaled the time with Logan and Drake, when they both had him. The entire experience had stained him, had driven home to him that he truly enjoyed having more than one lover.

The perfection of this moment built his ardor to new heights.

Beneath him, Arvel received his cock. Behind him, Gareth delivered his.

Peter, trapped in the middle, his entire body alive and on fire, tensed, held, and then exploded as he shot his release into Arvel's tunnel.

This was what Arvel had waited for, and it had been worth the wait. To see the faces of both men, their pleasure painted boldly there, its beauty almost too much to bear.

He shuddered when his stones pulled tight as Peter slammed deeper, pressed into him by Gareth's push. Just knowing Gareth's cock, that he'd felt inside him so many times, now rode Peter's channel, sent Arvel over the edge.

With his heart thudding in his chest, he reached down between him and Peter, his fingers around the base of Peter's shaft. When Gareth's sac struck the tips of Arvel's fingers as it slapped with each thrust against Peter, Arvel spilled across his own belly, white ropes of cream, his head thrown back as a glorious mixture of pain and pleasure devoured his body.

Gareth pounded him, his cock's friction both a delight and a damnation in Peter's ass. With one hand, Gareth pulled Peter nearly upright on his knees, and with the other he turned Peter's head to accept his kiss.

Peter opened, and Gareth plunged his tongue inside. Peter sucked on it, hard and unrelenting, until Gareth shuddered and emptied into Peter's channel.

All three men gasped for air. Peter collapsed to the side, taking Gareth, his cock still embedded in Peter, to the bed with him. A moment later, Peter squeezed his ass and Gareth slipped away.

Tangled in the quilts and each other, covered in sweat and lovers' cream, the men fell asleep.

Chapter Twenty-one

Caelin sighed.

Duke Marden, Logan, crossed the hall and climbed the stairs alone. Small miracle that, and rare to find the duke without his master of arms beside him.

Jealousy, like a raven, pecked at Caelin's mind.

What had Master Drake done to win the place of honor at Logan's side? Perhaps some great feat of swordsmanship or held off an advancing army single-handed.

Caelin didn't doubt it. The man's face, just as scarred as his was now, held both fascination and fear for Caelin. And something else, something that played at the edges of Caelin's mind—curiosity.

Was there more to the two men's friendship than duke and master? Perhaps the quiet looks passing between them meant more than just what occurred in the daily running of the castle. Perhaps...

"Caelin? What are you looking at?" Joss's voice brought him out of his musings.

"Nothing."

"You were staring at my da."

"Just wondering where master Drake is, that's all. Don't usually see one without the other." Caelin tried to sound as if it didn't matter to him, and hopefully he could fool two young boys.

"My da's training the men this afternoon." Joss sniffed. "He'll join us at table for the evening meal."

"Your father must be a fine warrior." Perhaps he could learn more from the boys.

"He is! My father is the finest swordsman in the country. He was a famous mercenary before he came here." The boy's chest puffed out like a sparrow's feathers in winter.

"He saved my life!" Tomas added. "Killed ten men to save me!"

"It was only four, Tomas. You mustn't tell stories," Joss reminded him.

"Four, you say? My, that *is* a lot of men." Caelin smiled at the two lads. "Are you sure?"

"Aye, I was there, wasn't I?"

"But you had your eyes closed."

"Drake didn't want me to see him kill them. But we led four horses back, and I heard Peter speaking of it when they thought I'd fallen asleep." Tomas folded his arms and gave Joss a sharp nod.

Joss turned his attention back to his tutor. "It's true. Four men. They'd kidnapped Tomas and planned to steal him away to Duke Weathers, but my da stopped them."

"Indeed." Caelin cleared his throat. He had no intentions of going up against a man such as Drake. As the son of a nobleman, he'd been trained in sword work, but he couldn't match the level of a mercenary. No, there were other ways of winning the duke, ways he'd learned among the monks at the abbey.

He stood and closed the book. "Lesson's over. You boys can run along."

Without any further questions, they leaped to their feet and ran from the hall, dodging around a servant to get to the door of the keep. Caelin watched, then wasted no time in leaving the table and heading to the bottom of the stairs.

If he didn't hesitate, perhaps he could speak with the duke in his chambers. About the progress of the boys.

He tried not to rush up the stairs but maintain a respectable pace. No reason to have anyone wonder what he was up to or question him along the way. It wasn't as if he were doing anything wrong; he just wanted to thank the duke for allowing him to remain at the keep and teach the boys.

At the top of the stairs, he turned toward the duke's rooms. A guard stood at the duke's door. He glanced at Caelin, tensed, and placed his hand on the hilt of his sword. Caelin wanted to turn around, but he'd come this far.

The guard watched as Caelin approached. "My lord." The guard gave him a small nod of his head.

Caelin nodded back. "I wish to speak to the duke." He took a deep breath and ran his fingers through his hair. No need to wonder about his ruined face. There was nothing to interest anyone there.

The guard knocked. "Your Grace, a visitor," he announced in a loud voice.

Caelin's heart stopped beating as he counted out the time until the door opened.

Logan opened the door, then recognized Caelin and smiled.

"Good day, tutor Caelin. What brings you to my chambers? Are the boys giving you a fit? They can be a handful." He stepped back and motioned for Caelin to enter.

Caelin entered, leaving the guard behind, and clasped his hands together to keep the duke from seeing them shake.

"Not at all, Your Grace. The boys are well behaved and quick to their studies," Caelin quickly explained.

"That's well. I'm working on the ledgers now. Is there something you need?"

Caelin licked his lips and looked up at the duke from under his long eyelashes. Perhaps the duke could see past the scars to appreciate his eyes. He'd been told by more than one person of their loveliness.

The duke gazed back at the young man giving him very peculiar looks. Then his eyes widened, and he cocked an eyebrow upward. A picture formed in his mind.

“Caelin, why are you here?”

Caelin swallowed. “I came to tell you thank you.”

“You've already given me your thanks, tutor. There's no need to give them again.” He walked over to the desk and leaned against it. If what he suspected were true, best to let Caelin run to the end of his rope and not leap to any conclusions.

Caelin took a step closer and fingered the gap of his shirt. It could have been a nervous gesture, but that, combined with the half-lidded looks and the licking of his lips, gave Logan no choice but to conclude that Caelin wished a dalliance.

Good Lord.

How old could Caelin be? Twenty? Twenty and two?

Had he ever been so young or so obvious in his ways? Logan caught the chuckle in his throat before it bubbled out to embarrass the young man.

“But I feel so grateful.” Caelin's full lips pulled up in a seductive smile.

Oh aye, Caelin had learned much among the monks, or had he learned those subtleties prior to being sent away to the abbey? Logan thought after he'd joined the abbey, if he wagered a coin.

Logan had to admire the man. Despite his wounds, he tried to give his best to the cautious dance between men. And Logan could see the attraction; he could see why those monks had wanted Caelin.

Lithe, long-haired, large brown eyes like a doe, and skin so pale milk would seem dark next to it. Lips as full and firm as any pillow filled with the finest goose down only added to his allure.

Logan's gaze came to rest on Caelin's scarred cheek. A gift from his father, no doubt meant to help the boy by making him less attractive. His father had been a fool. Caelin was like flame to a moth, drawing any hapless creature in to dance around him. No scar could dim Caelin's light or keep a man from desiring him.

This had to end. Logan shouldn't let it go on, shouldn't be alone here in his chamber now that he suspected the truth.

Caelin wanted him.

And that meant the younger man had divined Logan's preferences. And that meant a measure of danger to both Caelin and Logan.

And Drake.

Good Lord, what would Drake say about this turn of events? They'd shared before, with Peter, but Peter had been a man known to them, sworn to Marden and its duke. Caelin had given no such oath. Not yet.

"Caelin, you are most welcome. And now I have work to return to, so I must bid you leave." Logan pushed off the desk and moved toward the door.

Caelin stepped in front of him.

Logan halted and looked down into doe eyes of such soft brown...

"Your Grace..." Caelin wet his lips, and his gaze narrowed to include the duke's mouth. The young man leaned in, chin tilted up to receive a kiss.

"Caelin." Logan spoke his words gently and carefully. "You are my son's tutor. Nothing more. Whatever you think might happen here in this room, it cannot occur."

Caelin rested his hand on Logan's chest. "Why not?"

"Because I wouldn't like it," Drake drawled. He stood in the doorway, one hand on the frame, one on his sword. The stealth of Logan's lover never ceased to amaze him. Neither he nor Caelin had heard the door open.

Caelin gasped and spun around to face him.

Logan rolled his eyes. "Really, Lord Drake. You'll frighten the boy to death."

"Frighten him? Aye, I'll do more than that if he's laid one hand upon you." Drake growled, entered the room, and shut the door behind him.

Caelin's swallow could be heard quite clearly above the rumbling in Drake's throat.

“Stand down, my lord.” Logan grinned at his lover. “The tutor was merely thanking me.”

“With his lips?” Drake cocked an eyebrow.

Caelin looked from man to man, blinking and wringing his hands, his eyes wide with fear.

“Come, Caelin,” Logan murmured. “Leave us. I promise Drake will not harm you. He's like a toothless old dog, barking but unable to bite.” He chuckled as Drake shot him a narrow-eyed look.

Caelin nodded briskly, then fled to the door, opened it, and disappeared down the hall.

Drake closed it behind him and turned to his duke.

“What, pray tell, just happened?” He put his hands on his hips and waited for Logan to answer.

“It seems I have an admirer.”

“The tutor?” Drake asked, brows raised and mouth open as he glanced back at the door. “What did he say? What did he do? What did you say? What did you—”

Logan motioned for Drake to slow down. “Have no fear. He said nothing but that he wished to thank me. He did nothing more than place a quivering hand on my chest and bat his pretty eyes at me as if he were a lady of the court.”

Drake's mouth twisted as he listened. “So he thinks you such a man to return his affections. Is there any danger in his knowledge?”

“Knowledge? Suspicion more likely. I said nothing but to accept his thanks. You were the one to declare your ownership of me.” Logan laughed and sauntered up to his lover. He ran a finger down Drake's cheek, tracing the scar he'd rather trace with his tongue.

Drake shivered at his touch, and Logan grew hard.

“And I stated only the truth. That I would cut down any man who dared to touch you without your consent.” Drake heated stare burned into Logan's heart, filling it with desire and need.

“And if I had touched him? Kissed those willing lips?” Logan slanted his eyes at his lover, giving him a look meant to incite Drake's passion.

Drake pulled Logan to him with one hand and buried his other hand in the long tresses of Logan's blond hair, pulling back his head. “Without me?” he whispered as he nuzzled Logan's exposed throat.

“I am sworn to you, my love. You and you alone. Know that I would never have encouraged such a wounded bird.” Logan ran his hands over Drake's arm and shoulder.

“No matter that he offered? Even such a very pretty little dove?”

“I love you and want no other. Not even as a dalliance with you.” Logan gasped as Drake bit his neck, sucking hard enough to raise a mark. He hissed a warning and Drake released him. “Did you want him?” Logan frowned at the thought of his lover and another man.

“Nay. I want only you. My days of reckless behavior are over. You satisfy my every longing, my duke.” Drake licked a line up to Logan's ear and took his earlobe in his teeth.

Logan groaned. “My lord. I have such a need for you.” He pressed his manhood into Drake's side in proof.

“Aye, as do I for you. However, the day's shadows grow long, and we will be called to the table soon.” Drake released his ear, gave it a final lick, and stepped back.

“Damn. I hate waiting.” Logan ran his hand over the bulge in his breeches, hoping to lower it.

“As do I, Your Grace, as do I.” He grinned and turned to the door. “Logan.” He paused and looked back over his shoulder. “That tutor...”

“Aye?”

“He must go.” Then he left the room, closing the door behind him with a sharp slam.

Logan slumped against his desk and shook his head.

How had this happened? He'd merely done the right thing, taking in the young man, assigning him as tutor to Joss and Tomas, and now look at where they were.

Drake threatened. Caelin terrified.

And Logan stuck in the middle with not a single idea of what to do about it all.

Chapter Twenty-two

Peter stared into the fire as he decided his next course of action. His mission loomed foremost in his mind, and the new knowledge of Gareth's past with Weathers only added to his dilemma.

It had been nearly a month since he'd left Marden. A long time with no word of what he'd found. Would they send a soldier for him? Best to take some action before it came to that.

He'd need to leave soon, return to Marden and report to the duke and Drake what he'd found—nothing. Not a single breath of Weathers or his men. Still, Drake had been right when he said it might take more time to discover the duke's intentions, but how much time was too much?

Who would decide there was no danger here in the north? Could anyone ever say that with conviction? He doubted it. A man such as Weathers wouldn't let a few mountains or a river stop him.

"Come along, Peter. We're almost done preparing the ground for the garden. Your strong back will make the work go faster." Gareth clapped Peter on the shoulder.

Peter pushed out of the chair. "Of course." He followed the mercenary out of the lodge and around to the side, where Arvel had begun working. The young man chopped at the earth with a hoe, breaking up the rich soil.

They took up their spades and began working. Within an hour's time, the two men had removed their vests and worked in just their shirts as the sweat dripped off them.

"I'm glad I'm not a farmer, Peter." Gareth stopped and straightened, resting his arm on the end of his shovel. "My heart's not in it."

"Neither is your back," Peter replied as he stepped on the blade and pushed down with his foot.

"Aye." Gareth sighed. "Arvel should halt his work, for he tires."

Peter glanced up at their lover. Arvel's face was bright red, his breath panting, and his shirt drenched with his sweat. "Indeed. He looks quite done in, Gareth."

Gareth dropped his spade, went to Arvel, and touched him on the shoulder. He reached for the exhausted man's hoe, shaking his head and pointing to Arvel then to the house. Arvel frowned, wiped his brow with the sleeve of his damp shirt, and glanced at Peter.

"Go, pet. Take to the creek and bathe in the cool waters." Gareth ran his hand over Arvel's cheek.

Peter nodded and shooed him with his hand. "We'll finish here, pet."

Arvel nodded, took the hoe, and tramped off to the stable to put it away.

"He doesn't like being treated as an invalid." Gareth watched his lover as he left.

"He isn't an invalid; he's quite capable of much. However, he's not built for hours in the sun. He'd be better served to take his rest and conserve his strength."

"You're just worried he might not cook tonight's meal." Gareth chuckled.

"I'd thought of that, to tell the truth. The notion of eating your cooking..." Peter pretended to gag.

Gareth reached down, grabbed a handful of dirt, and tossed it at Peter, showering his shirt with clods of soil.

"Ho!" Peter danced backward, arms flung out.

Gareth charged him, tackling him around the waist and driving him to the ground.

Peter struggled against the weight of the larger man, his cock stiffening at the rough play. Gareth's laugh warmed Peter's heart, even as they struggled in the dirt, and Gareth wrapped his hands around Peter's wrists, holding them over his head and against the ground.

"Let go of me, mercenary." Peter growled.

"In good time, sweetling." Gareth grinned down at him, so sure of himself, so handsome. Peter couldn't deny his attraction to the man and marveled that only a month before he'd thought his life over, thought himself a dead man. Now he could feel again, although he had no name for those feelings.

Not love. He didn't love Gareth or Arvel.

Affection, perhaps. Aye, he had great affection for both men. Perhaps as great as his affection for Drake and Logan.

But it wasn't the love he'd felt with her.

He stilled beneath Gareth as his heart filled with her memory.

"Peter?" Gareth looked down into Peter's eyes.

"It's nothing. Old memories."

Gareth held him still, not letting him go. Peter liked the weight of the man on top of him, the soft puff of his breath, the intent look in his blue eyes.

Peter rose up enough to kiss Gareth's lips. Soft, gentle, inviting.

Gareth opened for him, letting Peter's tongue delve inside, swiping and tasting his mouth. Letting him control the kiss, despite keeping control of Peter's body. Gareth pressed into Peter, and Peter surged back, their movements as slow and easy as their kisses.

No need to rush. Peter wanted to enjoy this time with Gareth. Being taken by him last night had been more enjoyable than he'd wanted to admit. He'd known it would only be a matter of time before he submitted to the big man, and it had been good, but had that been because of Arvel's participation?

Peter needed to know if he alone could move Gareth or if Gareth needed Arvel's presence.

"Shouldn't we ask Arvel to play?" Peter looked up into Gareth's steady gaze.

"Nay. He needs his bath and his rest."

"We could wait until then."

Gareth's gaze narrowed. "Have you changed your mind, sweetling, and no longer desire my touch?" His eyes darkened, and if Peter didn't know better, he'd say they held hurt.

"Nay, not changed. Just..." Peter sighed. "I wanted to be sure you wanted this with me. Alone."

Gareth smiled, then bent down to kiss him. "Peter. I have no need to augment my desire for you with Arvel or anyone else. Do you desire Arvel without me?"

"Aye." Peter nodded.

"It is the same for me. I love Arvel. You know that; I haven't been shy about stating my feelings for him to you."

"I know that."

"But what you're wondering is what are my feelings for you? What are your feelings for me and Arvel?"

How could the man hit the mark so well? All the things Peter struggled with...

"Oh, I see. You question also."

"Aye, Peter. I question also." Gareth rolled off him and lay next to him in the dirt as he stared up into the sky. "I'll tell you this. I care for you, Peter. I desire you. Love? In a way, aye, I love you, but not with the depth and fullness of my heart as I do Arvel."

Peter stared up at the clouds passing over head. "It's much the same for me, Gareth. I care deeply for both you and Arvel, but I'm not in love with either of you."

"Perhaps that is why this arrangement of ours works." Gareth shrugged. "I don't know, but it's not mine to question. As long as Arvel is content, I am content."

“So if Arvel didn't want me anymore, you'd turn me away?” Peter's gaze slid over to the man next to him.

Gareth grimaced. “It wouldn't stop my wanting you, but it might stop my actions. If it would hurt him, aye, it would be over.”

“Fair enough. I only want to know where I stand in all this.”

“Are you concerned about not feeling love, Peter?” Gareth reached over and took his hand, giving it a squeeze.

“Nay, it's not for me. I had love once, and 'twill have to be enough for me.” Peter knew he'd been fated to this loss, and he accepted it without railing or complaining.

“Are you happy?”

“As I can be, I suppose.” Peter shrugged. “I'm fine. Don't trouble yourself over my lack of love. I am content to be here, to share your bed and Arvel's.”

“Are you content to share your body with us?”

“I am.” Peter pulled Gareth's hand to his mouth and kissed it. “Most content.”

Gareth chuckled. “Then can we continue?”

“Continue?” Peter grinned.

“Our little tussle here on the ground.”

“Here?”

“It's a garden, isn't it? And there is seed to be sowed.” Gareth laughed and rolled back on top of Peter. Peter wrapped his arms around Gareth and held him close.

“My seed or yours?”

“Both, if we do this correctly.”

Gareth's rumbling laugh awoke Peter's desire and his cock. It stiffened and pressed against Gareth's belly. “Oh ho! He lives.”

“Aye. And he has need of you.”

“Need? What do you need, sweet Peter?” Gareth bit his ear and sucked on it, pulling a low groan from Peter.

“Your mouth, doing that. On my cock.” Peter wrapped his hand in Gareth's hair and pulled on it, leading the man to his aching member.

Gareth moved down along Peter's body, pushing up his shirt to taste the skin on his chest and capture a hardened nipple. Peter gasped and arched into the sucking, and his staff grew harder as if it were directly connected to his nipple and to Gareth's mouth.

Peter fumbled with the strings to his breeches as Gareth moved lower, intent on his target. Together, they managed to loosen Peter's clothing and push his breeches aside enough to free his straining cock.

“Mine, at last,” Gareth murmured as he wrapped his fist around the leaking flesh and swiped his thumb over the head to spread the precream. Then he let go and tasted his thumb, licking it clean. “Delicious, sweetling. You've earned your endearment.”

Peter laughed. “Have I? And you? Are you as sweet?”

“Ask Arvel. He would know.”

“I shall.”

“Or you could take a taste yourself.” Gareth winked at him, then took Peter's rod in his hand and licked the fat head.

Peter groaned. “Christ, Gareth. Do it. I need you.” He buried his hand in Gareth's hair and guided him downward.

Gareth opened and swallowed him as Peter jerked in answer to Gareth's sucking. Long, hard pulls up and then a slight brush of teeth down, then long and hard again. Soft. scraping, each movement building Peter's arousal to breathtaking heights.

It felt so good, this physical pleasuring, but Peter longed for the time when such an act would soothe his damaged heart. A stab of fear and resolve pricked him. He'd never feel that way again, so he'd best accept it and learn to do without.

This would have to be enough.

Gareth cupped his stones and gave them a hard squeeze. The pain shot through him, and Peter reached his release, giving his cream to Gareth's waiting mouth.

After the last tremor had ended, Peter fell back, panting and enjoying the wave of contentment that washed over him.

"Thank you, Gareth. That was most satisfying."

"I'm glad I could have serviced you in so pleasurable a manner, my lord Peter." Gareth replied.

"And shall I return the favor?" Peter rolled on his side to gaze at Gareth as he waited for an answer.

"I think I'd prefer to spend my time on my back in the bed. With you between my knees and Arvel watching." Gareth slapped Peter on the thigh and climbed to his feet. He held out his hand for Peter to take.

Peter slapped his hand away. "I'm not an old man to be helped up."

"Really?" Gareth bent down, put his hands on his knees, and gave Peter a cocky grin. "If you can stand without assistance, then perhaps my skills are slipping."

"Perhaps. But perhaps I'm a stronger man than our Arvel, who finds everything almost too much." Peter winked and rose with ease. He straightened his clothing and tied his strings.

Gareth bowed and swept his hand toward the lodge. "You first."

"Indeed. As is only right." Peter returned the bow and started toward the lodge.

Gareth burst into laughter. "You're a brave man, Peter, to not fear my sword at your back."

"Ah, your sword at my back. That sounds well and good. Can we take up swords when we gain the bed?" Peter kept ahead of Gareth until he came to the door.

"I might consent to a duel, my lord."

Peter opened the door and stepped inside, with Gareth right behind him.

He froze and his jaw dropped open. His mouth went dry.

Arvel lay stretched out on the bed, pale on the dark quilt, red hair spread out on the pillow, and his stiff cock in his hand.

Gareth's voice puffed in Peter's ear. "Damn our pet. I fear our duel must wait. He's in need of a fucking."

Peter laughed and stepped aside. "And he has his eyes set on you."

Gareth growled and then launched himself at the bed and Arvel, who flung up his arms to welcome his lover.

Arvel smiled over Gareth's shoulder at Peter and winked.

Peter winked back, content to wait his turn. Content to watch the lovers. Content to be privy to this wondrous unusual grouping he found himself amid.

He would stop thinking about finding love.

This would be enough.

Chapter Twenty-three

Caelin stood on the wall of the keep and looked toward the town of Marden. Men worked the fields that surrounded the castle, tilling the soil, preparing it for the first planting of spring.

A year ago, he'd been sent to live at the abbey among the men of the church, thinking he'd found his place at last. All he'd ever wanted had been to save his father's pride from the damages done by his depravity, and if that meant hiding away among the monks, so be it.

He would have preferred to continue on at his father's keep, perhaps as a soldier, perhaps as his father's steward, to eventually serve his brother when he came to the title. His entire life had been spent preparing him to be a second son, just standing off to the side, keeping quiet in the shadows.

He'd thought the shadows would hide his preference for men, but they only shielded his ways from his father and allowed him to linger in them, nearly caught on more than one occasion.

If his father had asked, Caelin could have told him the abbey would not be the right place for him. A sultan's harem would have served better, surrounding him in women, keeping him from men and them from him.

Now he'd landed here, by the grace of God, among more men. However, unlike the quiet, devout monks, these men were dangerous, perhaps even deadly.

If he approached the wrong man, he could be run through with that man's sword.

And no one would blame his killer. Not even Caelin's father.

Still, if he could keep his inclinations hidden and stop fawning after the duke, this place could become a home for him. Tutoring the boys proved easy and, if he had to admit, even enjoyable. They were quick witted, easygoing, and interested in all he had to show them.

He leaned on the wall and sighed. He should be content, but his heart ached. He turned to look down at the bailey, busy as a hive of bees, its servants coming and going, the soldiers marching about, and the boys playing with their wooden swords.

This was not his home. Not where he belonged. There was no one who cared for him here, no one who loved him. No one he could belong to and spend the long nights of his life with.

He would be content here, he decided.

"Caelin, what brings you to the wall?" Drake's rumble spun Caelin around. He blinked and pressed back into the stone of the wall, remembering the man's threat.

"Just a little fresh air, nothing more."

"Looked to me as if you were lost in some thought." Drake's eyes narrowed.

Caelin shrugged. "Nay, merely taking in the view. It's beautiful. We didn't have such a splendid view at the abbey."

"How did you find the abbey?"

"It went well. I spent much time in quiet reflection and learned to hone my scribing by copying holy texts. It was only of late that there were troubles." Caelin and Drake stood alone on the parapet and could speak freely, but Caelin wasn't sure what Drake knew of the abbot's reason for asking him to leave.

"Troubles?" Drake leaned on the stones next to him. Caelin felt his heat and couldn't ignore the sword hanging from the master's hip. "Many say we bring about our own troubles." He paused and then turned to face Caelin. He reached out and ran a finger down the scar on Caelin's cheek. "Fool! To think he could mar your outer beauty, when it's your inner beauty that shines like a beacon on a rocky shore."

Caelin swallowed. "Beauty?" He frowned. "Master Drake, you make a jest of me." He held up his hand to cover the damaged side of his face.

"No, Caelin, I make no jest." Drake pulled Caelin's hand down, then brushed his knuckles across his face. "Don't be ashamed of your scars, for they speak much of you."

"I am hideous," Caelin spit out, his eyes brimming with tears, his heart bearing the hurt and the shame of his father's actions.

"You are most alluring. Trust me, tutor." Drake snorted. "I can see it, and Logan can see it also."

"The duke?" Caelin picked his head up and blinked back tears.

"Aye. Don't get so excited, youngster. The duke is not fool enough to dally with the tutor. However, I won't have you chasing after him. You'll put more than yourself in danger with that attention."

"Oh, you know?" Caelin lowered his gaze to his feet as the rush of a burn painted his cheeks.

"I am not blind, man. Not to your foolish attempt to persuade Logan into a dalliance, nor am I blind as to why it would be hard to resist you." Drake laid his hand on Caelin's shoulder.

"This face is easy to resist, my lord."

"Perhaps for some." Drake sighed. He leaned closer to Caelin and stared into his eyes. "Know this, Caelin. I will do whatever I must to keep the duke safe from harm. I've killed men for less, and for more, and if it comes to it, I'll kill..."

Caelin swallowed, fear gathering in his belly, forcing his hands to clench, as he waited for Drake's next words.

"I'll kill again to protect him, even from a young and foolish tutor."

Drake righted himself, strode to the stairs, and trotted down them.

Caelin slumped against the wall, grateful to have it to lean on and not fall to his knees in fear and terror.

Perhaps the keep wouldn't be so safe a place to land, after all.

Caelin blinked through the tears that overflowed, spilling down his cheeks, and he gazed at the castle's courtyards. On the inside of the wall stood some measure of safety, if he reined in his desires and needs.

On the other side? Out there?

Safety didn't exist, not for those of his ilk.

* * *

Peter rose the next morning, dressed, and went to the stable to ready his horse. If he started out today, he'd make Marden by the next eve. He'd thought about it most of the night, lying quiet and still in the dark, listening to his lovers' breathing. Well, in Gareth's case, the man snored off and on, but not so loud he couldn't sleep.

That wasn't what had kept him awake, but his decision to leave the lodge and return to Marden. He needed to make his report to his duke and to Drake, his master and commander.

Should he return to the lodge and continue or stay in Marden and wait for Weathers to make his move and show his hand? He'd be able to state the facts of his search, describe his failure to find hide or hair of the bastard's men, and then get some clear direction as to his next steps.

His stomach clenched as he wondered if, having failed to get the information, he'd be replaced by someone else. If someone were to be sent to Marden, would that someone be as kind to Arvel? Would he chase Gareth away, separating the lovers?

Or worse, would he take Peter's place as lover?

That thought hurt the most, not returning, and watching another man ride off to take his place at the silent lodge.

He brushed down his mare, placed her blanket on, then tossed the saddle over her back. He'd bent over to catch the cinch when Gareth found him.

"So, here's where you've run off to, sweetling."

Peter snatched the hanging leather strap, pulled it up to the ring, and looped it through. He tugged on it to ensure the saddle would not shift. His mare grunted, shifted from one back hoof to the other, and swished her tail at him.

"I'm leaving. Back to Marden." Peter turned and faced his lover.

"Thought as much. You've been working up to it for a few days, haven't you?" Gareth leaned against the stall and watched him.

"Aye. But I need to give my report and take my new orders."

"New orders?" Gareth's gaze darkened. "What might they be?"

"I have no idea." Peter shrugged as he slipped the bridle on and fitted the bit to the horse's mouth. "I do as the duke bids."

"And if he says for you to stay at Marden?"

"Then I stay." Peter gathered his reins.

"With no word to us?"

"I'll try to send a note, Gareth, but I can't promise it."

Gareth stepped in front of him, blocking his way. "Were you going to say good-bye to Arvel? Or me?"

"I'd hoped to leave before then."

"Coward." Gareth growled and put a hand out to catch Peter by the shirt and yank him forward. "Not even a kiss good-bye."

"I feared it would hurt too much and sway me from my duty." Peter gazed into ice blue irises.

"Kiss me then, and I'll share the kiss with our pet."

"Here is your kiss, then." Peter took Gareth's mouth in a hungry kiss as Gareth's fingers threaded through his hair. Their tongues dueled, wrestling as always, each demanding, each fighting to dominate the other. When they came up for air, both panting and hard, Peter sighed.

"Give this kiss to Arvel." Peter leaned in again to give Gareth the sweetest, most tender of kisses. Their lips brushed, tongues touched, tasted, then parted.

“Farewell, Peter. God's speed and keep you safe on the road.”

“Farewell, Gareth.” Peter led the horse out of the stable and across the glade.

At the opening to the path, he turned and raised his hand, knowing Gareth would still be there. His heart staggered in his chest. He'd had no idea it would hurt this much to leave the lodge, the place he'd come to know as his home.

Gareth raised his hand.

Peter turned, made his way down the path, and disappeared in the thick foliage.

Chapter Twenty-four

Gareth slipped through the door without a sound. Arvel slept, curled on his side in the middle of the bed, the quilts pulled up against the morning's chill. In the hearth, glowing embers were all that was left of last night's fire.

He padded over to the fire, knelt, and added several logs. After he stirred the embers and placed some kindling, the wood caught and in no time pushed needed heat into the room.

Peter had cut some of these logs.

Foolish, really, to miss the man already. He hadn't even reached the town by now. Gareth could saddle his horse and ride down the road at a gallop and probably catch up to him.

No use in that. Even Gareth knew Peter had to return to his duke. He had a duty, and as a mercenary, Gareth understood duty.

He sat in the chair, folded his arms over his chest, and stuck his boots out toward the hearth. Arvel would wake soon, ready to prepare the morning meal, and he'd miss Peter.

Anger at Peter's leaving him to explain it all to Arvel welled in the mercenary. At least, he thought that was why he was mad, but if he really gave it proper consideration, it was Peter's leaving, not his manner, that irked Gareth.

And would hurt Arvel.

He'd just have to be sure Arvel understood Peter might not return. Should he let Arvel think Peter would once again join them at the lodge and share their bed? If all hope of his coming back to the lodge were dashed like crockery on a stone floor, would that serve Arvel any better?

A small, gentle hand dropped on his shoulder, and he patted it without looking up. Drawing Arvel around the chair, he pulled the younger man into his lap, where he laid his head on Gareth's shoulder.

"Still sleepy, pet?" Gareth chuckled at Arvel rubbing his eyes and yawning. "It's time to be up and about."

Arvel snuggled deeper into his embrace, and Gareth rested his chin on Arvel's head. He could smell the tangle of scents—his, Peter's, Arvel's. And for the first time it struck him that the combination reminded him of peace, contentment, and happiness.

Pushing up, Arvel looked around the room. Peter was gone. Perhaps he'd gone out to the stable to tend the horses. Arvel's stomach clenched just as it did when he knew Gareth would be leaving him, and he knew Peter had left.

This time he felt something different in the air, in the tight way Gareth held his body, and in the way his gaze shifted away.

He needed to know. Frowning, he motioned to Gareth his sign for Peter, a touch to his heart with two fingers raised, but Gareth kept silent. Arvel stared into Gareth's eyes, demanding an answer by fisting his hand, hitting Gareth's shoulder, then touching his heart with two fingers.

"He's gone, pet." Gareth lips told the truth. But this was more than just Peter's previous coming and going.

Arvel opened his mouth, held out his hands, and looked around. Where had Peter gone?

"Back to Marden. Back to the duke. He had to make his report, pet."

Arvel's intense gaze never left Gareth's lips as he spoke, catching the words he understood. *Back to Marden. Duke. Make his report. Pet.*

Oh. Arvel's heart filled with sadness. He'd miss Peter, but perhaps he'd return and they could all be together again.

He moved his hands in a beckoning gesture, asking if Peter would come back even as tears filled his eyes. He sniffed them back.

"Perhaps. If the duke allows it." Gareth shrugged.

By Gareth's sad eyes and deep lines on his brow, Arvel doubted that would happen.

Peter had gone, perhaps to never return.

And he hadn't said good-bye to Peter. Hadn't been able given him a kiss to send him on his way. Hadn't told him how he'd be missed.

Arvel's eyes burned as the tears spilled. He wrapped his arms around Gareth's neck and laid his head on his shoulder. Gareth stroked his back, comforting him.

* * *

His arms full, Caelin hurried to the table where the boys waited for their afternoon lesson. He plopped down the book and box he carried, and Joss jumped in his chair, nearly falling out.

"Caelin!" Joss glared at him as Tomas laughed. Joss pushed Tomas and Tomas pushed back, and before the boys got a fight started, Caelin cleared his throat.

"Boys. Take your seats. Today's lesson is writing. We've been reading, and you're doing well. Now we'll practice copying what we've read." He reached into the box and pulled out an inkwell and three quills, placing them on the table in front of the two lads.

"I know how to write!" Tomas boasted. "My da taught me."

"Oh. What can you write?"

"My name." Tomas's blue eyes shone with pride.

Joss hunched a little lower in his chair, his gaze wandering off toward the kitchens. Not the first time Caelin had seen that look on Joss's face when Tomas outdid him in something or the other.

"Your name is very good, but you'll need more letters and words than that."

Joss smiled with new interest. "How many?"

"All of them, of course."

Tomas frowned. "I know five."

"Five is a good start, but we must learn them all in order to create words and then put the words together to create sentences." Caelin placed a sheaf of paper at each boy's place, gave them each a quill, and set the inkpot between them. "Now, I'm going to illustrate the proper way to write the letter, and you're going to reproduce it as well as you can."

The boys and he set to work; he bent over his paper, crafting the letters, and the boys imitating him. The afternoon crawled by without a single interruption.

No duke striding through to his rooms. No duke crossing the hall to sit in front of the hearth. And no Drake tagging along as if he were a puppy nipping at the duke's heels.

Caelin sighed and resigned himself to taking Drake's advice to stay away from the duke.

But he was such a lovely duke, so handsome, so brave, and courteous.

A man anyone would be impressed by, certainly.

Caelin had never seen his like before and probably never would again.

The lesson came to an end, with the boys going off to play and Caelin determined to stay out of the duke's sight and Drake's way. He'd have to start taking his meals in his room instead of at table with the duke, Drake, and the boys.

He gathered up his papers, book, and quills, placed them back into the box, and made his way toward the stairs. One of the servant girls, round and red faced, passed him, a squawking chicken under each arm and one in each hand. He motioned for her to stop.

"I'll take my meal in my room tonight."

"Aye, my lord." She dropped a curtsy and continued on to the kitchen. Caelin turned back to the stairs and began the climb to his room. Best if he stayed out of sight and out of trouble.

A man could cheat death only so many times.

* * *

Peter paused on the hill and looked down the road that veered toward the castle at Marden. It had once been his home but now his heart no longer leaped at its sight. Behind him, down the road to the north, along a hidden path to a small lodge, that's where his home lay.

Ahead of him sat the bustling town of Marden. The too-familiar church's spire stabbed his heart. He'd come alive at the lodge, and he didn't know where to lay the blame—on his mission or on the two men he'd left there.

It had been the worst sort of betrayal to her memory, finding life again when she couldn't. Oh God, not with another woman; not even with one man, but two.

He sat on his horse, deciding which path to take. Back to the little church graveyard and his past or on to Marden and the rest of his life. For months he'd traveled that road to sit at her side, desperately needing that connection with her.

Now the desperation had been lifted, but the healing had only begun. At the lodge, he'd found a new life, different from his previous one and not necessarily worse or better. He had to make a choice—to go on living and see what came to him or to stay buried with her and his unborn child.

Closing his eyes, he pictured the little stone cross, wildflowers growing around it.

With a ragged sigh, he tugged on the reins and turned his mare's head to the castle.

* * *

Caelin took a bite of the bread and chewed, relishing the quiet. He didn't miss the chatter of the duke's table, the discussions between Drake and the duke, listening to the duke's steward recalling the castle's business, or the squabbling of the boys. At the times he'd been pulled into the conversations, he'd mumbled his

answers. All the furor of it unnerved him, made him want to crawl away, so he'd taken to sitting at the far end of the table.

He'd spent nearly a year eating in silence and talking in whispers among the monks, and now he welcomed the quiet of his room. Perhaps there were more benefits to avoiding the duke than he'd thought.

His meal finished, he gathered up his bowl, spoon, and tankard on a tray to take them downstairs to the kitchen. If he traveled the length of the hall, past the stairs to the great hall, he'd reach the narrow servant's stair that led to the kitchens.

He'd just passed the main stairs when a shout went up from below. Caelin halted and leaned over the stone rail to catch a glimpse of the cause of the commotion.

"He's returned, Your Grace!" A guard ran across the hall to the table. "Captain has returned!"

The scrape of chairs and excited whoops from the boys piqued Caelin's interest, and he took a few steps down to get a better look. Crouching, he peered over the rail, trying to stay hidden. Whoever the captain was, everyone certainly seemed happy to have him return.

The door to the keep opened, and a man entered. Tall, broad shouldered, wide of chest, with dark hair and eyes. His face was tanned but not weathered, and with well-formed legs whose muscles strained the leather of his riding breeches, he took Caelin's breath away.

"Peter!" The duke shouted, clapped his hands, and rushed forward to greet him. Drake, right on His Grace's heels, grinned as if this fellow were his best and dearest companion.

The duke threw open his arms, as did Peter, and they embraced, slapping backs, then parted, only to have Drake replace the duke and do the same.

"I wondered when you'd turn up." Drake held him out at arm's length. "You don't look the worse for wear. Something must have agreed with you."

Peter shrugged. "It's good to be back, Drake. Logan, how are things?"

The boys, waiting their turn on bouncing feet, could be held back no longer and rushed him. "Peter! Peter!" they cried as he swooped one, then the other into his arms and ruffled their hair with great affection.

His smile captivated Caelin. It fairly blasted good will, caring, and confidence. Oh to be gazed at in such a way by such a man. Caelin shrank back into the shadows of the stairs, touching his hand to his scars.

No one would ever look at him that way.

The duke hadn't. Drake? Never. And neither would this man. He should return to the upper hall, back to the servant's stair and down to the kitchens and rid himself of these dishes.

But he found it hard to turn away, wanting more than a glance at this newcomer.

Caelin shifted the tray to get a better grip on it, but it tilted. The bowl slid to the edge, pitched over it, and smashed on the stone stairs.

Everyone turned, and all gazes fell on him as if he were illuminated by a hundred suns. Fire burned in his cheeks as he bent down to retrieve the shards of crockery that littered the steps.

"Caelin, come and meet Peter!" Tomas shouted as Joss ran up the stairs to meet him.

Caelin smiled and shook his head, keeping his face pointing to the ground. "I'm afraid I've made quite a mess here. I should clean it up."

"Nonsense, Caelin. Leave it," the duke ordered. "Come down and meet Peter."

He nodded, pushed to his feet, and stepped around the fragments. A servant girl trotted up the stairs, her apron held out to place the broken bits of bowl in, and passed him as he made his way down to the hall.

They gathered at the bottom of the stairs now, all of their faces turned up to watch him descend.

Caelin's knees knocked so badly he thought he'd tumble the rest of the way down, but if his heart didn't slow down, he wouldn't need the fall to kill him. It would just burst right out of his chest, letting him fall, slain, at Peter's feet.

For the life of him, for everything he'd ever held sacred and for every vow he'd ever made and broken, he couldn't pull his gaze from this incredible man standing in front of him.

Caelin reached the bottom step and froze, hand shaking on the rail as his other hand crept up to block his face from that intent dark brown gaze. Embarrassment and shame battled for dominance on his wounded face.

"Ho, Caelin, well met." Peter stared at him, his head cocked to the side, as if trying to decide what to make of him.

Caelin's mouth went dry, and his mind emptied of all thought.

"My name is Caelin," he blurted out, then looked down at the floor, willing himself to disappear as in the tales of old magic.

Could he think of nothing else to say to greet the man? Not welcome home? Not it's my honor to meet you, my lord?

A hand took his chin, firm, but gentle, and raised it. He stared up into Peter's warm brown eyes and sank deep into their depths.

"Damn the man who gave you those scars." Peter's brow furrowed, and anger flared in his eyes. He dropped his hand, and Caelin twirled away in darkness without the anchor of his touch.

The hall fell silent.

Chapter Twenty-five

“Come, Peter. You must be famished from your journey,” Drake announced, his voice booming through the hall. He'd had to say something to stop whatever had been about to occur. “Bring Peter some food and ale!”

The heat that had flared between the two men caught everyone present in its flame, and Drake feared Peter or Caelin would do something to betray their natures. Caelin he would be happy to see dragged off, but Peter? Of all the men here at the keep, his affection for the man was second only to his affection for Logan and the boys.

Drake glanced at Logan, and he raised his brows. Logan nodded. “Aye, Peter. Come and sit at the table and tell us of your travels.” He swept his arm toward the tables.

Peter turned and smiled at his duke. “Aye, a good meal is needed. I haven't eaten since I broke my fast this morning, in hopes of making the keep by dark.”

The crowd moved back to the hall's dining area, leaving Caelin still standing at the stairs. Peter halted, turned, and called to him, “Are you coming?”

Caelin swallowed and nodded.

Drake wished he'd just go back to his room, but to make more of it would only court disaster. Best if everyone put it out of their minds. Next to him, Logan chuckled and winked at him.

Drake rolled his eyes and growled.

They sat, Logan at the head, Drake on his right, Peter on his left. Before the boys could join them, Logan shooed them off. “This is the castle's business, lads. Leave us.”

Tomas grabbed a final piece of bread as Joss dragged him off.

Caelin stood by his usual seat at the far end of the table, opposite Peter, but didn't sit. Drake opened his mouth to tell him to leave, but Logan spoke first.

"Caelin, you may join us if you like."

Peter tried to keep his eyes off the young man hovering off the side of the table, looking as if he'd take flight at the slightest breeze. For his part, he'd do nothing to stir the air and lose this incredible, fragile being.

He'd nearly shamed himself in front of the others by putting his hand on Caelin and declaring his anger over the scars. They stood angry and pink against the man's pale skin, and the blush of his cheeks made them even more pronounced.

And very pretty. How scars could be so fetching, he'd never know, but he'd been struck with an almost uncontrollable urge to run his fingers over them, followed by his tongue.

God in heaven, he'd been damned.

If not for Drake's good sense and timing, he'd have done more than just touch. But this was not the lodge, he was not among others who didn't care, except Logan and Drake, and even they hid their relationship for fear of death or worse.

Peter glanced down the table, stealing looks at Caelin until Logan cleared his throat and made it clear Peter had to focus on his duke.

"I see you've not grown thin during your time away. I trust you found the lodge to your liking." Logan's green eyes shone with amusement.

Peter shifted in his chair. "Aye, Your Grace. I found the place most inviting and comfortable."

"Well and good. We'll speak of your mission later in my chambers, won't we, Drake?" Logan turned to his master of arms.

"Indeed. I'm most anxious to learn with Peter has discovered." Drake nodded.

"I await your bidding, Your Grace." A platter of chicken, turnips, and bread landed on the table in front of him, and he reached for a piece. The others had eaten, so he alone dined, but the servant girl passed around the table and filled tankards with ale.

They drank while he ate, and spoke of the weather, the roads, and what had happened at the keep while he'd been gone.

That's when he learned of Caelin, of his recent arrival, and of his tutoring of the boys.

"They're a handful, aren't they?" Peter said to Caelin. Caelin's head jerked up, and he blinked several times as if amazed Peter had spoken to him.

"They are boys," he whispered and shrugged. "But good learners and well behaved," he added with a glance toward the boys' fathers.

"Indeed. And devoted to each other, even more than mere brothers." Peter smiled, encouraging more from the man, but all he received was a nod before he resumed staring at the table in front of him.

Peter spoke with the duke and Drake, but his gaze slipped back to Caelin time and time again. At last, he finished his meal, and Logan rose. "Settle in, Peter. Then come to my room in an hour's time."

Peter stood. "Aye, Your Grace."

Logan and Drake left the hall and climbed the stairs to the upper floor, leaving Peter, Caelin and the servants alone.

"I best tend to my unpacking."

Caelin nodded and rose.

"I take a cot in the barracks." Peter willed the man to speak.

"I have a room." Caelin fumbled with the edge of his vest. "Upstairs."

"Indeed. I'll make note of that." Peter smiled at the wide-eyed surprise that painted Caelin's face.

The younger man turned and rushed from the hall, toward the kitchens, no doubt making his escape to his chamber.

Peter stored that bit of knowledge in his mind.

After he spoke with Drake and Logan, perhaps he'd pay a visit to the tutor. Muscles aching, he trudged out to the courtyard, crossed it, and went into the barracks. His cot, placed by the door, waited for him, with his saddlebags laid out on it.

Peter pushed them off and stretched out, glad to be off his feet and off his ass. He closed his eyes, determined to catch only a moment's rest.

"Wake up, Captain!" Someone shook him. Peter bolted up and ran his hand over his face. He'd fallen asleep.

"What time is it?"

"Late. The duke sent me to fetch you to him."

"Damn!" Peter hadn't changed his clothes. No time for it; he'd have to present himself just as he was.

The servant led the way, and Peter followed at a trot. He rushed up the stairs, forgetting about Caelin, even as he passed the many doors that lined the corridor. When he reached Logan's room, he nodded to the guard and knocked.

The door opened, and Drake smirked at him. "Did you forget the time?"

"Forgive me, my lord. I fell asleep." Peter ducked his head and stepped inside. Drake shut the door, strode over to a chair, and sat. He motioned for Peter to take the other chair in front of Logan's desk.

"We should let you rest, Peter, but we wanted to hear what you'd learned as soon as possible. There are decisions to make that rely on it." Logan flashed a regret-filled smile.

"I understand." Peter nodded and cleared his throat. "I found nothing."

"Nothing?"

“Not a single sign, not a person out of place, nothing to hint at Duke Weathers's intentions or his actions.” Peter shook his head.

Logan leaned on his elbow and placed his chin in his palm. “In many ways, this is good news. It means we are not too late.”

Drake shifted. “How many times and where did you patrol?”

“I rode out every few days along the river and the foothills. I questioned some of the townspeople about strangers, even the local priest. No one has been through there or caused trouble.”

Logan looked into the distance as if seeing something far away as Drake growled, brows bent together. Peter could see they were not pleased.

“If I may speak freely, Your Grace.”

“Of course.” Logan waved a hand to encourage him.

Peter licked his lips. “From what I can see, all this patrolling back and forth would be better done by organized troops, not one solitary man slinking about the woods and fields. Show a presence to the people there that their duke is concerned for their welfare and show Weathers we mean to stop him, as we did in the south.”

“Good ideas.” Logan nodded with a quick glance to Drake, who tilted his head in agreement.

“And to tell the truth, I could have ridden around for weeks and still not have a single clue as to what Weathers has planned for us.” Peter paused for emphasis. He took a deep breath and said, “What we need is a spy.”

Drake sat up, and Logan leaned back in his chair. “A spy?”

“Indeed. Someone who is familiar with Weathers territory, who can blend in, who has contacts there for information and can find out exactly what we want to know.” Peter looked first into Logan's eyes and then shifted to Drake's.

Slow smiles slid over both the men's faces.

“Know you such a man?” Drake asked, rubbing his chin.

Peter nodded. “Aye.”

"And where did you meet him?" Logan asked, leaning forward as he laced his fingers together on the desk.

"At the lodge." Peter swallowed.

"At *my* lodge?" Logan's eyebrow rose.

"Aye, Your Grace."

"What else did you find at the lodge?"

Peter decided it was time to tell everything. If anyone would understand, it would be these two men.

"I met Arvel, the caretaker." Peter looked deep into Logan's eyes to gain his courage. "We became lovers."

Logan grinned. Drake snorted.

"He had kept the lodge well, but he'd let the path grow over. It's safer that way for him." Logan nodded his understanding.

"Safer?" Drake's gaze shifted to Logan.

"Arvel is a deaf-mute."

"He's often set upon by the ruffians of the local village," Peter explained.

"He's quite beautiful, isn't he?" Logan said. Drake's face darkened.

"Indeed." Peter's face burned as the blush crept upward. "However, I soon discovered Arvel has a longtime lover, a man named Gareth. He's a mercenary." He turned to Drake. "Do you know of him?"

"Gareth? Is he a large man, blue eyed and blond like the old Norsemen? Quiet but with a certain wicked humor?" Drake grinned.

"That may be him." Peter nodded. "He's been living at the lodge between hirings, with Arvel caring for him. They are quite devoted."

"And yet Arvel took you to his bed while his lover was gone," Logan mused.

Peter swallowed. "As I said, Gareth is devoted to Arvel. Arvel is sweet and most generous with his affections." He cleared his throat. "We both shared Arvel."

He waited to hear the outcry from the two men he admired most.

"I have heard of such couplings." Drake nodded. "If all parties are agreeable, it can work well. If not, it's a disaster and men have died over fits of jealousy."

"It worked very well for us. In fact, it pained me to leave Marden Lodge and return here." Peter stared down at his boots.

Logan chuckled. "So our Peter has found what? A new life? Happiness? Are you in love with Gareth? With Arvel? Both of them?"

"Happy? If that can be called the opposite of what I've felt these long months since Mary's death, then aye, I found happiness. I love neither but care deeply for both. I'm not sure what I've found, but I'm sure now that it's gone, I shall miss it sorely."

"I think we can remedy that, Peter." Logan caught Drake's eye and winked. In his own way he loved Peter, and it would be a shame to lose him, but he'd rather see the man happy once again. "Were you truly happy there?"

"Aye." He nodded, but Logan saw the guilt battling on the man's solemn face.

"You know she would not fault you for finding happiness again."

"I know. She would be most sad to know I suffered after her death. Even furious if I'd stayed that way." Peter grimaced. "But to have found it with men?"

"Did she ever know of your leanings? Of the time with Drake and me?"

"Nay. But she was a loving person, and I have to believe she would not be ashamed of me, Your Grace."

"Then you should believe that, for she was ever only loving and kind." Logan reassured Peter.

Peter nodded, his face strained and drawn.

"Then you shall return." Logan slapped the desk. "Drake, it's the right time to put our plan in place. Marden Lodge will become our outpost in the north. I want it manned by Peter and this man Gareth." He looked to Peter. "Will he join us? Hire

on as one of our men and take an oath to Marden and her duke?" He leaned forward, pinning Peter in place with a hard stare. "Will he act as our spy in Weathers's lands?"

"I haven't asked him formally, but he hates Weathers, and I believe he would accept the duty with an open heart."

"Then I confer on you the right to take his oath in my stead."

"Aye, Your Grace." Peter sat up proudly. "But the outposts keep three men, Your Grace. Arvel is not built to the rough ways and sword work of a soldier. We'll be a man short, and I'm afraid not just any man will do for this outpost."

"Indeed. I have no intentions for any of my men, let alone one as dear to me as you are, to be killed by the villagers if their ways should be discovered." Logan tapped his chin with his finger as he thought about the problem facing them.

Drake's face lit up and he laughed. "I have just the man!"

Both Peter and Logan stared at him. "Who?"

"I have been struggling some time with what to do about the man, and now the answer has fallen into my lap. This is far better than the fate I'd planned for him."

"Who and what fate?" Logan asked.

"The fate would be death if he touched you."

"And who is this?" Peter asked, brows furrowed, his gaze dancing between his duke and his master of arms.

Drake sat back and crossed his arms over his chest, looking cocky and pleased.

"Caelin."

Chapter Twenty-six

Peter started and sputtered as Logan laughed and slapped the desk with his hand.

“Well done, my love, well done!”

Drake smirked. “Better this than kill him, and that is what I'd be driven to if he ever attempted you again.”

Peter gaped at Logan. “Caelin tried to...with you? When?”

“Soon after he'd come here. I suppose he was taken with me. After all, I'd rescued the poor lad from a worse fate, the scorn of his family.” Logan waved a hand.

“Tell me about him, for I am much intrigued by him.”

“I'll wager you are. If I hadn't interrupted you this evening, you would have taken him up against the stones of the hall.” Drake laughed.

The heat in Peter's face burned. “I will admit I couldn't take my eyes from him. There is something about him. Those scars,” he whispered and flicked his gaze to Logan for an explanation.

“Now he didn't tell me outright, nor did his father confess it, but I believe his father gave Caelin those wounds in order to make him less attractive. His father brought Caelin here, straight from the abbey. The abbot had asked him to remove Caelin. It seems that some of the monks couldn't resist him also.”

“His father?” Peter gasped. “His own son?”

“Better to have a scarred son than a dead one.” Drake shrugged.

"Will you take him with you, Peter? Do you think he'll fit in there at the lodge?"

"Better yet, do you think you can make a soldier of him?" Drake added. "I'm not going to send him just for you to fuck; I want some work out of him."

"Wait!" Peter stood. "There are other things to consider. And Lord Drake, how do I know he would want me?" His mind filled with the new possibilities and more questions.

Drake snorted. "Go to his room, then, and ask."

"Perhaps I will. But what about Gareth and Arvel? They must be taken into consideration. And there is only one bed and it barely holds three." Peter paced to the hearth and spun on his heels. "And the lodge can't support so many men. Gareth and I started a small garden for Arvel to tend, and we spoke of keeping chickens. Game is plentiful, but produce and grain cost dearly. And there's only room for two horses in the stables. And—"

"Whoa!" Logan came from behind his desk. "Slow down, Peter."

Peter took a deep breath and exhaled.

Logan put his hands on Peter's shoulders. "You know what is needed at the lodge. Make it so. Order all you need for three months and bring it when you return. You're captain there, and I'll provide the outpost with a purse for expenses and wages, just like the others."

Peter nodded and placed his hands over Logan's. "Thank you, Logan." He stared into green eyes the color of moss and once again understood why Drake had fallen in love with this remarkable man.

Drake came up behind Peter and placed his hands over Logan's. He leaned in and licked a line up Peter's neck. Peter shuddered but kept Logan's gaze.

"Now, go find out if Caelin is your man or if I'll have to kill him," Drake whispered. "My blade needs sharpening."

Peter's cock came to life, not at Drake's touch but the thought of Caelin being his man.

"Aye, Lord Drake."

"And let me know in the morn." Drake bit Peter's ear and tugged on it.

"Drake, my love, let Peter go." Logan chuckled. Then he leaned forward and brushed his lips across Peter's in a ghost of a kiss. "Go to him, Peter. He's yours. You have but to ask and take what he offers."

The two men stepped away from him, and Peter went to the door. He opened it and turned back to them.

"I'll report in the morning. No matter what his decision is, I'll prepare the supplies I'll need and make plans to return to the lodge." Then he pulled the door closed, leaving Logan and Drake alone.

The guard stared straight ahead of him. Peter knew he'd been chosen to guard the duke's door for his loyalty to the duke. And his ability to keep his mouth shut about anything he might hear or see.

"Which room is Caelin the tutor's?"

"That one." The man pointed to the door farther down the hall.

Peter nodded thanks, then strode to it and knocked.

The door cracked open, and Caelin peered out at him.

"My lord?" His soft voice trembled, and Peter wondered if that same tremor would remain when he was in the throes of passion. God, he hoped so.

"Caelin, I must speak to you. I come on the duke's business." Peter put his most formal voice on, and it echoed in the corridor.

"The duke's business?" Caelin stepped back and opened the door wider. "Of course. Come in." He moved away from the door to stand in the center of the room.

Peter entered, closing the door behind him.

For a long time they stared at each other. The same fire Peter had felt before ignited again. Caelin's chest rose and fell in rapid motion, his gaze locked with

Peter's, and his full lips parted as if in anticipation of what was to come. As if he waited, like a soldier, for Peter to command him.

"Come here," Peter ordered.

Caelin shuffled forward, halting just a few feet from him.

"Who scarred your face?"

"My father." Caelin's soft voice could barely be heard.

"Why?" Peter waited to see if Caelin would speak the truth.

"To protect me."

"From?"

"Men."

Peter took another step forward. "Do you need protection from men?"

"Perhaps." Caelin shrugged. "Are you going to hurt me?" His eyes begged Peter for mercy, and the look made Peter hard. Caelin had to look up at Peter, and Peter liked that, liked that Caelin had the same lithe build as Arvel.

"Nay, I'd never hurt you, pet."

Caelin's eyes widened as Peter reached out and stroked his undamaged cheek with the back of his hand, and he leaned into the touch. Peter grazed the other cheek, running his knuckles over the three parallel scars.

Caelin closed his eyes and moaned.

Peter's cock shifted, growing in its need, and he inhaled, dragging Caelin's scent into his nostrils. The man smelled like musk and sweet clover honey.

Wrapping his hand around Caelin's neck, he pulled the smaller man to him until their bodies touched. Peter tilted Caelin's head back, leaned down, and placed a soft, chaste kiss against those full, sweet lips.

Caelin whimpered as his body melted into Peter's, and his hands buried in Peter's vest as he clung to him. Peter took the kiss deeper, his tongue seeking entrance. Caelin opened to him, allowing him to find what waited for him inside.

Honey. The man tasted of honey. Sweet and thick and driving Peter higher in his arousal. His rod, now rigid and throbbing, bulged in his leathers, making his need known to Caelin.

Caelin writhed against him like a cat. His soft purr-moan filled Peter's ears until all he could hear was the pounding of his own heart and Caelin's sweet sounds of encouragement.

Peter gasped as Caelin let his vest go and worked on the strings of Peter's breeches. The loose cotton shirt Caelin wore soon fell to the floor. Peter couldn't remember how or who had removed it, but now exposed Caelin's pale flesh delighted him.

The man was lithe but not without muscles. Where Arvel was soft and hairless, Caelin's body was firm and his chest coated in a light growth of brown hair that dived down his belly to disappear under his drawstring pants.

Caelin reached inside Peter's breeches and found his straining cock, wrapping a warm hand around it, claiming it. He gave it a gentle tug, his thumb smearing the fluid that gathered on its head.

Peter broke their kiss as Caelin freed Peter's rod. "God, pet, that's good."

Caelin stroked it again, moaning as he kissed Peter's throat. With his hands on Caelin's shoulders, Peter pushed him down. He expected resistance, but Caelin went willingly to his knees.

"Suck me, pet." Peter ran his hands through Caelin's thick hair.

There was no need to guide him. Caelin had shifted his grip to the base, and before Peter could say a word, he'd taken Peter's rod into his mouth.

"Ah, Caelin," Peter whispered.

Caelin's tongue worked its way into the slit, teasing Peter. He used the flat of his tongue to bathe Peter's shaft, top, bottom, and sides, ending again at the fat head, which he sucked.

Using just his teeth, he scraped over the lip of the head, and Peter nearly lost his footing. He locked his knees and prepared for the onslaught. One thing he couldn't deny—Caelin was no stranger to the ways of men with men, and Peter thanked God for it.

He looked down at the top of Caelin's head, watching him as he bobbed up and down on the thick shaft. Caelin reached down to touch his erection, straining against the loose cotton.

“Don't touch yourself.”

Caelin groaned and clamped his hand around Peter's thigh as if to keep his hand occupied. It excited Peter that Caelin obeyed him, gave no complaint or argument to Peter's demands.

My pet.

Peter closed his eyes and concentrated on the way Caelin's ministrations felt on his cock. How it heated him, bringing his blood to a boil, made his stones hard and tight, and how his body began its slow climb to release.

He didn't want to shoot down Caelin's throat. Perhaps later. Now he wanted to fuck Caelin and feel the man's release squeeze his cock.

Peter pulled Caelin off. His pet released him with a loud, wet *pop* and a whimper.

“Against the wall.” Peter dragged Caelin to his feet and pushed him backward. Caelin stumbled, caught himself, and spun, placing his hands on the stones of the wall to brace himself.

Peter stepped up, grabbed Caelin's pants, and ripped them down, exposing his pet's ass. Caelin moaned and canted his hips to jut his ass in readiness.

Peter ran his hand over Caelin's ass, down his flank, and up the other side. “So soft, pet, so soft.”

“Peter, please,” Caelin whispered with a groan.

“What do you want me to do, Caelin?” Peter ran his fingers up the valley of Caelin's ass.

Caelin dropped his head and panted, pushing his ass a little higher. “Fuck me.”

“So you want this?”

“Aye, I want it.”

“You want me.”

“Aye, you. I want you.”

Peter leaned closer, his cock rubbing up that same valley. “Me alone? Or do you just want any man to stick his cock in you?”

“Just you, my lord. From the moment I laid eyes on you, I lost all desire for anyone else.” It was the most Caelin had spoken to Peter, and Peter didn't doubt the feeling behind the words.

Peter reached around and took Caelin's rod in his hand. Hot, hard, long but not as thick as his. He loved the weight of it, its texture, and the softness of the skin that wrapped it. Liquid dripped from it, and he smeared it over the head and down the shaft with his hand.

Beneath him, Caelin shuddered, and that sweet little purr-moan returned.

Peter guided his cock to Caelin's opening, then spit and slicked it to make the passage easier for his pet. He didn't want to hurt Caelin; he wanted to make Caelin forget all the other men who'd ever fucked him. He wanted Caelin to want only him.

“Now, pet?” He pressed the head into the tight bud.

“Aye,” Caelin cried out. “Fuck me now.” His ass pressed back onto Peter's spear as he impaled himself on it. Caelin's rod, still held in Peter's tight grip, never flagged.

Resistance, pressure, then he was through and inside Caelin's heated channel. He worked deeper, until they rested flesh to flesh, his balls against the top of Caelin's thighs.

Peter draped kisses over Caelin's back, running his hand over his pet's shoulder while he stroked that hard insistent cock, throbbing with each beat of Caelin's heart passing through their connection.

Resting his chin on Caelin's shoulder, Peter whispered, "You're mine, Caelin. My pet." He didn't move, just held Caelin in his grip, in his power, with his cock and his hands.

"Aye, my lord." Caelin nodded. "Yours to command."

"And I will command you. I will tell you when you may release."

"Aye," his pet whispered. It sent a shiver of arousal through Peter.

"I will tell you when to go to your knees."

"Aye, my lord." Caelin sobbed.

Peter withdrew, then lanced in, and Caelin gasped. Peter thrust slow and easy as if he had all night to fuck Caelin and to enjoy the body that trembled beneath his. Such a body. Strong, smooth, not like Arvel. Peter enjoyed Arvel, but his desire for Caelin he knew, even then, was stronger.

This was his pet.

God, is this what Gareth felt for Arvel? Did Arvel make Gareth's knees weak when he fucked him? Did he make Gareth's heart beat with the same strong emotion that filled Peter now?

And what would Gareth and Arvel say when he brought Caelin to them?

Peter moaned. Would they all share Caelin as they had shared Arvel?

The thought of that, the picture of it in Peter's head, sent a hard wracking shudder through him, and he lost the ability to keep his steady pace. All he wanted was to thrust madly into his pet, to reach his climax, to spill his cream deep inside Caelin.

To hear Caelin's cry, to hear him declare Peter his master and lord and love.

Even now, Caelin's cock throbbed, swollen and on the verge of expelling his seed. But Peter couldn't have that. Caelin must learn who was master and who was pet.

"Are you my pet?" Peter bit Caelin's shoulder and clamped his fingers around the base of Caelin's shaft. Caelin groaned, unable to find his release as Peter continued to thrust deep into his channel.

"Aye, your pet." Caelin grunted and dropped his head.

"And if I tell you to bend over and spread your cheeks for me?"

"I will. I swear I will." Caelin's voice broke with a soft sob as Peter's thrust raked over the spot inside his tunnel. Caelin rose up on his toes, body quivering. "Please." He groaned. Peter's grip on his pet's cock tightened.

"Not until I tell you, pet."

"Aye, my lord."

"And if I allow it, will you let another man take you?"

Caelin shivered. "Will you watch?"

"Aye."

"I will, my lord. For your pleasure."

"And for yours, pet." Peter slammed into him, and Caelin's arms strained and bulged with the effort to keep him from being pushed face-first into the wall.

Caelin nodded. "For mine."

"Then you belong to me."

"I belong to you, my lord. To do your bidding. To please you. As you command." Caelin cried out, sweat dripping down his back from the strain of his denied release.

"Give me your release, pet. Now." Peter let go of Caelin's cock.

Caelin opened his mouth, threw back his head, and shuddered as he pumped his cream out against the wall and floor. But he never made a sound as the walls of his tunnel rippled around Peter's cock.

Peter closed his eyes and let his own release swell, build, then explode, shooting deep into Caelin's channel, filling him until he had no more to give. Peter pulled out and spread Caelin's cheeks apart.

The tight pink bud quivered, letting a long line of white drip down the inside of Caelin's thigh.

With a final shudder, Peter tossed his head, rolled his shoulders, and slapped Caelin on the ass.

“Well done, pet.”

He pulled the shaking young man into his arms, and Caelin buried his head in Peter's neck.

“My lord. No one has ever...no one...” he cried. His arms came up around Peter's neck.

“Never fucked you like that?” Peter asked, unable to believe he'd done anything remarkable at all.

“No.” Caelin shook his head against Peter's chest. “No one ever understood me before. No one ever knew what I needed deep inside.”

Peter clung to his pet. He had known. He'd taken one look at Caelin and known.

Caelin needed to belong to someone. He needed a master.

And Peter understood in that moment that he had needed to be the master.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Peter lay on Caelin's bed with the young man's head resting on his chest. He drew circles on Caelin's shoulder.

"Pet, I will be leaving the keep soon."

Caelin sat up, frowning. "Take me with you, please, my lord."

Peter chuckled and pulled him back down into his arms. "But you don't know where I'm bound."

"I don't care. I want to be with you."

"Don't you like it here at the castle?"

"Aye, it's fine, and the boys are good." Caelin sighed. "But I want to be with you. You said it, my lord. I belong to you now. I go where you go."

Peter laughed. "Captured your heart, have I?" He didn't believe it. A man might say anything in the throes of passion, even swear undying love, but that didn't mean he spoke the truth.

Caelin nodded and spoke into Peter's neck as he pulled Peter closer. "Aye, from the first moment I saw you stride into the great hall. I couldn't take my eyes from you, my lord."

"Or I from you," Peter admitted. He felt Caelin smile against his skin and gave him a quick hug. "Now, about where I'm bound."

"Aye?"

"His Grace has decided to open an outpost in the northern territory. We'll be using an old hunting lodge his father kept as the outpost, but much needs to be done before we can station anyone there."

"And you go to ready it? Will you be gone long?" Caelin stroked his hand over Peter's arm.

"I go to ready it and I shall be its captain, Caelin. It's up to me to choose the men who will stay there at the lodge and serve under me."

"But that's perfect. I already have served under you." Caelin gave him a wicked grin.

"This is soldier work, pet. What experience has a tutor with swords, horses, and patrolling?"

Caelin sat up, and his brows gathered together. "Before I had been sent to the abbey my father had both my brother and me trained to take his place. As the second son of a nobleman, I know how to use a sword, how to ride a horse across country, and how to fight in close quarters."

Peter nodded. No wonder Caelin's body had such muscles, more than any of the soft monks he'd ever run across. "That is interesting, my pet. What else about you might I need to know?"

Caelin thought, his lips twisted off to the side. "I don't talk much. The abbey served me well in that respect." He shrugged. "But I can read and write, so I could handle all the correspondence of the outpost."

"Well and good." He'd need someone to write and read the messages sent between Marden keep and the lodge.

"And I can care for the horses and our equipment." The way Caelin kept finding reasons to take him on endeared him even more to Peter. Had any soldier been so enthusiastic?

Perhaps the drudgery of daily life would dissuade his pet.

"Have you ever worked in a garden?"

"Aye. At the abbey we all had to work in the gardens. If we didn't grow our food, we didn't eat."

“And are you also an expert with chickens?” Peter laughed. It seemed he would have to take the young man. How could he do without him?

“Aye, chickens also.” Caelin nodded and grinned.

There was no use fighting it. Peter wanted Caelin, and Drake wanted Caelin gone.

“Then prepare your students for your leaving and pack your things. As soon as I have the supplies ready, we'll be leaving for Marden Lodge.”

Peter slapped Caelin on his ass as his pet rolled over and licked a line down Peter's belly.

“My lord. Tonight, will you be leaving me so soon?”

“Nay, pet. I fear we have more to discuss.” Peter's cock came to life, not quite ready, but he was sure Caelin would take great pains to ensure it did.

Caelin rolled onto his back, grabbed his legs behind the knees, and spread himself wide for Peter. “I'm not much for words, my lord.”

“Oh, a man of action, are you?” Peter chuckled as he ran a finger along the underside of Caelin's rod. The man had the stamina of youth, thank God.

For the life of him, Peter had no idea why he also had gained new and fresh vigor when faced with such a pretty picture as his pet, but he knew before he returned to the barracks he'd know a lot more about him.

Such as what made him whimper and sigh and cry out Peter's name.

* * *

Gareth swung the ax, and the thick thud of metal on wood gave him a satisfied feeling. He paused, wiped his brow with his sleeve, then hoisted the ax to his shoulder for the next swing.

The woodpile had grown, and once he finished this lot, there'd be enough wood for some time. Spring would be in full bloom soon enough, and they'd need less wood as the summer approached.

He glanced around and spotted Arvel. The young man lay in the middle of the glade, the first of the wildflowers just rising above the tall grass. Nearby, Gareth's horse cropped the fresh green growth, unconcerned about anything but its next mouthful of grass.

Since Peter's leaving, things had returned to the way they'd been before his arrival. Gareth doing the heavy work, Arvel tending the lodge and Gareth. It had always been a good life, but now something was missing.

Peter. Gareth couldn't deny it. He'd grown fond of the younger man, and truth to tell, the constant fighting for domination between him and Peter had excited him. And to have taken Peter? That had been most wonderful.

But had he spoken too freely about his life as a mercenary? Had he offered to serve the duke of Marden as a spy in a foolish rush to impress Peter?

He didn't think so. No, he hated Weathers; that had been no falsehood spoken in the heat of anger. And he was the right man for the task, had been often in Weathers territory, he knew people he could gather information from. He could, if pushed, even hire on inside Weathers's keep as one of his guards.

That would be a last resort. There hadn't been many men in Gareth's life that he'd feared, but Duke Bors Weathers was one of them.

The man had no honor, no emotions, no caring for those around him, whether they were his own family or the people he'd sworn to protect as duke.

A man like that was no more than a rabid dog. A danger to all around him.

Gareth knew there had been plots against Bors, but like someone enchanted, he had escaped them all. Including the one Gareth had been involved in.

Surely that had been God watching over him, to escape Weathers's men and his wrath. He'd neglected to tell Peter of that event, but should he be pressed into duty if and when Peter returned, he had to divulge that kernel of information.

To be sent into the keep and be recognized would be sure and certain death.

Not that he was a coward. He'd kill any man who said he was, but other matters had to be taken into account. Like Arvel. If Gareth died, who would care for him?

Before there had been no one. But now Gareth knew the answer. *Peter*. He had no doubt Arvel's second Heart would rise to his lover's aid, no matter what the cost. And Gareth thanked God for Peter; he did. Just knowing Arvel had someone else to rely on soothed the worry in Gareth's mind.

No, if he took the oath, swore himself to Marden, then he would do it with his full being, and that meant obeying the duke's commands. If the duke ordered him to spy on Weathers, then spy he would.

He gazed at his lover, lying in the grass, one ankle crossed over his knee, staring up into blue sky. Letting his ax fall to the ground, he walked over to Arvel.

His shadow fell over the young man, who looked up at him, smiled, and offered his hand. Gareth took it and Arvel pulled him down to sit beside him.

"What have you been thinking, pet?" Gareth said.

Arvel's eyes danced as he watched Gareth's mouth move. He placed his hand over his heart with two fingers out.

"Ah, Peter."

Arvel nodded, his expressive face all troubled and concerned.

"I worry about him also." Gareth sighed and looked up at the sky.

His lover rolled on his side and put his head in Gareth's lap. Gareth stroked his hair, running his fingers through the long red tresses.

"Peter will return to us. Have no fear."

His pet nodded, then wrapped his arms around Gareth's waist and buried his face against Gareth's hip.

Gareth reached down and tilted Arvel's head back. "Shall we go inside?"

A smile broke across his pet's face, and he earned a quick nod. Then Arvel sprang up, pulling and tugging on Gareth to rise and follow.

Once Gareth had gained his feet, Arvel took off, dashing toward the lodge, his hair streaming behind him.

Gareth laughed, brushed off the backside of his breeches, and gave chase.

The door to the lodge slammed just as he reached it. Gareth pounded on it, knowing Arvel couldn't hear the sound but could feel the vibrations.

He'd seen his pet before, leaning against the door or the wall, feeling with his hands and body the shaking of the timbers. Arvel had even put his head to the horse's belly and laughed at the rumbling he felt there as the horse whinnied or nickered.

No, his pet's life wasn't completely without sound, and for that Gareth was happy. For Arvel, it took little to make him smile, but of late, since Peter's leaving, his lover had found less and less to smile about.

And so had Gareth.

He wanted Peter back, safe and sound, where he belonged. At the silent lodge with him and Arvel.

Of course, he'd have to be stretched between teams of horses to let Peter know he'd been missed. Let Arvel spill his emotions about the place, but not him.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Peter supervised the last of the supplies loaded onto the wagon. He circled it, his finger running down the list, his hand touching the crate that held the six chickens and one rooster as if counting it off.

Caelin approached. "Peter, all this for two men?" He ran his hand over the stack of wood Marden's carpenter had prepared as he tilted his head in question.

Peter didn't speak, just looked up and shrugged. Caelin had the feeling Peter hadn't told him all about the outpost. And if not, when did he plan on speaking of it?

Caelin walked around the wagon. Tomorrow morn they'd hitch the team of horses and leave for the lodge. He packed his meager belongings—some clothing, a pair of worn boots, and a few keepsakes from the boys—but it barely filled a small sack.

How could he be a proper soldier without any weapons? Or a uniform?

"Shall I ride in the wagon?" He canted his gaze toward Peter.

Peter looked up from his list. "Aye, since it's just you and I, you'll have to drive the wagon. Can you manage?"

Caelin nodded.

"Good. I'll ride my horse."

"What about the team and the wagon? Who will return them?" Caelin fingered the coarse canvas fabric of what appeared to be a tent.

"No one. They will stay at the lodge. One of the horses will be yours."

“Really?” Caelin smiled. His own horse. He liked that very much. “Thank you, my lord.” Perhaps he could go to the stable and ask which of the animals had been chosen for the journey.

“Don't thank me. They're the duke's horses.” Peter shrugged, then jerked his head toward the keep. “Time for evening meal.”

Caelin trailed after him. “Who is the other horse for?”

Peter cleared his throat. “It's an extra.”

“Oh.” Caelin ran ahead of Peter and opened the door to the great hall, stepped aside, and let Peter enter in front of him.

They strode to the table, where Drake, Logan and the boys already sat, breaking their bread and pouring wine for the men and water for the children as they protested.

After being greeted, they sat across from each other, and Caelin kept his eyes to his charger and the food that filled it. Best not to let anyone know about his new relationship with Peter.

“So, Peter, have you found your man?” Logan asked.

Peter choked on his wine, then wiped his mouth. “Indeed. It's as we discussed.” His gaze shifted to Caelin.

Caelin felt all eyes at the table fall on him. He squirmed in his seat and picked at his food with his blade. Had Peter and Logan spoken of him? Perhaps his joining the outpost hadn't been Peter's idea but Logan's. Perhaps Peter didn't really want him at all?

His heart ached and his appetite fled.

“Caelin, do you have something to say?” Logan's tender voice coaxed him to speak. Could he back out now? How much of a fool and a coward would he appear to the duke and Drake? Drake cared little for him, but he'd thought Logan had some small affection for him and Caelin didn't want to lose that.

Best to do it now, but the curious looks on the two lads' faces worried him. What if they were very upset? What if they weren't? He didn't know which would be worse.

"Aye." He cleared his throat. "Boys, I've decided to leave the keep. It seems my skills are needed at the new outpost. I'll be reading and writing the messages between the outpost and here."

The boys' curious looks faded to frowns. Tomas's bottom lip quivered, and Joss took a quick glance at him, then to Caelin.

"I think that's wonderful! How exciting! A post at the far north."

Tomas blinked, then grinned at him. "A soldier's post?" Joss's excitement spread to Tomas, surely the older boy's plan, bless him.

If there was one thing each boy wanted to be, it was a soldier. He'd seen them play at it many times with their wooden swords and had watched as Drake worked with them.

"Aye."

"But you're a *tutor*, Caelin. What do you know about swords and fighting?" Tomas voiced his concern loudly, crossing his arms over his chest and demanding an answer.

Peter opened his mouth as if to speak, but Caelin held up his hand to stop him.

"I am the second son of a nobleman, Tomas. I've spent my youth in training, both to defend my family's lands and those of my liege lord. I've also been instructed by my father's steward to manage his properties, including writing letters and doing the accounting."

"As I thought," Logan said. "You're a man of many valuable talents, Caelin. You'll be a worthy addition to the outpost. We'll miss you here at Marden, but I'm sure I'll be able to find another tutor for the boys."

And with his words, the duke ended any further discussion with the two young men of Marden. After their meal, the boys were sent to play by the hearth while the men finished conferring.

A surge of pride welled in Caelin. If only his father knew of this turn of events. For all Caelin knew, he thought his son dead, killed by the decree of Duke Marden. Perhaps, he'd never learn what fate had awaited his less-favored son, the son who'd shamed him. The son he'd taken his knife to and sliced lines across his face.

Caelin felt no shame now. For some reason he couldn't understand, he'd been chosen, not just by Peter but by Logan, his duke, to serve at this station. Caelin sat a little taller in his chair as the men leaned forward to discuss the outpost.

"Peter, have you all the supplies you need?" Logan asked.

"Aye, and then some." Peter nodded.

"And you're off in the morn?" Drake cocked an eyebrow.

"I am. I mean, we are." Peter's gaze shot to Caelin. "Are you ready?"

"There wasn't much to pack." Caelin shrugged.

Logan grinned. "Nonsense. There are uniforms, your riding leathers, boots, arms, and cloaks enough to fill the trunks. What about those?"

Caelin sat back and stared at his folded hands on the table. "I have none of those things, Your Grace. I packed all I had, the little I'd kept from the abbey."

"But as soon as you give me your oath, you'll be a Marden armsman, and as such, Marden will provide your livery." Logan winked at him.

Caelin glanced at Peter, then at Drake. Both men grinned at him.

"It's true, my lord?" His head swam at the thought. He'd been grateful for not being killed, much less having a full livery.

Peter nodded. "All truth. Not to mention the wage you'll earn."

"Wage? Oh that will be fine!" Caelin clapped his hands together, then sobered. "I'm ready to take my oath, Your Grace."

Logan pushed back his chair. "Drake, give me your sword." He held out his hand. Drake stood, pulled his sword from his back scabbard, and handed it to Logan.

Peter stood, pulled Caelin to his feet and over to where the duke stood.

With Peter next to him, he faced Logan and Drake.

"Kneel, Caelin," Peter whispered.

Caelin dropped to his knee, hands at his sides, and looked up. Above him, Logan raised the sword to point to the rafters of the hall.

"Caelin of Holdess, do you give me your oath? Do you swear with your life to obey the Duke of Marden, and as such, any of his named representatives, for as long as you live?" Logan's deep voice echoed through the hall, and everything fell silent, even the boys.

"I so swear." Caelin's once timid voice rang out in the great room.

Peter clapped him on the back and dragged him to his feet. Drake looked relieved and Logan grinned. The boys came running over to him to join in the celebration.

Logan picked up his wine goblet and raised it. "To your health, Caelin, and to your safety in your new duty."

The others, even the boys, raised theirs and drank to the toast.

Caelin glanced over at Peter, caught his eye, and gave him a tentative smile. He hoped this pleased Peter, and he prayed the look in Peter's eyes meant he would see the man tonight, before they left on their journey. His mind overflowed with questions.

"Now, Peter. Take your new recruit to the barracks, the stable, and the armory, and get him outfitted. Uniforms, clothing, weapons, and pick out his horse and tack," Drake ordered.

"Aye, my lord." Peter gave him a sharp salute, grabbed Caelin by the arm, and led him away.

Just before he stepped out of the door, Caelin looked back at the dining table. Logan leaned against it with Drake standing in front of him. There must have been something quite interesting on Drake's vest, because Logan's fingers played along the front of it.

Drake's gaze never left Logan's face.

"Oh!" Realization hit Caelin. He stumbled across the threshold and felt quite the fool for having not known sooner. Perhaps that explained why Logan had spared his life.

"Are you all right?" Peter asked as he caught Caelin on his way to the ground.

Caelin straightened and shook his head. Best not to let Peter in on his conclusions, in case Peter took offense or thought he meant to accuse.

"I'm fine. Let's go pick out my horse first."

Caelin's heart hammered in his chest as they crossed the bailey toward the stables.

Peter's laugh bounced off the stone walls.

How far he'd come, from a cleric's life to certain death to a tutor and now a soldier. It amazed Caelin, and he swore to himself and to God he wouldn't let any of the men who counted on him down.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Peter halted one of the stable lads. "I'm in need of two horses to pull the wagon for the outpost. Both must be steeds, not dray animals, for we'll be riding them also."

The young boy nodded, scrunched his face as he thought, then trotted down the wide aisle of the stables toward the rear. The building stretched deep into the keep, but most of the animals here belonged to others. "My master brought six animals for you to pick from, my lord."

At the end, he took a lantern down from a peg and motioned for them. They followed him. He opened the gate, and they stepped out of the barn into a holding pen, his light illuminating the half-asleep animals that huddled against the railing.

"These are the ones. All well trained to the wagon and as steeds for the soldiers."

Peter looked them over with the gaze of a man who'd looked at horseflesh many times and could judge it well.

"What do you think? See any you fancy?"

Caelin walked deeper into the pen, bringing the boy and lantern with him. "What do you think, my lord? This one?" He pointed to a pleasant-looking mare with white socks.

"She'll do." Peter nodded.

"She's a good horse, she is," added the boy as he approached the animal, took her by the halter, and led her back to the gate. They went inside the barn, and he clipped a leather lead to her halter, then returned to them.

"What about that one, my lord?" The boy pointed to a large gelding, black with a long white blaze.

"He'll do," Peter declared.

Caelin's eyes widened. He'd never had such a fine horse, not even at his father's keep. There he'd ride whatever animal had been available, unlike his father and older brother, who had their own fine mounts.

"He will indeed. He's far too fine an animal for the likes of me." Caelin shook his head, but felt so happy he couldn't keep the smile from his face.

"Have their tack loaded on the wagon, boy, and have them harnessed at first light." With a wave of his hand, Peter turned and headed to the front of the barn, with Caelin on his heels.

A quick glance back at the groom leading the black inside the barn, and Caelin couldn't have been happier.

* * *

Peter, carrying a bundle of Caelin's new clothing, accompanied Caelin back to his room in hopes of being invited inside. His pet, also carrying his own load and wearing his new sword, had brushed against him several times as they climbed the stairs to the upper floor. And now, from the pointed glances Caelin cast his way, it seemed as if his pet had the same hopes also.

Caelin opened his door and stepped to the side as Peter entered. "Welcome, my lord."

Peter strode over to the bed and dropped the clothes on it, then went to chair by the hearth and sat, his gaze on his pet. What delights would Caelin grace him with?

Caelin shut the door, placed his bundle next to Peter's, and then removed his belt and sword, hooking it over a peg on the wall. He spun around and faced Peter.

"What is going on, Peter?" Anger suffused his face, turning his eyes dark and his mouth into a hard, straight line.

Peter shifted and ran his hand over his thigh. "What mean you, pet?" Peter's hopes of spending the better part of the night with Caelin evaporated like drops of water in a fire.

"Don't 'pet' me, my lord." Caelin advanced and stopped a few feet from Peter. This was a side of Caelin he'd never seen before, but then, he'd never riled the younger man, and he thought it looked well on him.

With a quick flick of his gaze down to his boots, then up to Caelin's face, Peter shrugged. "What do you want to know?"

"All that equipment." Caelin pointed in the direction of the bailey. "That can't be for just you and me."

Peter rubbed his jaw. The time had come to tell Caelin of the others.

"We won't be the only ones there."

Caelin's eyes widened. "There are other men? Soldiers?"

"Two men, to be exact."

"Two?" Caelin paced to the bed and halted with his back to Peter. "Then we won't be alone. We won't be able to indulge..." He let his words trail off.

"That is not entirely true." Peter leaned forward, hands clasped between his legs. "At Marden Lodge, there is a caretaker, a young man the duke placed in that position years ago. His name is Arvel. He will continue on as caretaker."

Caelin nodded.

"The outposts are tended by three men. I will be captain at the lodge."

"And with me, that makes two. Who is the third, if not this caretaker?"

"Gareth." Peter sighed. "His name is Gareth. He's a former mercenary, and Logan has given me the power to take his oath to Marden when we arrive."

Caelin's mind seemed to work this over. Then he looked back at Peter. "This lodge, is it large? Where will we all sleep? I saw the framework and mattress for a bed in the back of the wagon."

"There is only one large room." Peter cleared his throat. "And only one bed."

Caelin's brows furrowed. "One bed? Then where did you sleep?"

Ah, here it was, the moment that would tell all. "We all shared the bed." He looked hard into Caelin's eyes, seeking some sign from him.

The younger man paused, mouth open as if to speak, then he closed it, walked to his bed, and sat. He licked his lips, then glanced up into Peter's face. "Is that all you shared?"

Peter couldn't tell if excitement or anger glittered in Caelin's eyes, but at this point it didn't matter. What was said was said.

"When I first arrived, Arvel was there alone. He offered himself to me, and I took him."

Caelin's fingers twisted in the quilts on the bed. "Do you love him?" he whispered. His temerity had returned, and Peter ached to have the new, confident Caelin back.

"No, pet. I don't love him. But I do care for him deeply. He is a very special person, as you will soon learn."

Caelin nodded.

Peter continued his story. "Shortly, Gareth returned to the lodge, and I discovered that he and Arvel were lovers also." He waited to see Caelin's reaction.

"Did he find out about you and Arvel? Did you fight over him?" Caelin sat up, biting his bottom lip in worry.

"He did find out. And he accepted it." There, he'd laid it out for Caelin to see.

His pet's eyes widened. "So you and Arvel continued as lovers? And Gareth and Arvel?" He stood and went to Peter. "Peter, did you and Gareth share Arvel? Together? At the same time?"

Peter pushed out of his chair. Caelin seemed to quiver as tiny tremors shook his hands. His breathing deepened and his lips parted. Even his cheeks flushed. If Peter didn't know better, he'd have sworn Caelin had become aroused by this news.

"We did."

Caelin put his hands on Peter's chest and leaned forward. "And did you and Gareth?" His eyebrow cocked upward.

"Aye." Peter exhaled. "We have all been lovers, the three of us, together and separately."

Caelin swayed, and Peter caught him by the arms. "Does that shock you, pet?" Peter pulled Caelin to him and whispered into his hair. "Or does that excite you?"

Caelin wrapped his arms around Peter's neck and he pressed himself into Peter's body. A hard, thick rod pushed against Peter's hip gave him the answer.

"And, my pet, will you share yourself with us?"

Caelin moaned. "Aye, if it is your wish for me to do so."

"I could command you, pet, but I don't want you to do anything against your will."

"I have to confess something." Caelin pulled away and leaned back to look into Peter's face.

"Confess what?"

"The real reason the abbot put me out of the order."

"I assumed you'd been involved with one of the clerics."

"It wasn't one. There were two men. Both wanted me. I wanted both of them. They demanded I choose between them, and I refused." Caelin's eyes gleamed.

"Oh." Peter smiled and ran his hand over the scarred cheek of his lover. "Does that mean you are amiable to our situation?"

"I think you will find me more than amiable." Caelin rose up on his toes to kiss Peter, just brushing his lips in a light tease.

Peter jerked him hard against his chest. "Caelin, you imp. You delightful, delicious, devilish imp. I'll wager those men didn't know how good their situation was, did they?"

"Nay, they were fools." Caelin laughed and pressed his mouth to Peter's neck and licked him. Peter moaned, grabbed Caelin's ass, and thrust against him.

"I am no such fool, pet. And neither is Gareth nor Arvel."

Caelin gasped. "Peter?"

"Aye." Peter nuzzled his throat.

"Will I still be your pet?" Peter looked down into Caelin's worried eyes, and the urge to sweep him up in his arms, to cover his face in kisses, to make Caelin understand how much he wanted him, filled Peter until he almost burst.

He took Caelin's head in his hands and rested his forehead against Caelin's. "Oh aye. Just as Gareth is Arvel's first and dearest love, you shall be mine. If that's what you wish."

Peter's lover melted against him, pulling him down to the bed. He wrapped his arms around Peter's back, his legs around Peter's waist, and with a few quick thrusts encouraged Peter to take him.

"I wish. No matter with whom I share my body, you are my first and best love."

Peter sighed as he looked down into Caelin's eyes. "Caelin, my pet."

He rolled over, bringing Caelin on top of him. Laughing, the younger man scrambled off, removed the clothing they'd placed there as fast as possible, then attacked Peter and stripped him bare. At last, Peter lay on the bed, naked, his manhood at full length, its thick head dripping, for Caelin's pleasure.

Caelin undressed and climbed up to sit next to Peter. "So the new bed, is that for you and me?"

"Aye. We will not all four fit in one bed." Peter laughed. "I think both Gareth and I would prefer to share our nights' sleep with our own lovers."

"Good." Caelin nodded. "I will spend every night in your bed and wake each morn in your arms."

"Except when either you or I are on patrol. Don't forget we have an outpost to run. This will not be all pleasure and games, pet."

"I understand. We must earn our wages." He nodded. "But when we're not on duty?" That devilish gleam sparkled in Caelin's eyes, and Peter's cock ached from it.

“Then what we do with each other and to each other is our own business.”

“Well, then, my lord, let us get down to business.” Caelin's grin left Peter with no doubts as to what the younger man planned.

“I'm ready.” Peter took his cock in hand and gave it a stroke. “Are you?”

“More than ready.” Caelin took over the stroke, and Peter let go, watching as his pet pumped his hand up and down over Peter's hard rod.

Caelin, on his knees, spread his legs wide. His heavy sac hung almost to the bed, and his cock stood up to his belly. With one hand he stroked Peter and with the other he reached down and fondled his stones, moaning as he did.

It excited Peter, and he could contain his desire no longer. “Turn around.”

Caelin let go of Peter's hot flesh, spun on his knees, and bent over, displaying himself for his lover. He reached behind, took a cheek in each hand, and spread himself open for Peter's gaze.

“Fuck, Caelin.” Peter groaned. His rod leaked like a sieve, so ready it was to sink home into a tight tunnel.

Peter rose to his knees, held his staff ready, and spit into his hand, smearing it over the fat head. Then he spit on Caelin's hole and spread it around with his fingers. “At the lodge, Gareth keeps oil for this, pet.”

“Oil is best. Makes the entry easier and the fucking most satisfying.”

“Does this hurt? Like this?” Peter didn't want to cause Caelin any harm.

“Nay. I'm used to it.” He shrugged. “Most men don't care enough to ask, my lord.”

Peter cringed at the thought that his lover had been treated poorly by the men who'd taken him before. “I promise you neither I nor Gareth is such a selfish lover. We would want only your pleasure.” He ran his hand over Caelin's back to soothe him.

“Well, if it's pleasure you wish to give, then let your staff find its home in me.” Caelin pushed back, urging Peter to claim him.

Peter gave up all thoughts of more than being inside his lover and thrust in, pushing until he had seated himself deep inside Caelin's tunnel.

God, it was hot and tight and slick. Peter marveled at how he craved this joining with another man. Had he had this urge all along? Had Drake's harsh looks and muscled body awakened these thoughts, these desires?

If they had, then he'd found everything he'd dreamed of in Caelin. And in Gareth and Arvel, his lovers also.

How had he moved from a man with a wife, living a normal life as a soldier, to this? To having not just one man as a lover but contemplating having three male lovers?

He could call it many things. Depravity would be one, but to Peter that had never been what had taken him over. There had been only emotion, love, feeling connected to his lovers, from Logan and Drake to Arvel, Gareth, and now, sweetest of all, Caelin.

He closed his eyes and thrust, loving the way it felt to slide in and out of Caelin, how his lover's sighs and purrs and moans made him even harder, how the air changed, became scented with their sweat and their drippings.

Peter's stones gathered close, and his groin caught fire. Beneath him, Caelin's harsh panting, the sweat on his tensed back, his muscled arms holding him up against the furor of Peter's fucking, all drove Peter to the very edge of a chasm.

Caelin cried out, and his release rippled around Peter's cock. "So sweet," he whispered, and his own exploded from him, filling his lover to overflowing.

Caelin collapsed, and Peter fell to the side, pulling his shrinking member from its home with a sigh of regret.

"I can't stay." Peter ran his hand over Caelin's shoulder, then kissed the smooth flesh.

"I know." Caelin rolled over to face him.

Peter stroked his knuckles down the three scars. "If I ever meet your father, I'm going to pay him back for what he did to you."

Caelin placed his hand over Peter's and pressed it to his face. "Forget him. It's done and over. Besides, as a soldier, I think it makes me look dangerous." He winked.

"I think it makes you look...well, I get hard each time I gaze on them."

His lover laughed. "You do? How odd."

"Not really. Don't you find that great scar on Drake's face arousing?"

Caelin smiled. "I didn't know you noticed Lord Drake. Logan is by far the more handsome of the two."

"Indeed he is, but for me, it's Drake's looks. His scar, his body." Peter shrugged. "Who can explain what draws one man to another? Or how one heart yearns for another?"

"Does your heart yearn for me?" Caelin gave him a shy smile.

"Oh Caelin. My heart has yearned for you for so long." He rubbed his forehead against his lover's. "And now it's at peace."

"Was it not at peace at the lodge?"

Peter sighed. "Not completely. There I began to heal from my loss, but here, now with you, I feel whole again. Complete."

"I never thought I'd find a man who'd give me what I needed. Strength, control, and freedom."

Peter sat up, kissed his lover's upturned lips, and dressed. "I'll be at your door at first light. Be packed and ready. We leave then."

Caelin lay back and wrapped his body in the quilt. Peter took one last gaze at him, hair rumpled, lips red and kiss swollen, and thought he'd never seen anything or anyone more beautiful.

"In the morn." Peter slipped out the door and closed it behind him.

Chapter Thirty

Peter rode ahead of the wagon as they passed through the little village near the lodge. Caelin sat on the bench, holding the reins of the team, taking in everything around him. Not too small, the village teemed with life, people coming and going in and out of shops, buying and selling, just living their lives.

They had both dressed that morning in their Marden liveries. Caelin thought Peter looked quite dashing in his blue tabard, sword at his side, and shining black leather boots. He glanced down to his own new boots. They were a little large for his feet, but he'd worn a second pair of woolen socks and made do. And the deep blue, the duke of Marden's color, looked well on him.

The pennant that flew from the pole rising above the wagon told everyone they belonged to the duke, and as such, they were treated with respect. The duke was well loved in his lands, and Caelin felt proud to serve such a great duke. And a handsome one as well.

The duke had certainly turned Caelin's head when he'd first been dragged to the castle by his father. Once he'd met Peter, all his affections had been lost to the man who rode alongside the wagon.

"Is it much farther?" Caelin asked, not for the first or third or even fifth time. He couldn't help it if he were anxious to arrive at the lodge and meet the other men.

"Very soon now."

"That's what you said an hour ago." Caelin's ass hurt as he'd bounced along the road. They'd spent almost two days getting there due to the wagon's slower pace. This morning, Caelin had padded the seat with a quilt, but now, late in the

afternoon, the thick pad had worn down to no more than a thin defense against the wooden seat.

"You're worse than the boys," Peter grumbled but shot him an affectionate smile.

Caelin's heart warmed, and he grinned at the truth. His lover knew just how to charm him into silence.

They rode on, leaving the village behind them, and came to a fork in the road. Peter pointed to the left, and Caelin reined the team to take that road as it wrapped around the woods.

Peter halted, and Caelin pulled on the reins to stop the wagon. He looked around, but woods surrounded them. "Where's the lodge?"

"Down that path." Peter swung down from his horse and went to a small break in the underbrush.

"That's a path? The wagon will never fit." Caelin shook his head.

Peter tied off his mare to the wagon and then dug around in the back. He pulled out a small saw blade and a scythe. "Here. Climb down. We have some work to do before we can reach the lodge."

Caelin hopped down, and Peter gave him the scythe. "I'll cut the branches and you mow the undergrowth, and we'll clear the path in no time."

"No time, eh? Why is it I think it might take longer than that?" Caelin looked toward the setting sun. "If we don't hurry we'll be cutting in the dark."

"Then let's get to it." Peter raised the saw and attacked the first of the branches. Once he'd gone into the woods about the length of a man and the width of the wagon, Caelin followed, swinging the scythe from side to side, cutting down the tall grasses, weeds, and young saplings. As they moved forward, Caelin would halt and retrieve the horses and wagon and lead them deeper toward the lodge.

They worked hard, cutting and hacking away the woods until they were both drenched in sweat, covered in leaves and grass, and their muscles ached. But at last, Peter broke through and stepped into a glade.

"Marden Lodge." Peter stepped aside so Caelin could see.

Caelin finished the last few feet, then lowered his scythe and stared at the little lodge.

"It's small."

"Aye, that it is." Peter nodded, then returned his saw blade to the wagon and stowed it there.

"But large enough for four, I think."

"It will be close quarters, but I'm positive we can make it work." Peter grinned at him and slapped him on the shoulder.

"Is that a garden?" Caelin's eyes lit up.

"Well, the beginnings of one. I've brought the seeds and plants to get a good start on it."

Caelin thought it the finest lodge he'd ever seen, not that he'd seen that many, but this one looked well tended.

Just as he opened his mouth to ask yet another question, the door to the lodge opened, and one of the largest men he'd ever seen stepped out, sword raised.

"Peter, is that you?" the man bellowed.

"Gareth!" Peter shouted and ran toward him.

The man swung his sword into his back scabbard and trotted out to meet Peter. They met halfway across the glen and embraced, clapping backs and laughing.

Truly happy to see each other, Caelin noted.

So, that was Gareth, the mercenary. A match to Peter in size and weight, and something told Caelin he'd be a man just as dominant as his Peter. A ripple of

arousal coursed through his body at the realization that he'd soon be sharing himself with this man.

A movement at the door to the lodge broke Caelin's gaze from the two men. A young man with the most beautiful long red hair hung in the doorway as if frightened. Then a huge smile of recognition burst on his pretty face, and he dashed toward Peter.

"Arvel!" Peter roared and flung open his arms. The man threw himself into Peter's embrace.

"Hold, Arvel." Gareth grabbed Arvel by the shoulder and pulled him back. "We are not alone." His steely gaze fell on Caelin and fear shot through him.

Peter turned back toward Caelin. "Yes, I bring the third soldier to man the outpost. The duke has declared Marden Lodge as his outpost in the north, Gareth. The position we spoke of is yours if you'll take it."

Gareth bared his teeth and growled, pulling the younger man, Arvel, behind him as if to protect him. He drew his sword again, held it at the ready, and advanced. Caelin took a step back. His own sword lay on the bench of the wagon, and he was defenseless.

"Peter?" Caelin looked to his lover, his gaze dancing between both large men.

Peter jumped in front of Gareth and grabbed his wrist. "Hold. He is no enemy."

"Have you lost your mind, Peter?" Gareth whispered. "You will have us all killed."

"Nay, hold your temper and your sword. I know what I'm doing. Caelin is no danger to any of us."

Peter turned back to Caelin. "Come here. There is no need to fear."

Caelin nodded and came forward. "Hail, Gareth. I am Caelin Holdess. Peter has told me much of you."

"Has he?" Gareth's eyes narrowed, and his grip tightened on the sword.

Peter chuckled. "God, you're such a bull of a man, Gareth. Take ease. Caelin is one of us."

"What?" Gareth stared at Caelin.

Caelin exhaled, stepped toward Peter, and wrapped his arm around Peter's waist, snugging him in closer. "What he means is I am his lover." Caelin's chin jutted up with the declaration, and Peter's chest filled with pride at his boldness.

"Lover? Is this true, Peter? You never spoke of a lover."

"It's true. And Caelin and I met when I returned to Marden. The duke asked me to choose a man to be the third at the outpost, and I chose Caelin." Peter hugged Caelin to him.

Arvel came around Gareth, frowning.

"Now, Arvel, will you give me that kiss?" Peter asked.

Arvel glanced at Caelin, his head tilted like a pretty little redbird.

Caelin laughed and pushed Peter toward him. "Go on, greet him."

Arvel smiled and launched himself at Peter, who caught him and received a most lusty kiss. "I missed you, pet," he said, once they'd broken their kiss.

"Here now. Arvel, this is Caelin." Peter stepped back to let the two young men meet.

"Hail, Arvel. Peter has told me a little about you." Caelin smiled and offered his hand.

Another man? Another Heart?

And one so very interesting. He'd never seen such scars on such a handsome face.

Arvel looked at his hand, then up into his face. He stepped close to Caelin and ran his hand over the scars on Caelin's face as he frowned.

"My father gave them to me. To ensure no man would want me."

That should have shocked Arvel, but he'd known of such hatred, such pain, far too many times to count. His heart opened to the young man nearly his own age.

And that Peter had brought him here? Could this be Peter's Heart?

And Caelin thought himself undesirable? Arvel wouldn't have any of that. He shook his head, leaned in, and placed a kiss on Caelin's mouth. Caelin gasped, wrapped his arms around Arvel, and licked along the seam of Arvel's lips. He opened for Caelin, and their tongues danced as the older men watched.

Caelin pleased Peter and that pleased Arvel. This turn of events was a fine thing.

The lodge had a new Heart, one that would add to their family.

Gareth leaned toward Peter. "I think he'll do well here."

Peter laughed. "I thought so also. But mind me, he's my pet as Arvel is yours. He sleeps in my bed."

Gareth laughed. "Of course. I wouldn't separate you. But you're assuming our pets don't decide to share one bed and put us in the other."

The two men still kissed, hands roaming and exploring.

Peter smacked Caelin on the ass. "Come, pet. We've work to do before the sun sets."

Caelin gave him a glare, as did Arvel, but he nodded. "After we unload the wagon, can we construct the bed?" He rubbed his ass. "I'm in dire need of a soft mattress."

Arvel motioned to Caelin his sign for hungry and waited.

"Oh, I thought you were too silent." Caelin looked at Gareth, who had tensed. So protective a keeper, Arvel's Gareth. "Aye, Peter and I are both hungry." He returned the motion, bringing his fingers to his mouth and nodding, showing everyone he understood that Arvel was mute and deaf and that he thought no less of the young man.

Arvel smiled, spun around, and trotted across the glade to the lodge.

“The meal will be prepared by the time we're done. Come on, men. Let's get this wagon unpacked and see what Peter has brought us.” Gareth walked over to the team of horses, took their leads, and led them toward the stable.

“The black horse is mine,” Caelin piped up. “The other is an extra. And there's a new bed, and wood for the chicken coop, and chickens, and a rooster. He's fine and black with white spots.”

Gareth turned to Peter and raised his eyebrow at Caelin. “Does he always talk so much?”

“Nay, he's just excited. Normally, he's very quiet and shy.”

“That's good. I like my silence. Grown used to it, I suppose.”

Peter nodded. “I also.” He led his horse alongside Gareth as Caelin trailed behind them.

“My lord Gareth, I spent nearly a year with the brothers in the abbey. Have no fear—if it's silence you want, you'll get it. But can I ask a question?”

“Aye.” Gareth waved his hand.

“Does the silence drown out the noise of the battlefield that still rings in your ears?”

Gareth and Peter stopped as Gareth swung around to stare at Caelin.

“Come here, pet,” he ordered. Caelin obeyed.

Gareth wrapped a large hand around Caelin's neck and pulled him to his chest. With his thumb he tilted Caelin's head back and took his mouth in a soft kiss, then released him.

He gave Peter a strange look, as if searching for understanding. For Peter, a small part of the puzzle that was Gareth unlocked with that one question.

“Will you keep my secret, Caelin?”

“Aye, my lord, until the day I die.”

Gareth pulled on the leads and started forward.

“You chose well, Peter.”

“We chose each other.” Peter smiled.

Chapter Thirty-one

"That's the last of it," Gareth announced as he fell into the chair by the hearth.

Arvel had prepared their meal as he, Caelin, and Peter unloaded the wagon. Across the room, Peter and Caelin had just finished assembling the bed and argued over how tight the strings should be. Peter wanted them tighter for a firmer bed, and Caelin wanted a soft bed.

"Your ass will mend in a day or two, but my back will be in pain for months." Peter gave each of the knobs another twist, then stood. Frowning, Caelin moved the mattress, filled with fleece into position, and tossed a few quilts over it.

"Fine." He strode off to the table and touched Arvel on the shoulder. In a few quick hand motions, he asked if he could help. Arvel nodded and gave him the chargers to set the table.

Peter sat in the chair next Gareth and sighed. "At least they get along well."

"It's not as if they were two women." Gareth shuddered. "We'd hear no end of complaint and whining if so."

"In the morn, I'll set the staff by the road and raise the duke's pennant so everyone knows we are here."

"Trust me, if you rode through the village with that great wagon, they know. I'll vow it's the topic at the inn tonight."

"Good. The duke wants his people to know they are protected."

"Protected? With two men?" Gareth's eyebrow shot upward as he snorted.

"Three. Do not forget Caelin." Peter pointed to his lover. "All the outposts have only three men. We're not meant to be the ones who stop the army, only the ones

who give cry. Halfway to Marden, I left fresh horses at one of the farms. If we need to raise the alarm, we ride, bent for hell, to the farm, switch mounts and arrive at Marden within a day.”

Gareth nodded. “It's a well-thought-out plan. Is it working?”

“So far, it's kept Weathers on his own lands this last year.”

“And what of the mission you spoke of into Weathers's territory?” Gareth lowered his voice and leaned closer.

“The duke wishes it so. Tomorrow, you give your oath to me as the duke's man, and as soon as we judge it right, you ride into enemy lands as a spy for Marden. Are you still willing?”

Gareth stared into the fire and weighed his decision. He was the only man for the job, the only one with experience enough and with the knowledge of where he must go. But, should he be caught, the method of death would not be pleasant or without pain.

“I'm ready.” He looked deep into Peter's eyes and nodded. The furrow of Peter's brow let him know that Peter knew what the duke asked of him.

Peter reached out, placed his hand over Gareth's hand and gave it a squeeze. “So be it, then.” They separated and sat back.

Gareth cleared his throat. “Now, just how much soldiering has your pet done? He looks a raw recruit to my old eyes.”

“He is. But he's a second son and has been trained with sword and horse. And he can read and write and will handle all the correspondence for the outpost. With some more training and a little experience, he'd make a fine soldier.”

“Does he take orders well?” Gareth leaned closer and smiled.

“Indeed he does.” Peter smiled back and winked.

“And are you prepared to share him?” Gareth lowered his voice so the others couldn't hear.

“I am. He holds my heart and I hold his.”

“Just as Arvel and myself. I am happy for you, Peter, to have found love.”

“Not as much as I. For a time, I thought it would never beat in my heart again.”

The two men looked at their lovers, who were sharing the work of the evening meal.

“Come, let's eat. I hunger.” Gareth growled, slapped his thighs, and pushed from his seat.

“I also, however, I fear I may not last long this evening.”

Gareth slapped his friend on the back. “Have no fear. I can take over for you if needs be, sweetling.”

Peter laughed as he stood and followed. “After dinner, we must push the beds together.”

“Indeed we must.” Gareth winked at him.

* * *

Only the sounds of spoon and knives scraping on the chargers, the men's chewing of rabbit stew, and their swallowing of wine could be heard. When every morsel of food had been eaten and the chargers taken and cleaned, they took their leave of the table.

Peter and Gareth pushed the beds together, rearranged the quilts and pillows, and then Gareth and Arvel helped Caelin and Peter carry their trunks and place them against the wall.

“Now can we get in bed?” Caelin asked, arching his back like a cat.

Peter pulled him in close. “Aye, pet. Now we can get some sleep.” He massaged Caelin's shoulders as the younger man writhed against him.

“Sleep?” Caelin frowned. “I said nothing of sleep. I said bed, my lord.” That wicked grin graced his face, and Peter laughed.

“You'll be the death of me, Caelin.”

“Never.” Caelin swooped in and took Peter's mouth with a hard kiss, then broke away. “Never.” He placed his hand over Peter's heart, mimicking Arvel's sign for lover. Caelin held out one finger as he did, earning a smile and a quick kiss from Peter.

“Undress, then, and get in. I'm not sure how this is going to work, but I'm willing to give it a try,” Gareth announced.

The younger men quickly divested themselves of their clothes as Peter and Gareth sat on opposite sides of the bed and watched.

“Perhaps tonight we keep it simple?” Peter suggested. He'd not energy enough for more than one round of bed sport tonight.

“That sounds best, at least until you've recovered, old man.” Gareth winked at him, and Peter tossed his pillow at him, scoring a hit on Gareth's head. The pillow flew back at Peter, who caught it before it struck.

Now they undressed as their younger lovers crawled into the beds and scooted into the center, leaving room for their mates. Once naked, the two slipped into the bed, and each pulled his lover to him.

Peter nuzzled Caelin's face as he stroked his hand down that well-formed body and found the staff that waited, ready and proud, for his touch. Caelin gasped and arched into his hand, pushing his rod through the tight circle of Peter's grip.

Soft, smooth skin over a hardness that made Peter's mouth water for a taste. He pushed Caelin onto his back and lowered his head to take his lover's rod in his mouth.

Just one or two quick licks and he opened to take in the fat head. He sucked it, drawing the clear fluid it leaked into his mouth. “Delicious,” he murmured.

Caelin reached up to him and wove his fingers into Peter's hair, then pulled him forward into a kiss. “Fuck me,” he whispered, and Peter's cock filled.

Peter got on his knees as Caelin spread his legs. “Where's that oil?” he asked Gareth.

“Here, take it. I'm done with it. Tomorrow go to the village and buy your own.” He growled, tossed it to Peter, then as Peter watched, Gareth rubbed his cock with the oil, positioned his rod, and pushed into Arvel.

Peter's sac grew heavy with seed as his need to empty grew. With haste, he oiled himself, painted Caelin's entry with more oil, and plunged home.

Caelin cried out, clawing Peter's shoulders and his legs wrapping around Peter's waist as he took him inside.

God, Peter wanted to spill right now, but he held back.

Beside him, Gareth stroked in and out of Arvel, their hands locked together on the bed, his powerful thighs making his thrusts hard and deep.

Gareth glanced over at Peter. Tired, eh? He didn't look exhausted, the way he rode his lover. It made him hard to watch Peter and Caelin. How sweet it would be to learn a new lover, what made him moan. And with Caelin, like Peter, Gareth would hear those sweet moans.

Arvel watched him and smiled. His pet knew of his desire for him and for the others, and he enjoyed it also.

Arvel pulled loose his hand and reached out to stroke Caelin's shoulder. Caelin turned to him, smiled, and reached out also. They turned toward each other to embrace as Gareth and Peter watched.

The young men found each other, grew closer, their hands petting and traveling over their chests, arms, and bellies.

Arvel took Caelin's cock in hand, and Caelin returned the favor.

Peter's gaze locked onto his lover as Arvel pleased him while Peter fucked him. Caelin, for his part, seemed even more excited to be touched by two men, and Arvel rode along with him in the pleasure, proof of it on his expressive face.

All four, caught in this blended act of love, moved as one. Four hearts, four deep gazes locked with their partners as their bodies joined, as their desire rose ever higher, until they lost themselves in a furor of hands and hips, of thrusts and strokes, in the age-old dance of lovers.

Caelin cried out, the first to spill, his cream shooting across his belly in a fine arc, as he gasped and writhed beneath Peter. His tunnel clenched around Peter's cock, and before Peter could take a breath or think to stop it, he fell over the edge of the cliff, diving from such a great height he thought his heart would fail him.

He emptied into Caelin, pumping in great spasms of pleasure that left him exhausted and shaking.

Arvel arched his back, clawing at the quilts, gathering them up in his fists, as he gave up his release, painting his chest with ropes of white. Gareth paused long enough to run his finger through the still-warm cream, then bring it to his mouth for a taste.

God, he was so beautiful, and Peter wanted to taste him. He reached over, grabbed Gareth by the back of the neck, and pulled him into a hard kiss.

Gareth moaned, opened his mouth to Peter, and let him plunder with his tongue, tasting, searching, demanding. Gareth closed his eyes and, still locked in the kiss with Peter, delivered a few quick thrusts. Then he let go and spun away in the great unknown as he gave himself to Arvel once again.

Their harsh breathing echoed in the lodge. Peter pulled out of Caelin and fell to the side. Gareth did the same, flopping on his back behind Arvel, stroking his lover's hip.

Arvel and Caelin rolled together and embraced. Arvel kissed Caelin's scarred cheek, and Caelin kissed Arvel's ears and lips, as tender as any lover could be.

"Come, my love, give us a kiss." Gareth laughed and tugged at Arvel's arm. Arvel grinned and turned to him, surging into the kiss. Gareth gathered him in his arms, and Arvel buried his head in his lover's shoulder.

With that, Peter whispered, “Here, love,” and opened his arms to Caelin.

The younger man came to him and snuggled in close.

“I love you, Peter,” he whispered.

Peter's breath blew against Caelin's hair as he rested his chin on his lover's head. He pulled the quilt over him and Caelin and closed his eyes.

Next to them in bed, Gareth did the same.

The fire died as the evening lengthened and the lodge fell silent.

 THE END 

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Silent Lodge

Lynn Lorenz

Lynn has been writing all her life, but only recently for publication. She writes a variety of genres besides historicals, including police procedurals, fantasy, paranormal, and contemporary romantic comedy, but enjoys reading suspense and detective stories most of all and wishes more cops would fall in love between their pages.

Born in New Orleans, she has a strong affinity for the South, pralines and po'boys. She's never met food she didn't like, but finds it hard to beat the food she grew up with and constantly craves from N'awlins. Going back occasionally to visit her father who still lives there, her car is often laden with epicurean delights such as Hubig Pies, Barqs in the bottle, Central Groceries' muffalattas and Gambino's pastries.

Graduating with a bachelor's degree in Fine Arts, Lynn is also an artist whose still lifes, life studies, and landscapes are done in acrylic, watercolors, pencil, and pastels. She loves getting away for a week at a time just to paint outdoors.

She has a real job that keeps her busy nine-to-five, but in her spare time she finds it hard to stay away from writing. It keeps her off the streets and out of the bars.

Lynn has two incredible kids, a supportive husband of twenty plus years, and a black lab/Aussie sheep dog mix. She's lived in Katy, Texas, since 1999, where she discovered her love of all things Texan and cowboy, like big hair, boots, and blue jeans. Yeehaw!