

*Dreamspinner Press*  
Fairy Tales



# HAMMER & AIR

Amy Lane

## PART I

### FIRST STEPS INTO THE WOODS

When all were said and done, Hammer probably knew what forces brought me to hide in that tree to watch him fuck the innkeeper's daughter before I knew, but it were an imperfect picture.

Between the two of us, that's what we had, an imperfect picture. I had the blues of it, he had the reds, and we were both still blind to the yellows. Sometimes you need that third color to see the world is beautiful.

But I didn't need to see the whole picture to know what kept me in the tree, even if I didn't realize what brought me there in the first place.

I were there for Hammer.

Hammer were gentle at fucking, I realized with something of a shock. You wouldn't think it; he weren't a talker, and he tended to move in gruff, blunt ways that made you think he'd be rough with a person while holding them.

But then he and the girl met, and he kissed her, made her comfortable, stroked her breasts and pinched her nipples through her clothes until she groaned. He unlaced her vest, let her flesh spill out over his hands and praised her for being beautiful (she were not) and smiled at her when she shrieked and giggled. She were a big-boned, hearty girl, with thick lips, a square jaw, and a gap between her teeth,

but when Hammer flipped her skirts over her head and knelt behind her, licking her quim as she leaned forward and clutched the bole of the tree, her face flushed and her eyes fluttered closed, and I could see something of beauty in her.

She started to beg him, then, coarse words, breathless, incoherent words, and abruptly I hated her, although she'd been nothing but kind to me in all my days.

Hammer unlaced his trousers, and his cock sprang free, and there weren't room for even that anymore.

It were huge. We lived in an orphanage, in a room with ten other boys; seeing another boy's pricker were not something you talked about, but not something you could avoid either. I'd caught glimpses of it, hanging monstrous and flaccid between his thighs and heard the meaty sound of his fist on it as we lay in the bed we shared like all orphanage boys shared once they were out of their slatted cribs. I had not, however, seen it erect, or even felt it rutting on my thigh, as I knew the other boys in our room would do at night when they could pretend they were alone in the privacy of the dark.

There it sported, huge and purple, and even from my perch in the tree I could see the head glistening before he even thrust it between the girl's thighs.

I licked my lips, suddenly cold and hot, wishing I could cradle the aching flesh between my own thighs instead of clinging to the limbs of the damned tree, and I must have made a sound.

Hammer's fingers moved to the girl's quim and she moaned, and then his blunt, broad fingers moved some more.

“There?” she asked, surprised.

“No baby,” he muttered. Yes, that would figure. Hammer had been dumped off at the orphanage at two, because his mother, apparently, decided he were too much of a bother to keep. He would not want a baby, not with a tumble in the woods.

“Right,” she hissed, and he wrapped his arm around her chest and pulled her up. He moved his hands and kept his fingers busy on her mound then, even as his other hand disappeared to her backside. She cried out—in a good way—and then he grunted and thrust and sighed, buried to his root in the girl’s backside, his fingers thrusting urgently into her quim.

My whole body shuddered, and a faint, damp spot soaked through my trousers, but I didn’t pay attention to that. Hammer’s straight, dark hair were cut shorter in front than in back, but it still hung in his eyes. His dark eyelashes fluttered closed on the flushed skin of his fair cheeks, and the brilliant blue of his eyes were hooded. The flesh at the corners of his mouth were drawn tight in concentration.

I knew that look; it were the look he wore at the smithy, the time I’d asked him prettily to make a protractor and a compass for me from scraps. Hammer were not a “small, delicate things” craftsman. He had doughty swathes of muscle across his chest and his back, in his thick, heaving thighs and his flanks, and even (though I couldn’t see them from this angle) in his jewel-hard buttocks. He could hold a horse in check with his shoulder while hammering on a shoe the size of an ale barrel. He could make wrought iron fences with the loveliest arabesques, or ploughshares that could

carve through hardpan for seasons on end, but the tiny scientific instruments had near to flummoxed him, that were for sure.

I looked at the girl, her face slack with passion, and looked to Hammer, his face tight with the not wanting to hurt the girl, and the part of me that had been building for nigh on twelve of my seventeen years began to scream.

*You don't want her, Hammer! You want me!*

I must have made another sound then, forlorn, like a whimper, because his eyes sought mine unerringly in the trees. He'd known I were there—hell, he'd told me to be there, and twelve years of doing what he said weren't easily shaken off. And now, he met my eyes and pumped into the girl as she screamed loud enough to be heard back in town. As she convulsed and shivered around him in what I could only assume were her climax, Hammer did the unexpected thing.

He pulled out of the girl and pulled her skirts up even higher, so her soft, pale arse were gleaming under the sun, and then he wrapped his fist around his cock and stroked.

His strokes were hard, and his grip were brutal enough to turn the head of the monster a deep, painful purple. One hand crept up to his shell-colored nipple, and he gave it a vicious pinch, while the other hand....

Ah, gods... stroke, pump, stroke, pump... some clear liquid spurted from the tip, and he grunted, and now on the upstroke, the flesh of his foreskin slid up over the head and swished over it, probably feeling good enough to make him scream, if that hadn't meant opening his mouth to do more than eat.

His eyes threatened to close, and I gasped again, not wanting the brilliant blue of them hidden from me, not now. Not when his face were naked, and, regardless of the flesh quivering in front of him, he were all mine.

His eyes opened again, and he mouthed a single word at me. "Taste."

Then he closed his eyes and stroked, and I envisioned having that thing in my mouth, tasting it. When it suddenly exploded in spend, spewing from the tip like a white banner and spattering the girl's backside in thick ribbons, I swallowed convulsively, hungry for the knowledge of what it would be or feel like on my tongue.

Hammer's eyes flew open, and he patted the girl's flank as though he'd been coming for her and not me, and then righted her skirts and held her for a moment and gave her a soft word. She laughed then, and kissed his cheek, and said if ever he wanted a tumble in the woods proper, she'd lay on her back and spread her legs for him, as were right, and he said he'd take her up on that perhaps.

But the whole time, he were casting surreptitious looks into the tree before them, and nothing he said to the girl could erase the thing he'd mouthed to me, while our eyes were locked and his come were still dripping in a clot from the end of his cock.

"Mine," he'd whispered, bringing his hand up to taste the white spend clinging to the webbing between his thumb and forefinger. "Mine."

Good, I thought fiercely. Good. He'd claimed me twelve years ago on the playground, and now that we were near to grown, it were time he made good.

My parents had died in a sickness epidemic. I'd had the sickness but skipped the dying, and had been taken to the orphanage by a solicitous neighbor.

I'd had with me only some hurriedly packed clothes and the things I clung to: a child's stuffed bear, a simple book of how things worked, and a small glass through which to look at things.

The women who ran the orphanage were kind, but weary. There were too few of them and too many of us, and the pecking order of the wild took care of many of their problems before any of the adults needed to be bothered.

I must have had some inkling of this, because the bear and the book were shoved immediately under the mattress I'd been given to share with Graeme. That were Hammer's name—his real name—but I were possibly the only human being on earth who remembered it, and that included Hammer.

"Eirn?" he'd said that first day, looking me over. "You're thin as air. Be careful. You'll get yourself beat."

He'd been right. The first day, playing in the yard, some of the older boys saw me, fretting in a corner disconsolately with my little glass, and set about to take it from me.

I weren't going to let them. I kicked one of them in the shin, and that set his mates on me, and that might have well been the end, but Graeme stepped in. At six (he were nearly a year older than me) he were not tall, but he were already powerful and wide, and fierce. I bit and I kicked, but

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Graeme—Graeme hit like a hammer, and that's where his name came from.

At the end there were the two of us, bloody but unbroken, in a circle of jeering older boys, not a one of them weren't bleeding himself.

You do that long enough, and one of the grown-ups were going to take notice. Sure enough, there were Miss Delaina, graying hair falling from its habitual knot, coming to see what the fuss were about. We scowled up at her and told her not a blessed thing.

Desperate, but it worked. From that moment on, Graeme were considered too lethal to harass in the play yard. The older boys dispersed, but since we hadn't ratted them out, they were honor bound to leave us alone. (The intricate code of honor found in the anarchy of a boy's play yard never ceases to amaze me.)

When Hammer and I found ourselves alone again, I felt I had to pay him back in some way—after all, he'd evened the odds considerably and kept me from being a victim. Even I could see that my life had just been made easier by the intervention of this big, sturdy boy with the brilliant eyes and surly curl to an already lean lip.

"Ya wanna look through my glass?" I asked diffidently. "Makes bugs look big and scary."

He'd blinked. "Alright."

We'd played the rest of the day in what were practically silence. I'd look at a bug and show him, he'd look, and hand the glass back to me to find another one. It seemed a good system at the time, and we continued everything like that, from lessons with books to new foods and even to our



apprenticeships. I may have ended up at the printer's shop, but not before Hammer had given me a go at the smithy, and the other way about.

And as for claiming me in the play yard?

Someone tried it again, once, and Hammer had broken his jaw. When questioned by the horrified attending woman, he'd growled, "Eirn's mine."

And so I had stayed. We graduated up a dorm at twelve, and we could hear the cacophony of muffled groans around us as the boys grabbed their pricks and emptied them into their own hands, or rutted them up against their companion's thighs. I feared for a bit then. I were still smaller than the other boys, and thinner, although were it not for that, Hammer and I could have been brothers, or cousins at the least. We both had black hair and blue eyes, but my jaw were narrower, and so were my shoulders. I grew a few inches taller than he were, but he would always outweigh me by at least three stones, all of it muscle, until we were so old that we lost flesh instead of gained it.

But my fears were ungrounded. I were Hammer's. The other boys probably assumed that he rutted with me, or even fucked me, but nothing could be further from the truth. I would hear him at night, pretend to sleep as he stroked himself to completion. His sounds made me hard, but I waited until he were asleep to take care of my own business.

One such night, after feeling my spend coat my hand and spatter inside my small clothes, I opened my eyes to see his gleaming at me in the darkness.

I turned red then and rolled over on my side, but his hand on my shoulder stopped me.

“You wait then?” he whispered, and I shrugged.

“It’s private.” And it were. It were between me and my fist—and my starving vision of Hammer, as I feasted my eyes on his face and smelled his semen under our sheets.

“You done it with a girl yet?” he asked insistently, and I cast a hunted look over my shoulder. Girls left me alone for the most part, and I were grateful. I did not hunger for them the way I hungered for the boy who shared my bed every night.

“No,” I said shortly, and he grunted.

“You still draw sketches in the old maple tree?” he asked, considering.

I drew in a deep breath. “You know I do.” We both had two half-days a week off—but on different days. I knew I could come off my shift at the printers and find him in the tavern, where he weren’t supposed to be, but the midwives had long since given up keeping him from it. He knew, any given half-day, he could find me out in that section of the woods around our little town (it were bigger than a village) classifying my flora and my fauna, and writing my notes on the poetry of the way the natural world worked beneath my fingers.

“You be up in the tree, your next half-day. Don’t skitter. You can see a woman, see if you want her.”

“And if I don’t?” I asked coldly, and he shrugged, before turning his own way. There were scant inches between us in the small orphanage beds, but we had perfected giving each other the dignity of those inches in the twelve years of sharing a mattress.

On nights like this one, those inches seemed like an impossible chasm, and one I would never breach.

"If you don't, we'll find summat you do like," he'd returned laconically, and it were all I could do not to plaster my slight body against his broad one and touch him all over with my mouth and my hands, so I could show him what I wanted, and what I'd *really* like.

But me and Hammer didn't work that way. He thought he were slow, and I thought he were coarse, and I thought I were cowardly, and he thought I were cold. We saw the blue and the red of each other, but not the gold, not back then.

And not now, as the girl ran off gaily back to her work, Hammer's seed drying on her skin. As I had that thought, feeling a little queasy about it, Hammer looked into the trees and called my name.

I clambered down from the tree, my sketchbook tucked in the front of my pants to hide the fact that my cock—a little shorter and more slender than Hammer's by a bit—were still hard and aching, and that my balls hung heavily in my loose trews.

"So," he said, squinting at me like he did when he were trying to give me something, "did she do anything for you?"

"No," I muttered, half-angry, all the way mortified. "Not a blessed thing. What, Hammer, did you think if I liked seeing you fuck, she'd spread her legs for me next time?" I shifted uneasily, because I had a vision of myself, bent over the tree, and Hammer hammering into *my* arse as he'd pounded into the girl's. *He wouldn't have to be gentle, an insidious voice whispered. His face could go slack and sweet with giving. He could look that way at you.*

Hammer shrugged. “Or both of us,” he said casually, and the thought of being naked with Hammer, girl or no girl, were enough to make it even harder to stand still.

His squint intensified, and he grabbed my shoulder. He were a bluff boy, a physical boy. He touched or tasted everything, from new cookies to worms to the sweat on his shoulder when he’d been working especially hard. I were used to his hands on my person—my elbow or my bicep or my back. He didn’t mind his own sweat, and he seemed not to notice mine, and so I came to crave the way he smelled when he were salty with perspiration, and now, when he smelled of both sweat and come?

It were all I could do not to moan as he stepped into my personal space.

“You lied!” he accused, and his hand cupped my crotch without apology. “It made your prick hard, I can feel it!”

At the attention from his hand, the thing tightened to the point of pain and jerked in his grasp, and he looked at me, surprised.

“Not her,” I said roughly, although I figured that should be obvious by now. “Not her, idiot. You.”

He pulled my sketchbook and dropped it, letting it fall to the ground in its bindings, and I gave thanks that they held. Still holding my shoulder with one hand, he pulled me to him then, and thrust his other hand, the one that were cupping my swollen prick, down my pants.

I groaned, and he pulled my face into his shoulder and grabbed it, wrapping his fist around it and feeling the slickness that preceded climax with his thumb.

I whimpered against his shoulder, and he jerked on it. It weren't rough, exactly, just... excited. Enthusiastic. I whimpered again, and he started a rhythm. I collapsed into his arms and clung to him, just clung to him, while my vision went white with the summer sun, and my whole body convulsed around his grasping, pumping fist.

When he were done, the only thing I could hear were the hot wind in deep yellow summer grasses, and our labored breathing as he held me around the shoulders and pumped my now flaccid, dripping cock.

He pulled his hand from my pants, and we both stared at it, almost in wonder. It were covered in fluids both clear and thick white, and he held it to his mouth and sucked on the webbing again. Then he wrapped that big, broad, blunt-fingered hand around my jaw, leaving his thumb, covered in my spend, to thrust inside my mouth.

"Taste," he ordered, and I closed my eyes and suckled, and he thrust against me and grunted. His enormous cock were, unbelievably, becoming hard again. I suckled harder, the taste bitter and salty, and he clutched me by the hips and rutted against me. I felt the thing grow large and stiff against my stomach, and then he rutted it harder and harder, biting my shoulder and crying out as it spat one final blast inside his trousers, and then I were supporting him, only I couldn't, and we both sank into the grasses at the bole of the old, great maple.

Our breathing seemed never to still.

"Mine," he grumbled in my ear. "You stay in my bed. I'll fuck you. No other boys."

“No women,” I snapped waspishly, and he grunted affirmative.

“Not even if you’re here to watch.”

I laughed a little, without humor, and he pulled back, meeting me with his brilliant blue eyes. “Next half-day then. You be here. Blanket, olive oil. You’re mine, Eirn. I’ll make you feel it, ye ken?”

An old expression. He used them sometimes; mostly, I think, because they meant he didn’t have to use many words at all.

“I’ll feel it,” I told him earnestly. “Anything. You do anything you want to me.” And then, I gave him something. It were an important something, something he clung to later, when anything I gave him seemed in doubt. “All I’ve wanted my whole life is for you to do anything you want to me.”

He grinned then, his eyes hooded, and the clutch of his hands on my shoulders promising all sorts of joys. “Right, then. I promise.”

He kissed me then, his mouth hard and bruising—more a sock in the arm than a kiss—but it were what he had. That were Hammer. Sometimes he’d have to bruise a thing before he learned to stroke it nice. I were no exception.

## PART II

# THE ARC OF THE SWING

My next half-day were in four days. Nothing seemed to change between us in that time, but it didn't seem to change at the same time the world rumbled, re-made at our feet.

He didn't attack me at night, pin me to the bed by the neck and drive himself into me like a piston in an engine. I'd heard the sobs of some of the boys who lived this, so I were damned grateful. He didn't place his palm across my stomach and bring me back against him in quiet moments, as I'd seen men do with their women; but then, he hadn't done that with any of the women I knew he'd fucked, so that didn't seem to matter. There were no hidden kisses, no whispers in my ear, no surreptitious touch of hands as we reached for sundries in the morning.

But none of that hurt, and none of that mattered, because at night, the fathom-deep chasm between our sleeping bodies had filled, closed, become nonexistent. What were left were the blissful heaviness of his arm, anchored around my hips or my shoulders or my chest.

I woke up every morning feeling as though I had been branded by him, the heat of his body having seeped through my skin like the smell of leather and now I wore Hammer as my own personal tattoo.

It were that invisible mark, the mark of Hammer on my skin if not yet in my flesh, that gave me the courage to put on a blank face the morning we were to meet by the tree.

Summer were fading now, but that didn't mean it weren't hot in the room with the printing press, and the smell of ink were stifling. I didn't mind so much; today's job were a newspaper, and the newspaper were running a short piece I had written on why earthworms made for more fertile farmland. I'd run an experiment out where the maple tree stood, and there were two flats of carrots, turnips, and tubers there, one bigger and grander than the other, and all, I were sure, for the extra bucket of earthworms I'd added to the soft soil.

It were a small thing, but large enough to tell Hammer, in broken sentences, over dinner at the orphanage the day we'd met at the tree.

He'd given me a gift in return. A smile. He didn't often smile—his face tended to set itself in surly lines, hiding his eyes behind his high brow and the squint of his cheeks. But he smiled, and his face were transformed into a thing of beauty, and my heart seemed to beat twice as rapidly as before. It were probably a scientific impossibility, but the feeling were enough to stop up my tongue, and I'd had no voice to tell him about the article itself. He'd smiled at me. I'd write volumes for such a smile.

They were so rare, that I might as well have.

So I were happy this day, as I set the letters with gentle taps of the hammer, and me and Linus, the other boy in the shop, placed the big sheet of paper and set the rollers over it. Linus glared at me, and I looked innocently back.



“Yer in a good mood today.” He were a sour boy, for the most part. He’d been sold into apprenticeship by his parents so that his younger siblings would not starve. They visited him on his half-days and brought him baked goods and fresh blankets, and in all, he had the most comfortable pallet at the printers. Of course, I had a bed in an orphanage, until Hammer turned nineteen in two months. Hammer had promised me he’d gain his majority and his mastership at the smithies, and rent a flat above the inn. Before that day at the tree, even, he’d said I could stay with him, and we’d both be quit of the orphanage forever.

“It’s my half-day,” I told Linus now, wishing I could say something, anything, about Hammer, meeting me at the tree. Such a small thing, but it felt like the sky.

“Yeah, well, let’s still hope we get them after Master Will takes over. That bugger’ll likely ream us in the closet and call it a lunch break.”

My fingers fumbled for a bit with the paper, and I had to pick them up right quick or they’d be crushed.

“Master Will?” The words felt cold as they fell from my numb lips.

Linus smiled evilly. “Not such a blessing being pretty, now is it?”

He could talk. He were a thin, sallow looking boy with a scraggly blond beard and stringy hair to match. Master Will, with his preference for boys, had never looked at him twice. But me, well, I looked like Hammer. I weren’t vain, but being told we looked like brothers our whole lives, and knowing he were beautiful, it did tell me that I weren’t tough to look at.

I remembered the last time the man were here. He were a bluff, red-faced man, with grizzled black hair, a chest like an oxen yoke, and punishing packs of muscle in his shoulders and biceps. I'd seen him break a boy's arm once, when the boy simply stood and wept after being ordered to go around the back of the building. He'd ended up going to the back of the print shop anyway, but he'd needed his arm wrapped afterwards. The action had been no more difficult for Master Will than snapping a branch in hard fists would be for Hammer, but even then, for as little as I truly fathomed Hammer's heart, I knew Hammer would never hurt someone by forcing him or hurting him for sport.

As if to seal my fate, at that moment, a shadow darkened the door, and there were Master Will, along with the current printer, Master Lea. Poor Master Lea—he were a stooped, kind, gray-haired, old man with rheumy eyes, and the things he did not know about the different men who'd come to assess the estate of this print shop were many and profound. He'd been a kind master. I'd be sorry to see him go; but I'd be sorrier to see that it were Master Will who would take over.

“Here they are, hard at work!” Master Will laughed jovially, and I kept my eyes on my business. The fact that something I'd written, a piece of knowledge I'd painstakingly documented, were being printed out on the press I'd set up, ceased to mean anything. *Hammer claimed me*, I thought resentfully. *I'm Hammer's. Master Will will not touch me. Not today.*

“Yes, and you mind that young Eirn, now. He’ll be one of your writers and a master printer of his own right, you will see.”

I smiled weakly at Master Lea. Gods—he only meant to pay me a compliment, to set up my place in the future. He had no ken that he might as well have trussed me to an archery target, with a big red circle around my waiting arse.

“Thank you, Master Lea,” I said quietly. “I’m proud of the faith you’ve shown in me.”

I were unprepared for the crack of a fist across my cheek. Master Lea sputtered, but he were small and old, and I think that some of the gold must have already changed hands.

“I’ll watch this one,” Master Will snarled, and I glared at him through the stars in my vision. “I’ll watch he doesn’t get above himself. Writing? Leave that for the scholars. This one... this one will have to be buggered to know his place.”

My jaw were swelling rapidly, and the vision in my swollen eye were going red with blood. At that moment, Linus, bless him, squealed pitifully and said, “Oh, help, the roller’s gone skittish!” And I rushed to assist him like any good printer’s lad would.

We worked in silence then, our eyes grimly met. Master Lea feigned confusion about how much gold had really been paid, so Master Will were obliged to go back to his rooms to find the signed contract. As he stumped out of the room, his feet thumping on the bare boards of the floor, Master Lea drew near.

“Take your half-day, Eirn,” he said quietly. “I’ll not expect you back.”

“I’ll miss you,” I muttered, and then, bobbing my head in farewell to Linus, fled the place I’d thought to work for most my life.

I wanted to go get Hammer, but I couldn’t. Running through town would put me in too much proximity with the fucker who’d just broken my face. I had to console myself with the thought that Hammer would come to me.

I’d packed us a lunch; it were wrapped in a blanket and stashed by the door of the press. All I had to do were grab it, as I’d planned, and run for the tree... for *our* place, and then sit there, trembling, until Hammer walked up.

I couldn’t do that, though. The tree were not far off from a stream, and with the stream came a blackberry bush. After I’d trembled out my nerves and run flat into a blank sheet when I tried to write up a plan, I went to pick a shirt’s worth of berries. Hammer savored them. For some reason, it were all I could think about as I pulled the ones waiting for me as purple and juicy as a ripe girl off their spear-guarded clusters. When I were done, I rinsed out my shirt and used it to soothe the right big bruise the side of my face had become.

By the time Hammer walked up, looking like a god with the sun at his back, I’d made a parchment bowl from a page of my notebook, and set up a farewell picnic I hoped he’d never forget.

I found I couldn’t look at him as he neared. If we were just there to fuck and be done with, I probably could have managed, even shirtless and vulnerable. But it had come to

mean summat more in the past days—his hand on my hip, our promises that it be only us—this would have meant something.

His shadow fell over me, and I fidgeted with the blanket. “You don’t look happy.” It were a question, sure as any.

“I have to leave,” I mumbled to my fidgeting hands. “A new master at the printers. He wants me. I can’t....” Desperation made me look at him. “I won’t be his.”

Those strong, blunt fingers came to grasp my chin, and he thumped abruptly to his knees. “He did this?” His voice sounded like flint tumblers, being struck in a lock.

I swallowed and nodded. “I won’t stay there,” I rasped. “And the orphanage won’t keep me, if I don’t have a place. I know it’s only two months ’til your majority, Hammer, but I can’t....” I looked away. “I’m sorry. I wish I could stay for you, but I can’t be in the same town...not with him.”

A growl then. “You’re mine. I’ll go back after dark. Get your things. We’ll leave together.”

I were shocked. Thrilled, but shocked. “Hammer, you’re two months from freedom. You’ll have a share in the smithy. You’ll have your own flat! Why would you want to leave that?”

He scowled. “You want to go off alone?”

I ducked my head and looked at my bare arms. I had two changes of clothes back at the orphanage, and some blankets at the very least, but that weren’t what I were thinking about when I answered. “No.”

He grunted in return, because that were all we needed to say on the matter I guess.

“Did you ice your eye?”

I nodded, and held up my sodden shirt. He took it up and folded it into a pad, and pushed it up against the worst of the swelling, then pressed my hand against it. Our eyes caught. I’m sure my left one were filled with blood, but that’s not what he seemed to see.

Me neither.

“Are the berries for me?” he asked quietly, his hand not leaving mine.

“They’re your favorite.”

He nodded, and the corners of his mouth turned up in what may have been a smile. “Thank you. I’ll eat them then.”

He ate them, and then gave me the soft portion of the bread and cheese I’d brought. We ate quietly, concentrating on little things. The way he needed to taste his fingers after every berry drew my explicit attention. He seemed fascinated by the crumbs I left on my lips. More than once his thumb came out to brush them off.

The food were gone eventually, and that thumb came out again and rubbed softly against my lower lip, the side not swollen. For once, he managed to not touch the painful thing, and I accepted his caress without having to pretend he hadn’t hurt me with misplaced tenderness.

“You’re still mine, Eirn,” he said into the westering gold of the afternoon. “You want to be made mine before I go round up our gear?”

Oh gods. “More than anything.”

His lips on mine were soft. I would find later that they were not always so. Mostly he were a hard kisser, as he had

been four days ago, but he didn't want to hurt me this night. Not the only reason, but the only one I knew at the time.

I were not wearing a shirt, so it were an easy thing for him to push me back against the blanket and assert himself over my body. He were very tactile. My skin had to be palmed, or explored with questing, rubbing fingers. His mouth went *everywhere*, and he learned the taste of my neck as different from my clavicle, as different from the dip in flesh down the center of my chest. As he tasted, I ran my hands through his hair and tried to hold still so he could explore.

I failed.

His mouth, hot and urgent, closed over my nipple, pale as sand, and he suckled on the thing, flat as it were. It were like a taut string attached to my cock were plucked, and my back arched, and I moaned under him.

"Hurt?"

"No." My voice were thin, and my hips were undulating against the dark wool blanket. He put the flat of his hand against my stomach and pressed until I held my hips still, but I could not stop the trembling in my body, or the way my hands jerked as I put them on his shoulders, his neck, anywhere, as long as I were touching him some more. He hadn't taken his shirt off yet, and I wanted him to... *yearned* to see his chest, powerful and glistening in the late afternoon sun, but he wouldn't let me pull at it when I tried.

He looked up and caught my eyes, and then took my hand in his. "Easy."

"Hammer... Hammer, I want... oh gods... I don't...."

His lean mouth curved a little. "Easy."

It were enough. Some of the urgency, the twitchy pain of arousal, faded and were replaced by trust. He pulled my trousers down around my hips, and for a moment, my thighs tightened. In the dorm, while Hammer had ignored the other boys, simply taking his nudity for granted in a group of growing young men, I had perfected the art of leaving my shirt on until my trousers were changed and vice versa. He were going to expose my body completely to the sunlight, and I were... were....

He pulled the trousers down to my feet and pulled my short boots off, then took the whole works down. I crossed my thighs to try to cover myself, but his warm palm against the soft flesh of my inner thigh put a stop to that.

“Can’t taste like that,” he explained.

“But I’m... I’m naked.” *And pale. And not as beautiful as you.*

“Shh.” He scooted up to my middle then and propped himself up on his elbow. His flat palm skated on my thighs again, and then my lower stomach, and he lowered his mouth to lick the crease of my thigh.

My cock jumped against my stomach and my hands sought out the silk of his hair. I clenched it and then massaged his scalp, and he moved under my touch like an animal seeking pets, so I kept it up.

The third time he kissed my stomach when I thought he’d been going to touch my cock, I whimpered, and he grinned wickedly up at me.

“I’m dying to taste it,” he confessed, nuzzling it with his nose.



“Then why...?”

“Are you crazy with wanting?”

“Yes!”

“Good.”

With that he opened his mouth and engulfed me, all the way down to the root, and I shook with the force of absolute desire that swept me.

*“Auuughhh!”*

He kept me in his mouth, though, and sucked in, hard, and my hands flailed, finally finding purchase on his wide, hard shoulders as he wrapped his forearm around my backside and clenched me to him.

“Oh gods... Hammer... Hammer... oh... gods... it feels....” That were me, always trying to put words to something for which there were no words.

His fist came to stroke my base and his mouth kept working on the head, paying special attention to the place the foreskin attached to the underside. My eyes went blind, and the little part of my brain that always seemed set to record an experience in careful notes turned to gray scale and fireworks. I thrashed helplessly under his hands and his tongue, and he stayed, solid as iron, pleasuring me with a systematic and immutable single-mindedness that rendered me brainless and shouting with arousal.

He simply let me thrash, holding my hips solidly in place until the wind roared in my ears, and my cock erupted and I screamed into the emptiness of a summer meadow.

He held my spend in his mouth for a minute and then spat it into the hand he’d held under my hips. Cupping the

liquid in the one hand, he let go of my cock and used the other to spread my thighs. I were still panting and dazed, and I must have made a sound of protest as he spread my arse cheeks and probed my entrance with all the absorption I'd shown to my two flats of earth in the months prior.

"Listen," he said gruffly, and even in the haze that still set my limbs trembling, I could hear the strain in his voice. "I want you. I want to fuck you. If you're not ready it will hurt. I'm not patient, ken?"

I nodded, wanting to reach out and hold him, even wanting to pleasure him as he'd pleased me. But he were Hammer, and he were powerful, and once he'd swung, it would take a force of the gods to stop him. I were liquid from sex and come; I were hardly a force of the gods.

I spread my thighs and put my own palms on my stomach to force myself to keep my hips still. He probed my entrance gently, and then poured the spend over it, probing and stretching all the while. My cock started to fill, but only part way, and I had to fight to hold myself, exposed and open like this, while he made me ready. His finger burned inside me, and then I loosened a little, and then the burning felt good.

"You bring the olive oil?" he asked, and as he sat up on his knees I could see the great tent in his trousers made by his massive cock. I realized that I had not seen it today, and I yearned to touch it.

I reached out my hand to him, mesmerized, remembering the handsome, glistening purple of it, and the way his spend had hung to the tip like cream.

He grunted and batted my hand away. "Next time."

My hand fell limply, and I were content. There would be a next time.

He found the bottle with the olive oil, and the stretching around my arsehole assumed a new feel, and soon I were grunting and squirming under his touch as I had been earlier. Suddenly he knelt studiously, and placed the flat of one hand on my stomach while his other hand disappeared between the cleft of my arse.

Two fingers breeched me, travelled smoothly along my insides, and then....

“Oh holy gods,” I breathed, my whole body shaking to the point of sweat. “What in the seven hells were that?”

Hammer nodded and did it again, and now words deserted me, and my prick came to life again, and he scissored his fingers inside me one last time. And only then did he pull his trousers down and let his cock bounce heavily out.

“Tell me if it hurts,” he commanded, but I bit my lip and resolved not to. His cock were leaking fluid already, and I wanted him to get something from this. It felt too good for him to change his mind about “next time.” He positioned himself, huge and broad, and thrust slowly and carefully inside of me.

I bit my lip harder, because the burning... the aching... it were exquisite, but....

I closed my eyes, seeing a rim of fire behind them, and the darkness of his cock as it burned its way into my arsehole, and then, when I thought I'd have to cry out because I was too much of a coward to keep the pain inside... then...

“Ahhhhhh....”

Both of us sighed in tandem, because his head had popped into me, and it were only my arse, clenching around his shaft, and it were full but not painful, and he....

I looked up and saw he were sweating with the effort of going slow, making it good, and I raised my hand to him, only able to brush his chest.

“You didn’t....” I gasped, because he started to move, and his whole body shook with the force of holding himself back. I remembered that look, that look of concentration that had pulled his jaw back and locked it in place. I remembered my vow that he didn’t have to be careful with me.

“You can’t hurt me,” I said, not sure if it were true or not, but wanting to see him as loose with passion as I had been. “Go ahead, Hammer. Go ahead and fuck me.”

He groaned a little, and pulled back, and then thrust himself in. He barely brushed that bundle of nerves that had set me off with his fingers, and when he felt me shiver beneath him, he fell forward on his elbows, adjusting his angle, and sliding all the way in to the root.

I whimpered. “That’s the place,” I told him. My hands came up to his shoulders, the rough fabric of his shirt crushing under my palms, and I pushed at him, urging him faster. “Hammer, don’t hold back for me.”

And that snapped something, because he didn’t. His hips started to hammer at me, and his cock ploughed through my body roughly. I cried out and wrapped my feet around his hips, shaking harder with the pounding of that place inside my arse, and clutching him to my chest as he plunged against me.

It felt... felt... oh *gods*, I had not imagined, not when watching the innkeeper's daughter getting buggered, not when his hand had touched my hips warmly in the dark of the night. I were possessed, completely and utterly, surging around him, lost in the white-blindness of pleasure and of having Hammer *inside of me*, where he seemed to have lived all our lives.

He could not last for long. He had been squirming with arousal even as he'd sucked on my prick, and now that he were buried inside me, it were too much for him to last. He thrust savagely, and I howled for it, and then, too soon, his head threw back, and he howled as he convulsed and spent in my arse.

He collapsed against me, shaking, and I wrapped myself around him and gentled the tautness of his shoulders and the slackening line of his buttocks and thighs.

When our panting eased up, he pulled out and rolled to the side, and the hot spend trickling down my crease and between my thighs were delicious. I took a liberty and rolled up onto my side and over his chest, peering down at him. I insinuated my hand under his shirt and he wiggled his shoulders. I were glad. It seemed he longed for my touch as much as I longed for his.

"We did good, yes?" I asked hopefully, living for the way he grinned with his eyes closed.

"Yes," he affirmed, and I took another risk and kissed the end of his chin. The slight curve to his lean lips deepened, and that were my reward.

"Where did you learn that?" I asked, suddenly thinking about it. "The thing in my body. Where did you learn that?"

He looked away. “The blacksmith,” he muttered. “He bugged me when I were smaller. I got bigger and knocked him one, and he stopped with that and kept on with the smithing, and we were equal.”

I gaped at him. We’d spent our whole lives in the same bed, and not once... not once.... I racked my brains, trying to remember. Had he come to the orphanage in those days, said something? Acted differently? If Master Will had taken me against my wishes, I would have... trembled, been afraid. Something.

He rolled his eyes and shrugged. “He weren’t brutal about it. He showed me tricks to make it nice. It just weren’t who I wanted, that’s all. I weren’t his.”

I swallowed. *You’re mine.* “I’m yours,” I said, understanding only dimly, it were true, but finally glimpsing the depths of what it meant to belong to Hammer.

He smiled a little more and nodded. “Aye. You’re mine. I want you.”

I nodded back. “I want you too.”

His smile became tentative, shaky. He raised his head then and met my lips, and I touched his lips with my tongue. His mouth opened and the kiss deepened, and the sky darkened to twilight.

He left me shortly after dark. He tried to make me hide in the tree, but I refused.  
“I’ll pick the vegetables in my flats,” I told him

practically. "I can wash them, and we can eat until we find a town that will take us."

He grunted unhappily, but it made sense.

"You see anyone but me," he growled, "you hide in our tree." He reached into the boot he'd just put on and pulled out a finely honed knife. "You see anyone you don't like, you use this first, ask questions later."

I looked at the knife blankly, so cold that I dropped it as I took it from his hands. My teeth threatened to chatter and I told myself to be stronger than my name, stronger than air.

"You put up with the smith," I said, but my throat clamped down so hard it hurt to speak. "You..." This would hurt me for many years. I could not hide it now. "You didn't even tell me. I could..." I shrugged and tried to pretend like this thought didn't make the bile rise in my throat. "I could submit. Grease myself with olive oil in the morning and make my mind elsewhere."

His hands caught my chin, rough enough to push the bruising that seemed to have spread even there. "I were a boy. You are not a boy. Besides, the smith were gentle. This one won't be. He won't be happy until you're bloody or dead. We'll go."

His thumb moved almost gracefully against my uninjured cheek, and I simply stared at him with wide frightened eyes. He nodded, as though to reassure me, and then turned on his heel and strode back to the town.

I got busy dulling his good bowie knife to help me dig up the tubers, carrots, and turnips I'd planted. I dug up the ones in the worm rich soil first. They were, of course, bigger.

But I had unearthed and washed my entire garden, and the moon had moved halfway across the sky, by the time Hammer came back from town, our possessions tucked into a knapsack on his back. I had watched the moon fretfully, trying to judge the time, trying to hear minutes and then hours in my heart, but I couldn't. It didn't matter. Something, something, were telling me that it were taking too long. Some turn of the moon, bird cry in the dark, or scent in the earth were telling me that there were summat wrong.

Hammer's wandering gait back confirmed my uneasiness, and I were only a little surprised when he wandered to the stream instead of toward the bole of the tree, where I waited.

When I got to the stream, he had shucked his loose shirt, the one that he had refused to take off when we were lying together, and were swishing it around in the water and using it to scrub his hands and his forearms, and his chest and his face and....

I fell to my knees beside him and grabbed his shaking, chilled hands.

"What happened?" I asked, panicked.

"You can go back now," he said without looking at me. "You can go back now. But I have to leave."

I blinked, and peered closely at him in the moonlight. There were a slash of something dark on his cheekbone and I reached out toward it. He flinched away but my arms were longer, and I took it off with my fingertips and brought it to my eyes. The moon were full, and seemed enormously close



to the earth, and I could almost make out the color in the light.

“Is this blood?” I asked, and he grunted.

“I need to go,” he said again. “There will be people after me. You tell them you don’t know anything. Nobody will bother you. You’ll be fine.”

He stood up again, and for a moment, I saw him walking away from me, leaving me puzzled in the aftermath of the dire thing that had happened while I were digging potatoes.

“Bollix!” I cried out, grabbing his bicep with enough force to hurt. “We’re going together, and you’re telling me what happened.”

“You don’t have to come!”

“Do you think I want to stay here without you?” I asked, miserable to admit it. Oh gods... twelve years, our entire lives. Since I were five or six, there hadn’t been a night I hadn’t gone to bed and not heard his breathing. The thought of it now left me terrified, bereft, as though my spirit left my flesh and wandered around this tiny, ten-mile radius that had been the bubble of our world for all our lives.

He closed his eyes and swallowed, and for a moment, I thought he were going to cry.

“He hit you,” he whispered after a moment. “He hit you. Do you think I could let him hit you... threaten you... do you think I would let him live?”

I swallowed. Oh. Oh gods. “I’m yours,” I said, shaking so hard my hand quivered on his flesh. He covered it with his other hand, and it were surprisingly firm.

“You’re mine,” he replied, his voice a little stronger.

“You can’t give me up now,” I told him seriously. Oh, what I did not know about my beguiling Hammer. Set me free? Maybe. Give me up? Never.

He nodded then, accepting. “Let me wash up,” he said, and I tugged on him until we were both back on our knees at the stream bank.

“Let me help you.”

He sat quietly while I used his wet shirt to wash away the blood on his face and neck. There were bruises, too, and when I asked, he said, “I woke him up first.”

“You what?” I were belatedly terrified for him. Oh gods. Master Will had been huge and powerful and... and.... “Why in the hells would you do that?”

Hammer’s placid gaze met mine with his customary directness.

“It weren’t honorable,” he said simply. “Not in his sleep. Any man deserves to know why he’s going to die.”

I shuddered. He were such a better man than I. “I’d rather your dishonor than your death, Hammer. Now tell me you brought another shirt.”

“I did,” he said. “Here. Let me use this one to clean my hammer.”

I didn’t even want to think about what he would be cleaning off of it. I were rifling through the knapsack looking for his clothes when I realized my few changes of clothes and blankets were in there too. So were my old book, and my looking glass, and my stuffed bear.

I pulled out the bear and looked at it fondly. “Hammer?”  
“Aye?”

“You told me to go back to town.”

“Aye.”

“But you brought my things.”

“Aye.”

I looked at him, the glimmer of a smile on my lips. “Why’d you bring my things if I weren’t supposed to come with you?”

Even in the moonlight I could see the flush wash his cheeks.

“I hoped,” he said simply, and my smile spread.

“With good reason.”

He grunted, and a little bit of a smile curved along his mouth, and then we got busy with the business of being gone.

## PART III

### ROSES IN THE SNOW

Hammer knew how to hunt, and I knew how to gather. It were the only way we survived. At first, we thought we would simply travel past a couple of villages, and find a place to ply our trades somewhere we could easily disappear into a crowd. The first town we stopped by, I ventured to the market by myself, looking for more olive oil and a passable cooking pot, and to scent the wind. Hammer waited for me in a small camp a league or so outside of town, and I'd bought the pot and had just purchased some big bread rolls to take back to him, when I saw it.

A flyer, probably run off by Master Lea's own press, were nailed to a pole, looking for Graeme and Eirn, brothers who had murdered.

It described us, down to our blue eyes and dark hair, and I did everything but turn pale and vomit when I read the finer details. Hammer had bludgeoned Master Will to death with his smith's hammer. I'd known that; it hadn't taken a genius or a scientist to figure it out, and I reckoned the bruises on Hammer's face from the roué had taken as long as my own to heal. But to see it there, in print, that your bedmate had caved in a man's skull, well, it were a frightening thing.

It didn't change the fact that I'd felt safer these weeks on the run with Hammer than I had the whole rest of my life.

As I stared at the words of what Hammer had done to protect me, I were blessed with the image, common enough in these last weeks, of Hammer, buried inside of me, his bare chest glistening in the firelight, and his mouth slack and relaxed with the passion of knowing I would care for him when I were in his arms.

I'd tasted his skin—it were salty and tart and sweet. I'd held his cock in my mouth, and swallowed his spend—it were musky and bitter and creamy. He'd gone into the woods in the evening to snare rabbits for us to eat, while I'd set up camp and started a fire, cooking vegetables for us in the embers. Every time he had brought back food, he'd had such pride. He could take care of me. He could possess me. For children who had grown up as we had, with very little to possess, I were his greatest accomplishment.

The words were nothing. The deed were incidental. Hammer waited for me in camp, and he thought I were something to be proud of. I made myself stop and trade my tiny looking-glass for more blankets. We were going to need them as winter progressed, and we were out in it.

Still, when I returned, it were a hard thing to explain to him why no town would do.

"We'll probably have to turn from the coast and go inland," I told him through a mouthful of bread. We were both eating it slowly; I'd just told him it were the last we'd be getting for a while. "Head for a kingdom on the western shore, far away from this one here in the east."

Hammer squinted in that way he had when he were trying to see things clear. "It says both of us? That makes no sense. You were last seen running from the town. I'm the one who went into his room!"

I shrugged. "It's not like I weren't the one with reason to make him dead, Hammer," I said, not particularly perturbed.

Hammer made a sound like a hammer hitting earth. "You could have had a life," he muttered. "Winter will be here quick."

I glared at him. "I didn't want 'a life'. I wanted you."

He rolled his eyes and stood. "We'll camp here one more night before we go westward. There's game around here. I'm going to set snares."

I sighed and stood. "We've got game, and we've got jerky. Stay around camp tonight, Hammer. It's getting cold and dark longer, and I fear for you in the dark like that." I flushed as I said it. We weren't girls, and gods help anyone who implied Hammer were such a one.

His lips twisted. "Worried about me, Eirn?"

I sighed and gazed at him helplessly through the fire. "Shouldn't I be?"

He shook his head and looked away. "Maybe you should simply run, you know. You can convince them it weren't you."

"Wanting to get rid of me, Hammer?"

He sighed, clearly frustrated to have his words turned back on him so neatly. "Shouldn't I be?" he asked gruffly, and I smiled, because I'd won.

We cleaned up our dinner and slung our rucksack of food up from a tree—there were bears in the woods, we both knew that—and set our bedroll by the fire, with the extra blankets I'd brought from town. Hammer had brought a thick sweater a piece for us from the orphanage, but once we were tucked into the bedroll, we didn't need them. I lay on my stomach, my head pillowed on my arms, and watched him settle himself on his back, his interlaced hands behind his head.

"Hammer?"

"Mmm?"

"If we find a new town, then what?"

He blinked hard. This weren't a question he'd answered in his head before. "I get a job smithing, you get a job at the printers. We find a flat together. Like we were, just somewhere different."

"There will always be us?" I asked, wanting to know for certain. He turned to me then, his profile lit by fire, and his eyes shadowed and opaque.

"You want there to be?" I could not tell if it were his wish as well. I answered him honestly anyway.

"Yes."

He rolled to his side then, and I to mine, and he held my chin firm as he kissed me. I kissed him back, hard and hungry, and he bruised my lips against my teeth with his want. I didn't complain. His wanting didn't stop at the kiss. He were hard and hungry throughout, turning my body roughly, prepping my arse with a bit of pain and haste, pummeling inside me with enough force to make me gibber into our blankets.

He finished before I did, a rare thing, and after he groaned and roared into my shoulder, and spent, he flailed for a moment blindly, before his hands found their surety and began to stroke my body with some tenderness. For minutes there were just him, still buried in my dripping arse, stroking me—my stomach, my chest, my back, my shoulders, along my neck, the planes of my jaw, my quivering thighs.

I began to squirm, my prick hard and unsatisfied and my body set to blazing by his touch. His cock were still mostly hard inside me, and that made me tremble and squirm. He laughed softly as I started to shake and grunted “no” when I tried to take my own cock in hand.

“Mine,” he growled.

“I’ll beat it myself,” I threatened on a whine, needing release so badly I almost wept with it.

“Mine!” he snapped. His fingers came up to my nipples and pinched. Not hard enough to bruise, just hard enough to make my whole body tremble with the fire of want and need.

“Ohhhh... *gods*... Hammer... bring me... please... I need... I need you... I need to come....”

He reached down under our bodies and pulled out a little, enough to let his spend trickle into his palm, and enough to make me wild with him all over again. I were practically sobbing by the time he brought that hand to my front and engulfed my jutting cock with it. His other arm went around my chest, keeping my back flush against him, and his hips started to move again, his prick staying hard enough to make me shiver as he moved inside me.



That slippery, rough hand on my cock were enough, but the fact that he were still hard and moving... oh... oh gods....

I screamed like a mountain cat and snarled like a bear. My skin exploded, and I were remade, there in his arms as he clenched me to him and held me, sobbing in climax, weak with my come.

It took me long moments to breathe again, and the shudders that racked my body didn't seem to want to stop. Finally, I relaxed enough to lean my head back against his shoulder, and his harsh breath rang in my ear with his words.

"It were a promise," he grated. "I sealed it."

*There will always be us.*

I swallowed and nodded weakly. Yes. There would always be us. I'd promised. I may have thought of myself as a coward, as the weak one, but I vowed to have enough strength to keep that.

Hammer pulled the blankets up around us and collapsed on me, still inside me, with my spend drying on his hand and my cock. I grunted, surprised, and he hauled me sideways—still in my body. Usually he spent some time cleaning us—it were part of our ritual of fucking, and it seemed a sweet thing, out of character with my gruff, visceral Hammer. Not tonight. Tonight, like any other howling, raw-boned animal, Hammer wanted me marked with his come and his sweat. I understood in a way that went under my skin, but that I couldn't put words to, not the words in my science books, anyway.

## HAMMER & AIR

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His arms anchored me to him, and I felt his breathing even out, and sometime before he slept, I muttered, “Hammer, we’re going to have to find other words for this.”

“Mine,” he muttered, hauling me tighter. His cock were spent and flaccid, though, and it flopped limply out of me, leaving me stretched and sore.

I guess that were what he had. He had me. Maybe he were right. Words would bollix the whole works up.

**T**he next day the wind picked up. The trees around us were mostly cedars and redwoods, but I could smell the metallic zing of snow. Autumn were nearly over.

The underbrush were turning brown with the cold, and the deer were fat and sleepy with the reserves they’d eaten during the wild harvest.

The mountain lions were feasting well, also.

Hammer were a smith. We’d both lived our lives in the town. We’d eaten slaughtered animals and vegetables harvested from gardens. He were proud of the conies and partridges he caught in his snares, and he weren’t stupid, but he weren’t a woodsman either. I were proud of the wild tubers and greens I recognized, and the herbs and medicines I gathered for just-in-case. I’d read as much as I could about the way the world worked, but I knew no more than Hammer.

We stumbled along, walking as far as we could through the woods in a day, keeping west and choosing our camp based on things we needed, like water and shelter and

firewood. Some nights we found all three, and those nights, if Hammer were lucky with a snare, we'd stay and dig some tubers and store up on our food. I'd worked with our tough wool blankets, a tarpaulin, and some cord in the bottom of my pack and could set up a passable tent over the fire Hammer built in the evening. If we let the fire burn to embers, we could sleep in relative warmth, although the ground weren't comfortable in the least.

We got proficient at things, and when we lived through a week of tramping through snow, I started having hopes we might see spring and a time when we arrived at a town that didn't have fliers posted with Hammer's crime written on them.

One day, Hammer ran down a deer, bashing it on the skull in one mighty swing of his arm, the smith's hammer at the end. The thing twitched for a bit—were still twitching, in fact—when I caught up with them, panting and blowing because I hadn't been expecting the impromptu hunt. I settled down with the knife Hammer had given me, and that I'd learned to keep sharp, and I went about dressing the thing.

It were another one of those things I'd read about and guessed about. There were some parts you'd want to eat and some parts you wouldn't, so I stripped the parts I wouldn't want to taste out of the middle of the deer and threw them into the brush, thinking that scavengers would come and do their part of the clean up. I started stripping off the skin and thinking of asking Hammer to make a fire right there, so we could roast the carcass and strip the meat from the bones, and just when I opened my mouth to say that, there were a

scream from the rock behind me that almost made me wet myself.

I were crouched in front of the deer, and Hammer were leaning against the tree next to me, waiting for the moment he could help. Suddenly, Hammer were behind me, screaming fiercely at whatever were making that screeching noise.

My first thought were the knife. How were Hammer supposed to defend himself when I had the knife! But as I scrambled around and saw Hammer, engaged in a life and death struggle with a giant mountain cat, I realized that a knife would have been clumsy and useless in Hammer's massive fist. He were doing just fine with the weapon he'd used so well just an hour ago on the deer.

The creature screamed and ducked as Hammer swung the smith's hammer like a mace at its head. A bitter claw lashed out, catching Hammer on the arm, but Hammer swung again and caught the thing with its long teeth and ice-curdling scream. It screamed again, this time in pain, and its jaw cracked and swung open. It whimpered then and retreated—I'd say, to lick its wounds—but it were clear to see that the creature would die eventually. At the moment, it were still strong and healthy, and still armed with claws, but its jaw were hanging by a bit of skin and naught else. It could still kill us now, but Hammer had ended its future right quick.

But Hammer's sleeve were soaked in blood, and he stood there, shaking, as the thing slunk off, probably to glare at us from the underbrush until we left the offal for it to lick. I came up next to Hammer, trying not to panic. The smith's

tool fell from his weakened hand, and I almost failed, even in that.

It took a minute of shaking so bad I couldn't raise my hand to tend him, but finally I stopped concentrating on what I'd do if Hammer died, and started concentrating on how to make him live. First, I pulled the flask of melted snow I kept at my waist and rinsed off my hands before I went anywhere near his wound. Then I took the knife, even as he stood there shaking, and sliced the tunic off his body. He looked at me when the first blast of snow-scented wind hit him, and I mumbled "Bandages" before slicing off the clean fabric from the undamaged arm off and wrapping the wound immediately.

I ran to my pack and pulled out a blanket, then, and walked him, trembling, back to the tree he'd been leaning against so casually just moments ago. I settled him down, and his teeth were already starting to chatter, and I remembered all I could about watching him build a fire.

I did well, all things considered, and soon had a pot of melted snow boiling away. I added yarrow, five-finger, and agrimony to the mixture, and then some rose hips for health. I poured a mug of the mixture, straining the herbs out of it, and made him drink it. He didn't complain about the bitterness, which were good since we had no honey left in our stores, and I took the pulped herbs and a strip of Hammer's shirt and started cleaning out his wound.

"What were you thinking?" I muttered, peeling back the original bandage. "I'm the one who had the knife, dammit!"

"I were thinking I liked you with your guts in," Hammer snapped back, and I sighed.

## HAMMER & AIR

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After dipping my cloth in the decoction, I worked gingerly at the mess of deep scores on his arm. “I prefer you with your skin intact myself,” I muttered, the tenth time I made him wince.

“Look, Eirn,” he said after he hissed and I retreated again. “It’s going to hurt. You can only make it last longer if you don’t just buckle down and do it, right?”

The thought made me shudder, but it were winter, and we were cold enough, and dammit, Hammer were wounded and needed me to be brave. I weren’t often, but this time, I had no choice.

With a grim set to my jaw and a hand red from the boiling water and the herbs, I took that pad of cloth and ground it into Hammer’s flesh, looking for all the dirt I could find.

He didn’t scream, gods bless him, but his head did loll back, and his eyes glazed over. I guess, sometimes, the body just quits responding to anything so it doesn’t have to respond to pain. I used that time to scrub deeply, and to layer a boiling poultice on the arm to draw out any sickness in it.

When that were done, I pulled out Hammer’s other shirt, and the sweater he’d turned his nose at and bundled him up, dressing him like a child and then throwing another blanket over his shoulders and making a pillow for his head with my clothes and the rucksack. He came to a little as I were settling him down, and tried to tell me I needed to let him finish the deer, and I told him sure, in a bit, after he’d rested a little.

I finished the deer. It were growing dark by this time, so I set up the tent without the fourth wall of blanket, and used the light of the fire to finish skinning the corpse. I kept the skin. I figured we'd probably taken out the one predator for a bit of territory, and knew I'd have time the next day to boil some water and use it to scrape the skin, then use the deer brains to tan it. By the time I were clean and ready to go sit by Hammer and tend him some more, the deer were on a stick, roasting at the fire, ready to be made into jerky to feed us for the next few weeks.

Hammer's wound were clean, but the skin around it were hot, and I treated it once again. For perhaps the first time in our lives, I heard him complain about something.

"It weren't permission to go rooting around in my skin, Eirn."

I tried a smile, but he were pale, and the smile were hard to dredge up and harder to hold.

"Well, you get inside my body most every night. Figure this were returning the favor."

"Yeah, but I hope it feels better than this," Hammer grunted, and he sounded fretful and insecure. I kissed his cheek—an odd gesture for us. We did not hold hands nor nuzzle nor touch at odd moments as I'd seen other people do. We lay down together. We fucked. There were some sweetness then, some softness in our touches, but standing, shoulder-to-shoulder on any given day, we were more likely to be mistaken for brothers.

Hammer surprised me. He leaned into the kiss, so I smoothed the hair back from his forehead and kissed him again, and kept our cheeks together for a moment.

“You’re wonderful at fucking,” I whispered. “It always feels good. Every night. And I wish I could make this thing on your arm feel better, but I’m not a healer. I’m stupid, and I don’t know what I’m doing. We need to get you to shelter, Hammer. You’ve got to sweat this out in a real bed, and I need to wash you down and keep you from getting too hot or too cold.”

Hammer shook his head and gave me a weak shrug. “You’re not stupid, Eirn. If anyone can get me better, it’s you.”

I tried. We spent the next day and night at the camp, and I washed and poulticed his arm as often as I could. I also used the brains to tenderize the deer hide, but I thought it might have needed more soaking and scraping than I had time to do that day. It didn’t matter. I needed it to help me shore up Hammer’s pack, because we couldn’t live here in this little hollow by the tree. There were no water, for one thing, and the ground were too clustered with stones and trees for another. No. We had to find a better place—a place where Hammer could get well.

We had no idea how deep the woods went, or how close we were to some of the towns in the western kingdoms, but west we’d started and west we continued. I carried as much of Hammer’s gear as I could, and I’d tend to his arm every time we stopped, keeping a store of herb infusion in the skin at my hip. (Since I were drinking this, too, I can tell you the taste were nothing to throw a parade about, but Hammer never complained.)

By our fifth night, I almost despaired. The snow had gotten worse, and the trees had gotten thicker until it felt



like I were kicking and ripping at an impenetrable wall of white-splintered-wood, just to make any headway.

If it had been myself alone, I would have burrowed under the brush and covered myself with the blankets and let the warmth of the ground and the coating of snow insulate me from the cold. But Hammer were with me, and his skin were hot to the touch, and the night before lying next to him were like lying next to a furnace, and I couldn't help but wonder when even Hammer's enormous vitality would burn out from throwing all that heat.

On that fifth night, Hammer started to babble.

"I didn't lose my hammer, did I?"

"No, it's in your hand!"

"Good. That old bugger in the smithy used to hide it so I'd bend over. Hated that game. Getting buggered weren't so bad, but losing my hammer... first thing I ever cast. It's a good hammer, you think, Eirn?"

He stumbled in the twilight, and I wrapped my arm around him, hoping for anything—a canopy of trees, a trickling stream, an old dead tree—anything, anything that would make camp easy for me, so I could tend to him. His arm had actually healed, but the fever that shook him like a brittle branch in an ice storm might be the end of him.

I had a plan to curl around his body and never wake up, if that happened, and had the poor sense to say so.

"Bloody horrible idea," he muttered. "Didn't kill that buggering fucker and haul you out into the middle of nowhere so you could curl up and die."

“Didn’t get hauled out here to the middle of nowhere to watch you do the same,” I snapped. “Now put one gods-be-damned foot in front of the other and keep going, dammit!”

He did. I begged, I cajoled, and prayed—oh, gods, I prayed. I prayed to every god I’d ever heard of: the god of sunrise, the god of children, the god of clouds, the god of joy, and the more I prayed, the more I hoped the gods would simply see my Hammer for the bloody great man he were and save him from sheer merit, because my prayers were angry and for shit.

Any world that would do this to Hammer didn’t deserve my prayers, but Hammer did, so I kept praying.

**T**he sun had gone down completely and I were about two steps from dropping to the ground and burning the choking underbrush around us, just to keep us warm, when I saw the glow of a lamplight in the dark.

“Oh... oh gods... I take it all back. Keep moving, Hammer. I see a house!”

“A what?” He were groggy and surprised, and I really didn’t blame him.

“I swear it’s a cottage. I can see it from here. Can’t you see it?”

“Are those roses?”

He were right to sound doubtful. We were well into the beginning of winter; there were snow on the ground to our shins, and the bare branches of the trees were black against

the dazzling white. But there... it were far enough away for us to doubt our sanity, and almost close enough to touch. It were a cottage on the green. The lawn were a little brown—like a lawn in late fall—and the trees around it were brilliantly colored. They were even the different sorts of trees: fruitless mulberry trees, maple trees, poplars, and honey locusts instead of pines and redwoods. The cottage itself had a millwheel and a stream running to power it, and yes, rose trees. A red one so dark and purple it were the color of blood, and a tree with blooms so purely white they were nearly blue. Each tree twined the boards supporting the awning on the side of the porch.

“That’s odd,” I mumbled, conscious of the idea that everything about it were odd, but fixating on this one thing because I could not seem to leave it be.

“That we’re both having the same dream?” Hammer asked, his grin a little loopy, and I hastened him toward the vision, because if we were going to die, this place looked decidedly warmer than the woods we’d been lost in for nearly a month.

“That the roses haven’t turned colors,” I said, and it were true. Rose bushes that old and that fully grown would have long ago met and melded, become cross-pollinated, sporting blooms the color of a bloody dawn.

Of course, that were the least of the oddities of the cottage, but since the thing were looking more and more solid and more and more welcoming as we drew near, I simply gave a whole and unfettered thanks from my heart for the little dwelling in the first place.

Together, Hammer and I trundled up the porch stairs and to the door, and I pounded on it and prayed for mercy.

No one answered, but the door swung open slowly, revealing a snug and warm kitchen, glowing with golden lamplight.

Were it enchanted? No doubt about it. Were it dangerous? Very probably.

But Hammer were dying, even as he giggled on my shoulder about the damned bloody roses, disobeying my precious laws of science, and I vowed that I would be the one to pay the price for any magic welcome we received.

## PART IV

### WISHES IN THE HEARTH

The place were empty. It were small—only two rooms and a privy besides the kitchen, currently lit with two lamps hanging from either far corner as we walked in. There were a sitting room, with big stuffed chairs and benches, and a chesterfield, all with cushions and blankets strewn about, as well as a great carpet of furs, stitched together in any order, but tanned and cared for, soft and warm. A fire blazed on the sitting room hearth, hot enough to keep the entire house cozy.

Next to the sitting room were a bedroom, with a great bed, big enough to sleep four hale men, easy, and softly woven blankets and great, fluffy quilts hanging over the end and folded neatly at the foot. The pillows were thick and soft, and it were here that I stripped Hammer to his skivvies and made him lay down on those pristine white sheets.

“Gonna get them dirty,” he muttered. “Nobody to clean them but us. I never learned laundry, did you?”

“No,” I muttered. “They showed girls how to do laundry, which were stupid...”

“Because it’s not like we don’t like our clothes clean, is it, Eirn? I know you like your clothes clean, and your sheets. I made sure, you know, to wash myself every night, so I didn’t have to see your nose wrinkle. You wrinkled your nose at the other boys, going to sleep dirty in soiled sheets. Didn’t want to see your nose wrinkle. It’s a nice nose. A little small,

but that makes you pretty. Didn't want to see it all turned up. You never turned it up at me. I took it as a sign."

Oh gods. A part of me wanted him to stay sick so he'd keep talking. Two months we'd been wandering. Two months he'd been bugging me nightly, and this were as near to courting talk as we'd ever shared.

"I never minded the smell of your sweat, Hammer," I confessed, distracted as I pulled out our gear. I had the pulped herbs from the last time I'd had a time and a place to boil some, but I wanted warm water. I wanted to clean him, and the wound, and wrap him in warm blankets. I went into the kitchen and pulled water from the pump. There were a wood stove in the kitchen, but there were also a trivet over the fire, and I used that to hang our pot from to start warming the water.

I'd turned the deer into stew during that long day after the attack, along with the last of our vegetables, and I'd filled a water skin with that (since melted snow weren't in any shortage, and all we had to do for water were fill our other skin with snow and keep moving until it were water.) I took it out, but Hammer weren't hungry and I were sure he wouldn't eat, no matter how savory the stew. I wished rather desperately for some blackberry preserves, because those he'd eat, and I'd feed them to him by the spoonful, if only he'd open his mouth and profess to some hunger. His body, stretched out on those white sheets, were getting thin, and the bulk of his chest and his shoulders that made up my Hammer were being wasted by the walking and the sickness and the time without food.

While the water were heating, I went to the privy; it were the kind with a pump and a water closet, very fancy for the likes of Hammer and me, who were used to running to a hut behind the orphanage when we had to make water and who had, once a week all our lives, hauled in buckets of water to boil for the big copper tub in the kitchen. There were a boiler in the privy, and warm water for the tub, and it looked to be a wonderful thing, but for now, all I wanted were the warm water.

But there, on the shelves, were towels and cloths and soap, and that's what I'd been looking for in the first place. The soap were milled—and that were a surprise—but it were clean and I figured Hammer were delirious enough to enjoy the smell without being offended that it were flowers.

When I had all I needed, and the water were boiling enough to steep my herbs, I went to bathe Hammer.

Ahhh...

His body, even sick, were such a wonder. He lay there and moved when I asked and babbled. I traced the lines of his muscles, the ones on his side and his chest, his back, his strong core, down his flank and his thigh and even his privates. I parted his bottom and bathed the crease of his arse, and under his stick and stones, and then along his thighs, outside and in. I could almost feel the skin of him relax when it were clean and not stinking of sweat and sickness and pain.

I bathed his wound separate and realized that I'd been fooled by the dirt on the rest of his body to think it were sound. It were infected and feverish, same as the rest of him, and I soaked it in a boiling poultice, thinking hard that

maybe a soak in the tub would draw some of the poison out of it, so Hammer could get on with the business of healing.

“You’re so quiet, Eirn, looking so serious. I always longed for you to look up from what you were studying. It weren’t right for a boy to sit so still. You’d play with me, though. That were special. I’d be the only one in the yard who could make you run a race.”

“And sometimes you’d let me win,” I said with a faint smile. I were washing his wound by this time, and my brows were puckered with thoughts of making him better.

“Had to let you win,” Hammer said, sounding so sober that I looked up. “I had to. You wouldn’t play with me if I kept beating you. Who wants to play with someone who’s always on top of the heap? And you let me win too. You let me see bugs. You let me hunt down plants when I didn’t know a daisy from a mushroom. You let me win every day we played.”

I were moved, beyond words perhaps, and my worry leaked out of my voice and my eyes. “There weren’t no letting you anything, Hammer,” I said, rubbing ineffectually at his toxic wound. “You were always first. Anyone on the playground, anyone in the house, you were my first. I were just honored you’d listen to my nonsense. Made me feel real and important, you did, when everyone else made me feel like air.”

Hammer’s good hand coming to grasp my wrist were a surprise. “You’re real, Eirn. You’re everything.”

“You too,” I told him, taking his hand between my own. Words. We needed better words. A fever shudder shook him then, and his hard clasp around my wrist grew weak. He



were as clean as he would get, and now I needed to get some food into him.

“Some stew, then?” I asked. I’d heated that up, too, on the trivet, and he bout broke me when he wrinkled his nose.

“It’s not sitting well in my stomach, Eirn. You cook good and all; I were surprised, you know, when your cooking turned out right. But not the stew.” His voice grew dreamy. “Remember those blackberries? The ones we had the night we left. I want those. They... the way it made me feel, that you picked them for me. I’ll feel that, every time I taste them.”

“Blackberries,” I said, my voice rusty and creaking. “Right. Blackberries. I’ll go look for some.”

Madness, I know. But it had seemed to be late fall at the latest outside the cottage. Maybe there were bushes out there. There were water, and there had been the smell of blackberries as we’d thumped up in the less-than-bitter cold. Gods... anything. Maybe soft bread, maybe cheese—please, gods, you gave us this cottage, I were already damned. Anything for Hammer?

I were on my way out the door to search for blackberries in the dark when I heard a noise in the kitchen. Not a loud noise, just a settling of something, and I turned toward the cabinet, next to the pump and the sink.

Something about the cabinet caught my attention.

It were a curious piece of workmanship, and that’s for certain. There were carvings, ornate ones of bears and deer and birds along the outside panels of it, and they latched together curiously; interlocking puzzle pieces of a bear, a

cougar, and a deer, and it took me a minute of pushing and finessing to figure them out.

I did, though—the deer went on top—and then the doors to the cabinet swung open, and there it were.

Five or six jars of blackberry preserves, and a loaf of soft bread.

“Right,” I whispered. “Right. Science bows to magic. Not a problem. Not even a question. If magic it is that keeps Hammer alive, I’ll study that instead.”

I reached into the cabinet and pulled out the preserves and the bread and set them on the counter, then ran the pump over my belt knife and cracked open a jar. Ah... gods... the smell of blackberries rolled through the kitchen, and suddenly it were late summer again, and I were feeding Hammer our last meal before we fucked, our last meal before we ran.

Our first meal celebrating that our bodies had started saying things we had no words for.

The smell of it filled me with shivers, the way Hammer’s eyes had, these last two months. Something wonderful—something with magic—would happen soon. I could smell it in the blackberries and hear it in Hammer’s gruff, “Bed now, Eirn?” that he muttered every night. Good things. These were good things.

I found a wooden plate in another, plainer cabinet and brought Hammer as much blackberry jam and bread as I could fill it with.

Hammer were actually singing to himself when I got back to the bedroom—some horribly bawdy ballad about a

girl losing her maidenhead to ten men at the very least—and I laughed a little in relief as I set down the tray.

“And were one of those men you, Hammer?” I asked, taking up a piece of bread and offering it to him. He took a bite, surprised, and I actually heard him moan in his throat as the sweetness of the preserves and the bread hit his palate.

But the joy of the food didn’t stop him from shaking his head and talking through a full mouth to answer my playful question. “Only cherry I ever picked were yours, Eirn.”

It were a good thing I’d set the food down on a nearby table, because I might have dropped it, and that would have been a shame. I took one of the pieces of bread myself and started to eat. It tasted like health and sunshine, and I started to have real hope that Hammer would survive.

“Get out! You had lads and maids swooning at your feet. Why wouldn’t you take them up on that?”

He took another bite of the bread and chewed slowly, thoughtfully, and when he spoke, it were the old Hammer, the one without the loose tongue, that gave me his piece.

“Cause fucking’s fucking. But that first time? That’s a promise. Lots don’t keep the promise, and lots carry ’round little bits of pain. Didn’t want that to be you, that’s all.”

*There will always be Hammer and Eirn.*

I would have followed him around the world, and twice over. Turns out, he only needed me to follow him into his bed with an open heart. My brow furrowed, and I would have said something then. I had a great swelling thing in my chest that needed to be spoken, but no way to give it voice. Hammer and me; on the surface of it we were so simple. I

had no words to tell him that it were more than fucking, more than comfort, more than habit, even more than simple, schoolyard loyalty.

It were a sleeping word, maybe one I'd known as an infant, nestled in my mother's arms, but like that memory, the word had gone with it. Maybe, like that memory, it were a word Hammer had never heard.

He finished a piece of bread and the preserves, but fell asleep in the middle of the second piece, and I were grateful. He were still sick—so sick—but the women at the orphanage had always held that no one died of fever on a full stomach, so I clung to that. I took our leftovers to the kitchen and wrapped the bread in cloth and capped the preserves with the wax seal, then put it back in the cupboard, but not before saying a surreptitious thank you.

"That were nice," I whispered, "and I'm grateful to you, whoever you are. If you could have this waiting in the morning, I'd be grateful too."

There were no answering sound, but I had a little faith and left the magic cabinet alone.

I wanted nothing more than to climb in bed with Hammer then, but two things held me back. One were that he were right—I never did like climbing in bed rank and soiling my sheets. The other thing were that he were sick. I couldn't sleep next to him when he needed my nursing, when I feared for each breath.

I took my time in the privy—stood in the tub and let the warm water run—then washed myself as it came. By the time I felt clean, the water lapping at my shins were brown

and thick. It left a ring around the copper tub that I resolved to clean up the next morning.

Since Hammer were naked, I figured I may as well be the same and emptied our clothes out of our rucksacks then, into the enormous tub, and ran some fresh water and left them there to soak. Then I wrapped a linen sheet around my waist and went back to watching Hammer and praying for the real miracle that this enchanted little cottage might just give me.

I took my seat beside the bed and felt Hammer's head. He made a child's sound then and leaned into my hand.

"Lay down beside me," he grumbled. "Our whole lives, we've been sleeping in the same bed. I cannot sleep with you just sitting there beside me now."

I were going to tell him "No" because I wanted to be able to do for him if he needed anything, but then he threw in the kicker, for a man who never asked for anything because he could make it happen himself.

"Please, Eirn?"

"Right," I murmured, shooing him sideways. He had enough strength to roll to his favorite position—on his side—and I shed my sheet and climbed in next to him. He wrapped his burly long arms around me, and I clung to him, furnace-heated skin and all, and prayed that should Hammer die this night, that I would die with him, and our bodies would be found just like this, twined together like roses that had grown together for too long.

The morning found him no better but no worse. I helped him to the privy, and he asked me with wonder where I'd found the wherewithal to wring our clothes out to dry and hang them on a line above the tub, and I told him, with a little bit of wonder myself, that I hadn't; the cottage had done that all on its own, thank you very much. He'd laughed and then blessed it gravely, with more soberness than I'd give him credit for.

He must have still been a little loopy from the fever because he looked at my surprise and said, "A storm, a forge, or a magic cottage, Eirn, it all deserves our respect, don't you think?"

I agreed with him, and made a point of thanking the cottage myself when I went in to fill the tub for him.

I made the water warm—not to scalding but warm enough to match the heat of his blood and not make him shudder. I wanted his arm to have a long, clean soak, and then the cooling water to pull his body heat with it.

I checked on him periodically, as I made us breakfast and unpacked the meager contents of our knapsacks. I took out my book of science and my notebook and put them on the small end table by the bed. I took the hammer and our knives and put them in the drawers in the kitchen. In a fit of whimsy, I took out the small stuffed bear that I'd had as a child, and that Hammer had rescued for me as we ran, and put it on the bed, as though this were our home and we had time for such nonsense.

When that were done, I folded our clothes. I stacked the first armload of them together on a dresser, and then went back for another armload. When I came back, the drawer

itself were open, and there were several new sets of linen small clothes, and I were so happy, I near to wept.

I put mine on, then went and pulled Hammer out of the cooling water. He hadn't started to shudder yet, and his arm were smaller and cooler to the touch, and that *did* bring tears to my eyes. I hid them from Hammer, though. I didn't want him to know how worried I'd been, because then he'd know how sick he really were.

He were a fractious patient—didn't like me helping him into his things, didn't like that I put him right back to bed when we were done, didn't like that I set to making the house to rights without him. It were to the point where I had to laugh or snap at him, so of course, I snapped at him.

"Dammit, Hammer, I just hauled you through a week's worth of fuck-all wilderness to get you some place that might not kill you! Do you think you could just lay back and get better already?"

"But how long, Eirn? I put a price on your head, whether I meant to or no. How long are we going to sit here and wait for someone to collect it?"

I blinked, and then I *did* laugh. "Hammer, this place doesn't even exist in our *time*. It's late fall outside, and we were trudging through the dead of winter. For all I know, we're not growing any older while we're here either! Enchanted cabinets, clothes that fold themselves, and a whole other season; I don't think the constable of our unremarkable little town is going to come banging on the bloody door any time soon!"

Hammer blinked and wobbled where he stood next to the bed. I drew closer to him (as I had backed up to yell at

him—it only seemed polite) and put my arm around his waist to help him into bed.

“Besides,” I said softly, “the price on our head is justly mine. It were for my defense. Now come on,” I urged. “Just lay down and accept that we’re safe.”

He allowed himself to be settled against the pillows, but the hand-knit little furrow between his brows stayed tight and anxious. “Are we ever safe?” he asked, and I took his hand and stroked it.

“I’ve always felt safe,” I confessed freely. “You always had my back. How else would I feel?”

He grunted, but I thought he were pleased. “I’ve never seen you shout before,” he mumbled, close to a healing sleep.

“I’ve never had to make you see sense before,” I grumbled. “You usually carry it ready at your belt.”

“You’re the smart one,” he muttered back. “All I am is the hard shoulder.”

I floundered for a moment, opening and closing my mouth like a puzzled baby bird. He fell asleep whilst I were still fumbling for the words to refute him, but what else were I to say? How could I tell him that I would not have followed a fool into the woods, no matter how good it felt when he buggered me into the ground?

There weren’t much to do that day. I poked around, discovered clothes in the drawers that seemed tailor made for Hammer and me: simple, strong, serviceable, but of finer make than we were used to. The shirts were of linen instead of cotton, the vests were of leather and not corduroy, but



there were a set that were broad in the shoulder and a set that were long at the waist, and that were Hammer and me, so I wore mine.

They fit lush against my skin, and I gave myself time for a shiver of longing for nice things, fine fabrics, fitted seams, before I moved on to the rest of the cottage. There weren't much to do there—much of it seemed to clean up after itself—but that were unsettling, so I tried to clear up breakfast dishes before they had a chance to put themselves away, and I picked up a broom and swept up the mud and dirt we'd tracked between the room and the bathtub and such.

When I were done, I went outside for a minute—Hammer were asleep by then—and breathed deep and tried to gauge the season by the smell of frost and the color of the leaves.

It couldn't be done.

The sky were the blue of early October, that deep, lazy azure you could fall into if you let yourself, but that weren't possible. It had been mid November when Hammer had been wounded. It were, earliest, late in the month now.

I ventured out from the house, with the intention of seeing where the enchanted world ended and the real world began—but I didn't get far.

My feet crunched through the dead leaves, and I snapped through maybe half a league of underbrush, before a terrible feeling of unease assailed me like a bucket of cold bathwater. For a moment, I thought I could hear the sea, and then... oh gods of magic, gods of motion... what in the hells of the holy *were that?*

It were a hideously sickening motion, as though the ground beneath my feet had been ripped asunder and tossed like a child's flying disk, me on top of it. My head spun and I fell backward the way I'd come, flailing as I fell and rolling as I landed, and I stayed there, gasping, trying hard not to vomit.

I fancied myself a scientist; an investigator. But something clearly did not want me to progress beyond that boundary. I could, I thought resolutely. I probably could throw myself across that space with a lunge of pure momentum. And then I remembered Hammer.

I stood up and brushed myself off and turned my back on that boundary without a single glance. Even then I knew that any course, any course at all that deviated from Hammer, were not a road I wanted to walk.

When I think about it now, all that is good in my life has come from that squaring of my shoulders and tramping back to the little enchanted cottage that held my gruff, short-spoken companion. It seemed like the most natural course in the world then, and it seems that way now, but it were the beginning of my realization that the language of science does not have a word for the sacrifice of the paths of ambition to achieve a heart's desire.

It should. All languages should.

I tramped back into the cottage, feeling an absurd notion to knock softly on the doorframe before I entered. Shaken by that terrible nauseating magical interlude, I did, the wood warm and giving under my knuckles. I *were* grateful, and, as Hammer had said, I *were* respectful. The cottage had wanted us. After feeling the protection it seemed

to be giving us from the outside world, I would not offend it for naught under the sky.

Hammer were awake when I walked in smelling of leaves and crisp grass, but he had not left the bed. I circled the bed with a glass of hot tea (I'd left the pot to boil over the trivet) flavored with rose hips and some honey I'd wished up in the cupboard. (It seemed to respond to the things I wished for Hammer. I'd longed for cream this morning, and there had been no sign of it. I'd wished for honey, since I knew Hammer liked it, and there it were.)

He watched me coming with wary eyes. "I had a notion you'd try and leave," he said softly, and I blinked.

"Weren't trying to leave," I told him, tilting my head a little. Had never been no signs that Hammer were witchy. Maybe it were simply the house. "I tested the boundaries of the magic. It told me when I found them, that's a certainty. But I didn't want to leave you. Just wanted to know where we were."

Hammer's lips turned up in a sleepy smile. "That's you, Eirn. Always trying to put a name to something, explain it away. Even I know magic and your science don't mix."

I set the tea down and put my hand to his head. I swallowed hard and blinked back tears. Sweaty, yes, but cool. The fever had broken. His body were sweating out the poison of infection, and that were why he lay so still.

I swallowed again, and went to give him his tea but my hand shook so badly I couldn't lift it from the end table. "I wouldn't leave you," I said, licking the spilt tea off my hand. Now my voice were shaking too. "I wouldn't," I repeated. I

had to say something. Oh gods... gods of magic, gods of motion, I had been so afraid.

Suddenly his hand came up and captured my wrist. I stared at the two hands—Hammer’s were broad and scarred and hard and capable, and mine were nimble and clever and long. Carefully—probably because he were weak and couldn’t move fast—he wove his fingers in with mine and squeezed.

“Eirn?”

Reluctantly I looked at him and used the heel of my other hand to clear my tear-scalded eyes. “You scared me ball-less, Hammer. Gods....” I took a deep breath, and then another, and then he gave my hand a tug, and I sank to my knees in front of the bed.

“No worries,” he muttered. “You wouldn’t leave me, I don’t plan to leave you. Right?”

I nodded and buried my face into the sheet next to his head and tried to wipe the tears off there. He let go of my hand and turned to his side so he could bury his hand in my hair and stroke my head until my shoulders stopped shaking, and I were still. Eventually, his voice, gruff and weak, penetrated my fog.

“Come on up and lie next me,” he ordered, and I kicked off my boots and did that while he scooted over. We lay there, face-to-face for a few moments and he raised his thumb to wipe my cheeks.

“Running were hard,” he murmured. “You were right. This place seems safe. Let’s be safe for a while, right?”

I nodded. “Right,” I whispered, but my throat were swollen, and my head were clogged, and I couldn’t manage much else.

“No. Close your eyes. When you wake up, it’ll be lunch time, and you can tell me a story.”

“You like stories, Hammer?” He’d been apprenticed young, had spent a lot of time in the nearby tavern when I were sitting with the other boys by the fireplace at the orphanage.

“I do.” He yawned then, the course of his healing taking over us both. “I always wished that book of yours were stories instead of seeds. Thought maybe you’d like me more if you could see me as a prince instead of a blacksmith.”

I stared at him, the fog and fatigue of relief and emotion muddling me. Still, I managed to say something, this once, to give him something that he needed.

“I couldn’t like you more if you were golden,” I murmured. “There is not a soul in all the kingdoms that I would rather have by my side than my Hammer. Not even a prince.”

“I wish I could give you a prince,” Hammer murmured, both of us so drowsy in that snug, enchanted little cottage. “I wish I could give you a prince, so you could know the difference, so you could have a choice.”

“Prince or parson, Hammer, I’d still choose you.”

We fell asleep then, side by side, fanning each other’s cheek with every breath. We were young and fond and foolish, and we did not realize then, the risk you take when you speak of wishes and princes in the hearth of an enchanted home.

## PART V

### GOLD LIGHT ON SABLE

It took Hammer some days to recover, but he let me nurse him, so I didn't mind. I'd leave him inside sometimes, to go out and collect herbs, to collect edible roots, to make up our stores so we didn't have to tax the house too greatly when winter finally arrived and the snows set in, but it didn't matter. All Hammer had to do were mention a food or a taste, a smell or something we'd eaten in times long past, and I'd wish, and it would appear in the cabinet.

I didn't tell him about it, but he figured out soon enough when his favorite foods kept appearing at his bedside. And, of course, there were the book.

We awoke from our nap that first evening, and as Hammer used the bathroom and sponged the sweat from his trembling limbs (a thing he begged me to let him do himself) I went to the kitchen for the rest of the bread and jam.

I found—along with a baked chicken and a skin of goat's milk—a hefty tome of fairy stories with a leather binding which was tinted a fantastic color of cobalt blue.

I pulled out the book first and fondled the gilt-edged hide pages with reverent hands. There were finely plated illustrations, with what looked to be hand-colored details, and the beauty alone of such a book made my eyes burn. But perhaps that were just the day for it, right?

“Thank you. Oh... gods of motion, gods of magic, thank you. I could not have chosen better for Hammer myself.”

He’d insisted on coming to eat at the table, and I’d insisted that I bring him a tray for the bed. We settled on him eating from a small table at the hearth, and as I watched him cozy into a big, stuffed leather chair with a throw over his lap, something inside me clicked rightly to place. The cottage might have been enchanted, but maybe part of that were Hammer.

We sat and ate (silently, because that were how we were raised at the orphanage) and then, when I’d cleared the plates, I showed him the book. His eyes glowed and a child’s eagerness crossed his usually grim mouth.

“Would you like me to read it?” I asked gently, just to watch him nod with that wonderful innocent happiness. The things I hadn’t known about him—the learning of them were as glorious as the fucking, if truth be told.

The story I chose that night were about a lass named Snowdrop who fled into a forest and met up with seven little men who gave her safety.

Hammer listened avidly, but when I were done, he snorted.

“They must have been poofy as we are,” he said, and I grinned at him.

“Why would you say that?”

“Because otherwise, they would have bugged the poor lass senseless. I think she only pretended to be dead to get away from them!”

I laughed then. “Well, not all of them were pooft; some of them must have been like you, liking both, otherwise, they wouldn’t have had to put her in the glass box when she didn’t look dead.”

He laughed back and then rolled his eyes. “Aye, and I don’t think much of her prince. What? He sees her lying there like a statue and thinks that’s a woman he must have? For all he knows, she’s dumb as a potato and has a voice like a poker against a steel plate.”

I laughed some more, but he grew thoughtful and cast me a glance from under lowered brows. “No,” he said with decision. “It’s a pretty story, but in real life you want someone you can know, good and bad, and who doesn’t make you long to jump on a sailing ship and never return.”

I returned his thoughtful look with one of my own longing. “Yes,” I said gruffly. “That’s exactly who I want.”

But he didn’t see my look. “Go ahead and read the next one, Eirn!” he begged, and my smile turned sad as I did what he asked. This one were about a pair of silly lovers, one of whom gets turned into a bird. It were a long story, and we had to mark it in the middle for the next night, because Hammer began to nod off in the middle. We made it to bed and stripped to our small clothes and crawled in. The softness of the mattress and the cleanness of the sheets were still blissful to both of us, and now that Hammer no longer threw off heat like a smith’s forge, I felt free to roll into his body as we had when we were camping in our bedrolls.

He wrapped his strong arm around my chest and rubbed his cheek against my back and then made a sound of complaint.



“You left your shirt on.”

I grunted and stripped it off, throwing it to the end of the bed, and he sighed in contentment as his cheek rubbed skin this time.

“Eirn?”

“Yeah?” Hammer would have used the old word, “Aye,” but that weren’t my word.

“You miss fucking?”

“Yeah.”

He yawned and pressed hard into my back, but he were too tired and we both knew it.

“Tomorrow,” he promised.

“When you’re better,” I told him, and I took the hand on my chest and kissed it before falling asleep myself.

It were good we’d decided to settle in for the winter, because by the time Hammer were up and about and ready to venture outside, winter arrived. Unlike the winter in real time, in the forest that near to killed us, this one didn’t announce itself in built up frost and the occasional snow flurry—no. One day, Hammer and I tramped about and found the border of magic around the cottage (if we were careful, and sensitive to the changes in the air, it could be done without the horrible sense of dislocation I’d endured before) and the ground were dry grass, brown leaves and frosted branches.

The next day, it were three feet of snow.

Hammer and I cleared the snow out from around the cottage—mostly for something physical to do—and then spent the day inside. The cabinet gave us cocoa, cream, and honey (which neither of us had asked for) and I made us mugs of chocolate, which we drank standing up in the kitchen. Hammer said he could live on that drink if we had to, and when I looked at him to reply, I saw that he still had cream on his lip.

I grinned then, and caught his hands to hold him still, and then playfully went to lick the cream off his mouth. He watched me move closer with his lips slightly parted and wide sober eyes, and as my tongue touched his skin, the moment went from playful to serious just that quick.

Our lips met, slow and then savage, and we barely remembered to set our mugs down before we kissed our way to the bedroom, shedding our clothes as we went.

We were naked, and I were lying on the bed, stretched out below Hammer as he pinned my hands above my head to keep me still so he could own my mouth completely, before it occurred to either of us that we were fucking in the daylight, on a bed.

It were our first time on a bed.

We both looked at each other and gasped, and he let go of my hands and pushed himself up on his elbows and lowered himself at the hips, and he were suddenly there, on top of me, looking at me quietly while our aching cocks throbbed against each other in time.

There were something in his eyes then, something like the eagerness he'd had when I read him fairy tales, or that

look I'd seen, way back in summer, when he'd thrust his hand down my pants and I'd said, "Not her, idiot! You!"

It were happiness, not just to be in bed, but to be skin-to-skin with me.

I looked at him with nothing less than my soul in my eyes, and he took it. His next kiss weren't hard or savage. It were firm and tender, and his hands framed my face and soothed down my neck and my shoulders.

He would have moved his mouth then, to follow those hard, scarred hands, but I didn't want the kiss to end, and when I protested, he came back to kiss me some more. And some more. And some more.

Our bodies were quaking with urgency, with the need to fuck and come, but our mouths, our souls, didn't seem to want to break off contact for that other thing. Our hips ground savagely, and harder, and I kept flexing my arse, craving him inside of me, craving that sweet burn, the shudder of my body as he nailed that thing inside me that made me see stars, craving the fullness of him, crammed into me, making my chest swell with the force of his cock buried inside me to the root of him.

He grunted and shoved two fingers into my mouth, and I sucked on them, *hard*. He pulled them out, covered in spit, and slipped them under me. The first one burned, the second one scorched, and then he spread them, and I gasped.

As I breathed in air, he filled me with his cock, and that were as good. The pleasure... it were excruciating, and it were necessary, and I screamed with it, and shoved myself

further on him, before he took over and fucked me hard into the softness at my back.

And our eyes never left the other, and our lips met skin desperately, yearning for contact, begging for connection, howling for the closeness that didn't come by fucking alone, but that we had no words for.

His end were coming; he'd been sick, his arm still gave him some pain, and he couldn't last long. He went up on his knees, slung my thighs up against his shoulders and supported my arse and my hips with his big, broad hands. "Yank on it," he growled, and I didn't even think about disobeying as I found my prick and began to pull.

My head tilted back at my rough strokes, and my eyes started to close, until he snarled, "Look at me, dammit!" And I snapped to and did.

He weren't treating me like I would break. He were fucking me like an equal—damn me, if he weren't—and it were hard, so hard to keep to his eyes as he drove us both to shivering, painful, swollen heights of wanting with every thrust into my arse.

In the end, he were the one who closed his eyes, who threw his head back and grunted and howled. In the end, there were something so tender in him, so vulnerable, that he had to hide it, and as my own cock spurted and spat come onto my belly, he collapsed forward, not minding the mess, and buried his face into my neck and sobbed breath into the hollow of my ear.

I wrapped my arms awkwardly around his shoulders and thought to soothe him, but he were trembling so hard that my embrace tightened, and I started to shake in return.

We just held there, clenched together, still joined, quivering with the power of the fucking, and of all the things that we didn't know to say.

Eventually he muttered, "Stay there," and rolled away, leaving my body open and weeping with his spend, and covered in my own. I heard sounds from the washroom. He came back with a cloth, and he cleaned me up with hands that shook, and set the cloth aside and climbed back into the bed with me, although it were still daylight. He pulled the fluffy white cover up around us while I looked at him with wide eyes, and then he lay back and patted his good shoulder. I put my head on it and wrapped my arms around his middle and clung, and he dropped kisses in my hair in the silence.

**T**hat night, we heard a sound at the door.

I were sitting, reading Hammer another fairy tale, (this one about a horrid little man who liked to kidnap children) and when Hammer looked at me shortly, I held up my hand. It didn't sound threatening; and I didn't like the thought of offering violence to a place that had brought us nothing but peace.

I went to the doorway, cautiously, it were true, and opened the door a wee bit to see what were there.

A bear stood there, seven feet tall, pawing softly at the door.

I gasped and slammed the door shut. Hammer stood from the front room and came into the kitchen, and as I

leaned against the door and gasped like a fish on a dock, he looked at me in shock.

“What is it?”

“It’s a bear!”

“A *what*?”

“A *bear*!”

“Well, what’s it doing out there?”

I blinked and thought a minute.

“Knocking.”

And now Hammer were the one gaping like a fish on a dock.

“*WHAT?*”

I shrugged, baffled, and not as afraid as I should have been. “Well, it were standing on its hindquarters and batting at the door to get our attention. What does that sound like to you?”

Hammer’s lake-blue eyes were as large as I’d ever seen.

“It sounds like knocking,” he said, setting back with a puzzled frown. “I’m thinking we let it knock!”

I grunted, unhappy. “I’m thinking...” I muttered to myself, reasoning. “The thing is,” I said, turning to Hammer, “why would it be knocking? If it were going to attack, it would have. But this cottage... it’s a good place. It’s seeming like a creature—even a furry one with teeth—that would be knocking at a door like this one, well, it would not be an enemy. You hear me on this, Hammer?”

Hammer let out a huff of air. “Aye,” he muttered, because it were the old word, and then, as though

remembering himself. "Yeah. Yeah yeah. But I'm not liking it, Eirn. When you and I are shredded bits o' bear dinner, you make sure...."

I grinned at him. He were not accustomed to uncertainty, nor to taking my lead. On impulse I leaned in and kissed his cheek roughly. "I'll be sure to write it in blood, that it were my thick idea. In the meantime, even if we're food for bears..."

"At least we'll be together," he finished cheekily, and I grinned again, mostly to hide my fear.

Then I opened the door.

The bear gave an affronted grunt and then shook himself, all over, the snow throwing off him in chunks of ice and pebbles big and hard enough to make Hammer and I duck and fend them off with our arms.

"Bloody animal!" Hammer swore. "Big lummoxy oaf! Get your snow off in the out of doors, dammit!"

The bear made a sound that I could only classify as apology and backed up. This time he shook the snow off on the porch instead of on us. When he'd gotten as much as he could (which were nowhere near all!) he made that little growl/moan in his throat again and looked at us questioningly.

"Yeah," I sighed. "Come on in. But stay in the kitchen until we get the worst of that off you, right?"

"Get it off with what?" Hammer wanted to know. He scowled at the creature standing in our kitchen with some resentment. (Yes, rather presumptuous, but the cottage felt like ours, and so did the kitchen. What of it?)

“Uhm...” I grimaced. “The rake. You get the rake, I’ll get the broom, and we’ll get him fit to...”

“To roam the house?” Hammer asked, still in disbelief, and I shrugged.

“Everywhere but the bedroom,” I said firmly, and he rolled his eyes, apparently mollified.

“Good. I’d hate to have to take that thing up the arse. When they said *hung like a bear*, they weren’t kidding, were they?”

I got a look at the bear’s tackle, hanging low from near its back end, and whistled lowly. “No thank you!” I muttered, and then winked at Hammer. “You’re quite enough for me, you bloody bugger. Here, let me go fetch the rake.”

The bear looked at Hammer sideways and growled.

“I’ll go get it,” Hammer said with ill temper. “It’s clear he likes you better.”

He did actually seem to like me better. Hammer and I cleaned him off with rake and broom, and the bear groaned in pleasure as we managed to scratch itches he probably didn’t know he had. I noticed that when I got a little rough he simply twitched away from me, but when Hammer were anything but gentle and genteel with his rake, the bear would growl like a menace. I told the damned thing to pipe down—if it weren’t for Hammer’s good graces, I would have left him outside to become the world’s fuzziest snow-covered hill, and then what would he do? He gave an affronted grunt and I scratched him between the eyes with the broom. That seemed to soothe him—he flopped on his bottom, and I told him he were probably clean enough to go sleep on the animal fur rug in front of the fire.



With a mighty yawn, he did just what I asked, and Hammer watched me skeptically as I swept the dirt and dirty snow out of the kitchen to the back porch.

“We’ll just leave him there, in the sitting room?” he asked, and I shrugged.

“Like I said,” I answered back, “he knocked. Aren’t there rules of hospitality we’ve got to follow?”

Hammer blinked at me with a sort of horrified blankness. We’d been bred with basic things: how to eat at a table without burying our face in like pigs at a trough, how to answer our masters when we were employed, how to help repair the orphanage, and how not to spit on the floor when there were women in the room.

Allowing someone into our homes presupposed that we would ever have them. The most Hammer and I had ever aspired to had been a flat over the smithy. Being on the run, that wish had become a bedroll by the embers of a dying fire, but because we shared the bedroll, it seemed enough.

But this—what we had been doing for two sennights—this were different. This were... a *home*. This home had a heart that seemed to beat for the things we wanted to give each other. This place were....

Well, it were as holy as any place of worship I’d ever been dragged to as a boy. (Our town had a local pantheon. I’d chosen the god of motion, but I’d been calling on the god of magic a lot lately. They seemed to work well together, at least for Hammer and I.)

And it were into this holy place that we’d just let an enormous beastie with long teeth and claws that could shred flesh from bones in one massive pass.

I sighed, looking at Hammer unhappily.

“He did everything we asked,” I told him, not sure if I were weak or strong. “And it’s wicked snowing outside, Hammer. I keep thinking, you know. The way this place works. I’m thinking that if he showed up at our door, he’s supposed to be here.”

I shrugged and kept sweeping, more pressing at my throat, but I weren’t planning on spilling it until Hammer took the broom from me and cupped my chin in his hard fingers.

“That’s not the whole of it,” he prompted, and I found I couldn’t look at him for this part.

“You were sick,” I said. “Burning up in my arms. Dying. I prayed to any god listening, Hammer.” I had to stop and wipe at my cheek, and swallow. Everything burned. “This cottage showed up, and it saved your life—”

“You saved my life.”

I shook my head. “I couldn’t have done anything without this place. And there you would have been, dead in the snow, and I would have died with you.” His thumb came up and passed over my cheekbone, and I felt weak and stupid in front of his practicality and stoicism. No one ever accused Hammer of being sentimental and foolish. How were it his touch on my skin made me feel like the very definition of a sentimental fool?

“We owe this place, then,” he said, seeming to read my mind for me, and I nodded in gratitude.

“Yes,” I whispered. “Very much, yes. We owe this place, and it gave sanctuary to this creature, and the least we can do is let him stay.”

Hammer put the broom in the closet that seemed to be made for such things. “Very well,” he said, putting his hand on the small of my back to take us back into the sitting room. “But you need to wish him his heart’s desire for breakfast. I have no idea what he wants to eat, and he already doesn’t like me.”

I grinned at him and impulsively kissed his cheek. He turned his head at the last moment and captured my mouth instead. The kiss turned sober, turned serious, turned real, and he pulled back. “That there’s an enchanted animal, Eirn. Be careful with him. If he were a man, I’d say he wants you already.”

I shrugged him off. “Everyone knows you’re the handsome one,” I said, believing it because I’d been watching girls and boys throw themselves at Hammer since he were old enough to hold his cock in his hand to aim it to target.

Hammer looked at me sharply, as though he were the one with something to say, but by then, we were in the living room, and the bear were watching us, and watching us carefully, listening to all that fell from our lips. Hammer glared at the creature instead of answering me, and we sat down together on the bench with the cushions, under the lamp, and I picked up the blue book again.

“Can we hear how it ends?” he asked, a wee bit of unselfconscious eagerness sneaking back into his voice, and I smiled.

“You want to rest your head in my lap?” Because I knew he were getting sleepy, and when he did that, I could rest the book on his shoulder, and it were comfortable for both of us.

“Aye,” he said, the old word coming naturally, since I never called him on it.

I read to him, liking the way his shoulders shook with the funny parts, or his hand gripped my thigh for the exciting ones. When we were done with that one, I moved to another one, and we forgot about sharing our cottage with the odd beastie, right up until he started to snore.

The snore interrupted my passage and startled Hammer, and I figured we’d best be on our way to bed anyway. I set the book down, and Hammer and I made our way around him, all sprawled out on that patched fur rug, the gold light of the fire playing on the handsome sable of his coat. The ends of the sable were touched with silver, and those flickered in the firelight too. Slumbering, with those small, bright, brown eyes closed, he looked like a peaceful creature, one who wouldn’t hurt a fish, much less a blacksmith and a printer who’d been lost in the woods with him.

Nevertheless, Hammer elbowed me sharply and looked behind us to the magic cupboard. I didn’t need to be told twice, and I wished especially hard for something to give the bear that he would crave and would make him not eat us, and then we ventured together into bed.

We closed the door against the bear, so the darkness covered us as we huddled under the quilt that night. Every finger against my flesh felt...sacred. Like the idea I’d had of home. Finding his lips and his skin in the dark were a

blessing, one I prayed for again with every kiss. There were no roughness, this night, no invasion, just each other's cock in our palms, and our cries of completion smothered in by the other's lips.

Still, it left us limp and sated, and he pulled the cloth from the dresser and wiped us clean before settling me into his arms, where I'd been wont to go since he'd healed enough to do this.

"Sometimes," he whispered in my ear, "sometimes, I like your spend on my skin, on my stomach or in my mouth. Sometimes, I want it to stay there, like proof that you and I were together."

Before we'd run, I would have thought this were proof that Hammer were a coarse boy, one whose only intelligence lay with what he could touch or taste. But I'd seen him light up with the promise of stories and heard the things he had no words to say in his voice.

"I'll wake up with you in the morning, Hammer," I told him, reassuring. "That's all the proof you need."

He smiled against my lips in the dark and kissed me goodnight then, in a way of comfort and not of sex at all.

## PART VI

### BEASTIE IN OUR BED

**T**he next morning, there were honeycomb in the cabinet, which we fed the bear on the porch when we went outside to sweep the snow off of it. We shoveled the walkway (not that anyone were coming) and shook out the tree branches we could reach so that they'd shed their burdens now, and not when they got full enough to crack over our heads.

By the time we were done with that, the roof were starting to get o'erfull, so I went up to sweep it off. Hammer wanted to go, but I refused.

"For one thing, you're squat and all muscle. If either of us is going to fall through, it will be you!"

"I'm not squat!" he complained, and I rolled my eyes.

"You're not, but you are all muscle, and I'm all bones, so that's one reason I should go."

"Name another. I'm not convinced."

I took his hand from around the broom and held it, feeling it tremble some. "That's the other," I said soberly. "We worked hard today, and you're not quite well. Now let me go!"

"You hate heights!" he complained, and he were right. It were no matter. I stood atop the porch railing and used the gutter at the edge of the cottage to pull myself up to the roof. When I were there, I reached down and Hammer passed up

my broom, and I got to work, being especially careful, since the roof were icy.

I looked down once in a while and saw Hammer, staring at me with a pale face. I'd smile and wave, and he'd wave back soberly, but he tracked my movements from edge to edge of the roof, making sure I would not fall.

Twice he had to trip over the bear, who were sprawled out on the porch to nap in the sun, but when the bear would have growled at him, Hammer swore at it, full of irritation. The first time I thought the thing were going to fell him and eat him; his roar and his glare were full of so much irritation, but then the bear heard me thumping away at the roof with the broom and calmed down. The second time, my foot slipped, and I fell on my rump on the roof, stopping my slide by digging my boots in. Hammer swore at me, and the bear actually looked up and saw what Hammer were doing and then stared at me in what seemed to be shock.

Hammer let loose with curses strung like overripe berries on a thread, each one splatting against my cringing shoulders, and the bear threw his head into the air and started to bark/howl/wail into the air.

I clamped my hands against my ears, and Hammer (who were closer) did the same, and the eaves shook with the force of that distressed rumble, shedding almost as much snow as I could sweep.

"Gods, Hammer, make him stop!" I begged, and Hammer shouted over the din, "He's worried about you, dammit! Get down from there, and let me do it tomorrow!"

"I'm *fine*!" I insisted, but as I tried to stand up, another howl sent the roof shingles shaking, and one of them slid

beneath my foot. That quickly, both feet went out again, and down I went, *shhwwuushing* off the roof like a child sledding down a hill.

I landed flat on my back in a thick patch of soft snow, staring up at an infinite blue sky and fighting for my next breath like I'd fought for footsteps with Hammer on my arm.

Hammer were crouched over me in an instant, his hand easy on my chest. "Give it a minute," he murmured anxiously. "Give it a minute, don't fight it... the wind'll come...."

A breath took me then, and every muscle in my body started to hurt.

"All right, Eirn, before you scare my shorts brown, do me a favor. Can you wiggle your toes?" I did, and he smiled a little, making me realize how truly frightened he'd been. "Now your fingers."

I held my hands up and said, "I'm not made of glass, Hammer, now help me up."

My shoulders hunched protectively and then twinged, and then Hammer slid a strong, shaking arm under them. I tried to keep the discomfort to myself until he got me upright. The bear were there, however, leaning against me, and I were in enough pain not to be nice about it.

"Get off me, you bloody great lummoxy beastie! Your caterwauling near to killed me! Now skitter, and let Hammer get me inside."

The creature gave a pitiful little moan and sat down in the snow as we passed.



“You know,” Hammer muttered, taking more of my weight as my thigh muscles went weak, “it would make a great addition to that godsawful rug.”

“Hush.” I grabbed the porch railing and tried to salvage a bit of my pride. “Binding you up after taking out one predator were bad enough. I’ve no wish to do the same for you again, no matter how lovely the cottage.”

Hammer’s sigh were eloquent. “Well, since you insist, let’s get you into the bath instead.”

The bath were hot on my abused muscles, and my back became liquid instead of iron by the time the water began to cool. Hammer left me for minutes to put our clothes into the basket that had appeared at the corner on our second day, and to take our boots to the porch. I heard him there, yelling at the bear, but something about the animal must have gotten to him because the next thing I heard were Hammer’s curses, as he brushed off the snow.

A few moments later, he huffed his way into the washroom with a thick towel and some sort of robe.

I looked suspiciously at the thick white garment. “What happened to my small clothes and trousers?” I asked, sort of horrified.

Hammer shook his head. “Don’t ask me. It were bulging out of the drawer. Someone wants you to have it!”

Our eyes met and narrowed, and I looked out to the front room, where the bear—relieved of his burden of snow—had taken up residence on the fur rug, his head resting in his paws like a Spaniel’s. He gave me a very *very* innocent look, for all that he were a bloody great mass of muscle and

claws, and I would have shaken my head, but the pain and stiffness held me back.

“No!” I snapped. “No! I’m not wearing that!” And to my surprise, Hammer sighed.

“It will be much easier than putting on your small clothes,” he murmured. “You know I’d rather have a cold box full of steaks and some jerky than that one hanging about, but he’s right. It’s warm. It’s soft. And when you go to bed, you just ease it off your shoulders, and I’ll keep you warm.”

I looked down at my cooling bathwater and flushed. “I’m not sure I’m up to...”

Hammer snorted. “Aye, so fucking’s out. If you were a girl, we’d still be up on the tally.”

I looked at him and wrinkled my nose. “I don’t want to talk about girls,” I said, knowing I were sulky and not caring. Hammer’s soft laugh let me know he were teasing me, and I shook my head and suppressed a wince, because bath or no bath, it all still hurt.

That night I simply lay on the chesterfield, and Hammer rubbed my back as the thick cloth robe slid off my shoulders. His hands were hard, but he knew muscles and their aches, had probably endured many when he first started smithing, not that I would have known. I mentioned this to him, and I heard the shrug in his voice, even if his hands still worked patient and tender on my shoulders.

“You learn. You learn what feels good, what don’t. I asked the smith, he’d rub my aches. I learned to tend ’em myself.”

I growled and he tried to chuckle, but I thought it sounded forced.

"It's not funny," I mumbled. "How did you bear it, Hammer? You're nobody's boy."

"I'm yours," he said mildly, and I moved my neck too fast and gasped at the twinge.

"You are by choice. Yours and mine. I don't know how you let yourself be..." I floundered for the word. I heard no violence in Hammer's talk, only coercion.

"Used," Hammer said without inflection. "You can say it, Eirn. I were used. It's common enough, but I knew it weren't forever. It were easy. If I were a girl, the smith would have had me more often. I think he fancied girls, just didn't have the good manners to woo them."

"Someone had you," I murmured into my arms. "Do you think I feel any less bitter for that man, making you do something you had no will to do, than you felt for Master Will, threatening rape and a beating?"

"That fucker *hit* you!" Hammer barked, his hands growing hard. "He *hurt* you. No one hits you. No one hurts you..."

"Hammer—"

"I could no more stand by and let that happen than I could watch that cat rip your throat out..."

"Hammer—" My stoic Hammer—he rarely grew so impassioned, but this had him in a lather—and his hands pounding out a storm.

“What I endured were...” I could actually hear him swallow, as he tried to rationalize this. “...unpleasant. It were unpleasant, but it were necessary—”

*“Unpleasant?”*

“There are worse things—”

*“Ouch! Hammer! That hurts!”* His hands came up off my shoulders and he were immediately contrite.

“I’m sorry, Eirn,” he said, looking miserable, and I fought the stiffness and the aches and sat up, the robe flapping around my bare skinny body and heedless of it.

“Don’t be sorry, dammit!” I muttered, taking his hands in mine. “Don’t be sorry you survived, don’t be sorry you got mad. For the sake of all the gods, don’t be sorry you killed that sack of shite.” I couldn’t look at him. “Just be sorry you didn’t tell me,” I muttered. “I slept next to you most our lives, Hammer. You think I wouldn’t have given comfort to you, during that time?”

“Didn’t want comfort,” Hammer growled. His blunt, broad fingers stroked mine. “Didn’t want pity. Wanted your attention lots of ways, Eirn; that weren’t one of them.”

I sighed and leaned my head forward and onto his hard, knotted stomach. He’d taken off his shirt in the warm room as he’d worked, and his skin gleamed in the fire.

“I wanted your attention in lots of ways, too, idiot. And watching you fuck the innkeeper’s daughter weren’t ever on my list. I won’t want you less if you hurt, you know.”

*Want* weren’t the word I needed. It were the only one I had.

"I won't want you less skittered of heights," he grumbled, and I managed to lift my head (slowly) and look him in the eye.

"Good. I'm not going up there again anytime soon." I yawned, and he followed, and it were time for bed.

"Can we read the book tomorrow?" he asked plaintively, and I smiled as he helped me up.

"Absolutely, but you must hold it on my lap, I think."

He bore my weight some more as he helped me hobble off to the other room. "That's easy enough. What do you want for breakfast in the morning?"

I thought of what Hammer would want the most, and said, "Fish and eggs, fried in butter."

Hammer grunted as we made our way around the bear, who watched us with waiting eyes. "That's not your favorite, that's mine. Let me do the wishing for once, right?"

"Oatmeal, walnuts, honey, and fat butter," I said a little dreamily. "But I like cooking for you, Hammer."

"It's not cooking when you open the cupboard and there it is," Hammer said practically. "But you've got a fair hand with the cooking when you need to."

"I planned to cook the fish," I told him with some candor, and he laughed a little. We were at the bed by now, and he sat me down and slid the robe over my shoulders. It were an overtly sensual thing, and I raised my hand a little against his touch. He slid his finger down my neck and over my shoulder again, both of us closing our eyes.

"None of that," he muttered.

“I like your touch,” I told him, and his expression as he gazed down on me were free from smile or smirk, from scowl or frown. It were just Hammer, pleased and happy.

“Did you think we’d end up in a place like this?” he asked from the clear glass blue of the winter sky.

“No,” I said, letting him swing my naked legs up on the bed. I grasped his hand and rolled to my side, facing outward, and he moved behind me to undress. “I thought we’d end up in a flat, above the smithy of whatever town would take us.”

“This is nicer,” he mumbled and I had to agree.

“But anything that’s ours is nice,” I said, believing it. “The cupboard’s only the heart of the home because we keep wishing for each other, Hammer. Are you going to shut the door?”

The bear had moved toward our room and were looking inside almost wistfully. Hammer startled out of bed, where he were about to settle in, and went out to the front room to blow out the lamps and stoke the fire to embers. The whole time, the bear looked at me as though I were better than dinner. I’d never felt more like strawberries, sugar, and cream in my life.

It were a relief when Hammer swore at the thing (“Get skittered!”) and swung the door shut in the bear’s irritated face.

He settled down behind me, his hand wrapped around my middle as he had been, and I almost groaned with how much of my bruised body’s misery were soothed with the touch of his skin on mine.

“When we leave here,” he mumbled, “we won’t settle for a flat over a smithy. We’ll make ourselves a place like this one. I’ll even plant you roses at the door.”

Touched more than I could even name, I kissed his hands and said, “I’ll cook.”

The next day were a soft day. I guess it were Hammer’s turn to wait on me, and he did. He propped up pillows in the sitting room and brought me my breakfast on a tray. The cupboard must have cooked this morning, because the oatmeal were perfect, and I settled into it, pampered in my thick robe, with Hammer doing his best to attend me.

“It will be a long winter with nothing to do,” I said after some quiet conversation. “How should we fill the hours?”

Hammer grunted. “How about a cottage?” he suggested, and I looked at him, surprised. He ran to the cupboard and came out with large sheets of paper and some quills, complete with a small bottle of oak gall ink. He brought the small table in from the kitchen and spread the paper out, and together, we started to make plans.

It wouldn’t be too big; we liked this one. It were cozy. We liked the living room and the bedroom, but we figured there should be a mudroom back behind the kitchen, because we’d need a place to wash up before we tramped our mud and our ash and our ink into our home.

“You’d still want to work the forge?” I asked, unsure.

Hammer had nodded, and his pen made blunt, crude strokes on the parchment. "I'd make us some iron fencing around our yard, and our garden," he murmured. "I'd make it sweet, with curls..." He paused and looked at me earnestly. "You *would* want a garden, right? That weren't just for worms?"

I nodded with some enthusiasm. I had liked my garden, and the fruits of it had saved our lives our first weeks on the road. "Aye," I told him, using the old word with a teasing smile. He smiled back, that eagerness and enthusiasm driving him to make this, the home of our dreams, as real on paper as it seemed to be in his heart.

We spent the day discussing it, and would spend many days that winter, talking about what we would want our home to look like, and how we would earn our way in the world doing things we treasured. To a farmer's daughter or an innkeeper's son, it may have seemed a simple thing to do. To a prince, it were a colossal waste of time. But to us, two boys who had nothing but each other, it were like stretching into the night sky for a star, and finding ourselves just close enough to stroke one with a trembling finger.

The bear stalked back and forth between the kitchen and the sitting room for a bit as we talked this day, until Hammer opened the door and gave him the option of going outside or staying in and leaving us to our business. He stalked outside with a huff, casting a baleful look at Hammer as he left, and a doleful look at myself. I were too busy thinking on how I'd want my kitchen laid out to do more than roll my eyes at him.



The next day I could move better, and Hammer and I spent the day dusting and polishing (there were pewter fixtures in the bright yellow kitchen, and in the bathroom) and airing out the bed and changing the linens. These were things the house probably would have done for us, but we didn't want to impose: we were grateful, and even boys like us knew that grateful guests gave some back. At any rate, I shook the soreness from my body with the movement, and did nothing to make me sore again, and that were a blessing too.

When we were done, we took turns washing off in the tub (no full bath—that much water more than twice a week seemed a luxury and a crime) and that night, I read to Hammer again. This time I leaned back into his arms so he could help me support the heavy book, and so he could nuzzle my ear, which came as a pleasant, toe-warming surprise. The bear had been out and about all day, but he came in for the evening in time for the story, and lay, muzzle in paws, on that godsawful rug.

This story were about a girl getting all dressed up for a dance and her step-sisters who wouldn't let her. We got to the part about the dance, and I grimaced.

"A dance? Really? All this fretting over a dance?"

I felt Hammer's shrug underneath my shoulders. "I think there's something graceful in a dance," he said thoughtfully. He shifted. "Here, put the book down and stand up."

I did as he asked and stood stiffly, and he stood up before me with one hand behind him and one in the fore, like a young gentleman, and bowed.

“So now I’m the lady?” I said, a little affronted.

“You start giving it to me up the arse, and you can lead,” he said mildly, and a wave of heat swept me.

“You’d let me do that?” I asked gruffly, sweating at the thought.

He looked at me, surprised, and then shrugged, but I suspected it weren’t no casual thing. “Someday,” he said softly. “When you’re sure.”

“When I’m sure what?” We were standing across from each other in this odd heartbeat of conversation, like two dancers, waiting for music.

“When you’re sure it’s me.” He didn’t wait for my reply, though, but took my hand in his and pulled me in. “Step forward, good. Now step back. Now I’m going to put my arm about your waist, follow my lead.”

And I did.

Hammer had spent time in the tavern, and he’d seen the country dances, and even the scandalous waltz. It were the waltz we danced now, with our bodies pressed together and Hammer’s measured count of “One-two-three, one-two-three” marking the time of our feet. It felt good to be in his arms, good to be moving to music, even the roughly hummed music from Hammer’s throat. The bear watched soberly—and, a mite resentfully to my way of thinking—from his place by the fire, but whatever or whoever the great beast were, it couldn’t distract me from the sweetness of Hammer and me, dancing in the heart of a magic home.

When my feet had the hang of it, I nuzzled his throat with my nose and lips, and caught Hammer when he almost stumbled.

“That’s not part of the dance,” he murmured. He did like his life orderly.

“Can we add it?” I asked, placing another kiss on the corner of his mouth. He raised his head and captured my mouth fully and plundered, while our feet stopped moving one-two-three, and our bodies started moving come-fuck-me.

“Aye,” he pulled back to whisper, and we’d reached the part of our evening when we were done with talking. I opened my mouth to him and his hands yanked at the hem of my loose shirt and at the strings of my trousers. The shirt were over my head in a moment, though it hurt to break the kiss, and my trousers were at my knees, and all while Hammer were still fully clothed. I made a sound then, of protest or summat, and before I could make another, Hammer had turned me around and planted my hands firmly on the back of the couch, bending me over so my arse were in the air.

“How sore are you still?” he asked gruffly, and I suppressed a twinge of muscle at my thigh and arm and answered, “Not sore enough to pass this up!”

From my position, bent over and vulnerable and dying for Hammer’s hands on my skin, I caught the eyes of the bear, who were staring at me with summat like hunger. I didn’t care. I turned my head from him and concentrated on Hammer’s rough palms, skimming my ribs and my waist and my thighs.

“I thought you said...” because I’d been thinking of taking him, but this pose were a familiar one these last months—although the furniture were new. He kissed the back of my neck, and the join of my shoulder, and started nipping his way down my spine.

“Not tonight,” he muttered. His touches were reverent on my skin, and I spent a moment thinking about how the nature of Hammer’s touch had seemed to change from those first rough pawings to now. Had my touches changed? I hoped so. The way I’d felt had deepened these past months, I hoped my touches had too.

He kissed his way, with that tender, deep press of lips and skin, down to the base of my spine, and I had to lean heavy on the chesterfield because my knees weren’t up for the job.

Then he got behind me and sank to his knees.

“Ham... gods... *ahhhhhh... gods!*” The air exploded from my lungs as he framed my arse with his blunt hands, parted my cheeks with his thumbs, and used his tongue on my hole until I screamed with the thought of it. I muffled the sound against the cloth of the chesterfield, and before I were done, he’d replaced his tongue with his fingers and then he stood and brought me flush with his frontside, and his fingers were replaced by his cock.

I were more than ready. He stretched his way into my backside, thick and hard inside my clenching body, and wrapped his arm around my chest, keeping me immobilized and close against him.

“More!” I begged.

“More?”

“All, Hammer. All!” His hips swung forward and there he were, flush against my arse, and I howled and gasped. The new angle gave him all sorts of access to me that he hadn’t had before, and one of his hands slid down to my cock, and the other hand stayed there, splayed against my throat, while I panted and begged and screamed.

It were over quickly, on my end. It weren’t long before I moaned, hard, and my cock spurt against Hammer’s stroking hand. He growled then and thrust harder and faster, while I whimpered, still aroused but no longer swollen and aching.

“Like this dance?” he panted behind me, and I gasped at a particularly savage thrust.

“My favorite sort of ball,” I panted back, and the sound he made seemed to crawl out of him, painfully and almost sad.

“*Gods*, Eirn...*gods*...” He came in a hot rush, quaking against me like an oak in a windstorm, as my spend cooled on my stomach, and his hand rested sticky against my thigh.

His breathing were harsh against my neck, and I cuddled his hand against my chest and shook with him.

“It’s better,” I whispered in wonder. “It’s better now than it were at the beginning.”

“Aye,” he muttered, and I could feel his breath on my skin. “And it were pretty good at the beginning.”

Hammer wandered around the cottage, blowing out lamps and damping the fire, and I settled our book and put it away. The bear watched him, even as I gathered our clothes for the basket in the bedroom. I didn't like that look in the creature's eyes and I told him so.

"Hammer and Eirn," I said. "There aren't no Eirn and great beastie without Hammer, so you'd better stop looking like you'll eat him if I'm not here to stop you. No Hammer, no Eirn, you hear?"

And by my gods, that thing's expression turned crafty.

I said nothing to Hammer as we slid in between the sheets together, the ropes beneath the mattress making homely, creaking sounds as we did. The bear were enchanted—there weren't no other answer—but he weren't planning to eat us as we slept, or he wouldn't be eating the fish from the cupboard. Besides, Hammer were already sleeping, his face nestled into the space between my head and my neck. I thought it would keep until morning.

An hour before dawn I awoke, my face buried in Hammer's neck. I knew him by his smell, and by the smattering of coarse hair in the center of his chest.

There were a nude male body behind me, and a firm, long-fingered hand sliding between my thighs and crooking my knee up so I were spread open. That hand came between my legs, cupped my testicles gently, and stroked my morning erection until I came more than slightly awake, and realized that I were facing Hammer, and these invading hands, these

sure fingers, these were not the hands of the man I'd thought to have in my bed.

"Hammer?" I murmured in confusion, and Hammer blinked bleary eyes at me, and then widened them.

*"Who the fuck are...."*

The hand moved to come around my hip, and the thing made a sound like the bear.

Hammer and I both froze in recognition, and my body were open, sloppy, dilated from Hammer's pleasurable use of it earlier. It were easy—as sex can be—so easy, for the man, the bear in the man's body, the stranger we knew, to slide his cock inside.

I gasped, and threw my head back, obviously not in pain.

"Hammer?" I questioned, lost. This... this person, behind me... we had not killed him. We had welcomed him into the heart of our magic home. We had let him see our sex, see our fucking, hear our intimate conversation.

Now he wanted inside our bed, and had taken our confidences for permission.

Hammer gripped my shoulders and let me burrow my face in his shoulder. "I'll kill him if you say the word," he said. "I'll throw him out, bear or no. But...."

"Bear" (for that were the only name we had for him) pulled his hips back to the point where his cockhead pulled at my stretched ring of muscle. I gasped, pleased, and then he snapped his hips forward, and I moaned the same way.

"But...." Gods of magic, gods of motion, I couldn't form a sentence I were so aroused.

“If you want it,” Hammer whispered, his voice seduction in itself, “if you want it, I’ll help give it to you. With me here, it will be us still. You won’t lose me, Eirn. Just have... have summat more.”

Those hips thrust again, and again, and all I could do were whimper screaming pleasure into Hammer’s shoulder. Hammer pulled back and met my mouth in a desperate, hungry kiss, and his hand, the one that had gripped my shoulder, came down between us, taking my cock in palm and squeezing.

I howled scorched desire into Hammer’s mouth.

He stroked, and the bear thrust, and I howled it again and again, gasping without words, incoherent and mindless with my body’s traitorous launch into the heavens. Hammer broke off the kiss and moved down my body under the covers. He stopped to nip at my chest, lave my nipples, and when I would have clutched at his hair to keep him there, he pulled away again. Quickly, with hard kisses, he moved down to my cock, taking it into his mouth and his fist, and sucking and stroking madly to keep up with the frenzy of fucking that the bear man were pounding me with from behind.

I were not sure which felt better, I were so overwhelmed. I think I might have sobbed, gibbered something, terrified by the fearful thing it were to have my arse and my cock and my senses invaded, because as my hand flailed on the sheets, I felt Hammer’s hand leave off my cock and come to lace fingers with mine.

It grounded me, I think, gave me a way to gather my pleasure, and focus, and come, sobbing and confused, and



dumping spend down Hammer's throat as fast as he could swallow. I clenched madly at the strange cock in my arse, and the man behind me shuddered and moaned like an animal, low in his throat, and then climaxed, spending inside me and clasping me back against his chest.

Hammer reappeared up near me, and I wriggled from that stranger's embrace and into Hammer's arms. He stroked my shoulders and murmured softly into my ears while the aftershocks rippled through the three of us. Hammer's stomach pressed into mine, and I could feel the stickiness of where his cock had spat, having never been touched at all.

There were no soft kisses or soft words from the man behind me. I couldn't bear to look at him—a stranger, or an acquaintance in an enchanted skin, it didn't matter. He'd come into our bed and taken me, and although in the end I'd given consent, I felt used.

He must have looked at me some way, made a movement, shared an expression with Hammer over my shoulder, because Hammer spoke.

"Well, what did you expect, coming into our bed like that? It were lucky he chose pleasure and not fear, or there'd be blood shed, much of it yours!"

The grunt at my back were not friendly, and I found I didn't have the strength—either of character or of body—to look the cock at my back in the eyes. I burrowed into Hammer some more and shivered, waiting to come down from the heights of a climax my body still couldn't believe.

Again, reluctantly, there were a soft touch of lips at the back of my neck, and something in me relaxed.

I managed a full breath, and another, and another, and the muscles at my back and my arse unclenched. The stranger fell out of me, limp and replete, and I were left, used and confused, seeking the shelter of Hammer's arms.

There were another growl, and another reluctant pet on my skin, and then light broke through the high window over the bed.

"Eirn, look!"

He shook my shoulders out of their hunch, and I felt the body on the other side of me shift off the bed. I rolled over just in time to see the change.

The man who had just fucked me were tall and broad—taller than Hammer, even taller than me—with a wide chest that narrowed to a slim, taut waist. The hair at his groin (impressive, but not as impressive as Hammer) were a deep brown, the color of chocolate, and the hair on his head were darker, like sable, and it were tipped with streaks of white.

His eyes were large and dark brown, and expressive. As he stood there and stretched and surveyed me, used and undone, he looked both arrogant and puzzled. He'd done something wrong, but he felt so good, he couldn't figure out what it were he'd bollixed up.

Even if he could have spoken in this form, we didn't have time for a breakfast conversation, because abruptly, as though shaking water off his skin, he shook the human off him, and were a bear again.

He turned his head, as though in embarrassment, and lumbered off into the kitchen, to sit and wait for one of us to let him out.

## PART VII

### AT THE WINTER HEARTH

Hammer let the beastie out and then came back to bed. I found I couldn't look at him, either. He wouldn't let that stand, though. Grasping my chin in both hands, he frowned into my eyes. "You... you wanted it, aye?"

I could only shiver. "It felt... it felt *wonderful*," I confessed, because once I'd relaxed and allowed it to happen, my body had been possessed not just with consent, but with glory.

"Then—"

"But he weren't you." The statement hung between us, and Hammer grunted, getting my attention again.

"That's not such a bad thing," he said decisively. "I'm nobbut a smith, Eirn. I kept you safe when we were snott-noses in a sandbox, but there's no reason to hitch your wagon to me forever."

My hurt must have hit him like a wave. "You don't want me?" The betrayal of this thought made my bowels shrivel like a salted snail.

"Now listen to me!" he snarled, gruff as he seemed to get when his heart were talking fierce. "I wanted you. I wanted you when I first took my fist to my prick. You want to know how I got through that other?" His time with the smith. "I got over it thinking of you, sweet under me, like you were that

night by the tree. I spent my youth wanting you, and not once knowing you'd want me back."

I gaped at him. "How could you not know that?" I asked numbly.

He shrugged. "You think real hard. I'm naught to think about."

I took his hands and held them to my chest and cursed the words we did not have. "If you wanted me so badly, why... why the girl, Hammer? Why let me see you with the girl?"

The memory... even now it made my cock stiffen. Even now it filled me with bile.

Hammer shrugged. "I didn't know which you'd want. You wanted a girl, I'd get her for you." The look on his face then... oh, gods. Simple longing, pure and undecorated. "You wanted me, instead. That were nice." More than nice. So much more than nice. "Now, you've got a chance, you see? Like your garden. Which one grows more, me, or your prince."

I frowned at him. "How do you know he's a prince?"

Hammer's shrug were as peasant a thing as he had about his person, even lying naked in the bed next to me. "He took what he wanted, and didna... didn't worry about the rest." More old words—peasant words. It were the first time it hit me that Hammer used less of them to try and impress me.

"You think I'm going to choose a man who will take me, regardless, over a man who threw himself in front of a

mountain cat to save my life?" I asked in amazement, and Hammer shrugged again.

"I'm thinking it's going to be a long winter," he said at last. "And I'm thinking we may get mighty bored, only the two of us in this bed. Maybe, it being three of us, you get your choice, and we get something to do until the ice breaks from the stream."

For a minute, I weren't sure whether to laugh or to throttle him, and I'm sure my face showed it too. Something dropped from his expression then, something raw and bare and terrified.

He were sure I'd choose the bear prince, whoever he were.

"Hammer..." I choked, unable to finish the sentence. I kissed his hands instead, kissed his cheek, his lean, vulnerable mouth. I resolved to try this thing—to let this man in our bed—so that Hammer would know, when I chose him, that I knew exactly the worth of the man I wanted in my arms.

"Hammer," I finished lamely, as he waited patiently for my thoughts to find their voice, "we have got to find better words for the things we have in our hearts."

"Words seem to be weak things," he murmured into my hair, and I could only hope our hearts would prove stronger.

**W**e slept late that day, but we made up for it by working to get the rest of the snow off the cottage roof in the early afternoon. Hammer did

the roof climbing this time, and I kept the porch swept, and there were no more mishaps. The bear watched Hammer with unfriendly eyes, but I didn't have much of a heart to look at him anyway.

In the afternoon, we went inside, and I made us the warm chocolate and cream (we'd started putting the things that the magic cupboard gave us into the other cupboards so we didn't have to work it so hard) and we sat down to plan our dream cottage again.

I watched Hammer, intent on the plans, talking of a garden and rose bushes, of a printing press that I would own and a forge that he would run, and I thought with an ache in my chest that he must have had some hope, then, that I would choose him. Something, at least. It were like the night we ran from our town, when he told me to leave him while shouldering a knapsack full of our things. He wouldn't make all these plans for the two of us if he knew bone deep there would only be the one.

Another layer, another level, of the breadth and depth of Hammer's heart came clear to me.

Without me, he would have no plans.

Oh, Hammer... what would it take? How could I make you know?

That evening, I read some more from the book. This one had a princess with a bloody-arsed-bugger for a brother, who kept trying to hide her birthright from her. Hammer looked at me slyly with that one. "It's good to know all the bits and pieces before going and making up your mind, isn't it?"

I grimaced back. “Hammer, she were taking advice from a potted plant. I’m thinking information were the least of her difficulties.”

He snickered then, and I had a moment to realize that I’d not had much opportunity to see Hammer laugh. He hadn’t often laughed when we were at the orphanage. In fact, most of his expression had consisted of a grave sort of glower, and another piece of Hammer fell into place.

He’d not felt free until we went on the run. He may have killed the printing master to protect me, but it seemed he’d turned the tumblers of his own jail cell as well.

We were sitting side by side on the chesterfield, and he were peering over my shoulder at the book. Although he could read, he weren’t smooth at it, and he claimed to like the sound of my voice. I liked the feel of his breath in my ear and his chin on my shoulder, as he stared at the words and engravings with the big-eyed joy of the child I could not remember him ever being. I turned my head so I could see him smile, and his grin fell at the corners.

We kissed then, soft like, and without any urgency at all. It were just a kiss.

It went on and on. It followed us as I set down the book and we stumbled to the bedroom, and it enveloped us when our clothes fell, fumbled to the floor. It punctuated the satiny feeling of our skin, as we tangled our limbs, and the line between Hammer and Eirn faded, became thin, became lost in the simple need for us to touch.

Our breath came faster, not from sex but from want. I wanted him, not his mouth on my cock, not the terrible pleasure of orgasm, but just... just *him*. We panted in the

darkness, huddled under the covers, our hands always moving, our mouths an endless mesh of tongue and lips and the hot taste of the other. I needed his arms around me so badly, I shivered with it.

We came—not because we tried—but because our hands, our bodies, were so twined that it weren't possible not to, and our spend coating each other's skin, simply changed the nature of the touch. Our mouths were never far from each other, and when they moved, it were to kiss a chin, a cheek, or the softness in the crook of Hammer's neck, because I could lose myself there forever.

I were lost in there, we were lost in each other, naked and twined and panting, sated and needing and yearning, when we fell asleep, so deep in each other's arms that I couldn't tell, didn't *want* to tell, which one of us were the other.

The bear probably watched all that, but neither of us cared.

I woke up again with the strange man at my back.

"No," I grumbled, when he ground his cock insistently against my backside. I were sated, and besides that, I were with Hammer. We had meant something to each other this night. Or, better said, we had *acknowledged* that we meant something, something big, something so huge that it could stop the breath in our chest at the same time it kept our blood running in our veins. I didn't want sex; not with a prince nor anyone else who cared to crawl in our bed.

There were a surprised grunt from behind me, and I snuggled deeper into Hammer's arms. "You can stay," I told him sleepily. "But tell that thing to stand down and go to



sleep. We'll play again later." My own desire gave a sleepy twitch, but like I said, I weren't in the mood.

There were another bear-like grunt, and then an arm came around my shoulders tentatively. I let it sit, and nestled closer to Hammer. I felt a clean, naked chest press up against my back, and a cleanly shaven cheek nuzzling my shoulder, and then I fell asleep.

When we woke in the morning, the bear were asleep on the floor by our bed. Hammer and I got up, bathed together, and ignored his baleful looks. Hammer went to go fix breakfast (he insisted it were his turn, which meant that he'd probably asked for something special from the cupboard) and I sighed and went to scratch the bear between the ears and have a talk.

"You have to understand," I said quietly, "it's always been him. You can play in our bed all you like, but Hammer will always be first."

I still didn't know the sly, crafty look that came into the bear's eyes then. I'd know it eventually for what it were in its entirety, but that night, I discovered what it meant for me and Hammer.

The bear had taken my words as a challenge.

The day were clear, the blue light glinting off the snow and showing the black boles of the maple trees in stark relief. We spent the bulk of the day testing our limits. Together with Hammer, my fear of leaving the cottage behind weren't so knife-edged. We ventured slowly, learned to find the moment when the falling feeling started, and using that as a guide (and not the full pain of vertigo that had flipped

me flat on my back before) we mapped out the boundaries of our little space of enchanted land.

It weren't huge—maybe twenty acres total, with the house as a center. Its shape were oblong—it seemed to make a special allowance to stretch over a cave in the forest on the west side of the border. It were a bear cave.

Hammer and I looked significantly at each other when we saw the mouth of the cave and then at the bear. The bear glared defiantly back.

Hammer went to go into the mouth of it, but, as he approached, he felt the magic grow stronger.

"The spell works at the cave mouth," I muttered, almost to myself, "but probably stops in the middle."

I looked at the bear. "Nice—you've got a home with a chesterfield and a rug in there?"

The bear gave a grunt and an indifferent shrug and ambled off in the direction of the house. I looked at Hammer, who quirked his lean mouth at me, and we watched the retreating snow-covered rug as it shook with every step through woods.

"What do you think?" he asked, sincerely wanting to know.

I looked at the dark fissure, dug into the side of a granite rise. "I think we shouldn't go into that cave," I replied thoughtfully, and he seemed to agree.

We went back then; it were getting dark, and the twilight purple of the woods seemed hushed and hallowed. We had no gloves so I'd tucked my hands in the folds of my sweater, and Hammer—who always seemed to run hot, even when we were children huddled under our one wool blanket

in the orphanage—reached into my sweater and took my chilled hands in his. He warmed me, and we tramped back to the cottage like that, hand in hand.

That night we planned some more and read some more, and Hammer said we were running out of stories, so I wished for another book. I knew he liked card games, so I wished for a deck of cards—he'd won many games at the tavern, and I thought maybe he could teach me. We retired early, not much in the mood for fucking, but tired from our tramp through the woods, and I were not surprised, this time, to feel a naked man sliding down my front in the dark of the morning, as I nestled back into Hammer's arms.

I groaned a little, but from pleasure, not resistance, and Hammer woke up enough to murmur in my ear. "You want him?"

"Mmmm..." The bear-prince were kissing a line down the front of my throat, laving each kiss with his tongue, and I arched backward into Hammer, my sleepy cock stretching and taking a look around.

It were greeted by the bear prince's hard thigh, and a satisfied grunt from the man who had found my nipples and were suckling hard, and with insistence.

"Want..." I muttered, not sure what the words were. Hammer started to nibble on my ear then, and I felt his cock, hard and insistent against my backside. "Want you inside, Hammer," I groaned, and the sound he made were happy, and not a little bit smug.

Hammer's fingers popped into my mouth and I wet them—and teased them with my tongue and teeth. Hammer groaned in turn, his cock growing harder. He ground up

against me, and my skin grew thickly wet with the dripping Hammer made before he spent. He slid his cock between my thighs and used that slickness to fuck the tender skin there. His cock rubbed my taint and my balls, and I gasped, because in a moment, it were all blood-swollen, tender, and throbbing with the touch, and the bear prince looked up sharply from my chest. Hammer's face were clearly visible over my shoulder, and I knew well the half-hooded eyes and relaxed joy that could be read there.

I groaned again and thrust my cock against the bear prince's stomach (he'd shifted by now) and there were a growl—possessiveness, challenge, it didn't matter. There were sharp nips on the tender skin of my ribcage, of my stomach, on the jutting bone of my hip, and then...

"Auuuugghhhh... *gods!*" His mouth on my cock were heavenly and wet, his lips were hard around my shaft, his tongue were clever around my crown, and my whole body started to tremble.

Hammer's fingers, wet from my mouth and from his dripping spend fumbled at my backside. I had been used, and used well, in past months—it took very little to stretch me, to take me past the burn and the pleasurable ache, and to thrust himself inside.

And it were that night all over again—a mouth at my cock and a cock in my arse—and I were half-blind and all crazy, my entire body tingling with desire. My hands flailed to the cover in front of me, and I remembered the way Hammer had come up to me the night before, soothed me with a kiss when I were done coming, and I yearned for it.

Then the bear prince turned his body—keeping his mouth busy with my tender flesh all the while—and I had a whole other worry.

There were his cock, long and thick and veiny, but not, thank the gods, as thick (*ahhh...*) or as long (*gods, Hammer, don't stop*) as the one moving teasingly in my arse. He pushed it against my face, and I grasped it in my fist and started stroking. There were a growl from the throat swallowing my own prick, and I figured fair is fair, and began to lick the crown. I tasted it curiously; it were earthy, like Hammer, but not salty, and the crown were missing the soft flap of foreskin that I could use to stroke the crown.

The growl turned into a whimper, and I took it into my mouth, bold and tight, the way Hammer liked it.

The pressure on my own cock increased to the point of pain, and the sound that I made around the prick in my mouth defied description, but it were a wanting, needing, *begging* sound, and Hammer, who had always given me what I needed deepened his thrusts until my head fell back to his shoulder and the cock in my mouth fell out, becoming the cock in my fist once more.

I didn't stop stroking, though, and the bear prince's thigh moved, and his foot planted squarely on the other side of Hammer's head, opening up his body and inviting me. It were awkward, especially with Hammer fucking me like a steam-driven piston, but I moved my other hand, the one not squeezing, stroking, tormenting, and fluttered my fingers through the spit-slick mess at the base of his prick and then behind the prince's balls.

I found his arsehole all on my own, and used two fingers to thrust roughly inside, and the throat around my cock rumbled in surprise. The suction became brutal and painful, and the prick in my hand spat white come on my face and my chest, coating my eyes and my hair. It probably spattered Hammer, even as he grasped my hips and thrust inside me again and again and again.

Hammer bit my shoulder, heedless of the spume on my skin, and his heat, coursing through my body, crude and sticky and wet, were enough to set me off.

I came, flooding spend into the bear prince's mouth, and he swallowed until he gagged on it, and then pulled back and let it coat his face.

Well then, we were even.

For many minutes there were only the sound of our breathing, roughly sanding the smooth darkness of the morning. There were a change in the light, a fractional brightening of the black sky in the window above the bed, and the bear prince sighed and rolled off the edge of the bed and onto his knees. He stood and looked lazily from a face glistening with spend and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He moved to me with purpose, arrogance and satisfaction written in every line of his powerful body, and bent toward me with intent. Just when his knees hit the ground and his face neared mine, the light changed again, and so did he.

There were no mistaking the unhappiness and sheer frustration in his human expression as his skin shook out with the thick rug of fur, and his features lengthened into the bear's.

He stared balefully for a moment, and if a creature could feel regret, then that is what he were feeling. The bear's sigh were almost sad as he shook his great head and turned, plodding out of the bedroom and into the kitchen, where he flopped on his stomach with his muzzle on his paws. He didn't show any urgency to get out, just a resigned sort of thoughtfulness as his long tongue licked fitfully to clean the short fur around his mouth and nose.

Once he were gone, Hammer's arms wrapped around me tighter, and I shuddered in his arms, shaken, once again, by the terrifying arousal and freefall that were climax between the two great men in my bed.

"Should we...?" I panted at last, and Hammer took a deep breath before answering.

"No," he gasped. "No. He don't want out in the snow. He just don't want to be in here to watch us." He pulled his free hand from my chest and wiped it on the sheet in front of him, then pulled the shaggy hair back from my face. I closed my eyes and leaned into his touch, a tender reprieve from the violent passions that had torn orgasm from my body.

I didn't even need to ask him what it were the bear didn't want to see.

Winter progressed slowly. Long nights, short days, a desperate scramble to find things to do that wouldn't make us crazy with the stillness of our bodies.

We were used to living in town, to working physically demanding jobs, even when snow covered the ground. With

enough people to tramp through it and shovel it out, it never stopped the world the way it did in our frozen little mesa of time and season.

Hammer and I took the bear outside for the days. We tossed a ball around, skirmished, wrestled, climbed trees like boys. In desperation, we wished up a hatchet and started cutting up dead trees for firewood. Before two fortnights were over, we had stacked it up against the back wall of the cottage—the side with the least amount of snow.

That brought us to the mill. Hammer knew iron works; I knew machinery. We spent a fortnight at the very least making sure that the small stream nearby could grind grain or mash grapes and apples, or power the pump that kept the water flowing. We primed and repaired the boiler that kept that water hot.

After the first fortnight of finding these things, I started wondering why they had all seemed to work just peachy before we'd come about, and I asked Hammer if he'd been wishing for things to break so we'd have something to do. He raised his eyebrows in question, while using a wrench on the plumbing to the boiler, to make sure it wouldn't leak.

"I'm not that smart, Eirn," he said, perplexed, and we were bored enough for my fear of making him angry or changing our balance to be swamped by my irritation at hearing this horseshit from him one more time.

"That's *bollix!*" I snapped, irritated. "*Bollix and shite!* You are as smart as I am, as smart as any man in our worm-speck town, and if you hadn't started planning our home together, I would be stark raving daft-mad right now! You throw that out if you think you don't have an answer you



should have, and the only reason I'm asking is because *it's an answer I don't know!*"

Hammer blinked slowly, a grin spreading like a glacier crossed his face. "Well, aye, Eirn. I wouldn't assume you were asking me a question to an answer you *did* know."

I couldn't help it. My lips twitched, and then I grinned back at him, and then we were chuckling heartily as we put that cottage to more rights than the place could possibly be without magic. I like to think that even if it didn't need it, the little dwelling could feel that we cared about it, with all of our tinkering. It had been good to us, and in the end, our goodbye were less than long.

It were these moments and a million like them that the bear watched, and every time we had one, every time the enormity of what we were to each other came closer to the surface, closer to words scratched painfully on the parchment Hammer used to plan our future, closer to the stories I read (and read and read) from the books (and books and books) that the cottage gave us, the bear would strive to take me mightily in the darkness of the night.

A young man could get mighty sore being soundly buggered every night, and I did.

One such night, (the night I told Hammer to stop calling himself stupid, actually) I told the bear to either snuggle up against me or piss-off. I were not in the mood for fucking.

The bear prince tried it anyway, slicking up his fingers and then invading my softened backside, and I twitched away from him hard enough to wake Hammer.

“I said no!” I snapped, and Hammer looked over my shoulder (where he were always nestled when we slept now) and scowled.

“We don’t need doing it every night,” he said crossly. “Some nights, it’s good to just touch.”

And it were true. Some nights, simply rubbing the other’s skin before we slept were better than fucking. Some nights, the fucking were better with the rubbing of the other’s skin.

The bear prince didn’t believe either of us, I guess, because he went back to doing what he were doing, and I sucked in a breath through my teeth and pushed back with my elbows.

“That hurts! Now leave me alone!”

There were an insistent, arrogant grunt, and he were going to try to bugger me after all, when Hammer whispered, “Take him in your mouth, Eirn, but be ready to gerroust of the bed.”

He were using the old words again—and his temper were high. I did what he said—turned my body and scooted down in the bed, taking that engorged, oddly cut cock into my mouth—but reluctantly. I weren’t in the mood for any of it, but I suspected Hammer had something in mind.

Sure enough, as the bear prince grunted appreciation and began to lose himself in the act of fucking my mouth, Hammer slid from my back softly, and the prince didn’t notice a thing.

Of course, when Hammer caught his hair in one hand, and breached him with a couple of spit slickened fingers on the other, he noticed right quick.

I were looking up at his expression when his eyes shot open and his hips shot forward, and it were good I had some warning because I scrambled out of the way and off the bed and Hammer held him to the bed in a wrestler's hold, his shoulders pushed down and Hammer's hand fumbling about the prince's arse.

"Do *you* want it tonight, pretty man?" Hammer demanded. "Are *you* in the mood for it? Because if you are just spread your legs and open to me, and if you're not, maybe you'll remember your manners!"

The bear bucked at Hammer, but not in panic—more like play. With a mighty heave of thick shoulders, the bear rolled, taking Hammer with him, and for a moment, Hammer were pinned, and the bear's grunt of triumph made Hammer's ill-temper curdle further.

"*I'm* not the one who tried to violate a friend!" Hammer snapped, and the bear looked surprised at that—perhaps he hadn't thought of it as violation—and Hammer took his puzzlement and used it to his advantage.

He hauled the bear down for a kiss, which surprised us all, I think, because after that one moment, when the bear prince's form took over, he hadn't tried to kiss me again, and it were the first time either of us had been as close to the man as the simple intimacy of a kiss. The bear responded with anger and passion and an aggressive desire, and Hammer rolled him over again, until the prince's legs were spread and wrapped around Hammer's waist and he were

frotting against Hammer's middle with a terrible urgency. Both their cocks were rampant, purple, and erect, and Hammer pulled back from the furious kiss, pulling the prince's lip between his teeth as he did so.

"You want to come, you bugger, then you'd better open your arse for me!" Hammer ground, and the prince whimpered and spread his legs wide, capitulating and begging for Hammer's invasion. Hammer slicked up his fingers with more spit and I ran to the cupboards for olive oil and reached over Hammer's shoulder to trickle some onto Hammer's hand.

Watching his fingers penetrate, stretch, widen, that tight, puckered hole were enough to make my cock grow harder again.

Hammer turned his head and caught my mouth in a kiss of our own, this one tainted with tenderness, and when he pulled back he murmured, "Grind up against my backside, if you want, Eirn. Or take yourself in hand. This lesson aren't for you to learn."

I did grind up against his backside for a few moments, while he kept stretching the prince's body, and the prince arched his back and groaned, thrashing against the sheets. When Hammer took his cock in hand and pushed up against the prince's arse, I moved to their side, for a better view. I confess it; I were mesmerized, aroused painfully, when I could have sworn I wouldn't get stiff again for days.

Seeing Hammer possess that arrogant prick would have turned on a grandam and mother of twelve, or a withered old man who'd had nobbut his wife his entire life.

It weren't soft nor tender. There weren't want nor yearning nor need nor gentleness nor any of the things I'd come to know with our fucking. In fact, it were so much the essence of *fucking*, that I came to despise the word. What Hammer and I did in bed, when our bodies were naked and alone, that were better than this, and far greater an act, for all it were the same press of flesh on flesh.

Hammer drove savagely into the prince's arsehole, and the prince's guttural cries simply drove him further, harder, taking pleasure, taking power, and giving nothing back.

For once, the prince were the one giving. He cried out, wailing like a bear, and moved his hand to his thickened prick. Hammer ripped it away and snarled, "You want to come, you bugger? Well you'd better hope Eirn takes mercy on you!"

I weren't inclined for mercy. I stood over the man, his beautiful face drawn back in a grimace, his brown eyes closed, and his frosted sable hair amassed on the pillow, and used that savage beauty as a spur as I stroked my own cock over his face. He opened his eyes as he begged us without words, and I stroked myself again, and he came off the bed to try to take me in his mouth. I didn't let him. Hammer pulled back and he arched, his mouth open, his tongue extended helplessly, and I kept my cock just out of reach and stroked it hard and leaking.

He whimpered and begged me some more with his eyes and I took pity on him then. It were rough, because Hammer were being rough, using the prince's body without mercy, but he managed to close his lips over me and pull, and I groaned. Since one hand were free, I showed more kindness

and wrapped my hand around his cock as he sucked on mine. He groaned in bliss around me, and my hips started to jerk as my come swept over me suddenly and without warning.

“Don’t give it to him,” Hammer growled. “You’re stroking his prick—don’t give him your come.”

I did what Hammer said, because he were Hammer, and this had all started because Hammer wouldn’t let me be used beyond my limits.

I pulled out of the prince’s mouth and beat my fist on my cock until it made little sucking, slurping sounds all on its own. Hammer’s hand came and took over on the prince’s body, and my eyes closed, and my hips jerked, and I came, splattering over the prince’s face, his chest, and his open, begging mouth.

Hammer slammed into him particularly savagely and gave him a tough, tight pull on his prick, and the bear prince threw his head back, his face dripping white and clear with my spend, and howled, spattering his own climax over his stomach and chest.

Hammer kept one hand on the prince’s thigh and then reached out his slick, sticky hand to me, and I moved into him, leaning over the prince’s splayed legs and allowing myself to be pulled roughly into Hammer’s triumphant, primal kiss.

The prince kept gasping, his come prolonged by Hammer’s skilful fucking of the little bundle of nerves in his body, and Hammer had to pull back as that clenching arse finally pulled Hammer over the edge of the cliff and into his own climax. He roared and howled, his barrel chest and

blunt face beautiful in his triumph, and I reached out and clasped his shoulder and let him feel my hands as he poured himself into the antagonist in our bed.

He would have fallen forward then, into the prince's waiting arms, but I caught him, and he pulled backward instead, his cock flopping limply and his spend dribbling from the prince's arsehole. I pulled at him some more, pulling him from that magnificent, haughty body, splayed and dripping come, and took him into the washroom.

I ran some water into the tub and stood Hammer on the rug then, leaving the door open for the prince to see as he may. I fell to my knees before him, and planted a kiss then, on his flaccid cock, wanting to take it in my mouth, but knowing Hammer wouldn't allow it. He moved his hand restively, and I pulled back and stroked his upper thigh, and smiled sweetly into his blue eyes. My Hammer. The defender of my honor. There weren't much I wouldn't do for a man who would stand between me and a man who would take my dignity and my right to choose.

Taking a cloth and some of the fragrant, cedar scented soap the cupboard gave us (after I wished fervently for something that didn't smell of flowers) I ran the cloth up and down Hammer's thighs, around his genitals, over his come-sticky cock. I bathed his stomach, over his chest, and, standing a little, I moved around to his backside, and washed that too.

He shuddered then, and twitched, especially as I parted the cleft of his buttocks and ran the cloth over his hole. I didn't linger—he weren't comfortable—but I did rinse out the cloth and bathe his back in the clean water, spending time

on his sweat-salty shoulders, his neck, and the sopping tangle of his hair at his nape. I ran the water over his hair, taking away the sweat on his scalp until it were clean and flat and combed back from his square, blunt, handsome face.

And then, standing before him and no longer kneeling, I took his face between my hands and pulled him to me for a sweet, tender kiss. He kissed back, no anger, no savagery, naught between us but what had always been between us. Naught between us but Hammer and Eirn. Him the steel, and me the breeze that caressed it as it rang home.

We heard a shifting then, and I looked behind my shoulder in time to see morning's light peek through the curtained window, and the prince, lying bereft and deserted, sated and used and covered in spend, gave a groan and became a bear again.

He banished himself to the kitchen, licking fitfully at his fur like a cat.

That day it snowed and snowed hard. There were no playing in the front yard, no sweeping the snow from the roof, and the mill room were too far away from the fire to work any repairs.

The bear ventured out after we fed it fish from the cupboard (it disdained the honey with a wounded look) and I wondered if it were sulking in its cave. There weren't much I could do about it, though, and the bear's tender feelings would have to repair themselves. I'd said "no" and I'd said it clear. I had the feeling that what Hammer had done to the



bear prince in punishment were more mercy than Hammer thought he deserved.

After a brief bout of house cleaning, we spent the day reading. I made Hammer read for once, and I refused to listen to protests about fumbling the words.

“You don’t practice,” I said shortly. “And I’ve had more than enough practice for the moment. Here, you adore this one. I don’t doubt you have it memorized in full.”

Hammer did, and I took his feet in my lap and rubbed them firmly, simply because I knew he would like the feeling. Together we lost ourselves in the story of a princess making shirts for her brothers, in spite of an insistent prince who wanted her before her task were done.

“He kissed her hands and her arms, making love to her shoulders and neck, until she blushed and pulled away and gave her consent.”

Hammer stopped, and repeated the words as though he’d never heard them before.

“What?” I asked, wondering at the workings of his peasant’s mind.

“The words, I like them.”

“Which ones?”

He looked me square in the eye. “‘Making love,’” he said with meaning, and I flushed, and then I found my eyes grow hot and my throat grow thick.

“It’s a sight better than ‘fucking’ isn’t it?”

He nodded. “Fucking’s what *he* does in our bed. It’s nice. Sometimes it’s even fun. But it’s not...” he trailed off

and blushed, apparently embarrassed by the words now that he'd found them and claimed them for ours.

"It's not making love," I said for him, and he smiled shyly at me and nodded.

"No. No it's not."

I smiled back at him, as shy as he were, and there were several heartbeats between us before he started to read again.

## PART VIII

### FISH IN THE STREAM

So much of the winter were spent with storms, that we lost track of the days drifting in the cottage, floating about in a white ocean of frozen time.

Eventually, though, the smell of the forest around us became less knife-edged and more wet. The snow became slushy, and the sun shined more brightly for longer. The stars we could see from our small patch of window shifted, became closer and fatter, like drops of water on a kitten's black fur.

The bear prince's time in our bed became shorter. The hours between midnight and dawn swept by in a glittering, heaving whirl of cock and fuck and come like a dancing princess's ball gown, whirling to the music of our grunts and pants and howls.

On the days when I wouldn't, when I preferred to sleep, to snuggle, to simply touch, he would take a spare blanket and sleep next to the bed, on the floor.

There were no convincing him to do otherwise, and it were a shame, I think now. He should have had that to remember, but he were too sure, I think, that one night, I would choose him over Hammer. Every night I spent in Hammer's arms, the idea that I would leave Hammer became more and more of a fairy tale.

One morning, we walked outside and our boots sank to muddied earth through the snow. The next, the snow were only there in patches around the small lawn of the cottage. The next, the rose bushes (which I had pruned to naught but twigs when the air first smelled wet) had tender green leaves unfurling. The next, they had soft, tiny buds.

Within a sennight, the lawn were new shoots of grass, and there were brilliant, brave first roses, blue/white on one side and red on the other, rising over the archway of the cottage to meet in the middle. They were so beautiful they made my breath catch, and Hammer chuckled softly in my ear as he came up behind me.

“So you’ll have roses by your home?” he asked smugly, and I smiled sideways at him.

“Haven’t you written that down in those plans of yours?”

“Aye,” he said, his voice as complacent as it could be. “Your home will have roses, Eirn, of that I have no doubt.”

He said it that way to give me a choice—I knew that, just like I knew he’d been trying oh so valiantly to let me choose the bear prince if ever once that were my inclination. I’d tried—in a thousand small ways I’d tried—to tell him it weren’t necessary, to let him know he were my only choice, but he wouldn’t believe. I figured he would believe when we packed our bags together and walked out of the cottage, saying goodbye to the only true home we’d ever known, and setting out to find one more suited for children of no one, using our skills to survive.

So now I only sighed, and wondered what sort of declaration it would take to get him to believe. The bear came outside with us—we were cutting up some more dead

wood, so the fireplace would be ready for the next desperate travelers hosted by the cottage, and I were wondering if I should plant something along the soft earth in the back as well. The cupboard had given me morning glory seeds, and I had no idea who wished them up, but I were thinking they would look very nice on the east wall of the cottage, and that the cottage itself might welcome a break from the brightness of the sun against the kitchen.

“As long as my home always has Hammer,” I murmured, thinking that I would plant morning glories here and in the phantom home, the one that housed our future. Hammer didn’t hear me—he were too busy running to get the axe for the wood—but the bear did. He grimaced at me and yawned, baring his teeth. He were not pleased—he were never pleased—when Hammer and I had those quiet moments that I were coming to think all grown people did when they built a life together.

“We’re not talking about your cock anymore,” I told him sharply. “There’s no reason to get defensive.”

The week before, when there were still snow on the ground, the bear had come out of the house and I’d been assaulted by a sudden question.

“Hey, Hammer!”

“Aye?” He didn’t seem to mind using the old words around me anymore. Now that we’d spoken where no one could hear, he knew I had only respect for the words in his heart.

“You know how the prince’s cock has the foreskin cut off?”

The bear gave a surprised snort to hear us talk like this—but it weren't like Hammer and I wouldn't have noticed. Both of us had to be fully erect for the crowns of our cocks to blossom out of their meaty hoods.

“Aye?”

“How come he still has a sheathe as a bear? Wouldn't it seem like his bear's cock would be hanging half out without that part of the sheathe—it wouldn't be brown, would it? It would be all pink and wet?”

Hammer and the bear both blinked at me, and the bear wrinkled his brow in what seemed to be embarrassment. Hammer gave the thing an unexpected pat on his waist-high shoulder as he shook his head.

“How come?” he asked, to make sure he heard right.

“Yeah. How come?”

Hammer and the bear exchanged that look again.

“Because magic is kind, Eirn, and I suggest we leave it at that.”

That weren't the only time Hammer and the bear seemed to be on the same side of things. That furious night when Hammer had fucked the bear prince into submission had left a mark in the bear's heart that surprised us all.

About two weeks after the first incident, we closed the door between the bedroom and the front room, and simply lay in bed and touched. We had just drifted off to sleep when the brown bear had begun to wail. A bear's wail, as opposed to its moan or its howl, is a terrible, stomach-clenching thing, and after laughing and half threatening to spend the night with our pillows over our ears, we finally wandered

(naked) into the living room to see what his royal bear-ness wanted.

He were also naked, in human form, and bent over the back of the chesterfield, his arse glistening in the fire light from the olive oil he were spreading inside his stretched hole with his dripping fingers.

He'd scowled over his shoulder at Hammer and I, his face a study in hurt and defiance.

He wanted to be taken. He *needed* to be taken. But he didn't know where the want or the need sprang from, and so he bathed Hammer in the contempt a master shows a servant, and with one haughty glare, *demande*d that he be taken.

Hammer weren't nobody's servant.

The bear prince found his head jerked back hard by his hair, and Hammer—looking at me slyly, as though knowing the sight of the two of them made my cock stiff and purple—were muttering in his ear.

“Naw, pretty man. You want it? You want me to give it to you?” The bear prince moaned, probably feeling Hammer's prick rubbing against his oily backside. Hammer nodded and grunted in his ear. “Yeah, you want it. You want it, you ask nicely.”

The prince whimpered and rested his cheek on the couch, looking up at Hammer with limpid eyes. Something about the look told me this man weren't used to begging.

“Close,” Hammer hissed, then looked at me slyly. “You want your knob polished there, Eirn?”

I gaped at him, and my cock started dripping at the thought.

“Aye,” I muttered, my throat rusty, and Hammer said, “Get on your knees then, and you,” he gave the prince’s hair a yank, “on your hands and knees. You want to be fucked, you’d best make him come.”

My cock had been used well plenty in recent weeks, but the prince’s mouth felt sweet just the same. What were sweeter were watching Hammer, setting himself up behind the prince, and waiting, waiting...

The suction at my cock became insistent, rhythmic, and I looked down to see the prince looking slyly up at me, as though hoping I were enjoying myself. I found I’d knotted my hands in his hair and were rubbing his scalp in encouragement, and that were when Hammer struck.

He gave no warning before plunging balls deep into the prince’s arsehole, and the prince’s groan around my cock were deep and pleasurable—from both our sides—but his groan had a fine edge of pain to it.

And then Hammer stopped, and the prince began to shake with need.

“You want me to move?” Hammer asked harshly, and the whine around my cock could only mean “Oh please *gods please yes!*”

“Good. You keep making him happy, I might bring you to come.”

The prince were too frantic, too needy, to be skilled. I got brushes of teeth, and no rhythm at all as Hammer started thrusting into his backside, but it didn’t matter. Watching



Hammer fucking him...it were enough to bring me off without touching myself, without being touched, without a thing near my cock but the sight of the two of them, Hammer in charge and the bear prince, begging for possession with a wiggling arse in the air.

I kept my fingers clenched in the thick sable hair, and every moan the prince made brought me closer. Hammer looked up from another vicious slam into the Prince's arse and said, "Don't come in his mouth, Eirn. He might like it too much."

The prince made a soft whimper, as though he both treasured my spend and *needed* the alternative, and my vision started to go black so I jerked backward just far enough to stroke myself. The familiar hot and cold flooded me, and my balls tightened to the point of pain. The prince raised a needing face to me, begging with his eyes, and I came all over it.

He opened his mouth to catch the odd spatter, and closed his eyes to savor the taste.

Hammer watched us, his eyes half closed, and when I reached out a hand to carelessly rub my spend into the prince's cheek, Hammer groaned and came hard. He pushed the prince's face into the rug beneath us so he could jerk his hips and empty his balls into the man's willing body.

The prince lay there for a moment and whimpered, and Hammer leaned forward and whispered loud enough for me to hear.

"Well then, let us see you bring yourself off!"

There were a fumbling then, and Hammer pulled out, dripping, and shoved the prince's hips over, flipping him to

his back on the many-furred rug. The prince lay there, wantonly, and grinned a tight, evil grin, before tightening his hand on his prick and stroking, hard, his thumb skating across the glistening, naked crown. His other hand moved up to nipples as pink as his lips and pinched, hard, and he groaned again, and writhed, and kept stroking.

Hammer looked at him in admiration—you couldn't help but admire the man's beautiful, proud body, and his skilled use of it. When the prince started to pant and to growl, to strive mightily for that climax, Hammer reached between his legs and cupped his balls gently with one hand, and used the other to play with the spend dribbling from his arse.

The prince's eyes flew open in surprise and arousal, and he came, the spend coating his chest and abdomen, and gleaming in the low embers of the fire.

Hammer wiped his hands on the prince's thighs and stood heavily to his feet. He held out his hand for me and I took it obediently. "We're going to clean up," he said, the ring of order to his voice. "You lay there in your own mess until morning."

The prince closed his eyes then, and his head eased backward. A faint smile relaxed his lips, and he looked pleased and sated and happy—especially at the last command, which left him splayed and vulnerable and used.

We went to the washroom and I bathed Hammer as I had before. Something about those moments called for it. Hammer, he were so humble, so contained in his own soul. To watch him command the likes of that one, well, it showed who the true prince were.

As we slid into the sheets that night, I made the beginnings of a question enough times to irritate Hammer into answering it without hearing it.

“You want to know why?” he muttered. “Why he’d beg to be taken like that?” He shuddered. “It’s not something I could stomach, I don’t think. Had enough of folks saying, ‘Do this, but not this. Bend over and take it but only when I say.’ But that one—his whole life, probably, he tells the world how it’s run. To have someone take over that job? It’s a pure relief for him, even if it’s just while fucking. But he hates it too. He’ll ask for it. He’ll do it—anything I ask for, so I need to be careful what I ask—and he’ll ask again, you mark me. But mark this too, he’ll be waiting for his turn.”

I swallowed, and leaned over to kiss Hammer sweetly. He returned the kiss, and we were quiet and kissing until we fell asleep.

Those moments flashed to me now as I announced my intentions (to myself and the bear) to stay with Hammer as long as I held breath. Hammer didn’t believe me, and the bear wanted me for himself. It didn’t bode well, I thought with unease. There just didn’t seem to be a thing I could do about it.

Because Hammer had been right: the bear *had* begged to be taken roughly. Nearly once a week he would do something irksome in his human form, and when Hammer snapped at him, he would go to his hands and knees and cower, demand and supplication written in every line of his face. Sometimes, Hammer would deny him that night, and

the next, he would simply beg, arse in the air, wailing with that bear's voice of his, and Hammer would take him—but usually not before he forced the prince to service me first.

The things the three of us had done together between midnight and dawn would make me blush in the daylight. When that happened, the bear would sniff the heat rolling off me and prick up his ears, and Hammer would catch my embarrassment at nothing and grin slowly, and with heat, and that would make me blush even harder.

But this day, this first real day of spring, I weren't thinking of what the three of us did when it were skin-to-flesh-to-mouth-to-cock-to-scream-to-beg-to-come. I were thinking of the way Hammer's one weakness were not believing he were my heart, and the bear's one overweening arrogance were thinking he could be.

Hammer weren't thinking about either of these things. His rough and ready body had been driven half mad by the long winter, and although the air were still a bit chill, the strong sun on our backs made it feel as balmy as summer.

"Aw, *Eirn!*" he crowed. "Look at that! The stream is running full, and there be fish!"

I could not help but smile in the face of unbridled glee. "Aye," I murmured, "fish. You ready to bait your hooks?"

He nodded eagerly, and once again it were brought to my mind how much child had been in Hammer that only I were allowed to see.

The cottage were as square as we could make it, and we'd already spoken softly about leaving in the next sennight. There were wildflowers in knots about the edges of the stream, gold and purple and blue and white, and the

idea of wading into that stream filled me with the same sort of joy it had when Hammer and I had managed to steal away to fish as children. Grinning, we stripped off our boots and socks and rolled up our trousers, and I set about digging up worms while Hammer fashioned us a couple of poles and some hooks from the metal stays of his knapsack.

Eventually we were settled, leaning back on our elbows in the grasses and watching our poles with lazy eyes. Hammer reached out and stroked the back of my hand, that shy, child-like smile touching his lips, and I smiled back. We would be on the run in a week, we figured, and we would be starting from scratch without a penny to our names, but our lives would start, and we would be together.

The bear wandered over and eyed us with a sour sort of snort and then started pushing at me with his muzzle. He pushed at my shoulder and then at my side, and then at my neck, whuffling with some urgency, until suddenly I were sitting up in exasperation.

"I think he wants me to go somewhere!" I said, and Hammer rolled his eyes.

"Well now, you don't need your experiments and tables to figure that out. Go with him, Eirn. I'll mind the fish."

That vague tremor I'd felt in my stomach congealed then, became slick and bilious and icy, and I almost said no. Then Hammer caught my hand and looked me square in the eye.

"Whatever you decide, you need to tell him," he said softly, and I nodded.

"We'll be back," I told him, without a doubt in my mind.

I stood up and the bear went down on one shoulder, then looked behind him with a patient sort of eye. I looked at Hammer, and he grinned and shrugged, but I could see the tightness in his grin. I couldn't think of a thing to say to him that I hadn't tried, and failed, to say before, and for the infinite time since that day at the oak tree, I wished for words.

Carefully, for all that I'd seen the bear prince's human body used hard, I stepped up on that shoulder and allowed the bear to carry me through the forest surrounding the enchanted little cottage. He headed straight for the cave.

I rode him, and a part of me enjoyed the ride very much. The wild flowers, the smells of the spring forest—even the trees, for those that weren't pine were clothing their branches in soft new leaves—it were as lovely as the world got. There were birds singing and rabbits rutting and deer munching grass and looking up in surprise as the bear passed their way, me sitting easily on his shaggy shoulders. But still, as we approached the rift in the granite rock face, and I felt the now-familiar tingle of the magic boundary start, I couldn't help looking to the pansy-colored sky and wondering where the big black cloud were hiding to block out the sun.

The mouth of the cave were bigger as we ventured in than it looked when standing out. The walls glittered with the fool's gold embedded in the granite, and the floor were packed hard from long travel, so that it seemed almost civilized.

I didn't feel so civilized as we neared the middle of the cave and I felt the magic pull at my stomach.

In a scramble, I were off the bear's back and panting, several strides back from where that invisible line were, the one that separated the cottage from the rest of the world.

"No!" I snapped, thinking hard. There were air flowing through the cave—there must have been a way out on the other side. Well, I weren't going to risk taking one step on the other side and coming back to find Hammer had grown old and died without me.

The bear took a few more steps, then shivered all over and shook out his fur, standing upright in his human body. He looked at me with hard, exasperated eyes, his gold-tipped sable hair hanging magnificently around his face, and said:

"Why?"

I were so surprised, I sat down.

"You can talk?"

"Outside the enchanted lands, yes. But I don't have long, you already know time travels in odd paths inside the circle. In a few breaths, I won't be able to come back to your time, and you're leaving with... with *him*. I want you to leave now with me instead."

I shook my head at the absurdity of the request. "No," I said shortly, and I turned to leave.

"But... but *why*?" His voice were low and measured; Hammer were right. If he weren't a prince, he were the next best thing. His assumption that I would go with him, in spite of all the things Hammer and I were to each other, were the blind sort of vision someone might have if they'd only been shown what he wanted to see in all his whole damned life.

“Are you mad? Daft? Have you not been paying attention? He’s Hammer. There aren’t a kingdom or a planet fashioned that would make me desert my Hammer.” I had turned my back on him, but I felt bad for a moment. He had tried, for all his assumptions. He had tried to make me care for him. He must care for me. It weren’t a good way to treat a suitor. How would I have felt if Hammer hadn’t wanted me, and he’d just turned his back?

I turned back, while he were still trying to pull words from the air.

“You can come with us,” I offered, feeling generous. “We could get to know you, since you can speak and all outside of the enchanted lands.”

This of all things seemed to offend him. “I am a *prince*! When I return to my home I shall sleep in clean linens every day, have people prepare my food! You could be my consort. You could spend your time doing research with the most learned men in the kingdom and never have to touch a printing press or cook fish in butter again!”

Hammer liked fish in butter. Now, after cooking it for him all winter, so did I.

“Hammer wouldn’t be happy in a palace with that much fanciness—” I began.

“*He* isn’t invited!”

“—and I would be very sorry never to touch a printing press again.” I sighed then, and threw him a scrap. “It’s too bad, then. We should have liked getting to know you.”



I turned to walk away, then, and I heard a roar of frustration behind me. It were the prince's roar, and not the bear's, and I turned to look at him.

"Why?" The prince were begging, just to ask the question. His word started to warble, and his body became... blurred in the darkness of the other side of the cave. "Why him? He's coarse and he's bloody arrogant, and I refuse to believe a man such as him would care for you the way I do."

I turned to him directly, and told him the one true thing I knew in the world.

"If you cannot see the fineness in my Hammer, you'd best look at him with better eyes."

I turned back to the mouth of the cave and started walking, then, thinking that the bear had made pretty good time, and I'd have to walk quickly to get back to Hammer before he worried. Behind me, I heard the patter of running footsteps, and then the rumbling grunt of the bear. I stepped to the side—the cave weren't *that* wide—and in a few steps the bear passed me up. He cast a baleful look behind him, but still, lowered himself to one shoulder so that I could climb up his back.

I were of a mind to refuse, and for a moment, we regarded each other with the gaze of a level at true plumb. The bear's look turned hard and crafty then, and I had a moment to think of Hammer, alone, his feet bare and his fishing poles in the water, and that made up my mind for me. I mounted him before he could change his mind, and he lumbered off at a surprising speed.

But it weren't a comfortable journey. He were frustrated, and I were worried at the things he might think to do to

Hammer or because of him. I were angry, and half-ashamed for no good reason I could think of, when we entered the clearing. Hammer were standing in the stream, putting fish on a line. When we appeared at the edge of the forest, the most tremendous smile broke on his face, a wreath of crinkles dimpling his cheeks.

He stood proud—as he were always proud when he provided for us—and held out his fish with such joy. I pulled my head up out of my own thoughtfulness and smiled back, feeling my eyes burn at everything he were to me, and my chest grow so tight my teeth clenched.

“It’s a fine catch, Hammer!” I called to him, dismounting from the bear with nary a thought. On an impulse, I waded out to the middle of the stream and kissed him, big, proud smile and all.

He floundered for a moment—he were carrying fish, and they’re not graceful—but after a moment he managed to hold the line with one hand and put the other hand on the back of my head and crush me to him. His mouth opened under mine and I drank him in.

The bear watched us from the bank, and before I lost myself in the kiss, I had a moment to wonder what he thought he had that were worth this.

He knew the answer, all right. He knew the answer, and he knew our weaknesses. How could I forget that a bear could rule the forest with his ruthlessness and nothing else?

That night, Hammer took me; our bodies were hard and happy and pounding and joyful. I'd chosen him, and nothing could take that away. Later, after midnight, when the bear assumed the prince's body, he did an odd thing.

I were sleeping, and I felt my legs spread, and my body flipped so that I rested my weight on my chest and my shoulders, and my arse were high in the air.

Then he framed my arse with his hands and began to lick. I groaned a little, because it were arousing—but slow, and squirmy-like, not sharp or hard or huge. So I lay there and moaned, and wished, but I never begged until the prince were done. It didn't escape me that in bringing me pleasure, he'd tried to erase every trace of Hammer from my flesh.

He left, and I were stuck, looking at Hammer's curious eyes, my body pleasantly needing, and my skin tingling subtly, but no release in sight. Hammer grinned a little, and I rolled to my back and looked to the floor where the prince sat, his arms wrapped around his knees, staring up at the two of us. Hammer stared back and began to rub my chest and tease my nipples, and then I turned my head, and he took my mouth.

Kissing were the one thing the bear hadn't brought himself to do with either of us. This kiss were hot and sweet, intimate, and it took the pleasantly needing feeling to that sharp edge that would make me come.

Hammer pulled back then and whispered, "Bring yourself off, Eirn. Let him see you don't need either of us. Choice is choice."

I did. First I took my hand and went to lick it, make it slick, but Hammer took care of that for me by licking my palm himself—slowly, and with enough teeth to make that edge of needing sing a little. Then I lowered it to my cock and began to stroke.

I remembered those furtive strokings under our covers, back in the child's bed we'd shared.

This had none of those in it. This were me, my legs spread, my hips arched, my cock weeping, and I squeezed shamelessly, and pulled up my other hand and pinched my nipples the same way. I went as slow as I could, as long as I could, and for a few strokes I met the bear's eyes with a hard stare. His eyes were half-lidded, and his mouth were half-open, and his cock were stiff in front of him as he palmed it, just as I palmed mine. I licked my lips then, and for a minute, he saw hope.

Then I turned my head to Hammer, and he kissed me, just as the pain of climax built in my balls, and I burst come all over my hand.

That should have been the end of it. It should have. The prince knew how I felt, and where my loyalties lay. He should not have tried again. He just shouldn't have.

But it were not all his fault.

I should have spoken then. The words, the fairy stories, the way we'd grown together in this little enchanted cottage—all of them, needed words. Men may think that

actions say everything, but sometimes, sometimes, while the body may know what it knows, the mind and even the most stalwart heart may need language to define it. I were a printer, and I longed to learn the sciences, and I'd spent my youth learning the power of words.

Knowing I should have spoken because Hammer had no words—this were a thing that should have been true, and it were not.

It were my fault too.

And Hammer? Hammer's only fault were thinking he needed to be more than he were to be worthy of me. It were not true—it were never true, will never be true, but the reason we need words to define our hearts is that our hearts are lonely, vulnerable, bare and beating things, and sometimes, they do not always know truth unless they hear it.

We prepared to leave that week. It were hard—although most of our packing could be done in an hour. The cottage, though, the cottage kept giving us things, and it near to broke our hearts. One night, I took the stuffed bear off the bed and, where we'd let it sit playfully, evidence that Hammer and Eirn lived there, even for s short time, and put it in our knapsacks. The next morning, it found its way to the head of the bed, where we figured we'd leave it until we left. Every night I put the books the cupboard gave us back into the cupboard. Every morning, they were all there in our knapsacks, weighing a thousand pounds. I tried to pack our

old clothes, two nights before we left. The next morning, they had disappeared, leaving fine and sturdy clothes in their place, and new small clothes, several fine-threaded sets of them, folded neatly at the bottom.

Hammer and I met eyes over the packs the morning the clothes appeared, and I said, “We can take one book, right Hammer?” And he smiled, that child’s smile, the one full of wonder, the one I’d never seen until we’d started waking up, tangled in each other’s arms, in a place that were ours and ours alone.

“Aye,” he said shortly, and as I went to have a few, gentle words with the cupboard (I figured it had listened to me intently since we arrived, it would probably listen some more as we left) I caught him, rubbing his rough, smith’s finger over the fine, soft edge of the blue leather binding of his favorite book.

That night, I woke up briefly to Hammer’s light touch on my cheek. I smiled a little in the bright moon from the window and then fell back asleep, and we must have worked harder than I’d thought (we were making sure the cottage were spruce for the next lost children it gave haven to in the woods) because when I woke up again, the moon had moved from our window to below the horizon, and Hammer’s side of the bed were stone cold.

The bear were gone also.

There were noises coming from the living room—sounds, from the bear prince’s throat that I knew very well. And not a

sound, not even a grunt, from the other person who should have been there.

My heart fluttered in my throat with iron wings, and I parted the door to the sitting room.

Hammer were there, and for a moment, my relief were such I had to fight to stay standing. Prince or no, the other one wore the form of the bear until midnight, and for a moment... oh gods... for a moment, I'd feared to find Hammer, bloody and... gods. I didn't even want to dwell on that moment, not ever again.

So Hammer's form were there, but his heart? His mind?

His body were bent over the chesterfield, his face toward me in the firelight. His eyes were as vacant and as featureless as the sky in a snowstorm.

*I endured it*, he said once of his time with the smith. Endured indeed. Whatever the bear prince had said (and I knew... ah, gods, I knew the one thing he could have said to bring this about) whatever transaction had gone between them to cause this, Hammer were not doing this by choice. He endured this violation in the hope of a better choice to come.

The prince's hand raised then, as he neared his climax, and came down with a resounding smack to Hammer's bare arse. I flinched, but I didn't have to look to know that Hammer did not. Flinching would have meant he were doing other than "enduring."

It weren't long. The prince heaved his hips forward, again, and again, and then he moaned and spent and sighed inside my Hammer. Hammer waited for a moment, his cock shriveled and thriftless between his legs, and then stood

stiffly and turned with heavy movements toward me—and toward, I were sure, the washroom.

He didn't seem particularly surprised to see me there, but then he didn't look me in the eyes, either. Hammer—who had never quailed to meet my gaze, no matter how much he thought he were wanting in my eyes.

My blood pulsed in my ears with a terrible tumult, and my hands shook as I caught his chin in my hand.

“You *never* need to hide from me!” I hissed. “And there will *always* be a Hammer and an Eirn!”

And then I were in the front room, my fist clenched, and I barely felt the thrum through my shoulder as it connected with the bear prince's jaw.



## PART IX

### TRAPS AND HUNTERS

**T**he prince didn't look surprised to find himself on his arse, rubbing the bruise on his jaw, but he did look smug.

He didn't look so smug when I followed it up with a kick about the ribs—a kick that didn't land, but only because he could move pretty damned fast. He scrambled to his feet, looking a bit alarmed now, but it weren't enough.

“*He's MINE!*” I howled. “*Mine!* And I'm *his!* You knew this when you slunk into our bed. I told you at the beginning, and I thought you understood, well, you understand now, don't you?”

He had the nerve to extend a placating hand to me, and I wished so violently for a weapon, I were not surprised to hear the clatter of a knife falling out of the cupboard.

I turned my head to the side and spat instead. “I told you ‘no’, dammit. I told you I'd follow him to the ends of the fucking earth, and I will, and you thought that if you took him, you'd take the way I felt. Well, you can't! Hammer and me—we're twined together, like rose bushes or wrought iron, and you can't untangle us, and if you did, you'd have to break us! Don't you see what you've done? You tried to *break Hammer!* He's mine! My whole life, the only thing I've ever wanted were him, and you tried to break him! And why? So you could have me? You don't care for me! I were kind to you, and you think that's... that's....”

It were so obvious. We'd been reading fairy stories this whole winter, and they used this word, and used it, until our ears were deaf to it. It were what made the prince find the maiden, and the reason the maiden held out for her prince. It were why the girl brought pastries to her grandam, and why the children held hands in the woods. It were the thing that brought down kingdoms and restored families, and caused the girl making shirts for her brothers to persevere, even though her life almost came to an end for it. It were the one thing, the one moment, the one heartbeat that ran through every story, but that we had never heard, not since we had been put in the same bed together and stood back to back in the playground, ready to defend the other to the death.

It were the one word that made our hearts beat, and the one thing that would make me rather draw blood from a prince than turn my back on a blacksmith.

"That's *love*!" I finished, my face hot and my eyes burning, and my throat so tight I could barely speak. "That's *love*, and not once have you felt it for me. Gratitude, and wanting, of that I have no doubt. But me and Hammer, we're bigger than that. We may never be more than tradesmen to you, but even if we never get our cabin, even if we never get our dreams, even if we have to settle for a cot in the back of a master's shop, we'll still be more than you are, because that is what we have!"

I tried to take a deep breath, but I couldn't. My chest were too wracked with the power of my heart, and my hands were shaking as they came up to press the salt from my eyes.

I wiped them and felt a hand on my shoulder, and turned to envelop Hammer in my trembling arms. He were wearing pants with no shirt, and his skin felt flushed and heated under my anger-clammy hands.

“I’m sorry, Hammer,” I said gruffly. “I should have given you the word forever ago. It’s been our word from the start.”

I looked behind me to the prince, and he were looking at us with stricken, remorseful eyes.

He still couldn’t speak—whatever geas had held him trapped in bear form while here during the day had not faded. But his mouth moved, the words as clear to my blurred vision as they would have been if he’d actually put a voice to them.

“I’m sorry.”

I shook my head, too angry to forgive. “Gerrou!” I swore, the old word holding so much more hatred than the proper one.

He had his hand on the doorknob, still naked and running like a man, when the first light of dawn slid through our window, and he loped off into the still-dark morning in the form of a bear.

I didn’t care. Hammer were quaking in my arms, and I had to find words now that would give him his bones back, when he thought he’d sold them for my heart.

“I love you,” I whispered. “That’s our word now, Hammer. It’s not just for princes and servant girls. It’s for us too.”

"I thought he would take you," Hammer muttered. "I know I said I could set you free, but a chance just to be near you. To see you, to work for you...."

I were crying now, like a child or a girl, and I couldn't mask it. "Never," I ground out. "You bow to no one, Hammer. You don't bow to the likes of him." I pulled myself together and framed his broad, bluff, dear, handsome face with my nimble, long-fingered hands. "I'll die before you have to *endure* a thing in order to be near me, beloved. You're mine. I couldn't love you if you weren't bigger than princes and braver than knights. You're perfect. You're my Hammer, forever and ever and ever..." I couldn't talk anymore, and he saved me, as he'd saved me from the first, and met my eyes with a bit of a smile.

"There will always be a Hammer and Eirn, right?"

I nodded helplessly. Gods of magic, gods of motion, thank you, for my Hammer, safe in my arms.

We stayed there for a few moments, shaking, touching, pulling ourselves together, and then Hammer stepped back and wiped his cheeks with the backs of his hand.

"We still leaving today?" he asked gruffly, and I said, "Aye."

"Good," he replied. "We're up. Let's start breakfast and say goodbye to the place so we can leave before the sun is high."

I nodded my head and went to get dressed. Neither of us mentioned that in order to leave, we would have to go through the bear's cave, and that the bear might be waiting for us there, broken hearted and as violent as I had been.

I washed and put the privy to rights, then closed the drawers with their fine clothes regretfully one last time. We made the bed together, and I patted it fondly—it had welcomed us, welcomed what we had done in it, whether it had been for love or for play, and it would be hard to go back to a bedroll on the forest floor again. I found, once again, that the toy bear we’d put in our knapsack had ended up as a decoration there, and I kissed it, half embarrassed, and propped it up on the pillow, as though we’d be coming home to it in a day.

I turned to Hammer, who watched me do this, and shrugged. “All that it’s given us,” I murmured. “It’s the only gift we’ve got to give back.” Hammer nodded, put a hand on my shoulder and kissed my cheek, understanding. Our childhood, left behind in this place—it seemed fitting.

We went into the kitchen as the sky turned pink, and I were surprised to see Hammer rolling up the big sheets of parchment we’d used to plan our home with, with more care than I’d seen him show anything but my flesh.

“It’s ours,” he said, his voice like tree bark. “They’re our dreams, the home of our heart. Even if it never comes to be, it won’t matter. We thought it for each other. We should keep it.”

I nodded and swallowed, tried out our new word. “I love you, Hammer.”

He blushed, and his head dropped a little, but he held my eyes with his own of lake-blue. “Love you, too, Eirn. Ready to make breakfast?”

The cupboard gave us a feast this morning—eggs and soft bread, bacon and ham and fruit and tomatoes. I cooked

the meat to make sandwiches and patted the cupboard in thanks.

“You’ve been wonderful,” I told it, feeling absurdly sad. “We’ve felt cared for here in a way we never had. We can’t thank you enough, little cottage. You’ve a heart in you bigger than your floors and ceiling, and sturdier than your foundations, and we’ll never forget you.”

There were a tiny clatter from the back of the shelves then, and I reached in curiously. There in my hand were the small seeing glass I’d brought from the orphanage and had needed to sell for food.

“Aw...” I sniffled. “That weren’t fair at all, little house. I hope you saved some kindness for the next children you find lost in the woods, and I hope they care for you like we did.”

Hammer and I finished packing up the food in silence, then. It had obviously been meant as a parting gift, and we would need it.

We had just finished getting our knapsacks together and were starting on the dishes when we heard the first scream.

It were a wild animal, a big one. It were a bear.

And he were in pain.

We looked at each other.

He’d betrayed us. He’d betrayed Hammer in the worst of ways—Hammer didn’t even have to tell me what he’d said to know that. He’d betrayed me by trying to trick Hammer, and my anger burned molten in my gut for it, that were a certainty.

But we'd heard that sound before. That were the scream of a creature trapped and in pain. It rang in our ears like the howl of the mountain cat Hammer had injured. The injury wouldn't kill him, but the results of it were just as deadly.

It screamed again and again, and we nodded at each other as though something had been decided. Hammer picked up the packs, and I went to take the carving knife out of the soapy water, when there were a tromping of big boots on our little porch, and the front door splintered open.

## PART X

### BLOOD ON THE THRESHOLD

He were a bloody great-sized man, he were, covered in black hair and a beard and wearing boots with rusty iron findings and animal skins. He seemed as surprised to see us as we were to see him.

“Two o’ ya?” he growled, as he surveyed the cottage, and the door slammed off the back of the wall. “This place looked near to deserted on the outside!” (Later this would have struck us as odd, for all our preparation to leave. I’m thinking the little cottage tried to dissuade the likes of this one from coming in with a bit of camouflage, and good on it for that!)

Hammer looked up from his pack, and I saw his hand inching inside. His hammer were there, and neither of us liked this stranger one bit. I kept my hands in the dishwater, and my fist wrapped around the handle of the carving knife the cupboard had given me when I were in my killing rage.

“Is it customary in your parts to just barge on in?” Hammer said with a scowl, and the man laughed. He took two giant strides into the kitchen and eyed us both with dismissal. Apparently, not even Hammer’s massy chest looked like a threat.

“Not much two little bits of you are going to do to stop me, now is there?” he boomed. “I’ve got a bear in a trap not far from here. I’m going to need some place to smoke and



dress the meat. Saw this little place, thought it were a damned sight more pleasant than any camp I could make, and I were right!"

A slow, evil smile bloomed across the man's face then. "And look atcha both! You're near to pretty as girls! It's been a long time since I had a girl."

"I ain't a girl!" Hammer snapped, "And he ain't yours. Don't you have a bear to kill?" He met my eyes and grimaced, and I knew that neither of us were going to let him kill that bear if we could help it, but first we had to get us out of our sweet little cottage.

The man's hand moved so fast to backhand Hammer that not even Hammer could lift a hand to defend himself. He went spinning to the bare wood boards of the kitchen floor, and I had to fight to keep my hands in the dishwater and my fist clenched.

In a quick stride, the hunter were directly behind me, his groin pressed into my backside, his meaty hands on my shoulder. He stood a head taller than I did—a giant of a man—and he smelled of rancid meat and his own filth.

"I'll save him for later," the man chuckled. "He's feisty; it'll be fun." A rough hand with dirty nails came to touch my cheek. "You, you're a sweet little piece. You'll be nice. More like a girl. Bet your arse will open for me like a quim. It's been a while."

"My arse is my own," I muttered sullenly, and he boomed with laughter. And while it rang off the walls, Hammer were standing up, I could see him from the corner of my eye. The man grasped my hips insistently, and I tried for a bit more time.

“Could you wait until I finish the dishes?” I asked shortly. “If I’m going to be bugged bloody, I’d prefer not to have to clean up when I’m done.”

The man grunted, surprised. “I’ll fuck ya now, ya little piss-ant! And when I’m done, you’ll help me skin that fucking bear! But first, we’ll let him wear himself out a bit—make him easier to kill.” And that horrible parody of a laugh. “And fucking. We’ll do some of that. Now come along; I might even grease ya like a pig!”

“Right,” I muttered, grabbing the knife hard. “Just let me dry my hands off.”

I turned around and thrust, just as Hammer swung down with his smith’s hammer and caved in the man’s skull. Whoever the fuck he were, he didn’t even have time to look surprised as his blood splattered over the kitchen and the light died from his eyes.

The first thing we did were drag his carcass outside, one of us on each arm, his boots thumping incongruously on the stairs of the porch as we hauled him down.

“Where’d this arse-ripper come from, that’s what I want to know!” Hammer grunted, but I’d thought of that.

“The cave. He must have come through the cave. That’s where the bear’s hollering from.” I thought quick, and Hammer were quiet to let me. “We should probably take him back that way; it’s west, it’s where we want to go.” We paused, and I stood and looked around. Burying the body were out of the question, but we weren’t going to let him just sit on the cottage green and rot.

“You take him deeper into the woods,” I said after a moment. “I’ll clean up the blood.”

Hammer nodded and didn't try to stop me. It were sacrilegious somehow to leave blood in that home. It weren't right, and we wouldn't do it.

But that didn't mean I didn't hurry, either. I apologized to the house as I scrubbed, and vowed to take the soiled linens outside and leave them, and told it that we were sorry to leave the place on such a note.

What I were also sorry about were that I didn't get a chance to take some rose clippings with me like I'd planned as we left, but I didn't tell the cottage that. There were other roses.

Hammer came back and took the soiled towels without a word, and by the time he came back with dirt on his hands, I had our packs, and we were all but ready to run out the door.

We paused for a moment to knock on the threshold softly.

"Bless you, little cabin," Hammer said softly, and we met eyes that were glossy and wet. It had taught us about home—there were no words for that.

The bear howled again, and we took off at a run toward the mouth of the cave. We were half-way there when I realized I'd forgotten more than rose-clippings.

"Aw, fuck," I muttered, that upset, and Hammer all but stopped.

"What?"

"The book, Hammer. The cottage gave us the book, and I left it on the fucking couch...oolf..."

There were a sudden, terrible weight in my pack, and before Hammer could even agonize over whether to turn around or not, I gave him a brilliant grin. “No worries. Hammer, I think that little cottage really loved us!”

Hammer grimaced and grabbed my hand, taking us closer to the bear’s agonized howls. “I hope so, Eirn, because I left our plans for the next one on the table.”

Those did *not* magically appear in his pack (although mine weighed a bloody ton) by the time we broke into the clearing of dry brush that surrounded the cave.

The bear were there, howling with pain, and his hind paw were clapped bloody in a terrible, iron-toothed trap. Not even Hammer could look at the thing without pity, and both of us winced in sympathy, garnering the bear’s attention.

The moment he saw us, he stopped caterwauling, and sank to his haunches, holding out his leg piteously. His look were as human as they came, and it were a frightening mix of shame, fear, pain, and humility. *Help me. I’m a bloody arse, but please, please help me.*

Hammer and I sighed in tandem, and Hammer pulled his smith’s hammer from his belt, and together we moved to see how to get the damned trap off. The bear watched us, shivering with pain, and Hammer drew close enough to fidget with the trap.

“That’s odd,” he muttered, his hands digging into the blood-saturated mess that were the bear’s fur. “It’s like the fur came off... like the rind off an orange....”

The bear gave an affronted howl, and Hammer swore for moments, the sun gleaming off the blue-black of his hair in

the breathless silence of the dusty clearing. “By every fucking god....”

There were a click, and the iron jaws sprang open. The bear collapsed, panting on his side, as though the rush of blood to the rest of his foot had done him in for pain.

“Eirn, c’mere and look at this,” Hammer muttered in the stillness.

I looked, and fought the blackness behind my eyes and the greenness in my stomach. “Oh holy gods,” I muttered, sinking to my haunches. “Hammer....”

I had to think, I had to reason—it were how I kept Hammer alive until we reached safety, it were how we’d managed to escape the town and a murder charge before. It were everything I believed in, and not even the magic involved could fracture my belief in it.

The bear’s skin and fur had separated, were bleeding—pouring blood, as a matter of fact—but beneath it were not jagged flesh and muscle as there should have been.

No. Hammer pulled apart the two sides of fur, and what were underneath were smooth, pale, human skin.

“Gods.” He wouldn’t survive the bleeding, that were certain; it wouldn’t stop. But the smooth human limb beneath.... I reached out and turned on that cold part of myself that had nursed Hammer’s festering wound and walked until I stumbled into our future.

Suddenly, all I could think of were our cottage, and that hideous rug of many animal pelts on the floor. Now, if this were a story, that would have some meaning, now wouldn’t it?

“Should we take him to the other end of the cave?” Hammer asked, and for a moment, I thought it were the best idea I’d ever heard. And then—

“No,” I said softly, and the bear looked at me with summat like relief. At least I hoped it were relief; I were staking his life on my ability to know a man I’d seen only as a cock in my bed.

“No?”

I looked at Hammer and tried to put it into words. “I think if we do that, that big strip of flesh on his leg will be lost when he becomes the man. I think....” And again, that horrible rug planted itself behind my eyes as though someone had dug the hole and watered the picture, “I think, that the only way he’s going to survive this, Hammer, is if we take the whole skin off.”

The bear raised his head and whuffed a little, then, gods thank ye, he nodded. It were the closest thing to a certainty we were likely to get.

Hammer swallowed, nodded, and put on that face—the one I’d seen when he were washing the blood off his hammer, the one I’d seen when he were being buggered. I recognized that face now, and I knew mine were set along the same lines.

The next few minutes were to be *endured*, as, perhaps, nothing else in our lives had been to this moment.

Hammer pulled out the knife at his belt, and I rummaged in the pack to find the great knife I’d used to cook. Hammer went first: he set the blade in the space made between bear skin and man skin, pointed it away from himself, and slit out.

The bear's roar made my ears ring and my vision go black, and Hammer, bless his stoic heart, ripped the hide to the chest and kept going up the side of the neck.

I saw what he were doing, and I steeled myself to help.

Finding a pocket of loose skin at the neck, I pulled out and slit the fold and wrinkle. It were hard—the hair were thick and the skin were tough and the bear were twitching for all it tried hard to sit still for us. But my hands were hard and nimble, and the knife eventually were positioned for me to rip the blade through the skin of the head, and up to the ears, and together, Hammer and I slit the skin of the bear's head in two. Hammer closed his eyes then, because the bear were still screaming and still twitching, but he weren't trying to get away or kill us, so we must have been on the right course.

Careful not to touch the tender, blood-softened skin under the bear hide, Hammer slit the skin around the neck, and together, heedless of the bear's screams of pain, we peeled the whole works off the prince's head.

I shuddered, hard, and almost turned to throw up, when I saw that we were right, and it were the prince's head. He looked at me through pain-hooded eyes, and through the mask of the blood that the bearskin left behind and mouthed, "Keep going," at me.

"Keep going," I repeated, nodding, and he nodded back.

Then he mouthed, "Through the cave."

"Do we take the skin?" I didn't think so, and his head flopped limply side-to-side, and I figured that the skin were a part of this enchanted land, like the cottage and the

millwheel and the stream with all the fish. It couldn't be a part of that godsawful rug if we took it out through the cave.

That were all he had in him, though. When he were done answering my question, his head slumped forward, and Hammer and I looked at each other grimly. Whatever the bond of flesh and magic holding this man together, we needed to sever it, and quickly.

I don't like to think about the next few moments, and Hammer and I never speak of them. We were skinning a bear alive. We were saving a friend's life. We were taking away the majesty and salvaging the battered human beneath.

When all were done, we had a pile of fur pieces at our feet, like some grim butcher's keep, and an unconscious, naked man, covered in blood.

"Water," Hammer said, his voice ripe with disgust. "We need water."

I thought about my visit to the cave, and what I knew of the land. "I think the stream that runs past the cottage runs by the cave!" I told him, anxious to have something, anything to do.

He closed his eyes thoughtfully, as though trying to remember. "Aye," he answered, and we met eyes.

"He took you last night," I said, putting words to the things we hadn't had time to speak of.

"Aye," he answered again, looking away. I couldn't bear him looking away, and Hammer started to speak heavily, as though this needed confessing before we could move forward. "He told me... he told me you would leave me,



eventually. That I... a man like me... I could not do for you like you deserved.”

“I told you...” I started bitterly, hurt inside that he should have ever thought that.

And now he looked me in the eyes. “Aye. There will always be a Hammer and an Eirn.” He believed it this time. I could see it, and we were free. “Now come on, one of us on either side, let’s get this bugger to the stream and wash this stench off our skin.”

The trip through the cave didn’t do much more than make our skin tingle as we passed through the line of where the lands were magic and where they weren’t. We kept going, though, and while a part of me grieved for our little cottage, the rest of me were too tired to grieve. We passed a small chamber—a chesterfield and a soft pile of rugs and what looked to be a feather mattress, and even a shelf for books—that were carved incongruously into a dent on the side of the cave, but we were too tired, and too urgent of the blood crusting on our skin to want to linger.

It were only midday, but it felt like midnight, and the glare of a sun in the late depth of summer near to blinded us as we came out on the other side. We didn’t think on it then, we knew we’d lived but a season, not much more, in the little cottage, but we had no idea what had happened outside of us. At the time, we had more pressing matters to attend.

We heard the stream almost as soon as we burst into the daylight on the outside of the cave. It weren’t deep, maybe to Hammer’s thighs, and we dropped our knapsacks at the banks, and together we dragged our prince out to the middle of it, and let the water sluice over him. I asked

Hammer to hold him in place, and I went to my pack, finding a few bars of the cedar soap the cottage had enjoyed to give us in the bottom. I brought one out, and a cloth, and went about washing the crusted blood from the prince, who revived a little in the stream, and took some water after it ran clean around him. We took him back to the bank and dressed him in one of my sets of fine linen small clothes, then stripped our own clothes off and plunged right back into the chilly, shaded running water, using the soap and the cloth and the heavenly coolness, and yes, we, too, drank some of the fresh running water when it were clear about our bodies.

Hammer looked at me with weary, violence-shocked eyes and said, “Maybe tomorrow this will be a whole other thing,” as he eyed me, naked in the sunshine, and I smiled shyly back.

“Maybe.”

But first we had to take the shelter we’d been offered, and see that our companion would live through the day.

We went back to the small room and set the prince up on the chesterfield, pulling one of the blankets from the bed on the floor up over his shaking shoulders. At the feeling of comfort, he sighed, whimpered a little and fell asleep. Hammer sat by his feet, and I sat by his head, stroking his hair off his brow like the teachers at the orphanage had done for us when we were sick. Eventually the shaking stopped, and he breathed easy in his own skin.

Hammer and I shared some of the meat and bread then, so tired from the horror and the physical act of skinning a bear in so short a time that we ate with our eyes half closed.

In a few moments, we were asleep on the pallet on the floor. It were warm in the cave, but our bodies were cool enough from bathing in the stream that we still felt comfortable being close to each other, and Hammer's arm were flung about my middle. I wove my fingers with his before we closed our eyes.

## PART XI

### GOLDEN BOY, GOLDEN FUTURE

I awoke to the smell of morning, my body stiff from lying down so long. A faint gray light were peeking in from the mouth of the cave. Turning my head, I saw Hammer, his arm flung over my back as I slept, the rest of him relaxed in his own sleep. At the orphanage, Hammer slept in a tight little ball, muscular and self-contained. Until we shared the bed in the cottage, I'd never seen his hard, busy body limp and at peace.

A quiet voice called my name, and I turned my head and squinted into the face of the prince.

"Hmm?"

"Eirn, I need you to wake up for a minute."

"You can talk now?" I tried to shake the sleep from my head. I knew he could talk on this side of the magic.

"Yes, but not for long."

He were dressed and groomed—and blond. The darkness of his shoulder-length hair had apparently been shed with his bear pelt, because his head were as gold as a miser's dreams. His clothes were rich and fine—velvets and brocades and intricate needlework. I wondered where *that* suit had been hiding in this snug little room.

I squinted again, trying to reconcile the time. "Were there magic in that sleep?" I asked, trying to make sense, and he nodded and looked away, ashamed.

“I’m afraid so. When I realized my men were coming, I put you under.”

I frowned. “You’re a wizard then?”

He grimaced. “I’m a king. A little bit of minor magic runs in the family.”

I frowned some more. “If you’re a bloody king, what were you doing running through the woods, eating fish and scaring bees and fucking peasants?”

That surprised a laugh from him. “Well, the eating of fish and scaring of bees is natural for a bear. The fucking of peasants,” his face softened, grew sweet and far away, “that was a rather wonderful benefit that I had not expected.”

“Well glory for us,” I grunted and pushed myself carefully up to sitting. Hammer whimpered a little and rolled into himself, and I put a hand on his hip to quiet him. Maybe it weren’t the cottage that let him sleep as open as a child.

The prince (or king, I guess, but I’d thought of him as “the prince” for so long it were hard to stop) chuckled a little and then sank to a crouch and put his hand on my shoulder.

“Listen, Eirn. This is important. My kingdom is to the west, by the sea. You follow this stream out for a bit; you’ll come to the shore, and I’m to the north. We do have a bit of magic in us—enough to make sure that the man who is about to get the throne isn’t a madman or an idiot. When the monarch passes and before the next king succeeds, there is a... a test. We come into this cave, where we know is home, shed our clothes and walk through the cave. Sometimes it lasts a week, sometimes it lasts a year. Sometimes it lasts five. We have regents in place until the test is over, and no

king who has ever ruled has spoken, not even once, about his time on the other side.”

“Until now?”

The prince nodded. “Yes. I think now would be a good time to break the silence.” He sighed then, and the crouch must have grown wearing on his knees, because he sat his bottom down on a corner of the blanket and drew his knees to his chest.

“My father is... *was* a good man. He arranged a marriage for me—with my permission—to a lovely girl. One of my best friends, actually, and when I return, I shall marry her.” He didn’t sound upset about it. In fact, he sounded happy.

“But?” I didn’t think much of myself, now did I?

“But why would I think I was in love with you?” he prompted gently, and I nodded.

“Because I am. Don’t worry,” he added hastily, because I must have looked as panicked as I felt, “don’t worry. I’m not going to try anything stupid. Or ignoble. Or mean. Not now. Not ever again. You see, the reason we do this is to learn something about ourselves. I saw you. And for all you and Hammer look alike, all I saw was... was you. And all you saw was...” he trailed off.

“Hammer,” I supplied gently. “It were always Hammer.”

He nodded sadly. “I know. I knew then. But... well, I’m spoiled,” he grimaced at my snort, “and you knew that. You guessed it when I walked in your door. I thought that the reason behind my spell was to help me find the love of my life. I was sure of it—the idea possessed me. It’s why...” he

blushed. “It doesn’t excuse what I did—and I can hardly apologize, because I don’t think the words can ever tell you how sorry I am. But I was obsessed with it. I was there to find someone else, to find a reason to step away from the adulthood I knew was drawn out for me, and into a life I had found for myself.” His face grew avid for a moment, possessed by the idea, and then he lost his enthusiasm, and turned thoughtful.

“I learned something else entirely,” he said after a pause. “I learned about loving your best friend, and about how even that is work. I learned the difference between love and lust, between caring and wanting, and between needing physically and needing in your heart. And yesterday, when I’d behaved my absolute worst, I learned about sacrificing for someone who had wronged you, simply because that someone was human, and in pain. Don’t ever mistake it, Eirn—you and Hammer have much to teach any prince. Even a headstrong one who was too foolish to take no for an answer.”

I sighed and looked away. “I didn’t want to hurt your feelings,” I said, embarrassed, and he chuckled.

“You were very gracious, Eirn, don’t ever doubt it. Now listen—we’re running out of time. In a fraction of an hour my men will be here. The breaking of the geas is a thing the entire kingdom will feel, and they’ve been waiting for their king. My kingdom is a good one, Eirn, and a growing one. They need tradesmen—and a blacksmith and a printer will have a place. I’ve left you things in a small satchel on the couch—please take them.”

“Things?” I scowled, uncomfortable with gifts, but he were having none of it.

“Gold, for one, and if *he’s* too stubborn to take it,” a fierce nod at Hammer, “then I expect better from you.”

“Not too much better!” I snapped, but he were a king, now, and he could just run right over me.

“Please take it, Eirn,” he said, and his tone was firm and unapologetic. “Take the gold, and take the deed to the land at the forest’s edge, and take the king’s pardon as well.”

My mouth went dry. “Pardon?”

“Yes. Pardon. You and Hammer have been gone for five years at this point—”

“Wait—you just up and left your kingdom for five years?”

“No, I left my kingdom for a few weeks at a time, to come meet with an advisor when it was needed. There’s a reason for this apartment in the cave, Eirn.” He took a deep breath then and looked away, as though feeling guilty.

“But you’re right. I must have been away from my lands for far too long if that hunter felt free to come through the cave and plant a trap. That is my wrong. I don’t know how I’ll catch the hunter—”

“No need to catch him,” I grunted, remembering the moment sickly. “He’s dead, and left to rot somewhere out of sight of the cottage. Rutting fucker. I hope the gods piss on him for an eternity.”

The prince looked pained. “Well, I’m sorry for that—and I should thank you as well, although I rather hope you don’t make a habit of killing every fucker who gets in your way.”



Now we're running out of time, so we need to move on. You and Hammer have been gone for near to five years, so your crime is old, but there are still stories told about the brothers who killed. In the satchel is a royal pardon, and there will be fliers posted in the trade section of the kingdom. You two can walk through my streets with your heads held high—but I'm not sure if you can walk through any others, do you understand?"

I nodded. "We were heading for the western kingdoms anyway," I said, thinking to myself.

"What happened?" he asked softly. "You almost made it."

I looked at him, sitting there with his arms around his knees. He were older than Hammer and me by about ten years, it seemed, but there were still a bit of boy in him.

"Hammer got attacked by a mountain cat. He managed to kill the cat, but he were dying of infection when we found the cottage." I shuddered. Five years? It had been but a scant handful of months to us, and it were still too near a thing.

The prince's pat on my thigh were nothing but a friend's reassurance, and I caught his hand, grateful.

"I'm going back to my kingdom," he said then. "I'm going back to marry my friend, and if the gods are kind and forgiving, we can be half as happy as you and your Hammer." There were the far away clatter of horses and shouts of men, and he stood reluctantly to his feet.

"I'm going to go out and meet them—no worries. I don't think the two of you would be comfortable with so many people, and," he blushed, "you two still feel like my secret."

My best and happiest time in my life. My kingdom would probably be titillated by my sexual escapades, but it would be no large thing. I would still be honored....” He trailed off, still blushing.

“We won’t tell no tales,” I said simply. “What we were to each other, that were private.”

He rose then and brushed unnecessarily at his trousers. “It *was* private,” he said gratefully. “And it was wonderful. And you two may not fully see the importance in it, but it could be the one thing in my life that will ever be completely mine. Thank you for understanding that.”

I made to get up, and he waved me off. “Go back to sleep by Hammer. I’ll leave you some more food. I want to think of you two, sleeping here, when I leave.” He gave another smile, this one with a twist to it and bright, hot looking eyes.

I nodded, willing to give him something. “No worries. And thank you for all your pains. It’s a little bit of trouble for someone named after the air, isn’t it?”

He looked puzzled for a moment. “Air? Is that what you think your name means?” He let out a soft, bitter laugh. “‘Eir’ means ‘dream’, Eirn. It’s one of the reasons I was so obsessed with you—your name. I thought it meant you were my dream.” His smile then were whole, but tears cut a dusty track down his cheeks. He bent and kissed my temple, and they fell into my hair.

“It turns out I was right.”

With that, he turned to leave.

“Wait a moment,” I said, and there were a terrible, forbidden hope in his eyes. I felt cruel for squashing it. “Can

we have your name? All of that, our skin together, and I don't even know your name."

His smile were bittersweet, as though I had given him a most cherished gift, and it hurt him just the same.

"Behrens," he said, and I snorted.

"It figures!"

He grinned at me, and it were that face, that young man's enthusiasm and old man's wisdom that I would see in him for many years. "It does indeed. I hope to see you soon. If nothing else, try to make it to the kingdom for the wedding, yes?"

And before I could answer, he were gone. I heard men's voices outside the cave, and the clatter of horse tack and the dust-stirring tramp of big animals. In a moment there were the thunder of the lot of them as they rode off, and only Hammer and I were left in the quiet of the cave.

"Dream, huh?" Hammer muttered into the pillow where he'd curled. He stretched a little and turned toward me, his arms open. "I could have told him that."

I went into his arms willingly. "You were awake for all of that?"

I felt his shrug around my shoulders. "It seemed only right to give him a few moments of you before he left."

I felt only a little bit of regret to think that were the only part of me the prince would get.

## PART XII

### THE COLOR OF ROSES

A month later, just as autumn's coat turned fiery, Hammer and I stood in the streets of our adopted kingdom and cheered with the rest of the world as the king and his new bride paraded through the streets on horses as big as our flat.

The cottage were still a dream, but one in the making. We'd taken the prince's gold, and the deed to his land, and walked to the kingdom with prospects and will and the skills to back them up. We'd started digging the foundations already, and looked to pour the aggregate before the snows came and undid our hard work. After the snows, we'd start on our home in earnest.

We'd both found places to work—me at a printer's and Hammer at a smith's, and Hammer looked to be in a position to buy the smithy in not too much time. Our flat above the place were just as we'd pictured it, lying side by side at the orphanage, when we were nobbut more than children.

It were nice—we made it nice. We brought flowers from the woods around our small property and we bought the flawed tapestries and old furniture offered by the other tradesmen in our quarter. It were a home, albeit a temporary one, and in those first days, coming home after working at the printers or at the smithies, and knowing the other one would be there, were all that needed to make it so.

It must have been so. It were there, in that first, makeshift flat, that Hammer let me take him, and he learned that possession meant more than “to endure.” Our coming together would never be anything but lovemaking after that. “Enduring” weren’t to be any part of the life that we would forge.

So it were with nothing but goodwill and a desire to see the fanfare that Hammer and I stood in the crowd, prepared to throw flowers at the King Behrens and his bride, Marianne. We were surprised, more than surprised, when he brought the entire wedding train to a halt in front of where we stood.

He smiled, a gold man on a white horse, inclined his head gently, then took his bride’s hand.

“Mari, may I present to you my good friends? They are the ones who will live on your father’s land. I wanted you to see that they’re good sorts and more than deserved the kindness.”

Hammer and I blushed and bowed, our hands clammy on the fabric of our best trousers. When we looked up, the pale-haired woman on the dark horse next to Behrens were smiling gently.

“It’s so good to meet you,” she said warmly, and her voice were... it were lovely. Her smile were lovely. If I liked women, even a little bit at all, I should have fallen every bit in love with this tiny woman with the pale hair and the small nose and the hint of freckles peeking through the powder at her cheeks.

“It’s wonderful to meet you,” I said, after Hammer poked me surreptitiously. Of course—if one of us were going to speak to her, it would be me. “Behrens mentions you fondly.”

I remembered the smile on his face when he’d called her his friend—his best friend. She were very much beloved by him, it were clear. I wondered then, that our time in the cottage must have made it clear, what were love and what were infatuation, and what were coarse and what were fine. This woman were not a great beauty, but she were so much a beauty in his heart. Perhaps, by the time he’d ridden his horse into his kingdom, and the magic had melted with the spring, the prince had seen in his bride what I’d seen in my Hammer: that delicacy and sweetness were no measure of a true and brilliant heart.

Queen Marianne’s smile were brighter than the sun on snow—and a good sight warmer. “He mentions you, as well,” she said softly, and I blushed, because I could almost imagine he’d mentioned everything about us, and our time together. Although we’d see each other many times and my reverence of her would do naught but grow, it were never a thing I’d ask her, and I blessed her for not ever telling me if it were so.

We would see them often in the years.

**W**e worked on the cottage steadily as we lived our lives. It were our dream, and the next summer, it were real.

We had left our plans there on the table of the enchanted place, and unlike our beloved book, they didn’t

just reappear as we ran—but the same is not true of our roses. *They* had appeared in the bottom of our knapsack, complete cuttings with roots, wrapped in moist linen and oilcloth.

I'd kept them alive, I'd kept them watered, I'd planted them in the earth of our small plot of land practically before we dropped our knapsacks after we first wandered into the clearing. And oh, how that little space between forest and meadow seemed made just for us. As the last board were sanded and the last latch drilled into place, the roses, one white and one red, were replanted on either side of the cottage proper. As the years passed they grew and twined, up over the porch and over the awning. I had to keep them trimmed and loved in order to keep them from attacking visitors—not that we had many, but we had some.

One evening, we had a prince, and his lovely bride. Another evening, near to a year later, we had a prince and his tiny son, carrying an old, ragged stuffed bear.

Hammer held the baby, besotted, and I poked the bear and looked at the bear prince, who shrugged. "I got to my apartment and there it was," he told me, bemused, and I laughed. Childhood indeed.

The son grew, and his sister joined him, and then a brother.

Their tiny sister died in the birthing bed, along with her lovely, lovely mother, and for a time, a small time, Hammer and I juggled all three of them while their father ventured into the woods again, to see what solace the gods of hearth and forest could give him.

He returned, and his children went home, but the visits continued. One year, the oldest took a turn in the smithy. One year the youngest took a turn with the platen press I'd bought and ran when it came clear I would never own one of the bigger presses, and maybe didn't want to.

For a few summers, Hammer and I, and three children in rough clothes, would venture to the stream in our backyard and pick blackberries. For a few years, a king's daughter would help me put them up to give Hammer a taste of summer.

The king himself would stop by some evenings, when our bones were settling from a long day, and bring a bottle of wine. Hammer and I had no head for wine, but we would sip quietly, while the king drank deeply, and told us stories of people we would never know.

We came to love the sea, since it were so nearby. Some days, Hammer would leave the smithy to apprentices, and I would leave the press to its small room in the back of the house, and we would go walking, wandering, until we came to where the ocean and land met, and think of our friend, the mighty king, who seemed to have found his only peace in the cottage of two peasants.

Ocean and land indeed.

One evening, more than forty years after we'd first wandered into the kingdom by the western sea with a bag of gifted gold and a modest dream, our ocean failed to wander to his land. For months, the kingdom mourned.

Hammer and I mourned, too, in the manner you would mourn your oldest and dearest friend.



A year after, the golden haired boy who had balanced on Hammer's knee and played at his forge, who had helped us build on our cottage and chased his sister with sticky, purple hands, came riding up to our cottage with a sheaf of aged parchment in his hands.

He took Hammer's hands in his and kissed his cheek, and thrust the parchment at him.

"My father told me to take good care of that place when I had a chance to see it. The morning before I left, the cupboard opened, and this came out. I think it misses you, will you go?"

But we didn't need to go.

We had built a cupboard of our own, of course, in shape and size much like the one we had known, but without the carving of the animals, because that weren't our strength. We filled that cupboard ourselves, with the things we loved the most for each other. I filled it with berries and butter for Hammer. He filled it with books and paper for me. As time had gone by, the wood had taken on a curious sort of shape, and then an obvious sort of shaping, and while our beloved friend's son had been away, having adventures of his own, it had carved itself, with love and care, into a deer, a cougar, and a far away bear.

The heart of the little cottage had been taken with us, and we had built a place for it. As time and love—oh, gods, love—had pushed the heart's blood of our home through the air that we breathed, the heart of our home came to beat in time.

The sheaves of paper had changed in the years. We'd labeled our drawn cottage—Hammer's tools, Eirn's garden—

and, of course, years of use had moved them. Our original plans had been but a dream to the place we'd built with our own two hands—but the drawings, faded on the yellowing parchment—showed what we'd built in the now.

We didn't need to go to our beloved little cottage. It were quite clear that it had come to us.

And it has loved us still, these last fifteen years. Our skin is no longer taut and golden, and our muscles are shrunken with age. Our bones creak and ache and settle, and Hammer's hair is mostly gone. (For many years, it were simply a white fringe, like a lady's tulle skirt, and the children's children had teased him gently about his bald pate. He had laughed then—he's never had no vanity, my Hammer.)

My own hair has become a grizzled mess atop my head, and I have my own share of teasing to enjoy with a smile.

My press has long since ceased to clunk in my favorite music, and Hammer has since sold his smithy to a successor for more gold than either of us shall ever want or use.

But still, we will sit and read books in the evenings—Hammer must read, because my eyes have become rheumy and useless. I still work my garden, although much of it is by feel. And still, I prune the roses that have shaded our porch for so very long.

They have twined together, of course, and they have shaded together as well. The ones on the bottom of the vine are still red on one side and white on the other, but the ones that have met in the middle? Oh, they have become every shade of rose, from softest pink, to most golden yellow, from red-tinted mauve to a violent, mesmerizing sunset. Perhaps

regular roses do not do this, but these are magic roses, mine and Hammer's roses.

We started out seeing each other in only reds or only blues. Hammer were the violent one and I were the weak one, Hammer were the coarse smith and I were the smart printer, and those were the flowers as we thought they'd always be. But we'd seen each other through a lens of gold, through the tint of a king's love and a king's scorn, and our vision changed, and our colors grew richer. I had killed to protect my Hammer, and fought to defend his tender heart. He had learned he had the heart of a child, of an artist, one who loved stories and pretty futures painted by colorful words. Our hearts have grown tightly twined, tinted by every color we could ever imagine, and some, I know for a certain, we never would have guessed were real.

Hammer does not think he will make it through this next winter.

His breath comes short in his chest, and it takes much effort for him to get up and dressed. My body is still creaky and sound, but with every labor of his breath, I think that my heart will not endure.

Enduring were Hammer's gift, not mine, and I will not endure a life in which he does not laugh by my side and touch my hand, wish for the best things for me, and rejoice when I have them. My sturdy, blessed, stoic Hammer—how can life be, without him?

So we lie together at night and scent the encroaching winter through the open window above our bed, and dream. I dream of three young men, younger than their prime, showing love and lust, friendship and obsession, through

## HAMMER & AIR

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heaving bodies and sweating skin. I dream of sweet looks from Hammer's blue eyes, and the rough feeling of his hand in mine.

I dream of a proud boy, standing in a stream, a string of fish on the end of the line, joyful in his soul because his lover has rejected a prince to come back to his arms.

I know these are only dreams. I know these days are long past. I wake to a dream in which Hammer's breath has stopped, and mine with it, and hearts have gone to a quiet sunny meadow with the sweetest little cottage in the middle, with a millwheel and a stream.

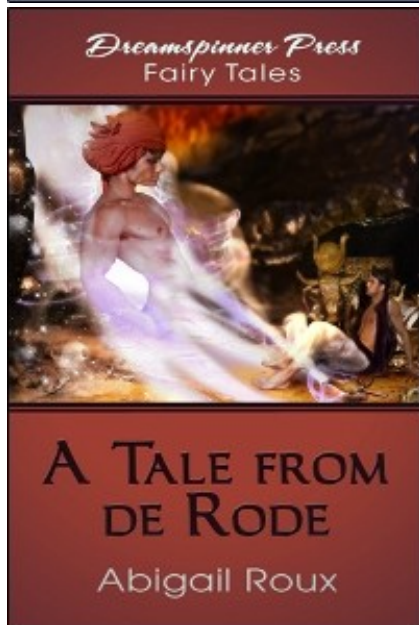
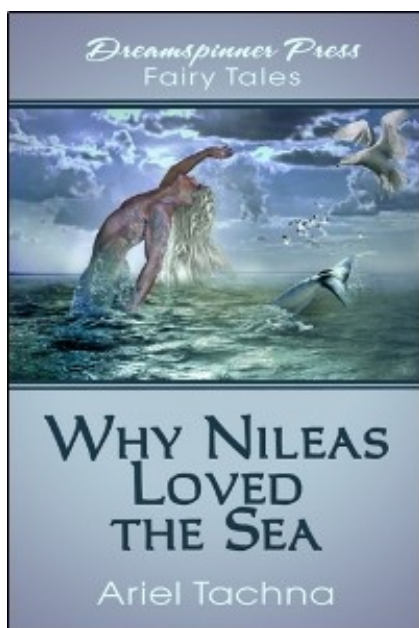
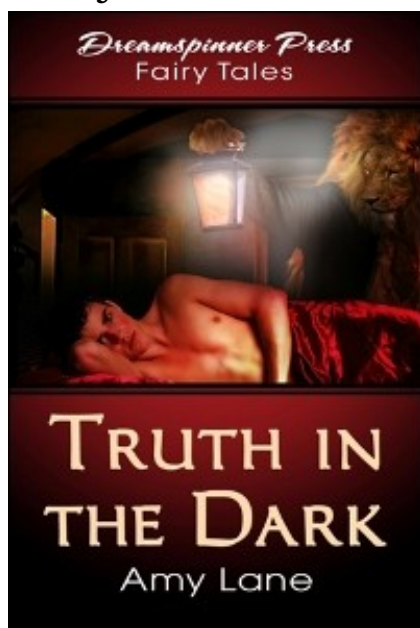
Our bodies will lie tangled until they become earth, like roses twining so closely there is no beginning and no end, and only the shades of beauty that were their growing.

Every dream I ever had as a child has come true, simply because Hammer loved me. Perhaps this one will too.

AMY LANE is a mother of four and a compulsive knitter who writes because she can't silence the voices in her head. She adores cats, knitting socks, and hawt menz, and she dislikes moths, cat boxes, and knuckle-headed macspazzmatrons. She is rarely found cooking, cleaning, or doing domestic chores, but she has been known to knit up an emergency hat/blanket/pair of socks for any occasion whatsoever or sometimes for no reason at all. She writes in the shower, while commuting, while taxiing children to soccer/dance/karate/oh my! and has learned from necessity to type like the wind. She lives in a spider-infested, crumbling house in a shoddy suburb and counts on her beloved Mate, Mack, to keep her tethered to reality—which he does while keeping her cell phone charged as a bonus. She's been married for twenty-plus years and still believes in Twu Wuv, with a capital Twu and a capital Wuv, and she doesn't see any reason at all for that to change.

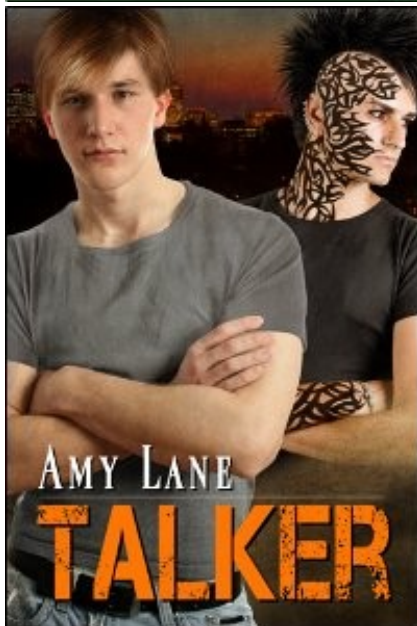
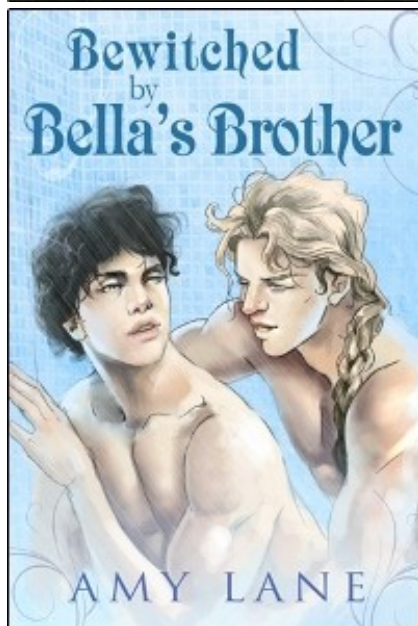
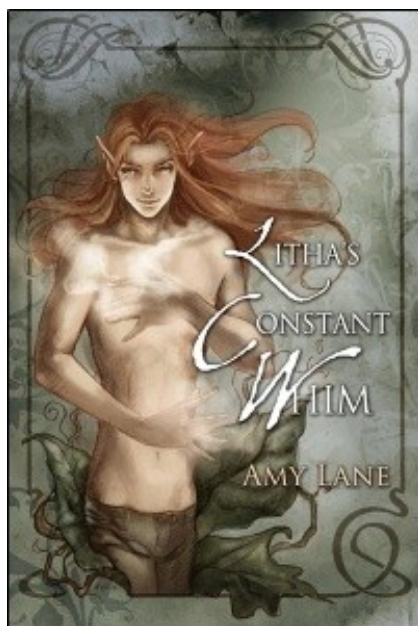
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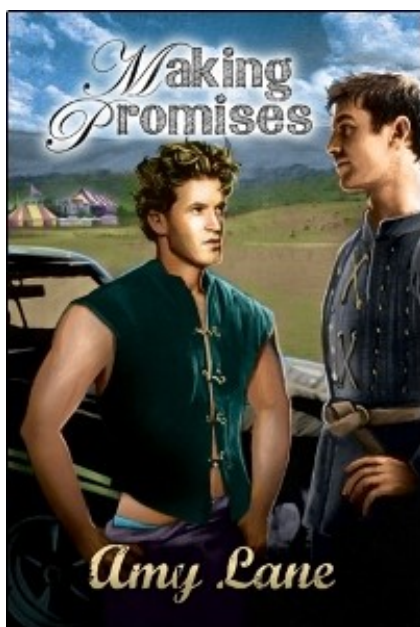
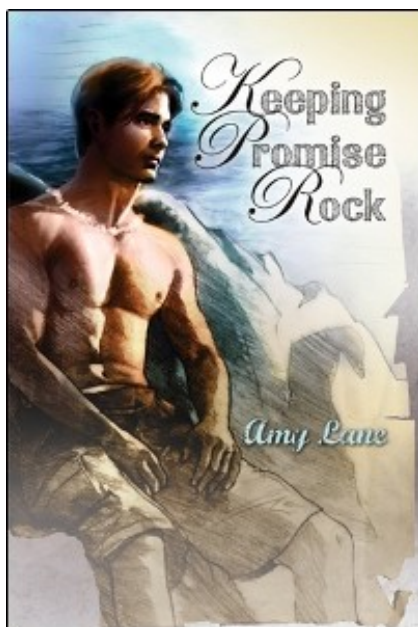
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