

I sat on the bench and leaned against the wall of the tavern, watching the other men talk, drink, and hire whores. All seemed to be locals, farmers, or artisans, come to the tavern to spend coin in pursuits of the flesh. All but one, a young man sitting alone at a table. He'd watched me, from under half-lidded eyes, ever since he'd arrived. His companion, a large black dog, lay at his side, head resting on its paws.

The young man stood, walked to the counter, and spoke quiet words to the tavern keeper, the dog a black shadow that followed him. The old man glanced at me, nodded, spoke, and then turned away. My watcher turned to face me and leaned on the bar, perhaps estimating his chances.

I sighed and moved my hand to rest on the hilt of my short sword. It wouldn't be the first or last time a young fool had tried to test his skill, and I'd become adept over the years at inflicting flesh wounds and scratches. I only kill when I'm being paid for it. I watched from the shadows as he pushed off and made his way across the tavern to my table with the dog trailing him.

The man was tall, but not as tall as I, nor as heavily muscled, and perhaps eight years my junior. Not quite filled out yet, I could see he'd possess the fullness of manhood in a few years. If he lived that long. I counted his weapons, one broadsword across his back, a short sword at his side, one throwing knife sheathed in a band across his chest, and the top of a blade's hilt I spotted hidden in his boot. I wondered if I should count the dog.

He stopped in front of my table and placed his hand on the empty chair opposite me. The black animal stood also, as if waiting to be asked to sit.

"Are you Drake, the mercenary?" His strong, yet soft voice held no swagger, merely the accent of the southern lowlands.

“Who’s asking?”

He narrowed his eyes and peered into the shadows that hid my face.

“I am Ansel.” No hint of challenge shone in his brilliant blue eyes, or cutting tone to his soft voice.

“Sit, Ansel, and tell me what brings you to my table.”

He pulled out the chair and sat, placing his hands on the table, palms down, to show he held no weapons. The dog lay down at his side, seemingly uninterested.

“I understand the Duke of Foray is calling for men. I wish to hire with him and am told you are on your way there also.”

“I hope you didn’t pay for that bit of information.”

“No. It was freely given.” For a moment, he flashed a smile and the corners of his eyes crinkled.

Despite myself, I returned the smile and then hoped the shadows hid it.

“And what is it you want from me?”

“To travel with you, and perhaps train along the way.” He sat back in the chair, waiting for my answer.

“I don’t travel with anyone.”

The edges of his upturned lips fell just a little.

“Often,” I added. His smile returned and oddly, I felt pleased. I glanced down at the dog, then back at him. “And I don’t train pups anymore.”

“I’m no pup. I’ve just returned from Moran.”

I leaned forward, brought my scarred face into the light, and stared hard at the man in front of me. He had survived the battle at Moran?

"I lost a few friends there," I said with a nod.

"I, also." He returned my nod. "I am no stranger to battle, Lord Drake."

He'd used my formal title, one I hadn't used since I was eighteen, and I wondered what he knew of me and who had told him.

"It's just Drake. Well, Ansel, how long have you been a killer for hire?"

He didn't blink at my bluntness or at the ragged scar that ran down one side of my face, though I could track his eyes' movement as he took it in.

"Since I left home at ten and eight. I am now twenty and two."

Four years and he'd survived, so he must have some skill. Most didn't stay alive past their first battle. Young men trained in pretty strokes of blade, but couldn't move fast enough, keep their heads, or swing wild enough to survive in the heat of a bloodbath.

If he was telling the truth.

"The war between Foray and Istend will be fierce. You must know that to ask for additional training." At least he was no fool.

"Aye. And from the best." He smiled again and tilted his head in a gesture of regard.

His blue eyes burned into me and I was grateful for the table between us. I felt a small prick of fear on the back of my neck and tamped it down as I scanned the room. No one in the tavern was paying us mind, or could possibly know what I was feeling. Even I wasn't sure about that. After all, I had a reputation, and in my business it could mean the difference between eating or not eating if you weren't hired, or having no one at your back if the men you fought with didn't trust you.

"That may be, Ansel." I inclined my head back to him as our eyes met.

What was I doing? This could only end badly. I should send him away and be done with him before trouble started.

Catching the eye of a young whore, I signaled for her to come to the table. With an eager grin, she swayed her way toward me, moving around the tables, a smile on her face. She wasn't pretty, but then, whores never are. Still, who fucks a face?

I stood as she reached the table and pulled her to me. She wrapped a thin arm around my waist. His eyes flicked to the bulge in my leather breeches and then back to my face. She giggled and looked at Ansel, giving him a bigger smile, but clung to my money and me.

"I leave tomorrow. Meet me here in the morn."

He stood, glanced at the woman, and his eyebrows drew together. "I'll be here."

"Where do you bed tonight?" Was I thinking of offering him to share my room? When had I lost my mind?

"I have a place in the stable."

I left with a nod, the whore at my side, and made my way to the stairs. As I climbed to my room, I could feel those brilliant blue eyes following me.

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Reaching the room, I opened the door and pulled the whore inside. My rod was hard in my breeches as she helped me with the strings. She removed my boots, slid my leathers down to my ankles, and I stepped out of them.

I removed my trows and sat in the chair as she knelt between my spread legs and took my rod in her small hands. Work-hardened yet gentle fingers ran over my sensitive skin while her other hand cupped my sac, and I leaned back to enjoy her ministrations.

Closing my eyes, I felt her hand slide up and down my shaft, coaxing me to grow harder. It didn't take much more to bring me to standing, and when her tongue swirled over the tip, it jerked in her hand and I swallowed a groan.

Her soft, full lips soon followed, engulfing the swollen head, sending out waves of pleasure. She worked her hand up and down as her tongue ran under, over, and around the tip, delving into its eye. One hand pumped and the other squeezed my stones until I thought I would burst.

I wasn't ready to finish, not yet, by damn sure. I'd planned to get my wick wet in her juices. Pulling her off me, I stood, threw her over my shoulder, and carried her to the bed.

"Hands and knees, girl," I said as I tossed her onto it.

She laughed, scurried around, and got on all fours, and I pulled her narrow hips to the edge of the bed. I stood behind her, pushed back her skirts, and exposed her white flanks. Running my hands over her smooth skin, my thumbs dug between the small, round globes of her ass. My fingers probed, pushed, and pressed into every opening, judging her readiness. When I slipped my fingers into her cunt, her hot honey covered them.

I brought my fingers to my lips for a taste. She was sweet enough, so I knelt down, parted her nether lips, and lapped. She moaned and thrust herself into my face, encouraging my tongue to linger over her swollen petals. My rod jerked, as if to remind me what she was here for, and that it needed a turn. I gave her a last lick, and then straightened.

Holding her narrow hips, I guided my cock to her opening and pushed myself into her. Crying out, she tried to move away, but my grip was too strong and it felt too good to let her escape.

She was lean, with small rounds of breasts and her cunt was tight, wet, and she had not yet been used hard. In truth, I preferred the dog position to face-to-face; there was less touching, I didn't have to look at her or kiss her, and it gave me more power and pleasure in my thrust. Also, I could watch as my shaft pumped in and out of her pink flesh, a beautiful sight. My cock glistened with her dew and I inhaled the heady scent of fuck. The moist smacking of our bodies, my stones thudding against her thighs, her soft grunts, and the creak of the bed filled the room and my ears.

I slowed and took my time, thrusting deeper, as I took her. I could feel the head of my cock bumping against the end of her tunnel and looked down. She wasn't deep enough to hold all of me, so I backed off. I fucked her shallow, with just the head of my cock entering and leaving her cunt, sending sparks of pleasure up my shaft.

My fingers dug into the soft flesh of her lean hips, holding her firmly in place as I took from her with no thought for her pleasure, even though I was skilled enough to bring her to release.

But I was paying to fuck her.

As the head of my shaft disappeared inside and then appeared again, I felt the familiar tightening of my sac and the pleasure building. My thrusts deepened, quickened, as I began to lose reason. She moaned, her soft keening filling my ears, drowning out the other noises. On the edge, the plummet coming, I felt the pressure in my stones build to

near pain. If I kept watching as I fucked her, it would be over too soon. I closed my eyes to hold back, not ready to spill so fast, wanting my money's worth.

Brilliant blue eyes were all I could see.

I drove myself deep inside her, my body stiffened and, groaning, I exploded. My seed pumped hard, then slowed, and with a final shudder, I pulled out.

She slumped to the bed on her belly.

"Damn," I whispered.

"Oh, aye." Her voice quaked, yet I heard the appreciation.

Grinning, I slapped her bare bottom.

"Get out, girl."

She rose, took the coin I handed her, pulled down her skirts, and on unsteady legs followed me to the door. I drew back the bar and let her out.

I willed my own legs to steady, then dropped the bar in place and returned to the bed. Lying down, I pulled the quilt over my body, naked from the waist down, too sated and sleepy to undress further.

I doused the lantern and rolled onto my side for some sleep. Morning would come soon enough and with it a long ride. It would take almost the better part of a sennight to reach Foray.

With a groan, I rolled onto my back, finding no comfort in the bed. I shoved a pillow under my head. Seven nights with young Ansel and those eyes that had made me lose control. I'd made a mistake taking him on. I sat up and thought if I went to the stables right now, I could tell him. Then, I thought, no, what if he wasn't alone, or worse, what if he was. Lying back, I decided to inform him of such in the morning.

I would travel my road alone, just as I'd done for the last ten years.

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Ansel and that black beast were waiting for me when I came down the stairs two hours after dawn with the tavern just waking. The fire had been stoked and he sat near it, warming his feet on the hearth, the dog stretched out beside him.

When I reached the bottom step, Ansel's boots hit the wood floor with a thud as he stood. The dog rose and gave a low growl as I approached.

"I've been here an hour." His eyes looked eager.

"Early riser?" I rubbed my stubbled chin and grimaced. Just what I needed, a young pup to wake me early each morn.

"Merely ready to be on our way." He grinned at me.

"Let's go." I gave him a jerk of my head and led the way to the door.

Damn me, it wasn't what I'd planned, but for a reason I wouldn't dare put name to, I didn't tell him and the dog to stay behind.

We walked side by side to the stables and saddled our mounts. His horse, a long-legged bay mare, was good-looking and good-tempered. My horse was a great, ugly, red creature with a tendency to bite stable boys and kick other horses, but I liked that about him. He reminded me of myself, except my hair is black.

In the light of the lantern hanging from a peg, Ansel's hair was the color of dark wood, burnished with gleaming copper and his blue eyes were ringed with thick, dark lashes set in an open, handsome face. No scars, I noticed, and wondered if the scars he carried were hidden beneath his clothes.

Pushing thoughts of bare skin and searching hands from my mind, I tightened my girth and mounted. Ansel swung up on the mare with the ease of youth.

In the early morning mists, we rode out of the courtyard, the dog trotting beside Ansel, and through the small village, passing few as we made our way. Before long, the road turned and ran west toward the mountains of Foray and the duke who would hire us to kill for him.