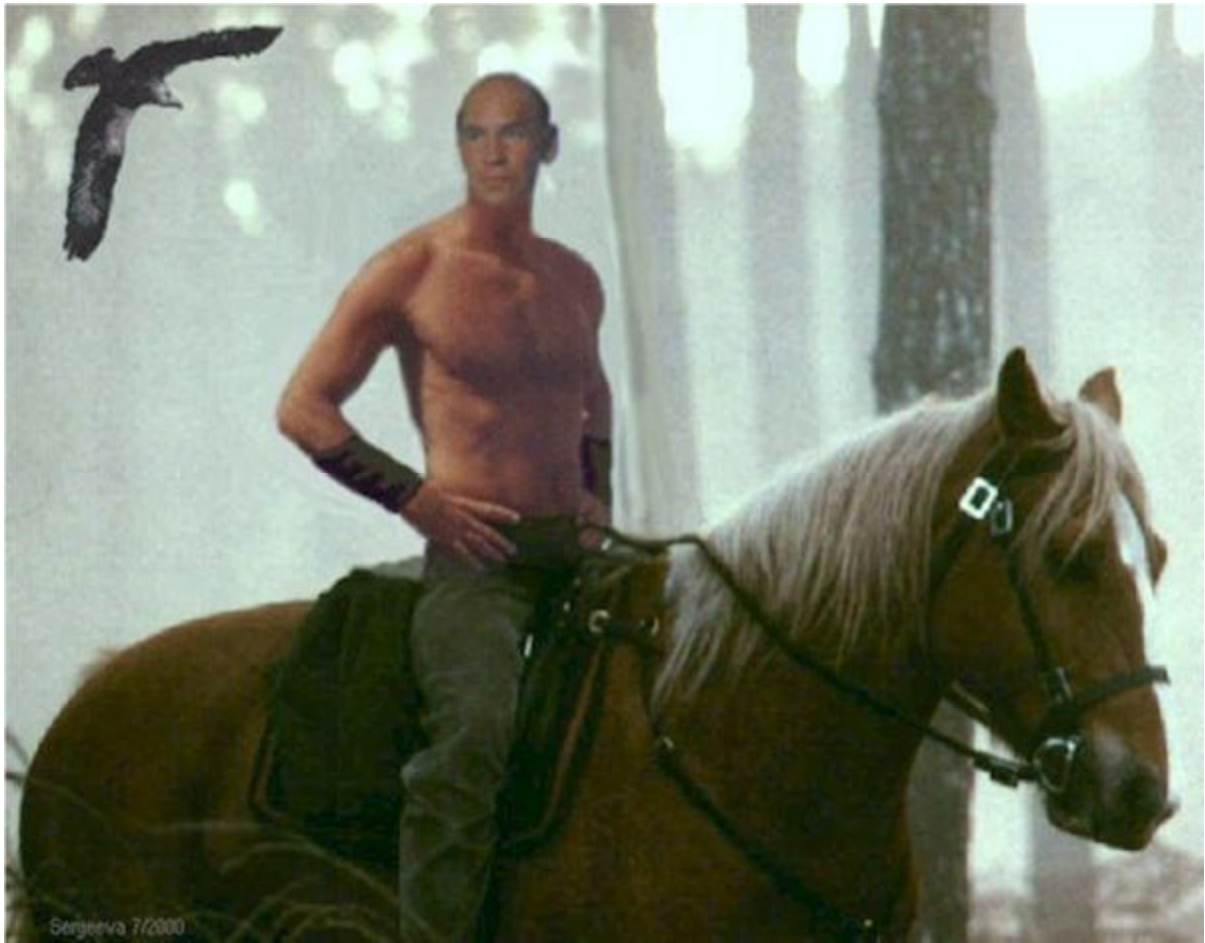


November by Xanthe



<http://www.xanthe.org/november/>

Story Notes:

Posted: 27th May, 1999

Graphic by Sergeeva.

November by Xanthe

The mist rising from the lake partially obscured the rider as he urged his stallion on. The dry, autumnal leaves crunched under the animal's hooves, and a light dew of perspiration bathed both horse and rider as they galloped. The horse was a bay stallion, his muscles rippling beneath a shining coat as his long, sturdy legs ate up the ground, his powerful flanks heaving with the exertion. The rider resembled his horse - long legs, taut muscles under

tanned flesh, a wide brow and dark, intense eyes. There was a fusion of flesh, animal and human, as the rider and horse became one, moving with perfect synchronized precision across the valley floor, unaware that they were being watched.

The watcher gazed, transfixed by the sight of the horse and man, so perfectly attuned to each other, the man barely needing the reins to guide the animal, the two so completely bonded that it was hard to know where the man stopped and the horse began. There was an intensity to their movement that made it seem almost like a dance. Finally, the gallop slowed, and the mood was broken. The man sat back in his saddle and glanced skyward, then gave a shrill whistle. A few seconds later a hawk descended, swooping low, and took her place on the man's outstretched wrist. He paused for a moment, talking softly to the bird, crooning to her.

From his vantage point on the hill, the watcher hugged his arms around his knees to keep warm as he drank in the sight on the valley floor beneath him. The rider was dressed all in black - soft hide trousers, a thick shirt, shiny leather boots that reached to his knees - even black leather wrist bindings to protect his arms from the hawk's sharp claws. Suddenly, the rider looked up, and the watcher's breath caught in his throat; the man's eyes were as black as his clothing - and full of sorrow.

The hawk flew up into the air again, and the man pressed the horse into a slow canter across the valley. He built up speed, then circled around, and, as if on a whim, directed the horse towards the rolling hills that bounded the valley, urging the animal in the ascent. The watcher scrambled back in alarm, not wishing to be seen, but it was too late - suddenly both horse and man were upon him, and he ran from the undergrowth, cursing his luck. The rider pulled up, fast and hard, to avoid crashing into the watcher, and they both stared at each other for a moment. The watcher could smell the horse's sweat, and could hear the man panting as he reined the animal in, and calmed him, patting his heaving flanks and whispering soothing words.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cause offense." The watcher raised his hands high in a gesture of apology.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" The rider demanded in a low growl.

"My name is Fox. I was just traveling through. I slept rough in the undergrowth last night. Please - I mean no harm." Fox spoke quickly, hoping desperately to avoid a repeat of yesterday's debacle, which had ended so painfully.

"You slept rough? Without a shirt? In November?" The man in black asked, incredulously.

"My shirt and I were parted from each other in unfortunate circumstances yesterday." Fox grinned, working his charm, which was all that he had left in the world, apart from his name.

"Hmmm." The rider looked him up and down, and Fox flushed under the scrutiny. "What brings you to my lands?" The man in black asked finally.

"Your lands?" Fox cursed silently, under his breath. "I'm sorry, Sir Walter. I had no idea." He gave a low bow, and then gasped in pain as he felt a finger trace a line down his bare back.

"And who flogged you so recently, and why?" The lord asked, his voice cool, and hard. Fox straightened.

"I was flogged by your seneschal yesterday, my lord," he answered in quick, flat tones. "I believe I made the mistake of asking if I could sleep in one of your barns or outhouses. He took me for a beggar, stripped me of my shirt, and gave me twenty lashes. Then he sent me on my way. I walked as fast as I could, but I was tired, cold, and hungry, and my lordship's lands are vast. I'm sorry that I didn't reach their boundary by this morning, and that my presence here thus offends you." He bowed his head, hoping that a suitable show of contrition would ward off any further punishment.

"My seneschal flogged you for seeking shelter? Are you certain?" The nobleman asked, his wide forehead creased by a concerned frown.

"Yes, my Lord. It's not an event I think I'll forget in a hurry. The details are remarkably clear to me - reminded of them as I am, every time I move my shoulders." Fox's hazel eyes held a glimmer of rueful humor. The nobleman grunted, and moved his horse away a step or two, looking down on the man who stood before him, half-naked in the cool November air. Fox wore a pair of old, tan, soft hide pants, and scuffed, weathered boots. He knew that with his welted back, and shabby clothing, there was no reason why the nobleman should show him any kindness.

"You were not offered shelter? Food, or drink?" The nobleman asked. Fox wondered why he was so confused by the behavior of his own seneschal - who was surely acting on his master's orders.

"No, my lord. I didn't ask for food or drink. I do not like to be taken for a beggar." The younger man straightened, wincing slightly as the movement hurt his back. "Although if it had been offered, I'm sure I would have taken it gratefully enough." He added with a smile.

"Your voice and manner make it clear you're no common beggar, certainly, if beggar you are." The nobleman ran his hand down the stallion's neck, and Fox noticed how wide and flat the man's fingers were. "If you have spoken true, then I'm sorry that you were treated in this manner on my land, and I cannot allow you to continue your journey in this way. You'll freeze to death." On an impulse, the big man tugged his own shirt over his head, and handed it to the astonished Fox.

Take it." The big man said insistently, thrusting it into Fox's hand.

"My lord will be cold, riding back without his shirt."

"No colder than you were, walking without yours." Sir Walter snorted. "Godspeed, Fox. I wish you well."

Fox pulled the shirt on. It was still warm from the nobleman's body, and damp with his sweat in places. The scent of horse and man permeated it, earthy, masculine smells that intoxicated Fox, light-headed from hunger as he was. The shirt was too long in the arm, and too wide in the neck and shoulder, and it covered him like a tent, wrapping him within its folds, and making him feel curiously comforted.

Fox watched as the nobleman directed his horse up to top of the hill. He reached it just as the sun broke through the misty morning air, and he sat there in his saddle for a moment, scanning the sky for his hawk. Fox felt his heart beat too fast inside his new black shirt. The nobleman's face was lit by the sun, and for the first time Fox saw how powerful and beautiful the other man was as he sat straight and true in his saddle, his bare chest exposed to the elements. His upper body was covered by curls of fine dark hair, and the sunlight illuminated his hard, flat stomach, and the curving mass of his muscular arms and shoulders. One side of his face was set in shadow, hard and mysterious, those dark, serious eyes hinting at some tragedy that intrigued Fox. The other side of his face was lit up, revealing sensuous lips set in a straight line, and wide, angular cheekbones. The rough dark stubble on the man's jaw provided a stark contrast to the smooth, tanned flesh of his bare head. His long legs, encased in soft, black hide, gripped his stallion's flanks, seeming almost to merge with the animal's bay flesh in the shadows cast by the sun's rays. Fox felt as if he'd been blinded, momentarily, by the sight he was witnessing, and it was as if time stood still, and there was just him, standing on the side of the hill, watching the man at the summit as he sat there, proudly, astride his horse, holding out a burly forearm for his hawk. Then the mood was broken, and the hawk descended to her master's wrist and settled there, knowing where she belonged. For a moment, Fox envied her.

As if sensing that he was being watched, the nobleman turned his head and gazed back at Fox, and then some emotion passed across his face, clouding his expression. He nudged his horse back down the hill and stopped by the other man.

"You must be tired, and hungry. Please...let me make further amends for your treatment on my land." He threw the hawk high into the air, ignoring her startled squawk of protest, and held out his hand to Fox. "My horse is strong - he can carry both of us back to my house. There I'll see you fed, and given new clothing."

Fox hesitated. The nobleman's eyes were sincere, but still he feared his reception back at the house. The seneschal had been most insistent that he get off his master's property before daybreak.

"I don't need charity." Fox murmured, glancing down at his worn boots. His stomach growled painfully, reminding him how long it had been since he had last eaten. The nobleman's hand remained outstretched.

"Not charity - reparation." Those dark eyes glowed like the coals of a dying fire. "You were offered insult here, and I must see that we make amends."

Fox looked at the proffered hand for a long moment. "No more floggings?" He asked, with a grin.

"I promise!" The nobleman almost smiled back, but his solemn features betrayed him. Fox thought that it looked as if it had been a long time since this strange, stern-faced man had last smiled.

"I accept your kind offer then, my lord." Fox placed his hand into the other man's hand, his fingers closing over the leather that bound the nobleman's wrists. He felt a sudden jolt of energy that made him gasp out loud, but the sound was lost as the big man pulled him up onto his saddle, settling the traveler in front of him. Big arms surrounded his body, as the nobleman picked up his reins again and set the horse off on a light trot. Fox closed his eyes, feeling the weak autumn sunlight on his hair, and the touch of Sir Walter's naked chest on his back, the warmth of the other man's breath on his cheek, and the rub of his stubble on the side of his face. He had been tired and cold, weary and hungry, but now he felt warm, and safe.

They arrived back at the house all too soon, and the nobleman dismounted, then held out a hand to aid the other man to the ground.

"I can do it." Fox smiled, dismounting easily and then holding onto the horse as his head spun from lack of food, and his back wailed a protest at the movement. Sir Walter stepped forward and slung Fox's arm around his shoulder, helping him to the house. He took him into a large room with a big oak table in the center. A huge fire roared in the grate, warming the cold stone walls and flagstones. Sir Walter deposited his foundling on a wooden bench, and clapped his hands, suffusing the room with his energy, calling for food, for drink, for his servants, and lastly, for his seneschal. People came running to do his bidding, and a plate of bread and cold meat arrived in front of Fox as if by magic, closely followed by a tankard of ale and a bowl of fruit. He began to eat, tearing at his food in his haste to ease the nagging ache in his belly, watching with one eye as Sir Walter paced around the room, pulled on a shirt that had been brought for him, untied the bindings around his wrists, and then flung them onto the table. Fox flinched. The nobleman was clearly in a foul temper, and he was concerned about what would happen next. He had received no succor at this house yesterday, and his apprehension remained, despite Sir Walter's earlier promise that he would not be harmed.

The seneschal was a solid, bluff-faced man. He took one look at Fox and his anger bristled - visibly. Fox held on tight to his tankard and drank deeply.

"This man says that you flogged him and threw him off my land, yesterday." Sir Walter stated. "Is this true?"

"Yes, sir." The seneschal shrugged. "He's a beggar, sir, and probably carries all sorts of filthy diseases. He's got a sly mouth on him too, sir. I whipped some respect into him and sent him on his way."

"He says he simply wanted shelter for the night." Sir Walter said tonelessly.

"He's a thief, sir. All his kind are. If he'd stayed here, we'd have been poorer by the morning."

"I'm no thief." Fox got to his feet indignantly. "Simply a traveler."

"With no money - how do you get fed?" the seneschal sneered.

"I can do a day's work, like any other man." Fox replied hotly.

"You don't look like a laborer. Half a day in the fields would kill you." The seneschal snorted.

"I'm stronger than I look. With a good plate of food inside me I could match you." Fox retorted. "I can also read and write. I'm happy to teach the children of the house, or to help with the accounts."

"There **are** no children in this house." The seneschal snarled, and Fox noticed the wince that passed across Sir Walter's face.

"Enough!" He growled. "I've heard you out, but you don't seem to have anything against this man other than that he asked if he could spend the night in one of our barns. Isn't that so?"

"You don't want his kind on your property, master..." The seneschal began.

"Have I ever said so? Has it ever been my custom to flog people for wanting shelter?"

"Well...you..." the seneschal looked confused. "Master, it hasn't been your custom to lay down any rules here for a long time now. I thought you wanted me to..." He broke off.

"I see." Sir Walter's jaw hardened, and his eyes blazed. "You took advantage of my recent...pre-occupation, in order to impose your own rule around here, isn't that so?"

The seneschal opened his mouth, and then paled, visibly, as Sir Walter moved close to him, his large body consumed by a silent anger.

"I'm sorry if I've done wrong, master." The man stammered.

"Yes, you have. This house has **always** offered hospitality to visitors. It's my duty and my honor to do so. You never know when it might be you out there, alone and cold, wanting shelter for the night. In this case, the punishment will fit the crime. Take him outside and give him..." Sir Walter paused and glanced at Fox. "Twenty was it?" Fox nodded, dumbly, unsure what was going on. "Give him twenty lashes and then send him on his way - without his shirt. Your employment here is terminated."

The seneschal screamed and threw himself at his master's feet, begging for mercy, but Sir Walter's face was set like granite.

"Please, sir." Fox got up, and placed a hand on the big man's arm. The nobleman glared at him. "I'd rather not have anyone suffer on my account. I didn't want to bring trouble to your house. Can't you let the matter pass?"

"No." Sir Walter shook his head, then sighed, deeply. "No, I can't, but I accept that I am partly to blame. I've been...preoccupied of late. I should have known what was being done in my name on my own land. You..." he poked his foot at the seneschal as if the man were a piece of offal. "Get off my land. GO! Now! Before I change my mind about the flogging." The man scrambled to his feet and ran out of the door. Fox breathed a sigh of relief, noticing how tense Sir Walter's arm was under his hand, and the stiffness in the other man's shoulders. He sensed a dark cloud around this house, and wondered at it.

"Fox - follow me. I'll show you to a room, and have the servants bring you water to bathe in." Sir Walter instructed. Fox followed the nobleman's long strides up a wide stone staircase, and along several corridors, then he was ushered into a room containing a huge, four poster bed. Lush red tapestries decorated the walls.

"Will this do?" Sir Walter asked.

"Do?" Fox gaped. "It's more luxury than I've known in a long time, sir." He wandered around the room, then threw himself down on the bed, laughing in delight. When he looked back at the nobleman, he saw that the other man had a wistful smile on his face.

"Stay as long as you like, Fox." Sir Walter told him. "The water for your bath will be here soon. My own chamber is down the corridor if you wish to speak to me. I trust you will join me for dinner? It's been a long time since I had company and I'd love to hear news of your journey."

"I would be honored." Fox gave a little bow, and watched as the tall, grim faced man nodded at him, then turned on his heel and walked away. "Sir Walter." He sat down on the side of the bed and pulled off his weathered boots. "Sir Walter." He murmured the name again, loving the sound of it. Then "Walter," he whispered it, caressing the name with his tongue.

Fox washed several weeks of grime off his body in the warm bath, then dried himself with the large sheeting laid out for him. It seemed a shame to pull on his old, dirty clothing once more, but he didn't have much choice. A part of him longed to feel the soft warmth of Walter's shirt settle around his body, comforting and protecting him. He had just pulled on his trousers when there was a knock at the door and the nobleman entered.

"I'm sorry. I realized you had no clean clothing. You're taller than most of the men here, but my own clothing will be long enough for you. I thought I'd bring you..." Sir Walter held up an armful of shirts and trousers and Fox smiled.

"You're very kind."

"My pleasure. I'm ashamed of the hospitality we offered to you. It's my own fault. I haven't paid much attention to my duties recently. That will change from now on." The nobleman laid the clothing on the bed.

"There is a sadness here. I notice you're dressed in the color of mourning." Fox murmured.

"Yes. My wife died a couple of years ago." Sir Walter said softly.

"I'm sorry for your loss." Fox felt an urge to put his arms around the other man, to offer some comfort, but he knew that the nobleman would scorn his pity.

"In childbirth." Sir Walter whispered, going to the window, and glancing out. "The child survived her by a few hours. I buried them both together, wrapping him up in her arms."

Fox walked to the window and stood behind the other man. Outside, a wind had sprung up, and rain was driving across the land, painting it in streaks of dark gray. Fox could just about make out a garden, and a statue. He didn't speak, he simply laid his hand on the other man's arm, and they stood that way for a long time. Finally Sir Walter moved.

"I'm sorry. I'm disturbing you. You'll need to dress. Oh..." He smiled, a gentle, soft smile, that banished for a moment the demons that warred within those dark, intense eyes. "I brought you these too." He gestured to a pair of boots, sleek and dark.

"For me?" Fox asked in disbelief. "They're too good. I'll be fine with what I have."

"Nonsense." Sir Walter shook his head. "I hope they fit. Sit down - let me help you with them."

Fox sat on the side of the bed, and watched in wonder as the nobleman knelt in front of him, took hold of his foot, and guided it into the boot.

"I shouldn't...you shouldn't wait on me, sir," he whispered, flushing. Sir Walter looked up in surprise.

"Nonsense. I want to see if they fit." He pulled the boots up so that they rested flush against Fox's calves, and smoothed them against the younger man's pants. "They do. I'm glad. Keep them." He gave another of those shy half-smiles, and then made his excuses and left.

Fox laid back on the bed, wincing as his wounded shoulders complained. He closed his eyes and fell asleep, dreaming of a proud, sad-eyed man, sitting bare-chested on a powerful bay stallion, a hawk on his wrist.

When he awoke, his back hurt him. He got up, wishing that he could ease the throbbing pain. An idea occurred to him, and he pulled Sir Walter's black shirt around his shoulders and wandered down the corridor to find the nobleman's chamber.

Sir Walter was seated by his fire, going through a pile of papers. He looked up, and smiled as Fox entered the room.

"You're feeling rested?" He asked. Fox nodded. "I'm going through these papers. Damn, but I didn't realize so much had built up. I don't know what that idiot seneschal was doing, but he certainly wasn't keeping the household accounts up to date."

"I have a quick mind and an eye for detail. I could help you, Sir Walter." Fox offered.

"Thank you." The nobleman nodded, gravely. "Not today though. Today you must rest and please - call me Walter. I save the "sir" for more formal occasions, and days at court. Now - did you want me for anything?"

"Yes." Fox flushed. "Do you have any salve? My shoulders..." He bit his lip.

"Of course. I'm sorry. I should have thought." It was Walter's turn to flush now. He went into an adjoining room and returned a few moments later with a stone jar which he handed to the other man. "Here. I use this when I hurt myself while hunting."

"Thanks." Fox stood there, uncertainly, the jar in his hand. The nobleman raised an eyebrow at him. "I...maybe you have a servant who could help me? I can't reach." Fox said apologetically.

"Of course. I'm sorry. Here, take your shirt off and lie on my bed. I'll help you." Walter ushered him over to the bed and Fox did as he was told. Walter's fingers were gentle and soothing as he smoothed the salve onto the dark welts that striped Fox's back. He took several long, painstaking minutes about his work, touching the other man very lightly, so as not to cause him any further pain. Then his fingers strayed to Fox's neck, and lingered there for a moment, gently caressing his guest. Fox sighed, and turned over, caught the nobleman's hand in his own, and kissed it.

"My thanks," he whispered. They gazed at each other, and then, on an impulse, Fox reached up, and touched his lips briefly to those of his host. A shock went through his body, as he felt the warmth and hunger in the other man's lips, and then the moment was over. Fox drew back, and smiled - then he got up, leaving the room's occupant seated on the bed, his face immobile in stunned surprise.

"Tell me about your wife." Fox asked, as they ate together later that evening, the huge fire flickering in the grate, and casting long shadows on the stone walls.

"Sharon...was beautiful." Walter smiled in the memory. "She was the daughter of my greatest enemy, and we fell in love despite the opposition of both our families. I stole her away to become my bride and for two years we wandered the world, not daring to go home. That is why I never refuse a traveler shelter - I met too many who refused me when I was a poor outcast." Walter paused, and took a sip of his wine. "Eventually though, we came home to face the music. My father had become used to the idea, and he welcomed us. Her father, however, never got over his loss. He has hated me ever since. When Sharon died, he promised that he would not rest until he saw me in my grave. He'll have his rest soon enough, I expect," Walter murmured. Fox placed his head on one side, and looked askance at the other man, but Walter refused to say any more. "What about you?" The nobleman asked. "You're clearly of high birth. What's your story, Fox?"

Fox sighed, and pushed back his plate. "I'm the only son of a wealthy family, but we have a dark secret - a stain on our birthright," he said. "The firstborn daughter of each generation is given away to the Priests of an evil sect. I begged with my father not to send my sister, but he was afraid of their vengeance if he refused them. They swore that they would bring a

curse down upon our house that would last a thousand years, if he did not honor the terms of this wicked pact. As soon as I came of age, I dedicated my life to finding my sister. I haven't stopped on that quest yet, although..." his long fingers closed around the stem of his goblet, and he shuddered, "what I have found out about this sect, leads me to believe that she was sacrificed to their god a long time ago, her virgin blood offered up to appease a vengeful deity. In my more lucid moments, I know that I'm chasing after a ghost, and fighting shadows, and yet...and yet..." Fox closed his eyes to fight back the tears, and was surprised when a large, warm hand covered his own. "And yet, sometimes, in the dark, I can still hear her crying out my name, and so I continue with my hopeless quest." He sighed, opening his eyes again and finding himself looking into Sir Walter's sympathetic eyes.

"We've both had our shares of trials then." Walter commented, withdrawing his hand. Fox found that he missed its warmth.

"And joys too. I've seen so much, laughed, loved..." Fox smiled and Walter nodded.

"You're right. We should celebrate the good times." He raised his glass and Fox did the same.

They talked long into the night, swapping stories about their lives, and travels. Finally, Walter took a candle, and they walked up the stairs together, still laughing, a little the worse for the wine they had consumed. When they reached Fox's chamber, Walter paused, and handed the other man the candle.

"Thank you, Fox," he whispered.

"For what?" Fox asked, surprised.

"Making me laugh again." Walter turned to go, but Fox's hand found his arm, and he pulled the other man close, claiming his lips again, in a long, deep kiss. The nobleman went quite still under his embrace, and finally the kiss ended and they looked at each other for a long time. "Come with me." Fox whispered, pulling the other man into his room. "The night doesn't have to end here, my love."

Walter allowed himself to be drawn into the dark room, lit only by candlelight and the glowing remains of the fire in the grate. Fox's lips brushed the side of the big man's face, and fastened onto his lips again and Walter surrendered to the caress, drinking eagerly, his large hands running up and down Fox's back. They parted, and Fox smiled, then raised his hands to the big man's shirt and began to unbutton it, slowly. Walter's dark eyes remained fixed on his young lover's hazel ones, as they danced and twinkled at him mischievously in the half-light.

Fox smoothed back the big man's shirt and allowed it to fall to the floor, and then he dipped his head and flicked a lazy tongue over the other man's nipples. Walter gasped, and brought his hands up to Fox's head, holding him close, and, duly encouraged, Fox took each nipple into his mouth, and sucked until they stood up in hard points. Then he tugged Walter over to the bed, and sat down on the side of it, opening his legs wide, and pulling the other man close, then closing his legs around the big man, trapping him there. Fox's fingers worked

insistently on Walter's belt, unfastening it, and unbuttoning the big man's pants. He reached inside, and Walter's hard cock lurched forwards to meet his hand. He fondled it for a moment, then put his hands on Walter's taut, bare buttocks, and drew the big man close, wrapping his tongue around the other man's cock. Walter placed his hands on Fox's shoulders and let out a deep groan, putting back his head, sweat trickling down his exposed throat as Fox worked his warm, wet caress along his shaft. Fox's hands kneaded Walter's buttocks, his fingers slipping inside the crevice between them, until Walter could hold on no longer, and he came with a cry, spurting deep inside the other man's throat. Fox drew back, licking his lips, and gave a tender smile.

"You needed that, my love. Come here," he beckoned, and Walter kicked off the last of his clothing and lay down on the bed beside his new lover. "You've been so lonely." Fox ran his long, sensitive fingers over Walter's bare scalp, caressing the soft, warm flesh, and bestowing little kisses upon it.

Walter took hold of Fox's face, and kissed him deeply. "Thank you," he whispered. "Will you let me?" His big hands moved with surprising gentleness as he began undressing the other man.

Fox smiled. "With pleasure," he replied, moving his hips so that Walter could strip him. At last they were both naked, and Fox's hard erection pressed into his lover's solid thigh, grinding into him as he sought relief. Walter smiled, and ran his fingers over Fox's eager cock, and the younger man arched his back and moaned, thrusting into the embrace and coming almost immediately.

"That was quick." Walter murmured, and Fox chuckled.

"Your touch is exquisite," he replied. "I couldn't hold on." He wrapped his long legs around his lover's muscled body, and Walter, in turn, wrapped his big arms around Fox's slighter frame, and entwined his fingers in the other man's thick hair. They lay there, in the dark, each listening to the other's beating heart, smelling the scent of sex and sweat, savoring the comfort of a few hours of love and happiness stolen amid pain and sorrow.

Fox woke at dawn. He glanced at the window, and saw that it was still raining outside, and then he realized that he was alone. He got up, stretching stiffly, and pulled on his trousers, and then went to stand beside the window, gazing out. His heart beat faster, as he saw a familiar figure in the distance, his body hunched against the driving rain as he ran towards the statue in the center of the garden. Fox turned, and, without a second thought, raced from the room.

The grass was cold and wet beneath his bare feet, and the November air was cold and wet on the exposed flesh of his chest, but Fox didn't care. He ran across the garden, slipping slightly as he went in his haste. He found the statue, and paused, gazing at the sculpture of a beautiful woman, clutching a baby in her arms. "In memory of my wife and child," the inscription read. Fox found the small tomb, located behind the statue, and pushed the door open. He could hear a soft moaning sound and he hurried, entering the vault and passing

the coffins of Walter's dead ancestors. His lover was seated at the far end, his back against the wall, his body convulsed in pain.

"Walter." Fox edged forward, then stopped, gasping. "Walter?" he asked, tentatively. The big man shuddered, and hid his face.

"Leave me, Fox. I'll be all right. Leave me."

"No. You're in pain." Fox knelt down beside the other man, and gently pulled his head around so that he could look at him. Walter's face was covered in strange dark bruises, and he was struggling for breath. "I don't understand." Fox took the big man's face between his hands and gently fingered the bruises. "What are these?"

"They only last an hour. Every day, at daybreak. It's a disease of the blood." Walter's dark eyes met Fox's, and they were full of despair.

"Your enemy...?" Fox guessed.

"Yes. Sharon's father. He can kill me any time he wants to. He keeps me like this, in this living hell, to remind me of his power over me. One day...one day he'll end it, but for now, he likes toying with me."

"How?" Fox asked, gathering the big man up and holding him against his chest.

"A kind of poison. If there's an antidote, I don't know what it is. I'm not sure I've really looked that hard." Walter shrugged. "After losing Sharon, I'd have been glad to die. As it is, he just keeps me like this, always on the verge of death, waking up with death every morning, as if to taunt me with it. Giving it, and then withdrawing it. Sometimes I long for him to finally end it all, but I won't take my own life. It's against what I believe in." Walter let out a gasping, pain-filled scream as a spasm consumed his body, and the bruises on his flesh turned a livid red. "Leave me, Fox. Go back to the house now before you see how ugly I am..." Walter begged. "I crept out here so you wouldn't see me like this. Please. Go back."

Fox shook his head, and gave a rueful smile. "It's too late for that, Walter," he said softly, sitting down beside the other man and holding him tightly in his arms, rocking him.

The spasms, pain, and bruises, lasted only an hour, as Walter had said they would. As the morning light spread across the world, Walter was returned to health and they ventured back out into the cool November morning.

"Fox - you've seen me at my worst. Will you...stay?" Walter asked hesitantly as they walked back to the house. "I'm missing a seneschal after all - and that's all your fault." He grinned.

"Walter - it's not that I don't want to." Fox sighed, lacing his fingers through the other man's and kissing him lightly on the lips. "But..."

"But you have a quest. Your sister..." Walter nodded. "I do understand."

"I'll stay for a while." Fox kissed him again.

"Through the winter?" Walter asked hopefully. "You won't make much progress when the snows come after all."

"All right." Fox smiled. "I'll stay here until spring."

November gave way to December, and then the January snows piled up around the house. Fox spent many long hours with his new lover, lying in the big man's arms, both of them naked in the firelight. He came to know every inch of that superb body, and loved the taut muscled flesh that he spent so many nights kissing. Every morning, they rode out, each of them with a hawk on his arm. Every afternoon, they worked on estate business and they spent their evenings reading, or talking. At night they made love, often, and with passion, for hours on end. Then, as morning dawned, Fox would hold his lover through his hour of torment, keeping him safe.

Winter turned to spring, and daffodils started to push their way up in the meadows around the big house. One morning, as birds sang outside the window and the sun lit up the room, Walter awakened and his fingers numbly found the note on the pillow next to his. There were only two words written on it: "Forget me."

It was a long, beautiful Summer. Walter took his stallion out each day, and remembered a time when, for a brief moment, he had tasted love again. He was a solitary man, used to his own company, and, even though he missed his lover, he was not as lonely as he had been before. Fox had come into his life and restored some of the joy, and he no longer grieved for the loss of his wife and child, as he had for so long before. Walter lost himself in physical exertion, building new houses on his land, and settling in tenants, riding, hunting, and hawking. Time passed, and before long Autumn had returned, the green leaves turning brown, and the mist rising up from the lake every morning. Walter smiled, remembering how he had ridden out, on that fateful morning a year ago, and found a stranger who didn't even have a shirt on his back, a man who had brought love once more into his life, and taught him to smile again.

"Thank you, Fox," he murmured, as he and his stallion pounded along the valley, unaware that they were being watched.

The watcher took in the sight of man and horse, bodies entwined as they covered the valley floor in great sweeping strides. The man was no longer wearing black - instead he was in a cream shirt, with thick, tan-colored pants. He looked, if not exactly happy, content. The watcher stepped out in front of the horse a smile curving his full lips as the stallion swerved to a halt in front of him. The man dismounted, in a frenzy, and pulled him into a firm embrace.

"Forget you!" He snorted. "As if I ever could! But why did you come back, my love? Did you find your sister?"

"No. I wasn't looking for her." Fox sat down and patted the ground beside him, inviting Walter to join him there. "I watched as you turned your back on your great loss, as you

turned back from death, and embraced life again, and I was humbled. I knew then that you were a braver man than I, Walter. You showed me that a thousand times, last winter. I've chased after ghosts, and embraced shadows all my life. You showed me that I could be more than that, that I could choose life - and love."

"Where did you go then? Why did you go?" Walter asked, his fingers finding Fox's face, and caressing his cheek lightly, in wonder.

Fox smiled. Then he opened his bag and took out a bottle. "I went in search of this. It's a cure for you, Walter. It took me several long months, but I found it. All those years of searching have made me quite good at it," he said modestly, his eyes glinting wickedly.

"A cure?" Walter's fingers fumbled at the bottle.

"Yes. Drink it. It's an antidote to the poison in your blood. I couldn't tell you I was looking for it, in case I didn't find it, or I died in the finding."

Walter's expression was solemn, and grave, as he took Fox's face between his hands and kissed his lips, his tongue pushing between them, and claiming the other man's mouth in an embrace that lasted for a lifetime.

"You did miss me then?" Fox asked cheekily, as the embrace ended. Walter cuffed him lightly on the shoulder.

"I missed the services of a good seneschal," he replied in a mocking tone.

Fox grinned. "Is that all I am to you?" He asked.

"No." Walter was suddenly serious as he opened the bottle and downed the contents in one long gulp. "You're the man who gave me back my life," he said, when he had finished.

"As you gave me back mine," Fox replied. "What I had before was a half life. Always traveling, looking for someone I could never hope to find."

They kissed, a light, gentle touch of lips, and then Walter got up and pulled Fox to his feet.

"Time to go home," he murmured, and Fox nodded. Walter pulled himself into his saddle and hauled Fox up front of him. He put his arms around the other man, and held him close.

Fox closed his eyes, and felt the cool November air caress them as the horse trotted back to the house. It had been a year since they had made this journey before, only this time he knew that, like Walter's hawk, he was exactly where he belonged.

The End.

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters and settings are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. No money is being made from this work. No copyright infringement is intended.