

# LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

## METRONOMY

Suki Fleet

## **Table of Contents**

Love's Landscapes.....3  
Metronomy – Information.....5  
Metronomy.....6  
Author's Note.....32  
Author Bio .....33

# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## METRONOMY

**By Suki Fleet**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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## Photo Description

A man in simple leather coat stands in what could be a crowded arena, a noose is around his neck as if he is about to be hung. His expression is defiant as he looks off to the side—he will not be beaten by this—but he also looks a little resigned, as if he knows this is it for him. There is a blood stain on his tunic, near his shoulder.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*I'm not quite sure how I got myself into this bit of mess. But, what I am sure of is that I'm going to need some help getting out of it.*

*There's only one man that can come to rescue me from this trouble. Problem is, should he save the day, I might find myself in an even more precarious situation. I can't seem to keep my hands off him... and in this day and age? That should spell nothing but danger and disaster...*

*Thanks,*

*Susan*

## Story Info

**Genre:** historical, paranormal

**Tags:** friends to lovers, action/adventure, sorcerer, mild peril, domination, rescued from death

**Word Count:** 10,851

# METRONOMY

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*My time has finally run out*, I think, a sickening dread filling my stomach.

There is a noose around my neck, the rope coarse and scented with death.

The crowd jeers, throwing insults around the hay-strewn arena, their hostility palpable, but I won't close my eyes—I will look at every last one of them. I tell myself I'm not looking for *him*—not desperately seeking out his face. If Hunter is here, he'll make himself known. He wouldn't leave it to the last possible second to make his move.

*Would he?*

Like a black spot on the edge of my vision, the hangman makes his grim procession across the arena. They dress him in black and cover his head with a black cloth, two circles cut out for his eyes, but the whole town knows who he is. Perhaps the anonymity is for the three of us. I try to block him out, along with the crowd, the shouts, the scent of the unwashed bodies next to me, the stains on the boards beneath my filthy, shoeless feet. It's one of the first things they do before they shove you into the stinking holes they call prison cells, take your shoes—if you have any.

There are two boys on either side of me; they barely look eighteen. One of them is crying, tears streaking down his dirty face. The other wants to comfort him, I can see it in his expression. Watching his friend's (his lover's?) tears is killing him. Well, it'll all be over soon.

*Where are you, Hunter?*

I hate that I trust him. Ever since I was captured yesterday in this town on the border between our kingdom and the next, I've held fast to the thought that things wouldn't get this far, that he'll come for me. The guardian he'd left watching over me (the eagle he thinks I don't know about) had flown immediately to warn him that I'd been caught. She would have reached him in hours and he couldn't be more than a day's ride from here. Perhaps I *am* going to die the death of a miserable traitor in front of this ugly crowd.

The wooden platform we're standing on shakes as the hangman steps up, and I know this is it. To the outrage of the crowd, one of the boys begins to struggle wildly, calling out to the other boy, telling him he loves him, pleading that they be allowed to hold one another's hand and straining against his bonds as if to reach for him in a desperate farewell. Their pain is almost tangible and it makes me long to have done things differently, makes me wish I had someone's hand to hold onto at the last, wish that I'd not left so much undone, unspoken, unrealised.

And in those last seconds I make a vow, perhaps it's pointless, but in what is left of this life and into the next, I vow to make it clear to the ones I love how I feel about them, whatever the cost, whatever hell I am sent to in the name of God, because love is the point of all this pain. Love is the meaning. Being caught spying, is not worth dying for. Love is.

As I feel those last seconds tick away, I stare up at the heavens and swear this upon my holy soul to a God I don't believe in and, more importantly, I swear to myself... and Hunter. *Save me and I am yours.*

The birds come out of nowhere.

One moment there is just the fathomless white of forever above us, the next a black cloud of rooks darkens the October sky. I've never seen so many.

At first, I wonder if this is what death comes cloaked in when he claims us, but as they get closer, I hear the noise, the awful cawing screech they make, and I know as they descend toward the arena that this is not a supernatural event destined to end the three of us.

All is chaos. The birds target those with shields and weapons—the guards, the noblemen sitting in the stands, the hangman. But the whole crowd is screaming and charging for the gates, the sounds muffled by a thousand birds' wings beating through the air. I close my eyes as their wing tips brush against my skin, knowing the birds will not harm me, but disliking their proximity all the same.

Hunter is usually so careful with using his gifts. No one but me knows that he can make some creatures do as he bids them.

The cold metal of a blade touches my wrist and my hands are released. Instinct drives me to pull off the noose before turning around to face my rescuer.

Hunter.

Nothing can touch my relief.

“Move,” the command is a teeth-clenched growl.

Poised and hyper alert, he scans the arena. He's in battle mode, so I don't expect any real conversation out of him other than the essential. And my relief, and the urge to act immediately upon my vow and gracelessly throw my arms around him, is tempered by the expression that darkens his face, pulling his full lips into a thin bruise-coloured line. It is an expression I have never seen before, and since we've known one another since we were seven—he the nobleman's son, me the stable boy—that's saying something. Even his wild black curls look more errant than usual, more dragged-through-a-hedge-backward, than simply un-brushed.

Beside me, the boys are struggling with their bonds. Ignoring the warning in Hunter's eyes, I reach down and take the knife from his hand to release them. I watch how they clutch one another, dive fearlessly into the rook-covered ground and run before any of the guards recover and stop them.

Hunter is right; we need to move.

Handing him back his knife, I cautiously crouch and ease myself off the wooden platform, the wound in my shoulder opening with the movement.

“You are injured,” he states, his expression unchanged, though I catch a flash of a much deeper emotion burning in his eyes as they flick over me, checking for severity of injury or weakness.

“It is nothing,” I say, almost without grimacing. And after nearly dying, it really is.

\*\*\*\*

With a slow limp I attempt to disguise as a jog, I follow him across the arena, the birds parting like a black sea before him, the air full of black feathers. Terrified people run past us, others crouch on the ground too fearful to move, the rooks standing guard on their bodies, heads cocked as though they are listening. The birds will not hurt anyone, Hunter would not let them. I can almost feel the hum in the air as they wait for his signal.

“Are you fit to ride?” he asks as we slip out through the gates of the arena and into the town square.

*Probably not*, I think, moving my shoulder infinitesimally and wincing. But I won't tell him that.



Birds have descended upon the whole town. I look around in wonderment. Not a rooftop nor patch of ground remain uncovered.

Stopping, he flicks his dark eyes over me, brings his fingers to his lips and whistles.

Moments later the ground trembles as Shiva gallops blindly toward us, her head cloaked with sackcloth (his faithful horse likes the birds probably about as much as I do). She pulls up at Hunter's side and obediently drops her head. White sweat stains mar her chestnut coat, typical effects of a hard, fast journey.

With undeniable grace in his strong limbs, Hunter swings himself into the saddle, and seeing I'm not going to be able to do it myself, takes my good hand and grips the leather of my coat and half-drags me up into the saddle behind him. Even though it hurts, I slip my arms around his waist, imagining my fingers brushing against the taut muscles of his stomach beneath his black coat. I breathe deeply, inhaling his familiar scent.

"I have a horse waiting for you at a farm a mile from here," he says.

And we're gone, clattering down the dusty track away from the town.

After half a mile, we slow as Hunter raises one hand dramatically into the air.

Ignoring the pain it takes to do so, I turn and watch the rooks rise up into the sky, their darkness scattering.

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"What the fuck were you thinking?" Hunter demands, as he paces back and forth in front of me, tension flying off him like sparks from a fire.

God help me, but I want to grab the front of his dirty white shirt and force him up against the barn door, pulling the tension in his body against mine.

But we're at the farm, only a short mile from the town, and we need to be going.

Not to mention my horse is a docile mare Hunter pilfered from some local farmer and she's hardly going to outrun anyone if we're being chased.

"I wasn't thinking, *'Oh yes, today I think I'll get fucking caught'*," I mutter, turning to try and adjust my stirrups one handed.

Hunter sees my difficulty and roughly pushes my hand away to adjust them himself.

I can't work out if this anger he seems to be seething in is because I got caught or because he's had to rescue me—something he's never had to do before.

"You were convicted of *sodomy*," he spits out the last word as if its taste disgusts him. And a small piece of my heart shrinks in my chest.

"What?" I ask carefully.

I'm puzzled. Yesterday, I was caught spying—which despite being what I *was* doing, didn't make much sense either—I had done nothing to alert anyone's attention to me and I had been well hidden in the Tavern's loft. I do not get caught. I think it's the main reason Hunter drags me along on these missions.

"Fucking men."

A wild sounding laugh escapes my lips before I can stop it. He thinks I don't understand the term he used.

"I *know* what sodomy is. I just don't understand why they didn't just hang me for spying, which is what they *caught* me doing!"

He pauses what he's doing and lays his hands against the saddle, his shoulders sagging as though in defeat. Or relief.

"Why would they lie?" he asks.

And I know he's not really questioning my integrity but still I say, "Why would I?"

Once my stirrups are adjusted, he boosts me up. There is a moment when the pain from my shoulder is so intense I near welcome the blackness that threatens to take me.

"We'll rest at Cassandra's," he says, mounting Shiva and checking I am upright and able to hold on.

Gritting my teeth, I follow him out of the barn and urge the reluctant mare to a gallop.

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Cassandra's is a large three-roomed, stone house in the woods that lie halfway between the border towns and home. It's mostly favoured by fugitives, and right now that means us.

We reach the hut by nightfall (just). I am ready to fall off my horse, and my horse in turn is about to collapse to the ground in exhaustion.

Hunter strokes her neck and soothes her, gently removing her saddle and brushing her down, while I lean wearily against a tree.

“Thought I was supposed to be the ‘stable hand,’” I state wryly, enjoying watching Hunter at work, even through my haze of pain.

Hunter flicks his eyes over me but says nothing. At least he’s no longer pissed off.

It’s true, ‘stable hand’ is my official title in the royal court, but it’s been months now since I’ve done anything like just look after horses.

Everything went to hell when the king died, leaving a son too sick to lead. When the rumours of rebellion in the north started, Hunter and his brother, Sylvain, took it upon themselves to find out what was going on. Hunter asked me to go with him on a few missions as a spy. I’m not sure when it turned into a permanent arrangement, but with people disappearing all over the place back at home and everyone wary of a dagger in the back, I’m glad that’s what it’s become.

“I’m sorry I took so long, Mouse,” he says quietly, concentrating on untangling the brambles in the mare’s matted coat and not looking at me.

When anyone else calls me by my childhood name, it sets my teeth on edge—he is the only one I will take it from. The only one who can utter it and set a shiver down my spine, a flare of heat to my groin.

“Sylvain said he was going to be tied up at the castle, and he sent me on a wild goose chase. I was miles away when I got the signal you had been captured... I didn’t think I was going to make it.” He closes his eyes as though the thought causes him pain.

I frown. Sylvain wasn’t tied up at the castle (despite what he might wish); he was in the town. I saw him leaving the Tavern just before they caught me. I’d thought he was perhaps there for more official talks.

I tell Hunter as much, watching as his face goes through a gamut of emotions. He steps toward me across the bracken-covered earth and reaches out, placing his hands on my shoulders. The strength and power I feel emanating off him and the dark scent of his sweat makes my cock twitch. I want him to order me to my knees before him. I want him undone and hard as rock, spit slicked against my lips.

*Christ, I've got to stop this.* But I can barely control the urge to reach up and place my hands over his just to touch him.

“Are you sure it was Sylvain?” he asks, just once.

I nod.

“Then what I did not want to believe may be true. Sylvain is trying to form an alliance with the rebellion. He will let them overthrow our fragile court and take our land for their own so that he will be spared death. He knew you'd be at the Tavern. He set you up,” he says bitterly, before giving me a tight sort of smile and then turning away to let out a roar which sends birds and animals scattering for a quarter of a mile.

“Go rest,” he says when the echoes have finally died away, and waves his hand in the direction of the hut.

I nod, even though I feel like I'm being dismissed and that pisses me off. However different our birthright, our friendship has always been as equals.

Still, I don't want to leave him alone right now, but there is nothing I can do if I stay.

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The hut is freezing. By the wan light of a guttering candle, I start a fire in the grey stone hearth. In the glow of the flames, I boil a shallow pan of water to wash with, and strip off my shirt to check my wounds. My shoulder is a mess from being hit with a barb and dragged from my prison cell. Gently, I finger the inflamed skin, blood still oozes from the cut. It hurts like hell. As carefully as I can, I wash the area with water hotter than I can really stand, hoping this will be enough to start it healing.

Feeling a presence behind me, I turn and find Hunter in the doorway, watching. I look away, at once loving the feel of his eyes on my naked skin and feeling utterly shamed that my heart speeds up for so little.

“Can I see?” he asks, crossing the room and crouching down before me, his eyes full of firelight, full of flickers.

“Fuck,” I hiss, as he grips my upper arm and presses around the wound with his thumb.

His hand is cold and he never was any good at being gentle. Most of the time it is his roughness that turns me on—even now, despite how much it hurts as he explores my injury.

Abruptly, he gets up. "I know what will help," he says decisively, before swiftly disappearing out the door and into the night.

Now, even though I am turned on by the roughness and readiness of his nature, I doubt Hunter has any clue as to what will help me. And if he's gone to get herbs, well, he has no idea about herbs—the last time he tried to heal me with them, he inadvertently poisoned me and made me sick for days.

But when he doesn't return, I get up from my position by the warm fire, pull my shirt back around my shoulders, and stand in the doorway, looking out into the cold night.

What I see does not surprise me.

Hunter is crouched down on the loamy earth just beyond the doorway, the fingers of one hand against his temple, the other hand flat on the ground, a humming noise coming from deep within his chest. The sound is eerie and yet tuneful, and I feel it call to the animal part of me.

This is how he sends his thoughts out to the creatures that surround us, checking we are safe, that we have not been followed, asking them to watch over us, perhaps. I don't quite know what it is he does or how he even knew he could do it, but he's done it ever since I've known him.

When we were kids, he'd send me messages by making the spiders in the woods spin crazy webs, or field mice spell out words in the yard outside the tiny hut I lived in. When I tried to teach him how to fish, he made all the fish in the stream come to him, and the birds, well the birds have become his guardians, and mine.

But although I know about his gifts, and he knows I know, hence he would not be crouching down and communing so obviously now, we've never really spoken about them—apart from one time. But that time also involved a kiss and we were barely thirteen and I'm pretty certain Hunter has buried that memory somewhere far, far beneath the surface.

"Okay?" I ask him gently, so as not to shock him with my presence as he slowly stands up, scooping the small pile of greenery beside him into his arms.

It always takes him a moment to come back to himself, for his eyes to become warm brown rather than depthless black. Instinctively, I reach out a hand to steady him as he sways, and end up locking my fingers around his

wrist. Touching him has always been hard, mostly because I really don't want to stop.

"Sylvain is coming. He is with the rebellion. He knows," he says quietly, his tone subdued and a little regretful.

It does not surprise me Sylvain would follow us; he wants me dead after all.

"Knows what? That you rescued me?"

"No, I care not that he knows I rescued you. I care that he knows *how* I rescued you, I care that he knows about *me*." Hunter grimaces. He has no words for what he does and neither do I. "After the spectacle I made today, how could he not?"

"Why does it matter if he knows or not? It makes no difference to anything." Not now that we are both fugitives, our kingdom on the cusp of rebellion and change.

"No difference?" Hunter hisses angrily, and shakes my hand from his wrist as though it were an afterthought.

It makes me want to grasp him until he looks at me properly, deeply, until he can see that I don't want to fucking let him go and I don't want him to let go of me. But it's thoughts and compulsions like those that get people hung around here—though, since this morning I now believe they are thoughts and compulsions worth dying for. I'm not sure I care any longer about rights and wrongs of the church or the law-makers. Dying for any other cause than the one in my heart is no longer an option.

Perhaps he really does awaken the animalistic part of me, the hidden glow at my core that answers to nothing but the truth in my heart. The thought gives me an intense jolt.

"If the rebellion succeeds, we are both running. Does it matter what it is we are running from?" I ask.

Unexpectedly, his hand comes up to cup my jaw, the contact stopping my breath.

All at once, it is as though the anger has been sucked out of him. I lean into his touch, feeling the effects of it thrumming through my muscles. "The stakes are higher now, Mouse. They will try me for necromancy or worse, and you as my accomplice. They will torture us, and I cannot see you die like that."

Hesitantly, I bring my hand up, mirroring his gesture, my thumb stroking the rough stubble of his cheek, his nose, his lips. My heart feels as if it is about to burst right out of my chest.

“Then we will not let them catch us.”

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The darkness brings with it cold winds that search out the pockets of warmth in the house's empty rooms and banishes them with howls and eerie whispers.

Hunter has been in the chamber opposite mine for hours, and I cannot wait any longer. I made a vow. If Sylvain is coming, we do not have long left—whether we leave now and run, or we stay and fight.

I murmur his name as I open the door to the chamber.

“I don't want to be alone tonight,” I say, closing the door behind me.

Hunter is sitting on the cold floor, his head in his hands. At my words he looks up, his expression again one I cannot decipher.

“You would do better without my company,” he says softly.

Paranoia makes me check that the chamber door is closed, the lock turned, before I slowly unbutton the thin shirt I put back on to stop the chill of the evening air gusting around this draughty place. I dressed my wound and applied a few of the herbs I recognised earlier, but it is still painful.

“What are you doing?” he asks, his eyes watching the descent of my fingers.

“If you deny this is what you want, I will not believe you.”

My voice is shaking because despite my words I *do* expect him to deny it. I expect him to throw me out of the chamber whether he wants this or not. I'm taking a risk. And I have no idea whether it will pay off.

“It does not matter what I want.” He runs a hand through his thick curls. Curls I want to press my cheek against as he holds me close, curls I want to breathe in, feel against my lips. “What I want is for you to be safe, and with me you are not.”

“I would be dead without you.”

“You almost *died* this morning.” I cannot miss the anguish in his voice, nor the way he is looking at me as I shrug out of the shirt, letting it drop on

the cold stone floor. Earlier I was shirtless because I was dealing with my injury, but now he must know this is for him.

“Why are you fighting for a cause you no longer believe in?” I ask him, looking deeply into his eyes as I push down the loose pants I put on after cleansing myself.

I do not miss the flicker of his gaze as he takes in the jut of my cock, the way it is straining for him. Only him.

“What do you want, Mouse?” he whispers.

*Can he not see?*

“I want to be yours,” I say, self-consciously walking across the room to stand before him. It’s the only thing I’ve ever wanted. “I would do your will, if you were to command me.”

“Why now?” he asks, making no move to get up, though his eyes take their fill of my body.

He is not refusing me, but neither is he reaching out to me with anything other than his eyes.

My heart feels heavy in my chest. My cock begins to flag as my bravado nosedives.

“In the arena, I thought I was going to die. In those last seconds I made a vow for whatever was left of my life and into the next, to show those I cared for how I felt. To no longer be a coward. The boys who were to be hung beside me were not cowards.” I stop, and take a deep breath. “And every single second since then I have felt the pull of my promise. I cannot... I do not *want* things to go on as they are between us. I am not just your friend, Hunter.”

Hunter looks away. “This is just a reaction to near dying. You feel like you need someone to prove you are still alive.”

I sink to my knees.

“Are you blind? Or... or do you not want me?” I have to know, even though I suspect the truth may sting more than a blade through the heart.

“You said you would not believe me if I denied this is what I want,” he says, turning his head away.

“Maybe I would not want to believe it, because I... But if... if that is the truth then...”



Why is it so hard to speak the words in my heart? It is like torture.

“It’s been ten years since you kissed me. Do you remember?” he asks, and when he looks at me, I glimpse the boy he once was, innocent and bold and completely unaware of the effect he had on me.

*Do I remember? I think about it every day.* But those words refuse to be spoken.

“Yes,” I say instead, and I cannot help but smile a little remembering the day—Hunter’s shocked expression when I pressed my lips against his as we tumbled onto the ground after a game of chase. How he melted against me among the fallen leaves, his arms coming around my back to hold me close, and how that in turn shocked and elated me.

But it was over before it began—we thought we heard someone following in the woods. Hunter panicked and used his gifts to see if anyone really was there, but I don’t think he was as experienced as he is now. I watched how his eyes grew dark and the sound came out of him and I was a little afraid. After he came back to himself, we talked about it a little and he’d tried to show me, teach me how to concentrate and send out my senses, to connect with the *other*. But of course I could not.

And somehow we never spoke of it again after that, and it was as though the kiss never happened.

But he remembered. All these years, he remembered. He didn’t bury it.

“I wanted to kiss you again, but there was never a right moment,” I say, dipping my head at the admission. Embarrassed. Talk of fucking would not have me as undone as these words do.

Perhaps there will never be a right moment. Perhaps the right moment is just the one you have available to you.

I lean toward him, watching carefully for any refusal, for any hint that this is not what he wants. I am not bold, or innocent, and I try not to think too hard about any effects I may be having in case there are none. Using my hand against his shoulder to steady myself, I close my eyes and brush my lips gently against his. My blood sings at the contact. I run my tongue against his bottom lip and feel a tremor pass through him, as though he is holding himself back and it is taking a great deal of effort.

When I pull back, his eyes are dark as night. He swipes his thumb across my mouth—so rough and unexpected—it makes me jump.

Sucking the same thumb into his mouth, he smiles sadly, his expression intense.

“I made a vow too, back when I was thirteen. I promised that I would care for a boy who was my friend. I promised I would do nothing to jeopardise his safety, which included acting upon any... what I'd been told were *unnatural* feelings I had for him.”

Oh.

“I wanted to fuck you as soon as I knew what fucking was. But there would have been *consequences...*” There is a fire in his eyes as he speaks, an intensity I have never seen before.

I do not know what to say or do, I can only look at him in the stunned silence.

“Fuck the consequences. We are beyond them now,” I whisper eventually, finding my voice, needing to say something, and not caring if it is the right thing. And maybe he's right, there is desperation to it, a need to prove I am alive, but he is the only one I want to prove that with.

All the air seems to have been sucked out of the room, leaving us in a breathless vacuum. He is calling to me, I can feel it. I want it, his control; I want to lose myself in it. I want to let go.

We have known one another for forever, but when Hunter looks at me like he is now, I feel I know nothing, that this part of him has been hidden from me. Until now.

I give myself over to it, rolling my head back at his suggestion, exposing my throat, my chest, my cock—the sensation has me as hard as the rock that makes up this house.

I lie back on the hut's cold stone floor and watch as he crawls over me, like a predator with its prey. One handed, he loosens the lacing of his trousers, exposing the blushed tip of his cock to the cold whispery air. God I want to touch him, taste him, but my arms are pinned in place above my head and he holds himself above me, not quite letting our bodies touch. He closes my eyes with his will and opens them for me again. Holds my balls in the palm of his calloused hand and strokes them gently, then squeezes until I can hardly breathe. I have no idea how he knows what this touch does to me, perhaps he has watched me masturbate.

I trust him beyond anything to let him play like this.

Leaning down, he nips my jaw. "Kiss me, Mouse," he murmurs, and I hear the words inside my head as he brushes our open mouths together, wanting to keep him this close always.

It is clumsy and rough but I would not want it any other way. With one hand pulling my hair, the other clawing my backside, the force of his desire jolts through me. His control is wavering as he collapses, dark eyed and wanting, to jerkily thrust his hips against mine. We rut like animals, wild and desperate. His cock is still sheathed by the coarse material of his trousers, and though I long to feel the heat of his skin, the friction near tips me over the edge.

Breathing hard, he slows it down. He was close, I can tell by the flush colouring his face and neck, the light sheen of sweat on his skin.

"Are you mine?" he whispers roughly, pushing himself up, looking at me as though there is nothing else worthy of his attention on this earth.

"Always," I gasp.

The heat of his gaze is hotter than the fire on my shivering skin. He touches my thigh and I let my legs lift and fall open, exposing myself to him. My cock leaks clear sticky fluid against my stomach, which I know from experience tastes saltier than come. Hunter traces the fluid with his finger, before rubbing it around my asshole, then pushes his finger inside, quickly adding a second.

"Please," I groan. Not sure what I'm asking, only that my mind is telling me from everything I've been taught that this invasion is wrong, and yet, God help me, I want more of it. I want to spread myself wide, pull him deeper and deeper inside.

I lick his palm and he spits against the wetness before opening his trousers wide and slicking his thick cock. I prop myself up on my elbows to watch, fascinated at how different he is from me. I've seen plenty of limp dicks over the years, but very few hard ones. His cock is thick and straight, a dusky obelisk rising from a forest of tight black curls. He spits again against my asshole, the heat of him burning as, grasping my thighs he pushes slowly inside me.

It hurts. Hunter must see the pain on my face, as, muscles trembling, he stops. My muscles want to push him out, he's too big, he's never going to *fit... but, God, the thought of him trying...*

I groan, willing myself to relax and take him. Without pushing deeper, he rocks his hips, withdraws a little, gives a few shallow thrusts, cups my balls, kisses me.

“More,” I gasp, beginning to unravel, beginning to want the pain because the burn is starting to feel so fucking good.

As though sensing I have given him permission, Hunter lets go, driving deep, and sucking my tongue into his mouth.

The world breaks down to a realm of sensation, of taste and touch. I want nothing to break the spell we have created, I want this moment to be forever and we, immortal.

But distantly, I am aware of an owl's call as it echoes through the wood that surrounds us, loud and haunting as the tolling of a bell.

Immediately, Hunter tenses above me, his hand gripping my hip in alarm.

The spell is broken.

Something is wrong.

He withdraws too quickly, leaving me bereft.

“Get dressed,” he whispers urgently, his eyes wide. “Someone is close. I thought we'd have more time than this.”

Frustrated as hell, I shift away from him to drag on my pants and shirt, cursing that I left the sturdy shoes Hunter found for me at the farm, in the other room.

If we have been followed this far, they must have been travelling through the night, which means they must know these woods well. They must know Cassandra's.

We are *fucked*. Fuck.

Hurriedly slinging his coat on, Hunter grabs his short blade (a tool used for skinning animals when we are on the road), stamps on the fire in the hearth and makes for the front door. I am still fiddling with the buttons of my stupid shirt and searching for my shoes, but I know he has to be outside to do his thing, he has to be touching the earth to talk to it—or touching that which he wants to command (like me). For a surreal second I wonder if he can talk to plants too or if it is just animals.

Shoes on, shirt and coat half done up, I creep outside after him, nearly tripping over his crouching form a few meters beyond the door. Staring blindingly into the trees, and wondering how many are out there coming for us, I hunker down next to him, feeling weirdly protected by the humming noise he's making.

When the noise dies away, I know he is coming back to himself and I press in close, knowing he will whisper what he knows in my ear that way. Plus, my frustration has not quite ebbed away and the need to be close to him is like an unquenched thirst.

"Sixteen, on foot, a few hundred meters away to the west. Sylvain is not one of them. There is a camp half a mile away in a clearing, a hundred men."

"All for us?" I ask, a little awed, fear clenching like a fist in my stomach.

But Hunter shakes his head, his hair brushing my cheek. "We are just the beginning."

"We need to go," I say, when Hunter makes no attempt to move, despite what he's just told me. We have no chance against so many. I don't understand why he is not moving.

"If we leave without the horses, we will have no chance on foot in the light of day," he says heavily.

"Then we bring the horses."

"And crash through the undergrowth with them, alerting the rebels to our position?" I know exactly the look Hunter is giving me, and I look away, into the dark... where something flickers...

With a quick jab, I elbow him in the ribs. "Over there!" I hiss.

A torch, just visible through the trees, weaves its way toward us.

"Stay here." Hunter's words are like a punch to my gut and I realise with shock he's just pushed his will onto me. I try and get up, go after him, but I can't, it's like struggling with impossibly heavy, invisible bonds. He's commanded me to stay and I can do nothing else.

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Unable to move from my crouch on the ground, I curse him over and over in my head. I'm so fucking angry. I gave him my trust and he's overstepped the mark. I am his but I did not consent to being held back while he goes it alone and gets himself in trouble.

Sucking in air through my nose and blowing it out my mouth, I will myself to calm down.

All is silent now. I strain my ears but I can hear nothing, see nothing but a few shadows cast by the light of the cloud-covered moon. The torch has vanished, though my eyes burn with searching it out in the darkness.

That is the direction Hunter would have gone.

The wind whispers the dry leaves together and all at once the weight pinning me in place is lifted and I can move. But now I am gripped by fear, fear that Hunter has been captured or hurt and that is why he has released me. My heart is hammering so loud I'm afraid whoever is coming for us can hear it. I'm forcing myself to think—I need to think—when a hand grips my arm and drags me back toward the stone wall of the house. The contact does not shock me; somehow I know it's Hunter without having to see him.

“One down. The rest are close,” he breathes, his lips against my ear.

“Don't *ever* hold me back like that again,” I hiss, angrily.

Awkwardly, he reaches down and squeezes my hand. The gesture is so unlike him I swallow my next words.

“Be angry with me later, right now we need to concentrate on staying alive,” he says.

There is movement, close by. Too close. Hunter must have been too distracted to notice. Some compulsion drives me to step in front of him and when the stick comes down it thuds against my good shoulder and I just react on instinct. My fist connecting with a jaw I can barely see and punching again until I hear a body hit the ground with a delayed yelp.

Hunter is by my side in a heartbeat, checking if the body I've knocked out is still breathing, as I shake out my aching knuckles and wince at the pain from what was my *good* shoulder.

His feral grin looms at me out of the darkness, all teeth. There has to be a word for a look like that, and if there is, it would definitely be a criminal offense in the eyes of every church and government I've ever known.

“I've never seen you punch like that,” he whispers.

But before I can bask in the glow of his praise, the night air cracks with movement, and torchlight drifts between the trees.

Hunter grabs my hand again and now we run.

This time we head away from the house, deeper into the woods, Hunter guided by whatever it is he's guided by and me following.

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Out of breath, and all but out of adrenaline (which is the only thing that has kept me going thus far), we rest by the jagged stump of what I imagine was once a magnificent oak. The trunk of the great tree rots in the undergrowth behind us, covered in moss and nettles. This deep in the woods everything smells damp and earthy and I fill my lungs with it, the scent comforting.

"Where are we going?" I ask between breaths, trying to ignore the sharp pains shooting down my arm and across my chest from my wound. It must have opened up again, but I have not the will to tighten the dressing right now.

"I don't know. We were surrounded and they were closing in, we just... we just need to keep going. I set Shiva and the mare free. Hopefully, I will be able to call to them when light returns."

Above us the sky has cleared, and I can see stars glittering like dust motes in the blackness.

"You were right, Mouse. We should have just run." Hunter's breath is still laboured, whereas mine is deepening and slowing... it is as though he is injured. The thought is like a shard of ice in my heart.

"No, I was speaking out of fear," I say as I step in close to him, still barely able to make out his form, and stroke my hand across his back. If he's injured I need to find out where and how bad. When my hand reaches his left side, he lets out a strangled yelp.

"What happened?" I ask softly, my fingers doing a slow dance under his thick coat, against his shirt, trying to work out the extent of his injury.

"A blade," he wheezes breathlessly, and my blood runs cold. I want to yell and punch something else, something more yielding and breakable than the jaw of a faceless rebel. Instead, I close my eyes and grit my teeth.

"Deep?"

He doesn't answer. But he gasps when my fingers press against the wound, and when I bring my hand away it is slick and black with blood. The scent of it is like that of a slain animal.

*Jesus.*

We need to stop the bleeding.

“Sit,” I say, placing my hands on his shoulders and gently guiding him toward the ground. Surprisingly, he does as he is bid. I would rather have him snarl and fight me. I would rather have him look at me as if I am making an unnecessary fuss than as though he needs me to be the one to take charge.

Shrugging out of my coat, I pull off my filthy shirt, twist it flat and sink down next to him to wrap it tightly around his waist, under his coat. He flicks his eyes away from me, barely holding back a groan of pain. I can almost feel the fight leaking out of him.

The shifting of the wind through the trees has an ominous feel, as if whoever is following us is closing in, fast.

We need to hide. We could be found at any moment and I would have little success defending us. *Help me on this*, I silently plead.

In the distance, I hear the baying howls of pack animals—hunting dogs. They must be from the camp. Their howls are warped by the wind, distorted by distance. But the distance will soon be gone.

Maybe it is better this way. They will make the end quick, and Hunter's fear of prolonged torture will be unfounded if we are to be torn apart by animals. But then again, if Hunter is alive he won't let that happen, he will just turn those dogs around.

If it was me, perhaps I'd turn those dogs on their owners, but Hunter would never use an animal to hurt someone, would never manipulate for harm or waste a life like that. He holds life sacred. All life. Even that of his brother (even though Sylvain tried to kill me), this is perhaps why it hurts him so.

Quiet footsteps step through the bracken, so close. I can scarcely breathe.

“They are surrounding us,” Hunter wheezes, and I grip his hand.

If I go, it is with his hand in mine. If I go, it is by his side.

The burning light of a torch weaves its way between the trees ahead. I turn my head and see another to the right, and another. A weird sort of calm washes through me, even though I'm scared as hell—I am exhausted. This is it. We have no strength to run.



When the ground around us begins to shake, I think at first it is an earth tremor, sometimes around here they are strong enough to knock down buildings, but then I hear Hunter humming, his head resting against his chest and I know he is using the last of his strength to help us, that somehow the earth is trembling because he asked it to.

“Hold your breath,” he whispers suddenly and pulls me close, his arm around my chest.

I barely have a chance to do as he asks when the earth comes up and swallows me.

Us.

His hand is still in mine, though I am no longer on my feet, and the sky is no longer above me, just the richly packed earth, so pungent and spidery dark, full of the tiny white roots of the forest plants. But there is space around me, air flowing freely, and if I turn my head, I can see a tiny patch of moon-dark sky through the gnarled dead roots of the fallen oak up on the forest floor.

We are underground, far, far beneath the rotting tree stump.

There is enough space to sit, my head pushing against the earth, enough space for me to lean over and desperately tend to Hunter's trembling form. Such a move must have taken a lot out of him, and I have no idea how he managed to pull us down into the earth and create such a perfect hollow.

Footsteps crunch through the bracken above, then voices, though they are too muffled for me to hear what they are saying. They must have been certain they had us. Fuck, that was so close.

I press my forehead against his shoulder and curl around his unhurt side.

“It'll be okay, Mouse. We're safe here. Sleep now,” he whispers.

And I know I shouldn't, I should stay awake and watch him. I should be strong and watch over both of us, keep us safe. But no strength on Earth can keep my eyes open, and I blink out like a snuffed candle flame and fall at once into a deep and dreamless sleep.

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A thin shaft of light warms my skin. I blink, and immediately sneeze, inhaling the scent of earth and wood, my skin covered in a light coating of fine soil.

Beside me Hunter is still. For a moment my heart stops, then his chest rises and falls and I close my eyes again in relief.

Trying to be careful not to wake him, I reach over and lay my hand against his forehead to check he is not burning up with a fever. Thankfully, he is not.

Sleepily, he frowns as I withdraw my hand, and his brown eyes blink open. His expression is confused and wary.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you,” I murmur.

“Come here,” he groans holding out his arm, a flash of pain screwing up his features for a second.

And even though my shoulder is hurting and Hunter is barely concealing his pain, I come into his arms, resting my head against his shoulder, the thud of his heart vibrating through me.

Whatever happens, wherever we go, wherever this weird place we are in right now, in his arms like this, I am home.

We rest like that, sleeping fitfully in one another’s arms until the sun casts no more light on us. At nightfall, despite Hunter’s protests and the fact my whole arm is stiff and painful, I make a sloping tunnel to the surface. It’s slow going but we need food and water, and a candle would be a Godsend so I can check our wounds, but I’m not sure I can make it back to Cassandra’s, and I promised Hunter I wouldn’t try to. I lay within the mouth of the tunnel for half an hour, listening for movement in the forest.

Fear clenches inside me as I crawl out the tunnel and look around. For a moment, all is silent. The rebels must have carried on, given up on finding us. I almost let my guard down a little when a series of sharp cracks, like running footsteps, fractures the fragile peace. My heart near seizes. The ground vibrates, and I desperately seek out the attacker who will fell me.

But it doesn’t come.

Instead, Shiva butts me in the back and snorts heartily. *Fucking horse!*

She has her saddle on, though it has spun around so it is against her stomach and the saddle bags, full of our supplies, are trailing against the ground. I don’t know whether to hug her or hold my head in my hands and weep.

Holding my bad arm across my chest, I unbuckle the girth, letting the saddle drop to the floor.

“Good girl. Thank you,” I whisper, giving her a pat and quick one-armed hug before picking up both saddle bags and slipping back down the poorly constructed tunnel, hoping the walls won’t cave in on me.

The moonlight provides a scant illumination, but it is better than nothing.

“You called Shiva didn’t you?” I say upon reaching the hollow, and marvelling at how perfectly intact the walls are down here, Hunter must still be using energy to keep it this way, to keep the earth from piling in and burying us within it.

“Didn’t want you trying to make it to Cassandra’s in the dark,” Hunter says, stiffly sitting himself up.

“I promised you I wouldn’t,” I say wryly, wondering about the trust that seems to be in doubt here.

But the fact that we’re having this conversation tells me Hunter is not as seriously hurt as I feared last night.

Blindly, I feel around in the saddle bag until I find a candle with the tinder box and the flint and steel lighter.

I light a small fire then the candle, Hunter watching.

“I’m glad I’m here with you,” he says eventually.

“You’d not rather be back at the castle then?” I snort, reckoning there is no doubt he would be washed and clean and in comfortable surroundings.

But perhaps there is no castle for us any longer. The thought is sobering.

I heat a pan of water, and silently we check our wounds. Hunter’s is a deep gouge above his hip, but more a flesh wound than a serious stab wound.

“What are we doing, Hunter?” I don’t mean to say the words out loud. I don’t expect his answer is the one I want to hear.

“Waiting them out. They have more pressing matters than hunting us down, but we don’t want to draw them back—”

“No, I mean, are we heading back to the castle? Because...” I sigh. “That doesn’t seem wise.”

In the flickering light I can feel his dark eyes watching me pensively, but I don’t meet his gaze. “We could head south, maybe pay for passage on one of the ships sailing out to the new world...”

*Who am I fucking kidding?* He'll never agree to that. It sounds like I am suggesting we run, but it's not running, it's choosing a different path. I doubt he will see it that way though.

Hunter's gaze is steady as he waits for me to finish what I have to say.

"I don't agree with their motives, but maybe the rebellion should succeed," I press on. After listening in on many a hushed conversation, spying for Hunter and his brother, I can see both sides of this fight. "Maybe it is time to let the people choose how they want to be led." I say this all very carefully, aware that despite the way Hunter has always treated me, there is a huge divide in our status. Though he is now an orphan, he was born to a rich and important family and he has everything to lose. Whereas, I have nothing. Except him.

"You are suggesting we abandon our kingdom to rebels."

I suppose I am.

"One man's rebel is another man's saviour. One man's fugitive is another man's friend..." I add with a self-conscious shrug.

"Not just a friend." He looks at me openly, his expression unguarded, every defence laid down.

"I'm glad Sylvain set me up. I'm glad of that noose around my neck," I say, wanting to touch the shadows of his face, to prove that he's real, that this is real. The reality of what happened gives me a terrible sense of relief and a vision of what might have been had Hunter been too late.

"I'm not glad about any of that." He sighs heavily, the sound so like that of the wind gusting through the woods above. "Our kingdom is everything I have ever known, Mouse."

Sadness wells up in his eyes, and my heart aches. For him, for me, for whatever decision we make. But I squeeze his fingers with the quiet realisation that this is a decision I want us to make together.

After placing the candle on the ground, near enough that it casts its warm light on his face, I lay at his side. My place in all this.

"The things that you do Hunter, I've never known or heard of anyone else able to do them. A long time ago you told me there were others... maybe we should find them...?"

Hunter looks away. "Stories I read in a book, that is all," he says quietly.

“But perhaps they’re not just stories, perhaps you were given those gifts for a reason. Perhaps for something important...”

“Something more important than fighting for my home, something more courageous than running like a coward?” he whispers, rolling on top of me, oh so careful of our injuries.

“Yes,” I say, my heart beating against his. “You hate fighting. You can’t bear to truly hurt someone, it wounds you.”

I’ve longed to tell him this, to tell him I know him so deeply, so well. And yet as I gaze at him, I am reminded yet again, that I know nothing.

The air is so still, the candlelight so steady, it is as though time has stuttered and stopped.

I don’t realise I am holding my breath until he kisses me, until I have to inhale, and draw in the musky scent of his skin with a chest-deep groan.

Almost painfully, his fingers thread through my hair, tilting my head back, exposing my throat, which he roughly strokes as he would an animal.

But he doesn’t let me touch him, not yet.

My need grows with each touch of his tongue against mine, exploring my mouth as no other has.

Deftly, he strips off my clothes. He sits up, looks at the shadow and light on my skin, traces the candlelight’s flickers. I’m beginning to see he likes me naked before him while he is still clothed. He swallows audibly, watching the way my cock lifts as he strokes my sides, the tension he causes in my muscles when he traces the seam of my balls. He smiles to hear the sounds I make as I try not to cry out. I think he wants me to cry out, to know he is the cause of my loss of control, as I wish to know I am the cause of his.

I follow his eyes, his mouth on my skin.

“Please take off your clothes,” I murmur, when I can stand the teasing no longer.

Quick as sunlight, he complies, lifting his shirt awkwardly over his head and unlacing his trousers. He allows me a moment to run my hand across his chest, through the thick hair there, across the curve of his muscles, the dark pebbles of his nipples, down, down, down, to the slicked wet tip of his cock, eager as an excited animal.

Wary of hurting my shoulder, I sit up and lean forwards, flicking my tongue around his foreskin and against his slit, feeling him tremble and wanting a little taste of him before I let him fuck me, because that is what he is going to do.

Faster than I expect, he pulls me up onto my knees and turns me around, so I am facing away from him. I brace my hands half way down the crumbling wall as he steadies me further with an arm around my chest and roughly thrusts two fingers inside me and then replaces them with the burning heat of his cock. Now I cry out, pushing back against him, against the intensity and the pain, until he is buried deep within me.

For a moment we pause, adjusting to the sensations of one another, his will so tangled with mine it is as though I can feel the pleasure he's feeling, the delicious hot pressure of my body around his cock.

With every touch I feel so alive, every point of contact our skin makes is like the bright map of the stars scattered across the heavens.

Groaning, he starts to move, pulling out and slamming back. It's not gentle, but I never wanted it to be. Letting him hold me up, I grip my fist around my cock and pull on it in time to his thrusts, my orgasm building like a fire blazing through my senses.

Hunter comes first, biting down on my shoulder as he squeezes me tight, his cock pulsing so hard inside me, my nerves thrum and my body jerks as my own orgasm follows on the tail of his. The intensity stops all thought, there is just feeling, all-consuming and a little terrifying in its brilliance. I grip onto Hunter, blindly searching for his mouth, his lips, his tongue.

Spent and exhausted, we collapse against the earth, Hunter blowing out the candle and dragging our clothes around us to act as a blanket.

"This is all I need," I whisper inside our cocoon, his wonderful chest hair curling against my nose. "If you want to return to the castle in the morning, we will do it hand in hand." Just so he knows, if I have to die, it will be by his side, as his lover.

For a while, he is silent but for the deep hush of his breath. I wonder if he is sleeping and I begin to let the sleepy tangles of darkness pull me to their depths.

"You're more important to me than that, Mouse. *This* is more important to me."

I blink my eyes open.

“I am home when I am with you. I do not want to lose you in some pointless fight,” he continues and sighs.

At his words, I push myself up on my elbows, and look into the gleaming darkness of his eyes.

“Then we leave this place, this kingdom?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says simply.

We talk no further but sleep does not claim me straight away. There is so much left for me to know, but as time ticks a heaven around the stars, I know the possibilities are, for once, endless.

**The End**

*Author's Note*

“Time ticks a heaven around the stars” is borrowed in part from the poem *The Force That through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower* by Dylan Thomas



## Author Bio

*A newly-published author with Dreamspinner Press and Harmony Ink Press, Suki Fleet currently lives in the heart of England. Her childhood was quite unconventional and she spent some time living on a boat and travelling at sea with her family. Since she was very small she has always dreamed of writing for a living, but although she has written original fiction online for years and encouraged many new writers to keep going and follow their author dreams, it is only recently she got the courage to make her own dream a reality and actually send something off to a publisher.*

*By day she runs her own business selling fabric (her second love) and juggling family commitments, by night she weaves the stories that the characters in her head dictate. These stories often start with pain or longing but always end with love.*

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