

Don't Read in the Closet Event 2014



**LOVE'S LANDSCAPES
ANTHOLOGY**

**BONUS
VOLUME 5**

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance Anthology

Bonus Volume 5

Introduction

The stories you are about to read celebrate 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 these anthologies are 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.

Over 210 stories were submitted and have now been published as a seventeen volume set with five additional bonus volumes, titled *Love's Landscapes*; this edition is Bonus Volume 5.

Words of Caution

These stories may contain sexually explicit content and are **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.

Dedication

As you can imagine, coordinating over 210 authors, proofing their work and publishing it both online and in e-print involved hundreds of hours of volunteer work. Over the course of seven months, nearly forty members chipped in to help at various times; the M/M Romance Group would like to extend a special thanks to the volunteers of the event team for their unwavering commitment and enthusiasm.

Ebook Layout and Navigation

This ebook can be navigated through the Table of Contents which lists the authors, their story title and its overall genre or theme. Any time you see the words [\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#), you can click on the link and be transported back to the TOC.

Written descriptions of the images that inspired these stories are provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view these photos, 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.

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HUMAN CHOICES

A Love's Landscapes Story



JAYE MCKENNA

HUMAN CHOICES

By **Jaye McKenna**

Photo Description

A young man with striking blue eyes, long hair, and a beard stares at the camera. He wears a breastplate over a simple tunic.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I'm in trouble and desperately need your help. It began a couple of weeks ago when I heard a fight outside my workshop. When I looked out I saw this man and a couple of others had been backed into a corner by a group of nasty-looking thugs. They were outnumbered, so I rushed down to help. In the ensuing fight, I got hit by the edge of a spell. I didn't think it had done anything, not then. I was more upset that the group I'd been helping ran off without thanking me once the fight was over. At least this man had the decency to look back at me before he disappeared.

Since then, though, I've had a name stuck in my head, a name I've never heard before. At first I just thought it now and then. Within a few days, it was slipping into my mind every time I relaxed. Now it's constant: the same name over and over again like the beat of my heart. I think I've been cursed. It's slowly driving me mad. The only way to break this curse is to find the man whose name it is. Is it him? How am I supposed to find him? Help!

Sincerely,

Amy

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: other world, magic users, apothecary, slave, prison/captivity, past abuse, first time, hurt/comfort

Content Warnings: dubious consent, attempted rape

Word Count: 50,791

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Dedication

To Amy Rae Durreson, for giving me such a lovely prompt to work with.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Arielle Pierce for beta reading and Jill McCarl for copyediting and proofreading. Thanks also to all the Love's Landscapes volunteers for all their hard work!

HUMAN CHOICES

By Jaye McKenna

Chapter One

“...Seb and Nida will spend the nights in their cottage, as usual. That means you’ll be alone at night.” Master Rikard’s bushy black eyebrows wriggled across his brow as he spoke. A mind-picture slowly swam through the haze in Khy’s head. He closed his eyes, trying to hang on to the image.

Black... fuzzy... caterpillar... crawling across the Master’s face... or had it been a leaf? He frowned and tried to put himself back in the garden. Had he been helping Seb pull up carrots? Or was it potatoes? Had that even been yesterday? Maybe it had been—

“Khy!” Master Rikard’s voice lashed through the air like a whip.

Khy looked up and blinked, his mind-picture of the caterpillar shattering into tiny pieces as he struggled to focus on the Master.

“Pay attention!”

“Yes, Master.” Khy’s own words sounded dull and slurred. He couldn’t make his sounds come out all crisp and clean the way everyone else could. His tongue just wasn’t fast enough.

“With any luck, I’ll be back in a few days. I’m not happy about leaving you alone at night, mind you, but there’s no help for it. With half the village down with the fever and the brothers run off their feet tending the sick, I can hardly send you to the monastery. Do your chores, take your medicine, and mind Seb and Nida. Do not make me regret leaving you in charge.” With that, Master Rikard strode out the door and was gone in a swirl of dark robes and darker temper.

Khy stared after him, blinking. What was it the Master had just said?

Something about charging...

He frowned and smacked the side of his head with his fist. Master Rikard sometimes did that for him when it took him too long to think about things. It was supposed to make him think faster and smarter. Khy wasn’t sure that it helped. Except for hurting, it didn’t feel any different from his normal thinking, all thick and slow, as if someone had poured honey into his head.

He stared hard at the door and tried to gather together the pieces of his thoughts. It was no use. He couldn’t remember the exact words the Master had

used. He had to go all the way back to the caterpillar. He smiled as he watched the way its little feet gripped the twig. Then Master Rikard had shouted... and all the pieces of the caterpillar picture had scattered in his head, and...

Khy's breath caught in his throat and his heart skipped a beat. The Master really had said *in charge*.

He'd never been in charge of anything before. Not that he could remember, at least, although Khy's memory was a tricky thing, full of holes and dark, twisty places where entire days could get lost.

Tonight, after supper, when he'd finished helping Nida with the dishes, and she and Seb had retired to their cottage, Khy would be in charge of the entire Tower.

Well. All except the workroom. And Master's bedroom. He wasn't allowed to go into the workroom unless Master was with him, and he must never, never go into Master's bedroom. He'd be in charge of everything else, though. It was a lot more than he was usually in charge of, which was exactly nothing, not even himself most of the time.

Khy turned a slow circle as he surveyed his domain. Being in charge was important, and he didn't want to do it wrong.

"Khy!" Nida's voice came from behind him, sharp enough that she might have already said his name more than once. He jerked around to peer at her, hoping she wasn't too angry.

The light had changed again. Morning sunlight had been pouring in the window by the door when Master Rikard had gone, and now the only sunlight he could see was coming in the window by the table. It must be nearly lunchtime. Somehow, he'd lost most of the morning.

He almost smacked himself again.

"Khy."

He blinked at Nida. She was busy tying her bonnet strings under her chin. When she was finished, she picked up a basket that had been sitting on the table. Khy tried to see what was inside, but it was covered with a cloth.

"Seb and I must go to the village. I've had word that my mother's taken ill. We'll be back by supper time. Stay in the tower. Wait here and I'll be home in time to make you something to eat. Can you do that?"

Khy frowned. Could he stay in the tower? Could he wait? “Wait right here?” he asked, pointing to the spot where he stood.

Nida’s eyes lifted toward the heavens for a moment, and then she said very slowly, “Don’t go outside, Khy. Seb and I will be back soon. Stay here.”

He nodded slowly. *Don’t go outside*, he understood. It was one of Master’s rules. He could only go outside if he was with Seb, and only if they were going to work in the garden or in the stable.

With Seb and Nida gone, Khy was in charge all that afternoon. He decided when the fire needed stirring. He decided when to sweep the floor. When supper time came and there was no sign of Nida or Seb, Khy decided that supper should be bread toasted over the fire and a big hunk of cheese cut from the wheel that Nida kept in the pantry.

Khy usually ate sitting on the floor next to the hearth, but since he was in charge, he took his plate to the table. He glanced around to make sure the Master hadn’t returned, and sat down in the chair opposite Master Rikard’s.

No one told him that toasted bread and cheese wasn’t a proper supper. No one told him he couldn’t have two helpings, either, so he did. When he went back to the table, he looked around to make sure he was still alone. He was, so he sat carefully in Master Rikard’s chair—just on the edge, though, so he could get up fast if the Master came in.

He frowned and scratched his nose. If there was no one to see him sitting in the Master’s chair, was it still the wrong thing to do?

When no one shouted at him or boxed his ears, he became bolder, sliding all the way onto the seat and resting his arms upon the armrests. When there was still no shouting, he relaxed a bit more and leaned back so he could look over the tower’s living area.

He was in charge, after all.

Being in charge made Khy feel brave and important, even if there wasn’t anyone that he could be in charge of. He felt that way right up until the purple shadows of twilight crept into the room. That was when it occurred to him that Master Rikard wouldn’t be coming back tonight. Khy would be all by himself in the tower. All night long.

He looked out the window, pressing his nose to the glass and squinting into the gathering darkness. Except for the small clearing where Seb grew

vegetables and herbs, the trees of the Skarwood grew close to the crumbling tower where Master Rikard made his home. Khy didn't like the look of the forest at night; it seemed very thick and very dark. There were supposed to be mountains nearby, but the trees made it impossible to see them.

After he shut the curtains to hide the night, Khy glanced over at his pallet, which lay rolled up near the hearth. Being alone at night didn't usually bother him. He was used to Master Rikard disappearing every night after supper, either up to his bedroom or down to the workroom.

Tonight felt different. Even though he rarely saw the Master in the evenings, just knowing that he wasn't here made Khy's stomach feel fluttery. He wasn't sure he liked being in charge anymore. While part of him was glad that Master Rikard was gone, another part wished that the Master would come back so he wouldn't be so completely alone. The darkness outside seemed to press in on the walls of the tower. Khy shivered as he imagined it creeping in under the door.

Maybe if he got ready for bed, he'd forget about the darkness. He pulled off his rough tunic, being careful not to touch the heavy, metal collar around his neck. He hated the collar. It made slimy feelings in his head when he accidentally brushed against it.

After taking off his breeches and folding them neatly, he put on his nightshirt and unrolled his pallet, placing it in front of the hearth. Still very aware of the darkness outside, Khy left the lamp burning on the table. It made dark, flickering shadows on the walls. Shadows that reminded him of something... something deep and dark and frightening. He tried to remember what it was, but thinking about it too hard made him feel sick. He crept out from under his blanket and blew out the lamp, then hurried back to his pallet.

Every noise seemed very loud. Khy hid his head under his blanket and shivered until he finally fell asleep.

Khy woke with a start. He knew the moment he opened his eyes that something was different. For one thing, his head was clear. The colors around him were brighter, the sounds sharper, and his thoughts moved with a quickness and a clarity that he hadn't felt since...

That memory wasn't one he wanted—it made him feel sick and afraid. With a shiver, he pushed it out of his mind and sat up slowly, frowning at his

surroundings. The round room he found himself in was familiar in the way a dream or a nightmare might be familiar. He recognized it... but everything about it felt hazy, as if it were only a distant memory.

Khy remembered the day he'd come here, a terrified boy, given to Master Rikard by the monks at the monastery where he'd been raised. They hadn't wanted him once they'd realized that a frightening power grew within him. A power the monks said was a curse, and came straight from the Black.

More memories crowded into his head: strong hands taking hold of him and dragging him down the stairs to the workroom... those same hands forcing him to lie on the cold, stone table while his limbs were bound... icy fire burning through him as Master Rikard stood over him, drawing the light from his body and weaving it into patterns in the air above him.

Khy couldn't stop him. Couldn't fight him. All he could do was scream until his throat was raw.

His heart raced and his eyes darted about the room, searching for Master Rikard. He dimly remembered the Master leaving yesterday... telling him to mind Seb and Nida... telling him to take his...

Medicine.

He hadn't taken his medicine before bed.

Was that why everything was so clear and bright?

Khy leapt to his feet. There was no time to waste—he had to get away from here. This kind of mental clarity was always followed by Seb and Master Rikard dragging him down to the workroom. Khy would fight like a demon from the Black, but it never did any good; Seb would always end up smacking him senseless and he'd still end up bound to the table.

He would certainly be punished if Master Rikard returned and discovered that Khy had forgotten to take his medicine.

Gulping down the fear, he dressed quickly, pulling on breeches and boots, yanking yesterday's tunic over his head. His hand brushed against his face, and he froze.

A beard?

His fingers explored the soft hair that covered the lower part of his face.

Where had that come from? He'd been a beardless boy when he'd first come here. How long ago was that? How many years since he'd burned the stable and been sent away?

He jerked his hand back. There was no time to dwell on it now—he needed to make his escape while he could.

Khy took nothing with him when he slipped out the door. He hadn't gone more than a few steps before he stopped, stunned. There were so many shades of green... so many smells. The morning air was cool on his skin, and carried the earthy scent of damp forest. Sunlight filtered down through the trees and Khy lifted his face to the forest canopy above. He could see each individual leaf dancing in the soft breeze.

How had he never been aware of those things before? He spent a lot of time outside, especially in the summer. He worked in the garden with Seb almost every day, and he stacked firewood by the side of the tower whenever Seb chopped it. He must have been blind and stupid to have missed all of this.

Khy gave himself a mental shake. Fascinating as it was, standing here staring at it was only going to get him caught. He had to get far away before Seb and Nida returned.

The path that led from the tower's only door wound past the gardens and on into the Skarwood. If he followed it, he would eventually reach the monastery, and beyond that, the village of Stone Creek.

That was where Seb and Nida had gone. He couldn't go that way. Deliberately, Khy turned his back on the path and darted into the trees. He didn't walk—he ran. Ran as if all the demons of the Black were after him.

The forest quickly grew dark and thick as he moved away from the tower. Khy tried not to think about the tales the monks used to tell of the dangers of the Skarwood. Some of those stories he was certain were only told to keep curious boys from wandering off into the forest. Others had a ring of truth to them that had him starting and looking over his shoulder at every unfamiliar noise.

Khy ran until his breath was ragged and his legs cramped. When his chest began to burn and a painful stitch in his side slowed his progress, still he dared not stop. All that mattered was putting as much distance as he could between himself and the tower.

Sweat trickled down his back and plastered his long hair to his face. Everything hurt, and he longed to throw himself down on the ground and rest. To spur himself on, he forced his mind back to the things that happened in the workroom. The terror those memories evoked gave him a burst of energy, and he kept moving until the ground gave way beneath him.

The bottom dropped out of his stomach. He had only a moment to realize that he was no longer running, but falling. A sharp, tearing pain in his side and another along his thigh had him drawing breath for a scream that never came. Breath and sense were both knocked out of him when he hit the ground hard.

When sense returned, the first thing Khy was aware of was pain. His side and his leg were the worst, and from the wetness of his clothing, he guessed he must be bleeding. He stared up at the canopy of leaves overhead and realized that he lay at the bottom of a large hole filled with sharpened wooden stakes.

The ones directly above him were dark and slick with blood. A cold feeling of dread gripped him. Had they gone right through him? He wriggled a bit. It hurt, and he seemed to be wedged between several of the stakes, but he wasn't pinned to the ground. If he was careful, maybe he could escape without further injury. He tried to sit up, but moving hurt so much that everything went dark again.

Khy woke to voices floating down from above.

“What in the Black—?”

“Is he even alive?”

“I'll go down and see. If he is, we'll need to look after him.”

There were scrabbling sounds and a grunt, and then someone was kneeling beside him, pulling at his torn clothing. Khy jerked away at the first probing touch. Pain flared through him, and he let out a whimper.

He heard a sharp intake of breath and then a soft curse.

“Hold still,” said a deep voice. “You're hurt and you're bleeding. Let's not make it any worse, hmm?” There was a pause, and then the voice called, “Dano, I'm going to need some bandages down here. I think we'd best bind his wounds now. Get some water boiling for blackseed tea, as well. We'll want to dose him with that before we try to move him.”

The time that followed was a lot like his memories of his time at the tower—hazy and dim, with moments of agonizing clarity. He let the strangers tend the wound on his leg and the one on his side, but when they offered him medicine he turned his face away, terrified of going back to that place where he couldn't think, couldn't fight, couldn't even remember why he should.

A hand smoothed the hair back off of his sweaty brow. “Easy, *skasha*.” The voice was low and soothing. “We’ve got the bleeding stopped for now, but if you thrash about, it’ll start up again, and we’re a long way from the nearest healer.”

Khy settled back, moaning in pain and fear.

A hand moved behind his head to lift it a little. The rim of a cup was placed against his lower lip. “Come, *skasha*, drink a little. It’ll ease the pain when we move you. We can’t leave you in this hole much longer. Night is falling and we need to get you to our camp so we can clean those wounds properly.”

Khy drank the medicine eventually, but only when they held him down and forced him.

They left him alone for a time, though he could hear their voices coming from above. Before long, the world grew fuzzy, and the horrible, tearing pain faded until it was only a distant, stinging sensation. By the time they lifted him out of the pit, he was floating in a warm glow.

When the voices woke him again, it was night.

“Don’t touch it, Dano! Don’t you know what those are?”

“No, but the way they sparkle, they’ve got to be worth something.” A hand brushed against his neck. Someone touched the heavy collar he wore, then drew back quickly. “Ah! I feel it in my head... slimy and cold...”

“Are you surprised, *dunka*? Those are leythe-stones. Magic.”

“Is he a leythari, then? He don’t look like one.”

There was a snort. “And how is a leythari supposed to look, hmm? Most leythari don’t look any different than you or me. I’ll tell you this, though—if he *was* a leythari, his magic would have stopped him from blundering into our trap.”

Khy’s head was lifted again. More water was poured down his throat. He gulped it gratefully and tried not to fight when they made him drink more of the

bitter tea. It had eased his pain the last time, and he hurt enough now that it was hard to keep quiet. The tea made him drowsy, and he soon drifted off into a deep, dreamless sleep.

The next time Khy woke, there were no voices. He was lying on a hard surface, wedged in tight by bundles of pelts on either side of him. He was burning up and freezing at the same time. His head hurt and his body hurt and there was a rocking, jarring motion that just would not stop.

Khy didn't understand where he was or what was happening, but it hurt too much to move. He drifted in and out of awareness. Every time he opened his eyes, the light had changed and he'd lost more time.

Sometimes the motion would stop for a while and people would touch him and dress his wounds. That hurt even more than lying still. Hands helped him sit and forced him to drink foul medicines. Khy had no choice but to comply. He didn't have the strength to fight them.

More dark dreams and periods of hazy brightness followed. There were more hands and more medicines until finally, a different voice, this one soft and gentle, woke him.

“That’s it. Come on. It’s time to wake up now.”

It was a woman’s voice. That was enough to make Khy pay attention. Nida was the only woman who ever talked to him, and her voice was high and scratchy and hurt his ears. This voice was low and rich, and there was something kind about it. Just hearing it calmed him. He wanted to hear it some more.

Khy opened his eyes to see a small woman with short black hair streaked with gray, and soft, dark eyes watching him.

Her lips curved in a gentle smile. “How are you feeling?”

He frowned, stretching carefully. He remembered the awful pain that had ripped through his side and up his leg. It didn't hurt now. In fact, it didn't feel as if he'd been injured at all. “It doesn't hurt...” His voice sounded rough.

Her smile widened. “It shouldn't. You're all healed now. It's a good thing Pitar and Dano got you to me when they did. The fever already had a good hold on you. If they'd brought you to me too much later, I might not have been able to save you.”

Under the covers, Khy pressed his hand against his leg. Only smooth skin met his questing fingertips. There were no bandages, no sign at all of the ugly, torn wounds he'd glimpsed during his few lucid moments.

How long had he dreamed? Long enough to heal?

She offered him a cup. Khy sat up in the bed, surprised that he had the strength to do so. He had dim memories of being too weak and sick to get out of bed.

While he drank the water, he glanced about the room. It was tiny and cramped, containing only the bed he lay in and a small table. The walls were wood rather than stone, and the room's single window looked out upon an open field. Beyond that was a dense, dark forest.

Was that the Skarwood?

"Where am I?" Khy asked.

"You're in the village of Rosefire, on the edge of the Skarwood. I'm Mara, the healer. Pitar and Dano brought you to me yesterday. You'd been hurt, falling into one of their boar traps. They did everything they could to take care of you, but your wounds took fever."

Khy barely heard most of what she said. He was stuck on the word *healer*. His chest tightened and his stomach fluttered as his mind worked through what she'd said. She must have used the leythe to heal him. Worked it the way Master Rikard did. His breath quickened, and he tried to sit up. He needed to run, to escape—

"Settle down. It's all right." Mara pressed him back against the bedding. "You're safe. Whoever hurt you isn't here now."

Her voice was soft and soothing, and a blanket of calm settled over him. His thoughts quieted and his racing heart slowed. Escape suddenly seemed a lot less important. He stopped struggling and lay back against the pillows.

"How do you know...?" He couldn't even finish the question.

Mara's expression softened. "Fever dreams. And other things only a healer can see. I know somebody's hurt you, and from what I gathered while you were raving, you've run away from him and you're afraid to go back to him."

Khy stared at her, mute with shock. How could he have given away so much? His escape, it seemed, was over before it had even begun. This healer

knew he'd run away, and once Master Rikard came looking, she'd hand him over.

He tried to think through the calm that lay over his mind, but he couldn't work past it, couldn't summon the energy to care.

"It's all right," Mara said again. "I'm not going to give you back to him. In fact, I'll do all I can to help you." She gave him a smile that looked friendly and encouraging. "I need to ask you a few questions first, though."

He was silent, waiting for her questions and wondering how much he'd given away while he was raving.

"I've told you my name... what's yours?"

Khy opened his mouth to tell her, then thought the better of it. If Master Rikard came looking, he'd ask for *Khy*, wouldn't he? "Arin," he said at last, naming one of the other orphaned boys he'd grown up with at the monastery. "My name is Arin."

"Well, Arin, what can you tell me about this collar you're wearing?" Mara moved her hand as if to touch it. Khy flinched, and she drew her hand back, frowning. "Does it hurt you?"

"Only if I touch it."

"Ah. I see. I won't touch it, then. How long have you been wearing it?"

Khy shook his head. "I... I don't know," he whispered. "I can't remember."

"More than just a few days?"

His hand crept to the soft hair that grew on his face. "More than that."

Mara's expression was very serious. "Arin, who put the collar on you? And why?"

Khy pressed his lips together. He couldn't tell her. Even if she promised to keep it a secret, what if Master Rikard came looking for him? He couldn't risk it, so he kept his mouth shut.

Mara sighed. "Well, here's what I can tell you, and you'll have to decide what to do about it. I think the collar is a leythe-chain. It's used to bind a leythari's power—to stop him from working the leythe."

"I'm not... not a leythari. I can't do anything like that."

“Collars like this are also used when a leythari has more power than he can control. Or when he can’t learn to work the leythe safely. Do you think that might be why you’re wearing it?”

Khy shook his head again. Master Rikard had never explained *why* he had to wear the collar; he’d just locked it around Khy’s neck and told him not to touch it. “I don’t know,” he whispered.

“Well, without knowing why your power’s been bound, it could be dangerous to remove it. I know someone in Andar who might be able to help you with it, though. Her name is Chavi. If I were to give you a piece of advice, it would be to seek her out and see what she can tell you about this collar. She might be able to remove it for you. If she can’t, she might know someone who can.”

The only thing Khy knew about Andar was that it was the capitol city of the Realm of Andarra. Master Rikard hated the place and frequently muttered that he’d never go back there, not even if they begged him. Going to a place Master Rikard wanted to avoid had to be safer than staying here, where he could still see the edge of the Skarwood from the window. “I... I don’t know how to get to Andar.”

“You happen to be in luck,” Mara said with a smile. “Pitar and Dano are on their way to Andar, and I’ve already told them that they owe you something for nearly killing you. They’re feeling rather bad about the whole affair, and they’d like to speak with you about it later on. I think they’d be willing to take you with them if you offered to help them during the journey. And once you’re there, they know the city well enough to help you find Chavi. I’ll seek her in the leythe and let her know to expect you.”

While it sounded like a good plan, things were happening so fast that Khy felt as if he’d been swept up in a whirlwind and was still waiting to be set down safely. “Thank you,” he said, but it came out sounding more like a question than anything.

Mara seemed to understand. She gave his hand a gentle pat. “You lie here and collect your thoughts for a bit. I’ll go and see about finding some clothing for you. Your boots are by the door there, but the rest of your things weren’t even fit for the scrap bag. When you’re ready, I’ll take you to the inn to meet Pitar and Dano.”

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Chapter Two

Khy stared about the inn, soaking up every detail. He'd never been to an inn before. He'd lived at the monastery just south of Stone Creek for as long as he could remember, right up until the day Master Rikard had come to collect him.

The inn was built from stone and wood, and had a wooden floor that was worn smooth with use. A large fireplace dominated one end of the inn's dining room, but it was currently unlit. The day was warm enough that the front door stood open to let in the breeze. There were two older men sitting at the bar, deep in conversation with the innkeeper. Otherwise, the dining room was empty but for himself and his rescuers.

Across the table from him sat Pitar and Dano. Like the healer, they both had black hair and dark eyes. They were brothers, trappers who traded fur and meat, and it was their trap he'd fallen into. They'd already apologized profusely for not marking the trap more clearly, and had paid the healer for her services.

The remains of lunch—a thick, tasty stew that had tasted far better than anything Nida had ever given him to eat—sat on the table, along with half a loaf of bread.

Dano, the younger of the two, rubbed his hands together and leaned back in his chair. "I'm ready to talk business if you are," he said, glancing at Pitar.

"All right, then," Pitar said, giving his brother a nod. Two pairs of dark eyes fixed on Khy, and Pitar continued, "Now, I'm not one to pry into a man's business, but Mara mentioned that you were headed for Andar. That's where we're going. We'd be willing to see you safely there, in exchange for a hand with the camp chores—hauling water, seeing to the horses, that sort of thing."

"I can do that," Khy said slowly. "I helped in the stables at the monastery."

Dano grinned. "What do you say, then? Will you join us?"

Moving steadily away from Master Rikard with people who actually knew where they were going had to be smarter than blundering about in the wilderness by himself. His lack of woodcraft had already nearly killed him. Khy had no desire to experience any further disasters that might arise from his ignorance. "I'll join you," Khy said. "And I thank you for the offer."

“Good, good!” Pitar said with a warm smile. “We’re keen to head out now. The wagon’s over at the stable being hitched up. Dano’s just going to run up to our room to fetch our things, and we’ll be on our way.”

When Dano came downstairs, he was carrying two backpacks and what looked like an oddly shaped piece of metal covered with leather straps. He handed it to Khy.

“Here. It’s not much, just an old breastplate that I outgrew a few years ago. You should put it on. Ours are with the wagon, and we’ll be wearing them, too, at least until we’re a couple of days south of the Skarwood. This part of the realm is crawling with bandits.”

Khy stared helplessly at the confusing garment of leather and metal. There were straps and buckles, and it looked far more complicated than the simple tunic and leggings he was used to wearing.

While Dano helped him put the thing on, Pitar paid the innkeeper and said their farewells. Dano tightened the straps as far as they would go, but the armor was still loose on him. Pitar had a look and said that it would do, and that life on the road would pack some muscle on his frame soon enough. Khy followed the brothers out the door and hoped he was doing the right thing.

Bandits, they’d said.

He stared down at the metal plate that protected his chest and belly. Facing bandits had to be more pleasant than a session in Master Rikard’s workroom.

When Khy stepped outside, his gaze was immediately drawn to the mountains that loomed large over the village. The trees were so thick near the tower that Khy hadn’t been able to see the mountains at all, and the Fireskye itself had been only a golden-orange glow directly overhead.

While Pitar and Dano were busy speaking with the stableman, Khy took the time to drink in the view. The shimmering curtains of fiery light that rippled in the sky above the mountains were so beautiful that it almost hurt to look at them.

“Well, if it isn’t Rikard’s little catamite.”

The familiar sound of that voice rooted him to the spot and turned his blood to ice. The voice belonged to Baine, the mercenary who sometimes did jobs for Master Rikard. Khy looked up to see the man glaring down at him as if he were a bug to be squashed. He swallowed hard and took a step back.

Baine leered at him. “Your master is looking for you, boy, and he ain’t happy.”

A big hand closed around Khy’s upper arm. The thought of being dragged back to Master Rikard—and what Rikard would do to him when he was returned—was enough to galvanize Khy. He jerked against Baine’s grip to free himself. It did him no good. Baine was far stronger, and yanked him forward until he had Khy pressed up against him.

“Too bad Rikard wants you unspoiled. You’d make a fine bit of sport.”

The rotting-meat stench of the hot breath that blew in his face was enough to make Khy gag. He shuddered and struggled to pull away. Baine’s free hand roamed over his body, cupping his rear and squeezing. With the breastplate hampering his movements, Khy couldn’t wriggle free.

He heard shouts and scuffling from behind Baine, but he was too frightened to take in anything beyond the fact that he was trapped. Baine would take him back to Master Rikard, and Khy would rather die than go back there.

Jaedin fingered the bundle of dried blackseed plants hanging from the rafters of his workshop. The leaves were dry enough to crumble between his fingers. Some of the small seedpods cracked open at the lightest touch, spilling their precious burdens into his open hand. He nodded with satisfaction and removed the bundle from its hook on the ceiling. Being careful not to shake the delicate dried plants, he carried the bundle to his worktable.

The afternoon sun shone in the window, bringing out the warm, gold tones of the wooden tabletop. Jaedin glanced up and found himself captivated once again by the sheets of coruscating orange light that gave the mountain range called the Fireskye its name. The curtain of light hung over the peaks, rippling and shimmering in all the colors of fire: oranges, pinks, and golds. In the bright sunlight it was a sight to behold; at night it was simply breathtaking.

Five years, he’d lived in this little cottage at the end of the dirt track that was the main road through Rosefire, and he was still struck by the sheer beauty of the view right outside his workshop window. Talon would have loved that view. He could almost hear his lover’s voice. *Poetry in the sky*, Talon would have called it—

Jaedin froze, a lump forming in his throat.

This place was not supposed to make him think of Talon every time he turned around. That had been his reasoning for settling so far from the land of his birth. The oaks of the Skarwood looked nothing like the pine forests of the northlands, and the Fireskye had softer, gentler lines than the sharp, jagged peaks of the Iceshards.

He had served nearly ten years in the mercenary army of Rhane the Red. Rhane's Raiders, they'd been called, and he'd been happy to count himself one of them, up until the night their camp had been attacked by Vakarran regulars and Talon had taken an arrow through the heart.

Jaedin squeezed his eyes shut and willed his mind along a different path. It didn't help. This particular track was so familiar he could do nothing but follow it as that last night replayed itself over and over in his head.

The shouts and the screams, his lover shuddering in his arms, struggling to breathe... the flickering shadows cast by the fires, the acrid scent of smoke on the wind... Talon staring up at him, unable to speak... those blue eyes that had once looked upon him with love and passion going dull and dead as Talon fell into the final, long sleep...

He supposed he should be glad it had been quick. Talon's suffering had been over in minutes. Jaedin's had lasted five long years now, and there was no end in sight.

Shouting coming from the direction of the inn across the way tore his mind from the grip of the past. He shook his head hard and swiped a hand over his eyes to dash away the tears. There was a scuffle going on in the inn's stable yard, and from what Jaedin could see, it did not look like a fair fight, not by any stretch.

Five large men in armor had cornered three unarmed men, the smallest of whom was being pawed by a big, black-haired brute. The smaller man struggled against the thug, who grabbed a fistful of his hair, jerked his head back, and forced a possessive kiss upon him.

Jaedin dropped the dried plants onto the worktable and headed outside, rolling up his sleeves as he prepared to join the fight. It had been a few years since he'd involved himself in a brawl of any sort, but Jaedin hadn't forgotten his training. Thanks to his long treks into the Skarwood and up into the Fireskye to gather herbs and plants and to hunt for fresh game, his body was nearly as fit as it had been when he'd fought for a living.

He'd never been one to back down from a fight when he'd run with Rhane's Raiders, so he waded into the fray without hesitation, intent upon rescuing the terrified young man from his assailant.

Jaedin shoved one man out of the way and punched another in the face. He was just about to grab the brute when a wave of terror broke across him, washing him in icy fear and dizzy nausea.

Help me! a voice screamed in his head. Jaedin staggered back a few steps and clapped his hands over his ears. His vision swam. The whole world was washed in color and shimmering light, as if the Fireskye had come down to Rosefire and set the very air ablaze. The weird light and the feeling of disorientation faded, and when Jaedin looked up, all five of the armored men were down on the ground. The three they'd been attacking were pounding down the dirt track on their way out of town.

The smaller man was well ahead of the other two. He turned to look back briefly, locked eyes with Jaedin for one moment, then pelted off toward the Skarwood.

Jaedin stared after them, trying to make sense of what had just happened. A hand on his shoulder had him spinning around to see Gil, the old stableman, frowning at him.

Gil drew his hand away and took a step back. "You all right, Jaedin?"

"I'm fine... I think. What... what just happened?"

"Not exactly sure." Gil shook his head and pushed shaggy gray hair off of his brow. "One minute that big brute there looked like he was about to have his way with the boy, and the next I saw, all five of 'em went down and the boy took off running."

"Went down?" Jaedin knelt to check the nearest one. He was alive and apparently uninjured, but unconscious.

"Damndest thing I ever seen," Gil said. "Looked like they'd been poleaxed, every last one of 'em. Maybe the kid's one of them leythari, working his magic on anyone that gets in his way. Only thing I can think of. But if somebody that powerful lived around here, you'd think we'd have heard about it." He glanced down at the nearest thug. "They all right?"

Jaedin shrugged. "Out cold, near as I can tell. Who was the boy? Do you know?"

“Nope. Never laid eyes on him before today. The two that went after him, though, that was Pitar and Dano. They was just tellin’ me ’bout him yesterday. The kid blundered into one of their boar traps out in the Skarwood.” The old stableman jerked his chin in the direction of the forest. “Pitar said he got caught up in the stakes. The way he tells it, the kid’s lucky to be alive. They found him at the bottom of the trap, all tore up and bleeding. Pitar patched him up best he could, and put him in the back of the wagon, but they was working pretty deep in the woods, and by the time they got into town, the kid was raving with the fever. Pitar said he figured the kid was a goner, but Mara fixed him up right as ever. They was planning to take him with them to Andar, but...” Gil looked off in the direction the three men had gone and shrugged. “Guess they’ll have to catch him first.”

Jaedin followed Gil’s gaze. There was no sign of any of the men now. “What should we do with these?” He nudged one of the unconscious men with the toe of his boot. The man stirred and moaned.

Gil spit on the ground, narrowly missing the man at his feet. “Don’t look like nothin’ I want to be messin’ with. I’d just leave ’em be. This one’s coming around already. Like as not, they’ll pick themselves up and take themselves off. If they want the boy bad enough, they won’t be hanging about bothering with the likes of us.”

Jaedin returned to his workshop to continue separating the seedpods from the dried blackseed plants. He glanced out the window frequently, keeping an eye on the stable yard while he worked. Sure enough, the thugs soon picked themselves up. After a bit of disagreement amongst themselves, they loped off in the direction of the Skarwood, looking none the worse for wear.

Of the trappers and the young man who’d apparently been the source of the altercation, there was no sign.

Jaedin turned his attention back to his work, lifting the leaves and stems away from the tiny seeds that had sifted down to the surface of the table. The seeds he would make into a numbing salve. The leaves and stems would be brewed into blackseed extract, a potent pain drug.

Damned ingrates. Jaedin scraped the tiny, black seeds he’d collected into a small wooden bowl, then rubbed his bruised knuckles. They could have at least thanked him for risking his own neck. Things could have gone very badly, indeed. He’d been stupid to even think about taking on the five of them, armed

with only his fists and his temper. He could almost hear Talon's voice, sharp with disapproval: *Shouldn't have got involved, Jaedin. Should've just stayed out of it. Not your business, not your problem.*

When Khy finally stopped running, he leaned against a tree trunk and strained his ears for any sound of pursuit. It was impossible to hear anything past his own ragged breathing and the pounding of his heart. Pitar and Dano had followed him when he'd bolted from the village, but he'd stopped hearing their voices not long after he'd crashed headlong into the Skarwood. Once he'd hit the forest, he'd made so much noise pushing his way through the underbrush that he had no idea if he'd been pursued or not.

He hadn't dared stop, not even to thank them. Baine's appearance had struck too much terror into his heart for him to think of anything but escape. Master Rikard must want him back very badly. The Master only used Baine for really important jobs, and when he did, a lot of gold coins changed hands.

The first time Khy had seen Baine, he hadn't been able to tear his eyes off of the big man. Baine was ruggedly handsome and he knew it. After conducting his business with the Master, he'd come out to the stable where Khy was helping Seb feed Master Rikard's horses. Baine had ordered Seb out and cornered Khy. He'd put his hands all over Khy's body, and forced his tongue into Khy's mouth. When Khy had stumbled away and run behind the stable to throw up, Baine's cruel laughter had followed him.

After that, Baine offered to take Khy off of the Master's hands every time he came to the tower. Master Rikard always gave Baine one of those grim little smiles of his and said that Khy was not for sale. Khy was *special*, and he was needed in the tower. Baine had laughed and said, *I bet he is.*

Khy wiped the sweat from his eyes and tugged at the breastplate Dano had strapped onto him. It was heavy enough to slow him down, and even with the straps done up as tightly as they would go, it was still loose on him. He undid the straps he could reach and managed to wriggle free of the ones he couldn't. After listening for a long time and hearing no signs of pursuit, he backtracked to the last path he'd crossed and laid it there. Hopefully Dano and Pitar would find it. Khy didn't want to be accused of stealing, but he dared not return to Rosefire to give it back to them. Not if Baine was after him.

After a short rest, Khy headed deeper into the Skarwood. Even if the forest was haunted, like some of the monks had whispered, Khy thought that taking

his chances with the ghosts was preferable to having to endure Baine's attentions.

The heavy canopy of leaves soon grew thick enough to hide the sun. The trees were closer together than on the forest fringes, and the underbrush became thicker and more tangled. It was dark enough that if he moved quietly, he could stay hidden. If he kept his head and didn't go running off in a blind panic at every sound, he should be able to avoid stumbling into any more traps.

Still, even after his recent experience, the prospect of being caught in another boar trap was far less frightening than the thought of what Master Rikard or Baine would do to him if they caught him.

As the light began to fade, Khy came across a small stream. He knelt beside it and scooped icy water into his mouth. When he'd drunk his fill, he splashed the cold water onto his sweaty face and scrubbed every last trace of Baine's horrible kiss from his mouth and his skin.

The stream was so cold, it must have come down out of the Fireskye. Khy decided to follow it and find out. He'd always wanted to see the mountains, and having a destination in mind made him feel a little more in control. He followed the stream for the rest of the day. When it became too dark to see, he crept into the underbrush and made himself a little hollow. There, he curled up and tried to go to sleep.

Sleep, however, did not come easily. Every unfamiliar sound was fuel for his newly freed imagination. Always before, the tower's thick walls and solid wooden door had stood between himself and the dangers of the Skarwood. Now he was out in the forest alone with nothing to protect him.

He wondered if leaving the breastplate behind had been a good idea. Dano had said it didn't fit him anymore. Perhaps the trappers wouldn't have missed it after all.

Thinking about the trappers made him wish for some company. He was usually happier by himself than with Master Rikard, or with Seb and Nida. Pitar and Dano had seemed nice enough, though. He wouldn't mind their company. Or Mara, the healer, who had been kind to him, and far more gentle than he remembered Nida ever being. Or that man who'd come rushing into the stable yard when Baine had grabbed him. His hair had shone like spun gold in the sunlight. Khy had never seen hair like that before. He wondered where the man was from. Not from anywhere near Rosefire or Stone Creek, where everyone had black hair and dark, dark eyes.

The man was a leythari, Khy was sure of it. He'd appeared and then Baine had suddenly let him go and then crashed to the ground as if someone had clouted him on the head. The men with him had all fallen down, too. Only a leythari could do something like that. Khy had to wonder what could have moved the man to use his power to help a stranger. He wished he could go back and thank the golden-haired leythari.

A distant howl cut through the night, freezing Khy's thoughts and his blood. He curled himself up in the tightest ball he could and waited for the night to end.

Jaedin never did finish making the blackseed salve. A bleak melancholy had settled over him, fueled by both his memories of Talon and his annoyance at the less than satisfying outcome of the fight that afternoon. He wondered if the young man had made good on his escape, or if the thugs had caught up to him in the Skarwood. What had the boy done, he wondered, to bring down the wrath of such an unsavory looking collection of characters?

He'd looked innocent and bewildered enough, but Jaedin was well aware that appearances could be deceiving. Talon had presented the world with a similarly guileless expression, which had hidden both shrewd intelligence and ruthless determination. Frail and waiflike in appearance, Talon had been capable of a cold-blooded brutality that sometimes shook Jaedin to the core. The young man whose honor he'd tried to defend earlier in the day might well be a similar sort.

In which case, the village of Rosefire was probably well rid of him.

After a supper that he hardly tasted, Jaedin sat at his kitchen table and stared out the window at the Fireskye, brooding. He might have sat there in a black mood all night, had a knock not sounded at the door.

He was quite surprised to find Mara on his doorstep, her brow drawn up in a frown. The sun had set some time ago, and he couldn't imagine why she would be here this late until he recalled that he'd promised her a batch of blackseed salve.

"I'm sorry, Mara. I meant to get that salve started this afternoon, and then there was all that excitement in the stable yard... It threw me a bit, and I never did get back to work. I'll have it for you by tomorrow evening."

Mara waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. “Oh, I’m not worried about the salve. I’ve enough to last a bit longer. It’s actually the excitement at the stable yard I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Oh?” Jaedin stood there blinking for a moment before he remembered his manners and invited the healer in.

While Jaedin lit the oil lamps to brighten the room, Mara took a seat by the fire and waited for him to join her. She declined his offer of tea, so he pulled up a kitchen chair and sat facing her. “So... you want to talk about what happened this afternoon?”

“It’s that young man Pitar and Dano brought to me. Arin, his name was. After those horrible men tried to attack him, he ran off into the Skarwood. Pitar and Dano went after him, but he was too fast for them, and he disappeared into the forest. They spent a good part of the afternoon hunting for him—Dano had loaned him a breastplate that he wanted back. They found the armor, but they didn’t find Arin.”

Jaedin frowned, not certain what this had to do with him. “Gil said he fell into a boar trap.”

“Yes, he did, and nearly died of wound fever. I’m worried about him, Jaedin. I don’t know where he came from—I’ve never seen him before yesterday. He was raving for hours before I got the fever down, and it sounded to me like he’d run away from someone who was hurting him. I’m afraid those men might have been sent to fetch him back.”

“Mara, you and I both know that half the things men say in fever dreams are fantasies.”

She raised an eyebrow. “And the other half?”

“All right,” he conceded with a shrug. “There could be some truth to it. So? You want to mount a rescue? I’m not sure Rosefire could put together enough of a militia to take on even that bunch.”

Mara’s frown deepened. “I’m aware of that,” she said softly. “No, I’m not suggesting we fight a gang of armed thugs. That could bring us far more trouble than we want. But I’d feel a lot better about the whole affair if somebody went into the Skarwood and had a look. If Arin did escape them, he’s out there in the forest all alone. He seemed so lost and confused, and if he managed to blunder into a boar trap, I dread to think what other trouble he could get into. You know the Skarwood better than anyone in Rosefire, Jaedin. Could you go after him?”

Jaedin leaned back in his chair and let his breath out in a heavy sigh. “It’s that important to you?”

Her dark eyes fixed on him. “I’m a healer. I can’t stand by and not help when someone is hurting.”

He glanced out the window at the sheets of orange light shimmering against the black of the night sky. “It’ll have to wait until morning,” he heard himself say. “It’s too dark now—I’d never pick up his trail.”

“Thank you.” Mara let out her own little sigh, the lines on her brow smoothing a little.

“Don’t thank me until I’ve found him. And don’t get your hopes up—if those thugs have any tracking skills, it’s likely they’ve already picked him up and are long gone.”

“I know. And Jaedin... that collar he’s wearing... don’t try to remove it. I think it’s a leythe-chain, and it might well be binding something that’s best left alone.”

Jaedin frowned, remembering the working that had taken down the thugs that afternoon. “He’s a leythari?”

“I don’t know. Possibly. I asked him, and he said he wasn’t, but... I couldn’t get much out of him about the collar. He seemed so confused and afraid that I’m not sure what to think.”

“All right. I’ll leave the collar for you to deal with. Assuming I can even find him.”

Mara leaned forward and patted his arm. “Thank you, Jaedin. I won’t forget this.”

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Chapter Three

Jaedin woke up in a cold sweat. Visions of intricate shapes woven out of colored light lay burning in his mind. In his dream, he'd been bound to a hard, cold surface. A man stood over him and drew light from his body, using it to build a glowing pattern that hung in the air above Jaedin.

Every shred of light torn from him was agony, cold fire burning him in hidden places no one should have been able to touch. Screams echoed in his mind and slowly died away, leaving behind a whisper of sound that formed itself into a single syllable, repeating over and over in his head: *Khy... Khy... Khy...*

Jaedin sat up in bed, rubbing his face with his hands. He wasn't sure how long he'd slept, but dawn had yet to add its pale gray tones to the soft golden-orange glow of the Fireskye.

Khy...

It was a whisper in his mind, a thin thread of sound winding its way through his awareness and pulsing softly to the beat of his heart.

Khy... Khy... Khy...

Who or what in the Black was Khy?

Too much wine before bed, he told himself. The wine might help him sleep, but the bad dreams that came with it were hardly restful. He should have learned that by now.

When the sweat of his fear had dried and his heart had finally stopped pounding, Jaedin lay back down and closed his eyes. He'd just drifted off again when he was awakened by a cry that was so loud and so clear that it had to have come from just across the room.

Help me!

Jaedin leapt out of bed, fists clenched, body tensed for a fight. Enough of the Fireskye's orange glow leaked through the thin curtains at his window for him to be certain that he was alone.

He padded out to the main room of the cottage, where he stirred the fire back up, threw on a log, and set a pot of water to boil. With those disturbing

dream-images lingering in his mind, he wouldn't be going back to sleep anytime soon.

He'd make some coldroot tea. That should soothe his overactive imagination. Involving himself in that fight in the stable yard had obviously been a mistake. It had unsettled him, got him thinking about the things he'd come here to forget.

Not that there had been any real choice about involving himself; once he'd seen that brute forcing his attentions on the boy, he'd known he would have to act. Gods only knew what would have happened if he *hadn't* stepped in.

As he waited for the water to boil, his thoughts drifted back to that voice. There it was, whispering through his mind again: *Khy... Khy... Khy...* Jaedin stared into the fire, trying to think where he'd heard that voice before. There was something familiar about it. It took a few moments of thought before he placed it; it was the same voice he'd heard during the fight, right before he'd—

What in the Black...?

Had someone laid a leythe-working upon him? He remembered now the wave of icy fear and the dizziness that had staggered him for long enough that he'd missed whatever it was that had taken down the thugs.

Remembered, too, those eyes that had locked onto his for the briefest of moments.

Maybe the kid's one of them leythari. Gil's words echoed in his mind.

No... Mara had said the kid had denied being a leythari... and if he was one, surely he'd never have allowed himself to be attacked in the first place. The leythari Jaedin had known in his mercenary days had all had a very clear sense of when malicious intent was focused upon them, and were thus adept at avoiding confrontation.

He shook his head. It didn't matter. Too damn much wine and too little sleep, that was his problem.

He didn't resort to the wine very often anymore. After Mara had left, however, the ghosts of the past had hovered close. Combined with his annoyance over how easily she'd talked him into going after the boy, the wine had been his only recourse, if he wanted any sleep.

In retrospect, perhaps it hadn't been the best solution. A sleeping draught would have made more sense. Mara would certainly have told him so.

He brewed himself some coldroot tea and drank it down without tasting it. When he began to feel drowsy, he took himself back to his bed. The tea did its job. He slept, but not without dark dreams in which he lay helpless, writhing in agony while complex structures of multicolored light took shape over his body.

The voice was still there the next morning, chanting softly in the back of Jaedin's mind, echoing the rhythm of his pounding heart.

Remembering his promise to Mara, he dressed quickly and prepared to head into the Skarwood. The wine had left his stomach feeling sour, so he skipped breakfast. He took his bow and his hunting knife, but he didn't bother bringing any supplies; he expected to be home by midday.

Given the boy's apparent lack of woodcraft, Jaedin figured he was either hopelessly lost somewhere near the edge of the forest, or he'd been captured by the thugs. Both meant Jaedin would be home quickly, because he wasn't going chasing after a band of armed men all by himself to rescue a boy who was as likely to be running from justice as abuse.

Jaedin set off in the direction he'd last seen the boy running, and it wasn't long before he found tracks—three sets, it looked like, and he recalled that Mara had said that Pitar and Dano had spent the afternoon hunting for him.

He sighed. If Pitar and Dano, both experienced woodsmen, hadn't been able to find him, how did Mara expect Jaedin to do any better? His own tracking skills were somewhat rusty, and with that infernal voice chanting just at the edge of his awareness, Jaedin was finding it difficult to concentrate.

The tracks ran together and separated, and several times, Jaedin had to backtrack when he realized he was following the wrong set entirely. By midmorning, the voice was even louder. His head was pounding, his heart was racing, and when he lost the boy's trail yet again and couldn't pick it up, he decided it was time to admit defeat.

The only bright spot was that he'd seen no sign of the kind of tracks that armored men would have left. They'd been unconscious in the stable yard when the boy had run off, and they'd clearly not picked up his trail on the way out of Rosefire. Perhaps the boy had escaped them after all.

Perhaps he was hiding in the forest even now, watching Jaedin's struggles from a high perch and laughing to himself. With a scowl, Jaedin turned and headed back to the village.

Mara was waiting for him, and answered her door at his first knock. She wasn't happy that he'd come back alone, but he reassured her that he'd seen no sign that the thugs had been following the boy's trail. She didn't seem overly comforted at that. Jaedin wasn't sure what more he could do, and wasn't feeling up to trying to explain how difficult it would be to find the boy once the trail grew cold. He took his leave before she could press him into searching farther afield.

Back in his workshop, he tried to distract himself with work. He had the blackseed salve to make for Mara, and she'd mentioned a few days ago that she was running low on the tansin leaf poultice mixture he supplied her with.

Jaedin found it just as difficult to concentrate on measuring ingredients as it had been to focus on tracking. With that name repeating itself incessantly in the back of his mind, he kept making mistakes. When he lost track of his measurements and had to throw out an entire batch, rather than start over, he put the ingredients away and slumped down at the kitchen table.

Khy... Khy... Khy...

Now that he wasn't trying to focus on anything else, the voice seemed even louder and more insistent.

At bedtime, it was still there. Jaedin was wound up so tight, he turned to the wine again. A bottle was plenty enough to send him back into dark dreams in which he screamed and screamed.

No one came.

No one helped.

No one even knew.

Khy blinked at the wall of prickly thorns in front of him and wondered how he was going to get past it. It lay across the narrow stream he'd been following, blocking his path for as far as he could see in both directions.

His stomach growled as he studied the thorny tangle. It had to be nearly lunchtime, and he'd had nothing more than a handful of blackberries since lunch at the inn yesterday.

Was it only yesterday? It felt like he'd been creeping through the Skarwood for days. His feet hurt, and his belly ached with hunger. Master Rikard might

not have been kind, but at least at the tower, he'd always had enough to eat and a comfortable place to sleep.

Here there was none of that.

Khy considered his dilemma. If he tried to find a path around the thorns, he might lose the stream entirely. Then he wouldn't have any idea which way to go. He might even wander around in circles until something big and hungry found him.

If he turned back, though, he might well run into Baine. Khy shuddered at the thought. The way the man looked at him made him feel sick and dirty. If Baine caught him out here in the Skarwood, there would be no one to stop him from doing whatever he wanted. Khy closed his eyes and forced himself to breathe slowly. There was nothing to panic about yet. He hadn't seen Baine, and he hadn't heard any sounds of pursuit.

It occurred to him then that Baine might even be dead. The golden-haired leythari had done *something* to Baine and his men. Khy hoped with all his heart that the man had sent the lot of them straight to the Black, but it would be too dangerous to assume he was safe. He needed to keep moving.

Khy eyed the thorns in front of him. Some of them were as long as his little finger and sported wicked barbs. With his luck, he'd end up tangled up like a fly in a spider web, flailing about until wild animals found him.

Or until Baine heard his struggles and came to *rescue* him.

He couldn't risk that; he'd have to go around.

Uncertain of how long it would be before he found his way back to the stream, he knelt and drank his fill. When he could drink no more, he set off, following the edge of the tangle deeper into the wood. He glanced back a few times, trying to keep sight of the stream, but it was soon lost in the gloom. Khy resolved to keep the brambles in sight and on his left, so he'd be able to find his way back to the stream if he had to.

The thorny bushes never did thin out, in fact, they seemed to multiply, and Khy kept having to change direction to avoid them. Soon he wasn't so much avoiding thorns as finding the path of least resistance.

It wasn't long before Khy was hopelessly turned around. He wasn't sure in which direction the stream lay, and the canopy of leaves above him was so thick, he couldn't tell where the sun was.

He stopped to pick blackberries whenever he came across them, and when the light began to fade, he crept into a thicket to hide himself. There, he curled up in a miserable ball. He was hungry and thirsty, and he was beginning to think that he might be lost.

Maybe things would look better in the morning. He'd try to find a good climbing tree tomorrow. Then he'd be able to see where the mountains were and get his bearings again.

With that thought in mind, Khy finally fell into an exhausted sleep.

Jaedin had had enough. He was no longer certain how many days it had been since the scuffle at the inn, but whatever was wrong with him, it was getting worse. The voice in his head had been growing steadily louder and more insistent as the days went by. Wine did nothing to drown it out, and coldroot tea was becoming less and less effective. He couldn't sleep. His eyes burned with exhaustion, and his head was pounding most of the time now. He couldn't concentrate, couldn't think his own thoughts, couldn't do *anything* without that infernal voice intruding.

It was time to get some help, and the only person in Rosefire who knew anything about the leythe was Mara.

She answered her door at his first knock, and stared up at him, hands on her hips. "Well, it's about time. You said you'd have that blackseed salve for me days ago. I've nearly run out, and—" She stopped suddenly, dark eyes narrowing as she frowned up at him. "Jhara's mercy, Jaedin, whatever's wrong?"

"Mara, I... I need your help."

She pulled him inside and shut the door behind him. Instead of leading him to her workroom and making him sit on the table, she took him to the other side of the cottage, to her living quarters. There, she sat him down in one of the armchairs by the fire.

While Jaedin tried to think how he was going to explain his problem without sounding as if he'd gone mad, Mara took a jar of herbs from above the hearth and measured some into a mug. She lifted the kettle from its spot over the fire and poured hot water over the herbs. "Let that steep a few minutes before you start it," she said, handing the mug to Jaedin. "Now, tell me what's troubling you."

Jaedin stared into the fire. “It sounds crazy, but there’s this voice in my head. All the time. It won’t go away, no matter what I do. I can’t work, I can’t think clearly, I can’t sleep... and when I do sleep, the dreams I’m having are...” He shuddered, hoping she wasn’t going to want him to recount those dreams.

Mara frowned. “Is the voice saying anything?”

“A name, I think. The same name, over and over.”

“When did it start?”

“The day that boy—Arin?—was attacked in the stable yard. You said that collar he was wearing had something to do with the leythe... and the way those thugs went down, *somebody* worked the leythe during the fight.” He frowned, thinking back to the encounter. “Could he have done something to me? I think... I might have caught the edge of something. It didn’t knock me out like it did the others, but I remember feeling dizzy. And everything got bright, as if the world was washed in color... like the Fireskye, only different.”

“Anything else?” Mara’s voice sounded sharp, and her frown had deepened.

“The voice. It screamed in my head: *help me.*”

“You said there was a name, too. What name?”

“*Khy*. Does that mean anything to you?”

Mara’s finger tapped her chin as she considered his words. “In Aeia, it means *nothing*... I suppose it could be a name, though. Let me have a look at your aura. I should at least be able to tell you if there’s a leythe-working of some kind affecting you. Relax and drink your tea. This will take a few minutes.” Her eyes unfocused, staring through him rather than at him.

Jaedin looked away, unnerved by the vacant expression on Mara’s face that meant all of her attention was focused on the leythe, on things that Jaedin could never see. He stared into the fire and sipped his tea. It was sweet, and while he found its effects somewhat soothing, it did nothing to quiet the voice. Even after he’d finished it, that whisper in his mind was still there. He closed his eyes, wishing for peace, for a few moments of silence, for a night without dreams of light and pain.

After a long time, Mara finally leaned back in her chair and rubbed her temples. “Well. That is an extremely powerful working.”

“What is it?” Jaedin whispered. “What did he do to me?”

“It’s a compulsion of some kind. I can see the colors of it threading through your aura, and extending out into the leythe beyond it. I can follow the threads of it a little way, and I suspect it might go down as far as the energy matrix itself, though I’m not strong enough to follow it that far. I’m afraid the roots of this working go much deeper than I can reach.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I can’t do anything for you. This is far more complex than anything I’ve ever seen.” Her eyes lifted to meet his. “Whatever it is, it goes deep into your aura, and removing it is not going to be a simple matter. If you want to be free of it, you need to seek out the leythari who laid the working upon you in the first place.”

“Arin? The boy in the stable yard?”

Mara regarded him with a grave expression. “You really think Arin did it?”

“He must have.”

“He couldn’t have. Not while he was wearing that collar, at least.”

“Why not?”

“There are only two things I know of that the collar could be. One is a leythe-chain, and I’m almost certain that’s what it is. It binds a leythari’s power and stops him from touching the leythe. If Arin was wearing a leythe-chain, there’s no way he could have done anything like this.”

“And the other thing?”

“A focus. Something that would concentrate and amplify his power. If that’s what it was, though, I certainly would have sensed it. It would light up the leythe like a bonfire. Even a lowly healer like me would see it.”

Jaedin had seen things like that before; some of the leythari who had worked for Rhane’s Raiders had worn leythe-stone jewelry that helped them focus their power.

He set down the empty mug and pressed his hands to his face. Despite Mara’s doubts, there was no question in his mind who had done this to him. Pitar and Dano weren’t leythari. The only person who *could* have done it was the boy. Those eyes... the way they’d locked onto his... that voice... *Help me!*

“This is all I need,” he muttered.

“I’m sorry.” Mara’s voice was soft. “I wish I could help you, Jaedin. I just... I don’t have the knowledge or the skill. This is... something entirely out of my realm of experience. I can see enough of it to know how difficult removing it will be, but I dare not touch it. I could do more harm than good without meaning to.”

Jaedin sighed. “Then it looks like I’m headed back into the Skarwood. I just hope I can pick up his trail again.”

Mara reached across the space between them and squeezed his hand. “Good luck, then. And if you need me, you’ve only to ask. You know that.”

“I know it,” he said, and accepted a chaste kiss on the cheek in farewell.

Khy peered through the leaves above his head and reached up to grab the next branch. He could just brush it with his fingertips, but no matter how far he stretched, he couldn’t catch hold of it. He glanced down at the ground. It was a fair drop, and if he tried to jump and missed, he could easily break something. Then he wouldn’t be going anywhere.

The ground below him spun and tilted. Khy clung to the tree trunk until the dizziness passed. He’d managed to find a few blackberries before he’d attempted the climb, but they’d done little to relieve either his hunger or his thirst. Nausea was now his constant companion, and the dizzy spells were becoming more frequent.

He stared up toward the sky. He thought it was close to midday, but even as high up as he was, he couldn’t see the sun clearly enough to tell. All he needed was one glimpse of the mountains so he’d know which way to go. It didn’t look like he was going to get high enough this time, though. If he didn’t find food soon, he might not have the strength to try again.

His stomach growled at the thought of food. How many days had it been since that meal at the inn? He thought of the bowl of stew he hadn’t been able to finish, and the half loaf of bread they’d just left on the table.

What he wouldn’t give for those leftovers now.

Khy took a deep, steadying breath and turned his thoughts away from food. He started down the tree, moving slowly and carefully. Whenever his limbs

began to tremble or the world began to spin, he stopped to rest. At the bottom, with his feet firmly on the ground, he sank down, panting, and wondered what he should do next.

He wasn't long in doubt. A big hand closed around his wrist, and Khy was hauled to his feet. He found himself staring up into Baine's flat, black eyes.

"Well, look what I've found," Baine said, grinning widely. "It's Rikard's little slave boy."

Khy's heart galloped in his chest. He tried to pull away, but Baine's grip was far too strong. Before he could wriggle free, a fist caught him on the side of the head and everything went black.

He woke up choking on liquid. Thirst had him gulping it down before he recognized the bitter aftertaste of Master Rikard's medicine. He clamped his mouth shut. Several large men were holding him down, and one of them pried his clenched teeth apart and poured more of the cold, bitter stuff into his mouth.

He tried to spit it out, but two fingers pinched his nostrils shut and he was forced to either swallow or choke. Khy swallowed. The men released him and backed away. Khy tried to scramble free, only to find he was bound, feet together and hands in front of him.

They left him lying on the forest floor like that until the fog began to close in on him. His thoughts slowed, moving with all the speed of cold mud. Everything felt dull and far away. He couldn't remember why escape had seemed so important, and he lay there staring up at the dark canopy of leaves above him and tried to remember what he was doing outside.

He wasn't supposed to be outside...

He hoped Master Rikard wouldn't find out.

Rough voices brought him back to the surface. He opened his eyes to see Baine standing over him, leering down at him.

"Looks like I've got you right where I want you," he said. He held a waterskin to Khy's lips. Once Khy was certain it was just water, he drank thirstily. Baine held the skin for him until he'd had enough. When Khy finally turned his face away, Baine gave him a wide grin. "Soon as we make camp, you're gonna do for me what you do for Rikard."

Khy shook his head. "No..." he moaned, certain that Baine meant the workroom and the pain. Khy didn't want to go to the workroom. "Please..."

Baine's grin broadened. "Ah, you look so pretty when you beg, little Khy. I bet you'll look even prettier with that sweet mouth full of my cock."

Khy shuddered, a few dim memories struggling up through the mud that clogged his mind. A lifetime ago, he and one of the other boys at the monastery had touched each other that way. He'd liked doing those things with Arin... but he didn't think he could do them with Baine. Before he could open his mouth to tell the man *no*, Baine scooped him up and slung him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

Bound as he was, Khy could do nothing to stop him. The rank odor of stale sweat and unwashed male filled his nostrils, and Khy gagged and turned his face into the breeze.

Baine pinned him in place with one big arm around his hips, while his other hand roamed over Khy's body, pinching and squeezing him through his clothing. Khy whimpered at every touch, earning himself a hard slap on the rear.

"Quit your crying," Baine growled. "Or I'll give you something to cry about, boy."

Khy squeezed his eyes shut and wished the golden-haired man was here to help him again.

It didn't take Jaedin nearly as long as he'd feared it would to pick up Arin's trail. The boy had found a stream, crossed it, and followed it in the direction of the Fireskye for a good distance. When the forest became a thick, tangled mess of brambles, tracking became a lot easier. Arin had turned north to avoid the thorny vegetation, and from there the dense underbrush made it much easier to follow his movements.

Jaedin had been tracking him for a day and a half, and he found himself questioning his own conclusions about the boy. Arin was simply forcing his way through the least dense patches of vegetation with all the woodcraft of a rhyx running down prey. Surely a leythari powerful enough to take down five armed men was powerful enough to hide his own tracks. Or disappear entirely, if that were his choice. If he was powerful enough to create a working that Mara couldn't remove, why wasn't the boy bothering to hide his tracks?

As he moved deeper into the forest, Jaedin noticed that the voice seemed to be just a bit less insistent, a shade less urgent. Was the working beginning to fade? Perhaps, given enough time, the voice would go away on its own.

The moment he turned around with the intention of heading back toward Rosefire, the voice grew louder, increasing in intensity with every step toward the village, until it was a shrill shout. Jaedin clapped his hands to his ears, turned around, and practically *ran* deeper into the Skarwood.

Once he was back on the boy's trail, the voice faded to a whisper again, as if it were aware of his every thought. Jaedin scowled, hating the feeling that he was being driven by a leythe-working rather than his own desires.

By afternoon, he had come to the conclusion that, leythari or not, the boy was hopelessly lost. There was no sense of direction to his wanderings—he appeared to be taking the clearest, easiest path.

The signs of the boy's passage were becoming fresher, perhaps only a few hours old, which lifted Jaedin's spirits. If his luck held, he might actually find the little bugger before dark, and perhaps by tomorrow, this nasty episode would be but a bad memory.

His optimism lasted right up until he reached the base of a tree and saw the boy's tracks joined by at least four other sets. Heavy tracks left by men who weren't trying to hide their presence.

They were headed north, deeper into the Skarwood.

Of the boy's tracks, there was no sign. Jaedin made a wide circle of the area, searching for a place where they might start again. He found nothing, and finally had to concede that the boy had been taken by the group—probably the very same group that had attacked him in Rosefire.

With a somewhat heavier heart, Jaedin followed the tracks north.

Baine kept his men moving all afternoon and into the evening. It was almost too dark to see when he finally called a halt. He set Khy down on the ground, and he and his men set about making camp. Khy watched them as they cleared a circle of ground right down to the dirt. Two of them went off to gather wood for a fire, while another set about skinning some rabbits.

Khy's thoughts drifted as the men went about their camp chores. It was so hard to think through the fog that blanketed his mind. He was tired and hungry, and he didn't like the way the ropes cut into his wrists every time he shifted.

It occurred to him that he didn't want to be here. He didn't think he wanted Master Rikard to find him, either. That meant he needed to get away. The way Baine kept looking at him, with that dark glint in his eyes, Khy was quite certain that whatever Baine had planned for him would hurt just as much as going to the workroom would.

He started to get up, but found that he couldn't move. It took him a few moments to remember that he'd been bound. He tried to tug his wrists free, but the rough rope only cut deeper into his skin. Khy whimpered in frustration. How could he run away if he was bound? He couldn't even free one hand so he could smack his head and make himself think better.

The smell of roasting meat soon turned his thoughts from escape. His mouth watered and his stomach growled and twisted, reminding him that it had been far too long since he'd eaten. He wondered if they would feed him. They seemed to have forgotten him. Khy couldn't decide if that was a good thing or not. Nobody was hurting him, but they might forget he was there at all. What if they left him here alone in the Skarwood, all tied up and helpless? He wondered if he should remind them. Then he thought about the way Baine had looked at him and decided that perhaps he'd better not.

He closed his eyes, remembering the golden-haired man in the village. The one who'd worked the leythe and helped him make his escape. He wished that man was here. Wished it with all his heart. He'd work the leythe again and then he'd untie Khy and they would slip away into the forest. Khy would be safe with him. The man had looked like he was big enough to protect himself and Khy, both. He probably knew how to find food, and he would—

A hard blow to his ribs jolted Khy back to the forest. He yelped and curled himself in a ball to avoid another kick. A dark shape loomed over him. He knew it was Baine from the cruel sound of his laughter.

Baine scooped him up under his arm and carried him to the circle of men around the campfire. "Rikard's whore," he said as he draped Khy face down over a log that had been pulled up close to the fire.

"Pretty," said one of the men.

“Don’t look strong enough to last the night,” said another, his words almost as slurred as Khy’s usually were.

“Then I’d better have him first and leave what’s left for the rest of you bastards to fight over,” Baine said.

“Remember Rikard’s orders, Baine,” said a voice that sounded clearer than the others. “The boy’s useless to him if he’s not still a virgin. You fuck him, we don’t get paid.”

A snort came from behind Khy. “Rikard’s a liar. He just wants to keep this sweet little ass all to himself. You can bet Rikard’s had him. We’ll get paid all right, long as we don’t tear him up too bad.” He laughed. “Besides, Rikard’s a right bastard. I like the idea of taking his boy right under his nose.”

Rough hands pinned Khy to the log and hauled his breeches down, then took hold of his hips in a bruising grip. Khy wriggled and squirmed to escape. A hard body pressed against his back, holding him in place. Hot breath blew across his neck. “I’ve waited a long time for this,” Baine’s voice growled in his ear.

Khy squeezed his eyes shut and thought of the golden-haired man.

The light faded quickly once the sun began to set. Jaedin figured he didn’t have much daylight left to find a place to camp for the night. He’d just found a small clearing that might be suitable when that sense of urgency returned. It had faded into the background while he followed Arin’s trail, but now it flared bright in his mind. The sense of fear that accompanied it was so strong that he froze, eyes darting about as they sought the danger. When he was finally able to make himself move, he turned a slow circle, scanning the gloom for any sign of movement.

A distant flicker of light through the trees caught his eye, and he edged toward it, drawing on all his years of experience as a scout to keep his movements as quiet as possible.

The light was coming from a campfire at the center of a large clearing. Five rough-looking men surrounded a smaller figure bent over a fallen log. It didn’t take much imagination to guess what was going on. The increasing intensity of the voice in his head and the terror that accompanied it told Jaedin he’d probably found his leythari. Now he just had to stop these thugs from killing the boy.

He slid the pack from his shoulder and lowered it quietly to the ground. Readying his bow, he took careful aim. One man leaned over the captive and yanked the boy's breeches down. Another loosened his own clothing and pressed himself against the boy's back.

A third man grabbed hold of the one who was about to take the boy and hauled him to his feet. An argument broke out, and while the men were busy shouting at each other, Jaedin shot one through the throat.

If their loose, clumsy movements were anything to go by, the men had been drinking. Two were dead and Jaedin had a third in his sights before it occurred to those remaining that something was wrong. When the third man went down, the last two staggered across the clearing toward their packs. Jaedin's arrows took them both before they got anywhere near their weapons.

He waited then, straining his ears for the slightest sound that might indicate more of them, hidden in the trees. He was fairly certain he'd been tracking five men, but it was always possible that they'd been joined by others when they camped.

When he heard nothing, Jaedin made a slow circle of the camp before moving into the clearing. The boy was in no immediate danger, and he wanted to be certain there weren't any sentries posted farther out. Given the fact that the men had been drinking, he rather doubted they'd bothered, but he hadn't worked for ten years as a scout without learning caution.

The boy lay across the log where the thugs had left him. Jaedin couldn't tell if he was conscious or not, and approached with all due caution. He'd seen too many accidents in the aftermath of battle—healers and combat medics injured or worse when they tried to help a leythari who was too wracked with pain and fear to be able to tell friend from foe.

Jaedin grabbed a dusty blanket from the ground near the fire and approached slowly, speaking in a soft, soothing voice. "Are you all right? I'm a friend—I'm here to help you. The men who tried to hurt you are all dead. I've got a blanket here to cover you with. I'm just going to put it over you, all right?"

The boy whimpered, and Jaedin very carefully spread the blanket over him.

"That's better. I'm going to touch you now, just to cut these ropes off of you and help you get to your feet. Is that all right?"

“Please...” the boy whispered.

Jaedin cut the ropes. When he helped the boy up, he noted that the boy's wrists had been chafed by the rope until they were raw and bleeding. He'd have to do something about that once they stopped for the night.

The boy stood there clutching the blanket about himself and shivering. He swayed on his feet, and Jaedin put a hand on his shoulder and guided him to the fire.

In the flickering firelight, Jaedin immediately changed his initial assessment. This was no boy. He was on the small side for a man, but he was in his early twenties, at least. He had a short, neat beard, long brown hair that was currently a mess of tangles, and a face that could break hearts.

The man looked up at him. Those intense eyes that had captured his attention before locked onto his. Jaedin could have lost himself in that gaze, but before he had the chance, something odd caught his eye. The man's pupils were constricted into tiny pinpoints, even in the dim firelight. Jaedin reached out and grasped the man's chin gently, turning his face toward the fire to get a better look. The oily sheen of swirling colors drifting over the whites of his eyes was a sure sign that he'd been drugged with leythe-bane.

Nasty stuff, that. Leythe-bane could render even the most powerful leythari utterly helpless. Jaedin knew the drug from his days with Rhane's Raiders. He'd made the stuff himself for use on enemy leythari taken captive. Leythe-bane made it impossible for a leythari to even touch the leythe, let alone work it. It also had the useful side effect of dulling the mind and slowing the body, rendering even the most recalcitrant prisoner docile and compliant.

“What in the Black...?” he muttered. “Why did they give you so much?”

The man blinked up at him. “You came for me.” His voice was thick, his words slurred from the drug.

“I didn't exactly have a choice, leythari.” It came out sounding cold and a lot harsher than Jaedin had intended. “You made certain I would come.”

Those beautiful eyes widened. The man stared up at him, clearly confused. “I'm not... I didn't...” He swayed on his feet, and Jaedin put his hands on his shoulders to steady him.

“Arin... is that your name?” Jaedin asked.

The man frowned as if Jaedin had just posed a most difficult question. “No,” he said finally. “My name is Khy.”

Jaedin felt his shoulders loosen a little at the sound of the name that had been bouncing around in his skull for the past few days. At least he had the right man. Although, drugged to the point of stupidity and clearly in shock, Khy was hardly in a fit state to be untangling a complex leythe-working. Jaedin would have to wait until morning to see about having the thing undone.

“Not Arin?”

The frown deepened, and the man shook his head. “I don’t... no. Just Khy.”

“All right, Khy. I’m afraid we’re going to have to walk just a little farther before we make camp. I’d rather not be anywhere near this place when the scavengers come sniffing around later on.”

Khy said nothing, only stood there blinking in the firelight.

Jaedin doused the fire and retrieved his pack. Then he helped Khy fix his breeches, adjusted the blanket around the man’s shoulders, and guided him back toward Rosefire.

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Chapter Four

Khy woke to the sounds of the forest. He lay very still, not daring to open his eyes quite yet. With effort, he kept his breath deep and steady, feigning sleep as he tried to remember what had happened. His head felt clear, so he must have forgotten to take his medicine again. Master Rikard would be angry if he found out—

No... he wasn't in the tower anymore. He'd left the tower...

It all came back in a rush, and Khy had to press his lips together to keep from making a sound. He remembered the words Baine had spoken all too clearly: *We'll get paid all right, long as we don't tear him up too bad.*

Khy shuddered. He'd been certain Baine would do it. If he had, Khy wouldn't have been able to stop him. Even if he hadn't been bound, the medicine made him stupid and far too clumsy to defend himself. He remembered Baine bending him over a fallen tree and tearing at his clothing... and then Baine was gone and someone else had been there.

Someone who had spoken to him in a deep, gentle voice and covered him with a blanket. Someone who had spread a soothing, numbing salve on his wrists and carefully wrapped them in clean strips of cloth. Someone who had fed him and given him water to drink, and then settled him in a bedroll...

Khy opened his eyes to see the golden-haired leythari who had helped him escape the village. The man was sitting near a small campfire, his pale green eyes fixed on Khy. The expression on his face was not pleasant. In fact, it was rather like the look the Master wore when Khy had done something particularly stupid or clumsy.

"Khy?" The voice was deep and gruff, and there was an edge to it that sent a shiver through him.

Khy bit his lip. How did the man know his name?

"It's all right." The voice gentled a little. "I'm not going to hurt you. That is your name, isn't it? Khy?"

"Yes, it's Khy." He sat up slowly and began to untangle himself from the bedding. He kept one eye on the leythari, who was sitting far too close for comfort. Close enough to lunge at him and grab him if Khy tried to bolt...

“My name is Jaedin,” the leythari said. “I’m from Rosefire.”

He seemed to expect a response of some sort. Khy searched his mind for something appropriate and finally said, “I remember... you helped me escape... I wanted to thank you, but... I wanted to get away, too.”

Jaedin frowned. “*I helped you...*?” The big man shook his head. “No, I didn’t do anything. I’d only just started bashing heads. And then you worked the leythe and those thugs all went down... That’s why I came after you. Whatever you did back there, I think I caught the edge of it. Ever since then, I’ve been hearing your name in my head. It’s driving me mad. I can’t concentrate on anything, I can’t sleep, and there’s this... *pulling* feeling in my mind, driving me toward the Skarwood. Toward *you*, I think.”

Khy stared at him, confused. Jaedin thought *he* had worked the leythe?

“I’m not angry,” Jaedin continued. “You looked like you were in a panic, and... well, maybe it was an accident. I’ve worked with leythari before, and I’m well aware of how difficult it is to work the leythe when you’re upset or frightened. I understand that you probably didn’t mean to catch me up in your working. Right now, I just need you to undo whatever it is you’ve done to me.”

Khy opened his mouth and then shut it again. “I... that wasn’t me. I’m not... I’m not a leythari. I’m just—”

“You don’t have to lie to me. I’m not looking for vengeance or recompense. I just want my life back. I want it quiet in my head.”

“I told you, I’m not—”

“Don’t. Lie.” The man’s voice was a low growl. His shoulders had tensed and his pale eyes had narrowed. “They wouldn’t have drugged you with leythebane if they weren’t afraid of what you might do. And that thing you’re wearing around your neck... the only people I’ve ever known who wear leythe-stones like jewelry are leythari.”

Khy’s fingers crept to the collar, but he didn’t touch it. Not quite. Touching it with his hands hurt him deep inside. He’d learned that the hard way. The very first day he’d come to the tower, the Master had locked the thing around his neck. The hours that followed had been a nightmare of fear and pain that had grown worse every time he tried to claw the thing off. That one night of agony had taught him to keep his hands well away from the thing.

Now, he stared at Jaedin and slowly shook his head. "I'm not..." he whispered.

Jaedin leaned forward, lip curling. "I said, *don't lie*. I know what you are. And I know you're the one who did this to me. What do you want? Gold?"

Khy shrank back. He didn't understand why this Jaedin thought he'd worked the leythe. He'd never been able to work the leythe. Master Rikard was the one who did that.

Had he missed something? His memories of the previous evening were fuzzy from the medicine. Maybe it hadn't been last night? Maybe he'd lost time again...

He tried to think back to the fight in Rosefire, but he couldn't remember doing anything other than trying to escape Baine. Surely he'd remember it if he could do something as big and important as working the leythe. Khy clenched his hand into a fist and smacked the side of his head. Maybe that would help him think smarter.

A big hand closed around his wrist. "Khy, stop! Don't hurt yourself."

"No, please, don't—" Khy cringed, closing his eyes and waiting for the blow that didn't come.

Jaedin let go of Khy the moment he cringed away, instantly regretting the anger that had made him speak so harshly. He hadn't meant to scare the man, but Khy's admission that he wasn't a leythari wasn't exactly comforting. Nor was his confusion over what he'd done to Jaedin.

He'd thought this was going to be straightforward and simple: find the man who'd cursed him, get him to undo whatever mischief he'd done, and head home to get on with his life.

The gods apparently had a more complex scenario in mind, and Jaedin was far from pleased about it. Still, getting angry at Khy, who seemed more frightened and confused than anything, was hardly going to help matters.

Jaedin drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It's all right," he said, gentling his tone and moving back a little to give Khy some space. "I'm not going to hurt you."

Khy watched him with those liquid blue eyes. Jaedin had to tear his gaze away to avoid being drawn back into them.

“I didn’t mean to frighten you,” Jaedin continued. “I’m frustrated. And I’m not sure I understand. The fact that you were drugged with leythe-bane tells me that *somebody* thinks you’re powerful enough to do some damage. Why would they think that if you’re not a leythari?”

“I don’t... I don’t know what leythe-bane is. Do you mean the medicine they gave me yesterday?” A shudder rippled through Khy’s thin frame. “That’s the medicine I always take. Master Rikard makes me take it every morning and every night.”

Khy was forced to take leythe-bane twice a day? *Every* day? Jaedin might not be a leythari, but he knew what was in the stuff, and he doubted a constant diet of it was doing Khy any good at all. “Master Rikard?” Jaedin didn’t know the name, but then he’d kept mostly to himself since arriving in Rosefire, and didn’t pay much attention to local gossip.

“He’s... he’s a leythari.” Khy swallowed hard. “He lives in the tower. In the Skarwood. I live there with him. Or I did... until I ran away.”

Jaedin frowned and eyed the collar around Khy’s neck. It was made of metal and studded with deep blue leythe-stones. The golden flecks swirling in their crystalline depths told him the stones were active—not just decoration. Every piece of leythe-stone jewelry he’d ever seen was used to enhance a leythari’s power, but Mara thought the collar might be binding Khy’s power, instead.

Either way, he was a leythari.

Or... perhaps the collar was something else entirely? Something this Master Rikard used to influence Khy or keep Khy under his control? Put that idea together with the forced drugging and the way Khy cringed away from him, and the picture forming in Jaedin’s mind was far from pleasant. “You were his prisoner? Or his slave, maybe?” he asked gently.

Khy shivered. “I think... yes,” he whispered.

“Can you tell me where to find him?” If Khy couldn’t fix what he’d done, perhaps this Master Rikard could.

He was unprepared for Khy’s reaction. The young man was on his feet and plunging into the forest before Jaedin even realized he was moving. Jaedin jumped to his feet. “Khy! Come back! I didn’t mean—”

Khy didn't stop. He disappeared into the trees. Jaedin took off after him, unwilling to lose his only connection to the leythe-working that was destroying his peace. Fortunately, due to the lingering effects of the leythe-bane, Khy wasn't very fast or very agile.

It didn't take Jaedin long to catch up to him. When the dense underbrush finally slowed Khy's flight, Jaedin scooped him up with one big arm around his waist. Khy fought like a demon out of the Black, kicking and punching and spitting curses. Jaedin tried to calm him with his voice. When that failed, he simply wrapped his arms around Khy and held him tight until the young man finally ran out of energy and went limp against him.

"Won't... won't... go back... can't... make me," Khy spit out between frantic gasps for breath.

"Nobody's going to make you go back," Jaedin said in the gentlest voice he could manage. "I'm sorry I frightened you. I didn't realize you felt so strongly about it." He let his hold loosen a little, testing to see if Khy would squirm away at the first opportunity. "I'm going to put you down now. Don't go running off again. These woods are dangerous, and I'd hate to see you get hurt."

Khy stared up at him, eyes narrowed. "I'm not going back to him."

"I won't ask you to."

"Then I won't run."

Jaedin set him down, fully prepared to have to take off after him and fetch him back again. Khy backed away a little and watched him with wary eyes, but he didn't run.

The expression on Khy's face set off another alarm in Jaedin's mind. He'd seen that look before, when he'd been fighting in the north—on the faces of prisoners of war who'd been badly abused.

"Khy, did your master hurt you?"

Khy pressed his lips together and wouldn't say, but those eyes, those startling blue eyes that seemed to reflect everything in the man's soul, said, *Yes. Too much, and too often.*

Jaedin sighed heavily. There was no way he could ask Khy to guide him to his master. He'd have to make inquiries in the village. Once he knew where to

find this Rikard, Jaedin could always approach the leythari by himself. He didn't have to involve Khy. "Well, then, I think we'd best seek the advice of the leythari in Rosefire. You don't want to show me the way to Rikard's tower, and I don't want to spend the rest of my life with your name rattling around in my head."

A shudder rippled through Khy. "Leythari?" he whispered.

"You've already met her. The healer, Mara. The one who took care of you after you got caught up in Dano and Pitar's trap."

Khy's brow smoothed and the set of his shoulders relaxed a little. "Mara," he said with a little nod. "I liked her. She didn't hurt me."

Jaedin shook his head sadly. He hated to think what Khy's life had been like if he needed to classify people according to whether they'd hurt him or not.

Once his initial fear wore off, Khy decided that he liked Jaedin. In fact, once it had finally sunk in that Jaedin really wasn't going to try to drag him back to Master Rikard, Khy found that he couldn't stop staring at him.

Jaedin had hair the color of spun gold, woven into a complex braid that hung halfway down his back. Khy wouldn't have minded wearing his own hair that way, but he knew from experience that his fingers were far too clumsy to make even the simplest of braids.

Khy liked Jaedin's eyes, too. They were a fascinating pale green. Khy hadn't ever seen eyes that color before. Everyone he could remember meeting had black hair and dark eyes.

Besides being nice to look at, Jaedin had much more patience than Master Rikard ever had. He didn't shout at Khy, even when he was slow to respond. He made sure Khy had something to eat and drink before they set out. He'd even brewed a sweet tea that he said would neutralize any leythe-bane left in Khy's body. Jaedin promised that Khy would feel a lot better by the evening. Khy couldn't remember the last time anyone had cared about him feeling better, let alone taken the trouble to make sure he ate enough.

It was early afternoon by the time they set off. Jaedin walked fast, and Khy would have had to trot to keep up, except he didn't have the energy for that. He quickly fell behind. Jaedin noticed right away and slowed his pace.

“We won’t get back to Rosefire until tomorrow at this rate,” Jaedin said.

Khy stared down at his feet. “I’m sorry. I’m too slow.”

“No, no, that’s not what I meant,” Jaedin said quickly. “I just meant that we’ll have to sleep in the forest again tonight. Last night you were drugged so heavily with leythe-bane, I couldn’t have kept you awake if I’d tried. Tonight though... will you be all right sleeping outside?”

Khy looked up at Jaedin. Was the man serious? Why would he care whether or not Khy was all right sleeping outside? “I slept...” he trailed off, realizing that he wasn’t sure how many nights he’d spent in the forest. It all seemed like one big blur of hunger, thirst, and fear. “I’ll be all right,” he said finally. He looked away then and added almost under his breath, “Long as you’re with me.”

Jaedin was silent for a long moment. Finally, he cleared his throat and said, “When we get to Rosefire, we’ll go and see Mara. Perhaps with both of us in front of her she’ll be able to tell us something helpful about this... this... *leythe-working* or whatever it is.”

Khy just shook his head. Whatever it was that Jaedin needed help with, it wasn’t anything he’d done. He was certain he’d remember doing something powerful and important like that.

They walked in silence for the rest of the afternoon, but it wasn’t an uncomfortable silence. Not like the silences in the tower, during which Master Rikard waited, watching like a hawk, for Khy to drop something or trip over his own feet so he could be punished.

That night, after they’d eaten and the purple shadows of twilight had melted into the night, Khy stayed close to the fire, starting at every sound. Jaedin didn’t seem bothered by the nighttime noises of the Skarwood, but Khy almost wished that someone would come and give him his medicine. At least when he took the medicine, his mind didn’t wander into dark, twisty corners at every sound.

Jaedin spread out his bedroll and told Khy to crawl in and go to sleep.

“What about you?” Khy asked. “Where will you sleep?”

“I’ll sit up and watch for a while.”

“Watch what?”

“Watch the night. Make sure nothing sneaks up on our camp.”

“All night?” Khy wanted to know. “Don’t you need to sleep?”

“With this voice in my head?” Jaedin waved a hand at his own head. “I’ll sleep when we get to Rosefire.”

So Khy snuggled down in the bedding and closed his eyes. The last few days had included far less food and far more exertion than he was used to, and his body was tired enough that it should have been easy to fall asleep. Without his medicine, though, his mind was wide awake and kept playing over the things that had happened last night.

He kept hearing the voice of one of Baine’s men: *Remember what Master Rikard said. The boy’s useless to him if he’s not still a virgin.*

He’d been mulling over those words all afternoon. He knew what they meant. He and Arin had spied on the brothers sometimes, and he knew what men did with each other when they didn’t want women. Fear of discovery and lack of privacy had prevented Khy and Arin from exploring very many of those possibilities, but Khy had no doubt that they would have eventually found a way.

Before the brothers had given him to Master Rikard, anyway.

Before he’d set fire to the—

Khy sat up in the bedroll, eyes wide.

How had he forgotten that he’d set fire to the stable?

He’d remembered it for the first time the day he’d left the tower. After Baine had drugged him, the memory had sunk back into the mud with the rest of his past, and it had only just resurfaced.

So many of his memories had been shrouded in the fog and haze in his head, but now the veil was slowly thinning and parting, and he remembered that day clearly. He and Arin had accompanied Brother Valentine to the market in Stone Creek. Their job had been to take care of the wagon and the horses while Brother Valentine haggled with the merchants. While they’d been there, Khy had caught Arin kissing a girl.

When they’d returned to the monastery, Khy had confronted Arin. They’d argued and—

—and the fire had raged in Khy's head like a brilliant wash of orange light. The next thing he'd known, there were shouts from the brothers, and the screams of frightened horses. The stable was burning. The brothers had managed to save the horses, but the building had burned to the ground.

The brothers had been angry. They'd called him evil and tainted. They'd fed him some foul medicine and locked him up in a cell until they could arrange for Master Rikard to come and fetch him. There had been talk of the Master taking him on as an apprentice. The monks had made it clear that they didn't approve of those who tampered with the leythe, but what other choice did they have? Father Ambrose had said he shuddered to think of the evil Khy could get up to if left to his own devices.

"Jaedin?" he said, his voice sounding very small in the huge darkness that surrounded them.

"Yes, Khy?" Jaedin's voice was a warm, comforting rumble.

"What you said earlier... about me being a leythari... I think you might be right." He swallowed hard as other memories crowded in, forming a picture that was only now starting to become clear. "I think... Master Rikard was supposed to teach me, only... only he didn't. He made me a slave instead." Khy frowned, trying to remember. The parts of his life from before the tower had come back into sharp focus, but the time he'd spent with Master Rikard was still foggy and mixed up. He didn't know of any good way to ask for what he wanted, so it all tumbled out in a rush: "Last night... one of them said that Master Rikard wouldn't have any use for me if I wasn't a virgin. Jaedin, please. I don't want to go back there. He'll hurt me. Would you... would you..." He couldn't finish, and he squeezed his eyes shut, cringing as he waited for Jaedin's response.

The silence that followed his clumsy request lasted so long that Khy had to crack open an eye to make sure Jaedin was still there. In the shifting firelight, he couldn't quite make out the expression on Jaedin's face, but the big man was staring into the flames.

"Go to sleep, Khy." Jaedin's voice sounded heavy and rough.

Khy didn't say anything more. He burrowed down into the bedding and covered his head so Jaedin wouldn't see his burning cheeks.

Jaedin figured it was a good thing he'd already decided to keep watch all night. The thought of a powerful leythari creeping about the Skarwood in search of his escaped slave was quite enough to keep even the most footsore soldier awake. With the voice in his head constantly whispering Khy's name, coupled with Khy's blurted plea for help, sleep was the furthest thing from Jaedin's mind. It was also the last thing he was likely to get, even if he did close his eyes.

He stared into the embers of the fire, half his mind on keeping watch, the other half...

Well. The other half was chewing over all that had happened in the last few days, and trying to sort it all out.

Khy's request had caught him completely off guard, and he was still trying to decide how he felt about it. Part of him was repulsed at the thought of taking anyone to his bed. Even thinking about it felt like a betrayal of the worst kind; Talon still figured large in his thoughts and his dreams, and Jaedin hadn't looked at another man since Talon had been taken from him.

Another part of him—a part that had been buried for far too long—thought that he might be able to look at Khy.

That made Khy dangerous. Khy was exactly the sort of man who caught his interest, and he was disturbingly like Talon. Not to look at, no, but there had been a sweetness and an innocence about Talon that ran counter to the fiery, independent spirit that raged within that deceptively small, slender body. Jaedin had already seen hints of that same kind of fire in Khy. It may have been drugged into submission during his years of slavery, but as the effects of the leythe-bane wore off, Jaedin could see it shining through.

It both fascinated and frightened him.

Khy's problems were hardly trivial, and Khy's presence posed a serious threat to the quiet, peaceful life Jaedin had struggled to build for himself these past five years. He couldn't afford to get tangled up with Khy.

That thought brought a rueful smile to his lips. With that voice in his head and the irresistible urge he felt to protect Khy from harm, he was already far more entangled than he was comfortable with. Untangling himself would likely be messy and complicated.

Morning found him wide awake and still as conflicted as he had been the night before. Khy slept late, and Jaedin let him. Leythe-bane was nasty stuff. If

Rikard had kept Khy drugged all the time, then Khy was probably enjoying the first real sleep he'd had in years. Jaedin was loathe to wake him, so he kept himself occupied preparing another batch of the cleansing tea for when Khy awoke, and made a pot of porridge for their breakfast.

Then he settled back to wait for Khy to wake. He tried to think about something else, but his thoughts—and his gaze—kept returning to the young man curled up across the fire from him.

With his features relaxed in sleep, Khy was breathtaking. Jaedin could well imagine the disparaging comments his former comrades would have made had they been here to witness his gruff refusal of Khy's clumsy advances. If Jaedin was a less honorable man—or perhaps if the shadows of Talon's memory didn't haunt his every breath—he might have been very happy to take advantage of Khy's request.

One look at Khy's face, so innocent and vulnerable in sleep, stopped that line of thought cold. Jaedin knew he could never do such a thing. Khy had been hurt and taken advantage of quite enough in his young life. Jaedin had no desire to abuse him further.

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Chapter Five

It was sort of endearing, the way Khy sat on the table in the healer's workroom and swung his feet. With a silent curse, Jaedin tore his gaze away from the young man yet again, and turned his attention to Mara.

She'd been studying Khy in silence for some time now, and every time her frown deepened, the coldness curled tight in Jaedin's belly unfurled itself a little more. Whatever she was about to tell him, he was quite sure that it wasn't anything he wanted to hear.

Finally, Mara stepped back. Her dark eyes focused on Jaedin. She gave him an apologetic smile and shook her head slightly. "The working that's tangled up in your aura hasn't changed since I saw it the other day. I know you're convinced Arin—sorry, I mean Khy—is the one who laid it upon you, but I'm almost certain he didn't."

"But who else could have done it?" Jaedin asked. "There wasn't anyone else."

"After you went off into the Skarwood the other day, I contacted my mentor, Chavi, through the leythe. She has far more skill with the leythe than I do. I described the collar to her." She gestured to the collar around Khy's neck. "She confirmed what I first thought—that this is a leythe-chain. It binds Khy's power so he can't work the leythe. With this on, he can't even *sense* the leythe. Even if Khy understood what he'd done and knew how to undo it, as long as he's wearing this collar, he wouldn't be able to."

"So he *is* a leythari," Jaedin said with a frown.

Khy shook his head. "I'm *not*," he whispered. "I can't do things like that."

"You said you set fire to the stable," Jaedin reminded him.

Khy pressed his lips together and didn't say any more.

"Trained or not, you have power, Khy," Mara said quietly. "Power that somebody wanted to keep bound."

"Why bind his power?" Jaedin asked. "If he's never been trained, what would be the point? He wouldn't know how to do anything anyway."

"Chavi said that it's sometimes done to control one who cannot control himself," Mara said softly. "Occasionally the power is too strong, or the

leythari unable to learn the discipline required to control it. To protect himself and the people around him, his power must be bound.”

Jaedin turned his attention back to the distracting young man sitting on the table. Khy was watching him from beneath half-closed eyes. “I know the leythe-bane has made it hard for you to remember, Khy, but do you have any idea why your master would have made you wear the collar?”

Khy licked his lips and looked away. “He didn’t always,” he mumbled.

“No?” Jaedin glanced at Mara, who shrugged. “When didn’t he?”

A shudder shook Khy’s thin frame and he wrapped his arms about himself. “In the workroom,” he whispered.

“What happened in the workroom, Khy?” Mara’s voice was gentle, but her expression was grim.

“I don’t... I don’t remember... Just... light... and cold... and pain.”

Mara’s frown deepened. “Khy, was your master named Rikard?”

The voice in Jaedin’s head became loud and strident, and all the color drained from Khy’s face. He raised his eyes, locking his gaze onto Mara’s. “Don’t make me go back to him. *Please...*”

“Nobody is going to make you go anywhere you don’t want to,” Mara said. “Are they, Jaedin?”

Jaedin squeezed his eyes shut, trying to concentrate through the cacophony. He took a step toward Khy and laid a hand on his shoulder. “No, they’re not.”

Khy turned wide, haunted eyes on Jaedin, and the noise in Jaedin’s head immediately quieted.

“How did you know it was Rikard, Mara?” Jaedin asked.

“Chavi warned me about him,” she said. “Told me what to look for, showed me what patterns I would see in the leythe if I encountered any of his workings. From what she told me, I think this collar is leythe-locked, keyed to Rikard. Which means Rikard can use it to track Khy through the leythe.”

Khy made a whimpering sound, and Jaedin’s hand slid from his shoulder to his back, moving in slow, lazy circles. “Shh,” Jaedin whispered. “It’ll be all right.” He looked up at Mara then. “What can you tell me about Rikard?”

“Nothing much,” she replied. “I’d never heard of him until Chavi mentioned him the other night. He lives on the far side of the Skarwood, and keeps to himself. According to Chavi, he was banished from the court in Andar some twelve years ago. There were rumors that he was stealing power from his apprentices to use for his own workings. How one would accomplish that, I’ve no idea, but if that’s what he was using Khy for, it would certainly explain the collar. Binding Khy’s power would be a lot less trouble than teaching him to control it.” Mara’s gaze flicked to Khy, and her tone softened. “Khy, do you have any idea how long you were with Rikard?”

“I don’t know. I was fifteen when the brothers sent me to him, but... I’m sorry. I just don’t remember very much of what happened after that.”

Mara patted his shoulder. “That would be the leythe-bane. I’m afraid if he kept you on it all the time, some of those memories may be lost forever.”

Those beautiful eyes closed briefly. “That might be for the best,” Khy muttered.

“Can you recall anything happening at the monastery around the time you were sent away?” she asked him. “Any celebrations or big storms? Any fires or sicknesses?”

Khy frowned. “I don’t think... no, wait... there *was* something...” He fell silent for a time, gaze turned inward. Finally, he said slowly, “Father Ambrose was gone when I set fire to the stable. The brothers locked me in a cell until he returned and could decide what to do with me. He’d gone to Andar for Princess Lyri’s handfasting.”

Mara shot Jaedin an alarmed look.

“That was ten years ago,” Jaedin whispered. He’d still been fighting in Vakarra, but rumors of the scandal caused by Princess Lyri, who had fled rather than be handfasted to the young prince of Daerne, had spread across the Westlands like wildfire.

Jaedin immediately regretted his thoughtless words when Khy turned even paler. Khy’s eyes closed, and his body swayed. Afraid that Khy was about to pass out, Jaedin moved up against the table behind him and pulled the stricken man back against his chest. “It’s all right,” he said softly. “It’ll be all right.”

Khy leaned against him, letting Jaedin take his weight. Without thinking, Jaedin let his arms creep around Khy. When he glanced up at Mara, she was watching him, one eyebrow raised.

Jaedin ignored the knowing look she threw his way. He was just making sure Khy didn't pass out and hit his head, that was all. The man had just had a shock, and Jaedin was doing what anyone with a heart would do. He cleared his throat. "All right, then, it looks to me like we have two problems to deal with. One is getting this collar off of Khy so that Rikard can't find him. The other is getting this voice out of my head before it drives me mad. You're the closest thing to an expert on the leythe that we have, Mara. What do you suggest?"

"The only leythari I know of who might be able to help you is Varian. Chavi trained under him years ago."

"Chavi can't help us?" Jaedin asked.

Mara shook her head. "Not with the collar, at least. If Rikard is the one who set the leythe-lock, she won't be able to break it."

"But this Varian could do it?"

"I imagine he could. According to Chavi, there isn't much he can't do. He lives somewhere in the Fireskye. I'll contact Chavi again tonight. She'll know how to find him."

"We'll stop by in the morning, then," Jaedin said, "and see what you've found out."

Khy lay in Jaedin's bed and listened to the sounds of Jaedin packing up for their journey. Despite his exhaustion, he'd tried to pay close attention to everything the healer had said that afternoon. Some of it he hadn't really understood, especially the part about leythe-chains and him having power. One thing that had been perfectly clear, though, was that it would be a lot less trouble for Jaedin to just take Khy back to Rikard.

In fact, the more Khy turned it over in his mind, the more sense it made for Jaedin to do just that. He couldn't understand why Jaedin had decided to seek out Varian when Rikard was right there in the Skarwood. Maybe Jaedin felt sorry for him. Khy wondered how long that would last if Varian proved difficult to find. He was certain that it wouldn't take much for Jaedin to decide that Khy wasn't worth risking his own neck for. Then he'd seek out Rikard, and Khy would end up back in the tower.

He shivered a little and tried to turn his thoughts away from Rikard. A noise at the bedroom door startled him and he peered through the dim glow of the

Fireskye to see Jaedin creeping into the room. Jaedin moved to the foot of the bed and opened the chest there.

Khy burrowed deeper under the covers and pretended he was asleep. He liked Jaedin's bed. It was soft and much more comfortable than his pallet by the hearth had been. It smelled like Jaedin, too. He inhaled deeply, taking in as much of that scent as he could.

Eventually he drifted off to sleep, but it wasn't a peaceful sleep. Now that the medicine no longer chained his thoughts, Khy's mind was free to conjure all manner of nightmares. His dreams took him to Rikard's workroom, right into the cold and the fear and the awful, burning light...

He heard the liquid syllables falling from Rikard's lips, felt those cold hands moving over his body. The pattern of light floated above him, twisting and writhing into shapes that were so wrong it hurt to look at them. Icy, burning fire feathered its way through him with every motion of Rikard's hands...

Khy screamed and struggled, fighting against the hands that held him down until Jaedin's voice cut through the terror-soaked dreamscape.

"Khy! Wake up! You're safe."

He shuddered and opened his eyes. An oil lamp stood on the nightstand, and in its warm, yellow light he could see Jaedin leaning over him. It was Jaedin's hands—not Rikard's—that he could feel on his shoulders.

"I'm all right," he choked.

Jaedin frowned down at him and lifted his hands away. "You didn't sound all right."

"Dreams."

"Nightmares," Jaedin corrected. "You're shaking."

The bed dipped and a moment later he was scooped up and hauled onto Jaedin's lap, covers and all. The big man's arms went around him, and Khy found his head tucked under Jaedin's chin, his ear pressed against Jaedin's broad chest.

"Better?" A big hand smoothed the sweaty tangles of hair off of his face.

Khy squeezed his eyes shut and tried to calm his racing heart. He *wasn't* in the tower, Rikard *wasn't* standing over him drawing the light from his body, and Jaedin *wasn't* going to take him anywhere near the Skarwood.

As long as they were able to find Varian in the Fireskye. If they couldn't find him...

Khy trembled in Jaedin's arms. Jaedin's hold tightened, and he began rocking Khy gently back and forth. After a while, Khy heard him yawn, and Jaedin carefully shifted Khy off of his lap. The covers were pulled up over him. There were rustling sounds as Jaedin readied himself for bed, and then Jaedin lay down next to him.

It wasn't long before Jaedin's deep, even breathing told Khy he was asleep. Khy wished he could sleep, too, but there were too many thoughts running around in his head.

If this was all going to end with him back in Rikard's hands, he almost wished that Jaedin hadn't shown up to rescue him when he had. Baine and his men might not have been gentle, but at least if they'd had their way with him, he wouldn't have to worry about being useful to Rikard anymore.

Perhaps he could still convince Jaedin to help him. It might have been his clumsy way of asking that had made Jaedin refuse. Khy knew what felt good, remembered some of the things he and Arin used to do to each other. Maybe if he did some of those things to Jaedin...

He kicked the covers out of the way and wriggled out of the nightshirt Jaedin had given him. Naked, he lay back down facing Jaedin, who had stripped down to his skin before getting into bed. The pale violet light of the moon shone in the window, illuminating Jaedin's face and throwing every muscle of the big man's chest and arms into sharp relief. Khy's fingers itched with the need to touch.

He pressed his body close to Jaedin's, skin on skin, and ran a tentative hand down Jaedin's chest. Jaedin stirred in his sleep and murmured something that sounded like *talon*. An arm snaked around Khy and hauled him close, and a hand began a lazy exploration of his body. It stroked its way across his belly and his chest, pausing to tweak a nipple, then moved down to brush over his hip and cup his ass. When that hand wrapped around his cock and began stroking him, Khy let out a low moan and bucked his hips, seeking more friction.

Jaedin's mouth sought his, devouring him in a hot, hungry kiss. Khy whimpered as Jaedin's hand began to move faster. Heat and tension coiled tighter and tighter inside him, and he could feel himself moving toward something... something...

“Talon?” Jaedin’s voice sounded rough and confused. “No... you’re not Talon... what in the Black...?”

That sweet, firm pressure disappeared, the hands moved away, and Khy found himself alone. Jaedin stood beside the bed staring down at him with wide eyes.

“Khy, I’m sorry.” Jaedin’s face was a pale mask of horror in the moonlight. “I thought... I thought you were...”

“Please, Jaedin, I want—”

“No!” Jaedin rubbed his face with his hands. “No, no, no. I can’t. Not... no.”

“You wanted to, you were going to, please, you have to fuck me.” Khy’s voice sounded high and panicky. He tried to stay calm, but he could feel his salvation slipping through his fingers. Why wouldn’t Jaedin just do this one thing? If only Khy could make him see—

Something shifted in Khy’s head. There was a *pushing* feeling, followed by a pulse of twisting, flickering light that moved from him toward Jaedin.

Jaedin blinked and shook his head.

There was a low growl. When Khy looked up, the horror was gone from Jaedin’s face, and the man’s expression had turned feral. Khy hardly had time to register the change before Jaedin was on him.

Jaedin pushed Khy down on the bed and straddled him. He paused only a few moments to spit into his palm and stroke his already hard cock. His hands gripped Khy’s hips, and he turned him over onto his belly, then pulled him up and set him on all fours.

Khy wasn’t sure if he should be pleased or terrified. The heat of Jaedin’s skin as he drew closer was all the warning he had before something nudged between his cheeks and Jaedin started pushing his way into Khy’s body.

It burned, gods, it burned. Khy bit back a yelp at the sudden, painful intrusion. He squeezed his eyes shut and reminded himself that this was what he wanted. All he had to do was get through this, and then Rikard couldn’t use him, wouldn’t want him. Even if Rikard could use the collar to hunt him down, he couldn’t use him for—

Jaedin's hands took hold of his hips in a punishing grip and he slowly pulled Khy back onto himself. Khy gritted his teeth and took it. He'd asked for it, after all. This pain wasn't nearly as bad as what Master Rikard did to him.

Jaedin pulled back and plunged in again, fucking Khy with long, hard strokes. His grip on Khy's hips tightened, and his breath soon became ragged.

All Khy could do was clutch the sheet beneath him and ride it out, hoping it would end soon. The burning pain had just started to ease when Jaedin's rhythm grew faster and more frantic. After what seemed like an endless time, Jaedin stilled behind him and let out a string of curses that ended on a low moan. When he was finished, Jaedin collapsed on top of Khy, pushing him down against the bed.

Khy lay there struggling to breathe under Jaedin's weight.

Was that it? Was he different now? He didn't *feel* any different, other than sore, but he wasn't a leythari. Maybe the difference was something only Rikard could sense.

A grunt came from above him, and Jaedin's warmth and weight were gone. With a muttered curse, Jaedin scrambled off the bed and backed away. Khy didn't move; he lay there shivering, caught somewhere between relief and regret.

"What in the Black...?" Jaedin's voice came out of the darkness, weak and shaky. "What have you done to me?"

Khy's only answer was a whimper. He shifted carefully, seeking a more comfortable position. Gods, he was going to hurt tomorrow.

"Khy? Are... are you all right? Did I...?" There was a note of fear in Jaedin's voice now.

"I'm fine," Khy whispered.

"What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything. I just... wanted you to... to take me. So Rikard couldn't use me."

"And I wouldn't, so you forced me," Jaedin said in a strangled voice.

Khy turned his head to look at Jaedin, but he couldn't see the man's face clearly in the darkness that blanketed that side of the room. "I didn't force you. I asked you. And you said no... and then it all changed, and you... you..."

“I don’t care what Mara says about leythe-chains. This would not have been any choice of mine. *You* did this somehow, just like you put that voice in my head.”

“I didn’t!” he protested, but a sliver of doubt had entered his mind, and it grew stronger as he recalled that odd *pushing* sensation and the flickering twist of light he’d seen just before Jaedin had come after him. It was like the fire at the stable. He hadn’t meant to do that, either.

“Damn it, Khy, using your power to force people to do what you want makes you as bad as Rikard!”

Khy’s whole body went cold and then hot. He rose to his knees on the bed. “I’m *not* like him. I just... I needed... You wouldn’t help me!”

“I *am* helping you. I’m taking you into the Fireskye to find this Varian character. Believe me, boy, it would be a lot easier to take you back to your master and ask him to sort this out.”

“Why don’t you then?” Khy demanded. “I know you don’t want to be bothered with me. Why not do what you want and *leave me alone*?” He flung the words at Jaedin with all the anger and fear in his heart. Something twisted in his head, twisted and *pushed*.

He was completely unprepared for the strangled cry he heard from Jaedin.

He was even more unprepared for the thud that shook the whole cottage when Jaedin’s body hit the floor.

Jaedin woke to gray morning light and a blinding headache. He frowned as he became aware of the hard floor beneath him. How in the Black had he ended up on the...?

He scrambled to his feet, stomach clenching as he remembered the events of the previous night. The bed was empty, and he cast his gaze about the room, seeking Khy.

There was no sign of the young man, though the smears of blood on the rumpled sheets told him that what he’d thought—hoped—was nightmare, was in fact memory.

He checked the cottage’s main room and his workshop, but Khy was nowhere to be found. Panic flared through him for a moment before common

sense took hold. Even if Khy had run off, it wouldn't be long before he got himself into trouble and the voice in Jaedin's head started screaming at him to—

Jaedin froze.

The voice was gone. There was only silence in his head.

Well. Except for the unhappy yammering of his own thoughts of loss and betrayal. Jaedin sagged against the nearest wall and rubbed his hands over his face.

He should be relieved, but his mind was seething with dark thoughts and his gut was churning. He'd betrayed Talon's memory. He'd done the one thing he'd sworn he'd never do, and it hadn't even been his choice.

Khy had done it. Khy could deny it all he wanted, but Jaedin was certain he was responsible. Jaedin would never have touched him otherwise, would certainly never have...

He moved slowly back to the bedroom, eyes fixed on the bloodstained sheets. How badly had he hurt Khy? Badly enough that he'd gone to Mara?

The thought that he might have injured the young man worried him. There was only one way to set his mind at ease on that point. Jaedin dressed quickly and headed down the dirt track toward the healer's house.

The sky was heavy and overcast, the Fireskye a dull, sullen glow hanging over the mountains. Warm lamplight spilling from the front window of Mara's cottage told him she was already up and about. She opened the door at his first knock.

"Has Khy been here?" he asked as she ushered him in.

She blinked up at him. "No, I haven't seen him since yesterday. Why?"

"He was..." Jaedin stopped, considering his words. The last thing he wanted was to have to explain to Mara just why he thought Khy might seek her out. "He was having nightmares. I thought maybe..."

Mara shook her head. "No, he didn't come here, and I was up a good part of the night. I spoke to Chavi for you. She says she hasn't been in contact with Varian in years, but the last she knew, he was living in the Fireskye, near the Firehard. You know it?"

“I’ve seen it. From a distance. It’s hard to miss.” The Fireshard was a spire of orange-gold crystal that towered over all but the highest peaks of the mountains.

“Chavi said to warn you that the leythe lies heavy around the valley where the Fireshard stands, and the leythe-storms in that area are extremely dangerous.”

Jaedin grunted. “The place will be crawling with rhyx, then.”

Mara nodded gravely. “Most likely. But she also said that Varian will help you if he can. Assuming he’s still there and that you can find him.”

Had he still required Varian’s help, Jaedin might have been concerned about having to make such a dangerous journey, but now that the voice was gone, he had no reason to seek out a leythari. Not for himself, at least. As for Khy... Well, Khy had used him and then run off without even an apology. He owed Khy nothing.

Jaedin frowned as another explanation for Khy’s absence occurred to him. Mara had said Rikard could use his leythe-lock on the collar to track Khy. Maybe Khy hadn’t run off at all.

Maybe he’d been taken.

The fact that the possibility troubled him at all was disturbing.

“...and if you’re still... Jaedin?” Mara frowned at him. “You’re awfully distracted this morning. Bad night?”

“The worst,” he muttered.

She gave his hand a sympathetic pat and continued, “Chavi tells me the fastest way to the Fireshard from here is to take Crystal Pass. If you follow the trail just beyond the South Trade Road into the mountains, it will take you through the pass. The Fireshard stands in the valley on the other side.”

He knew the route—he’d followed it once before, soon after he’d settled here. “South Trade Road... Crystal Pass... the Fireshard,” he mumbled, only half his mind on her directions. The other half was still wondering what had happened to Khy. *Had* he left on his own? Or had he been taken?

Those eyes... Jaedin couldn’t stop thinking about the depth of the need and the fear he’d seen in those eyes. Part of him wanted to tear out of the village right now and find Khy, wrap him up in his arms and keep him safe.

It was almost as bad as the damned voice.

“Mara,” he said, frowning as another thought occurred to him, “can you have another look at that working that was laid upon me? Tell me if anything about it has changed?”

“Certainly. Come and have a seat,” she said, and led him to her hearth again.

Jaedin sat while Mara sank her awareness into the leythe to examine his aura. When she emerged, her expression was very serious. “What happened?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“The working is gone. All traces of it. I can’t even read an echo of it in the currents of the leythe, and that should not be. A working of that complexity and depth would leave some kind of impression within the leythe, but there’s nothing.”

“That can’t be. *Something* is still influencing me. The voice is gone, but... I still feel this... this urge to protect him.”

Mara shook her head. “Whatever you’re feeling, it’s not coming from any leythe-working. It’s coming from your own heart, Jaedin.”

“Impossible,” he said, and got to his feet.

He’d reached the door before he felt her hand on his arm, pulling him back. He stopped and turned to face her, not wanting to see the knowing look in her eyes.

He saw nothing of the sort. Saw only concern. “Jaedin, be careful. Especially if you plan to take Khy into the Fireskye with you. Rhyx use the leythe to hunt their prey, and they’re not the only things that hunt that way. Khy’s power may be bound, but they’ll still sense it, and as long as he’s wearing that leythe-chain, he’ll have no defense against them.”

He gave her a grim nod. “I’ll be careful. I’m sorry I won’t have time to restock your supplies before I leave.”

“Don’t you worry about me. I was making my own medicines long before you settled in Rosefire. I’ll manage. Take care of yourself, Jaedin. And take care of Khy.”

“I will,” he promised.

Outside again, Jaedin headed home to collect his pack. The clouds had grown darker while he'd been speaking with Mara, and he smelled rain in the air. That would make for a miserable—

He stopped in the middle of the track, frowning.

When, exactly, had he decided that he was going to chase after Khy?

No.

He wasn't going *anywhere*, damn it. The voice was gone, there was nothing driving him, nothing to tie him to the man. After what Khy had done last night, Jaedin was glad to see the back of him. There was absolutely no reason for Jaedin to go tearing off after him.

Except those eyes. The fear he'd seen in those blue depths when Khy had spoken of Rikard still made him want to hold Khy and protect him.

Jaedin shook his head hard to dislodge that thought. No, no, no. There was no room in his heart for anyone but Talon. He *wasn't* going after Khy. The man could damn well take care of himself.

Except...

Except he couldn't. It had been painfully obvious, just in the short time they'd traveled together through the Skarwood, that Khy was as helpless as a newborn babe in the wilderness.

He'd left Jaedin's cottage with nothing but the clothes on his back. He had no food, no bedroll... he didn't even have a cloak. Jaedin lifted his eyes to the heavy sky just as the first raindrops began to fall. Khy would need a cloak before too long.

Assuming he hadn't been taken by Rikard.

And if he has been taken by Rikard? What then, Jaedin? Will you go up against a powerful leythari for the sake of a man who used you to get what he wanted and then ran out on you?

With a long sigh, Jaedin trudged the remaining distance to his own cottage. He'd worry about Rikard if and when he had to. Right now, he couldn't get Khy out of his head.

He caught up the two packs he'd filled the night before, bade his home a fond farewell, and locked the door behind him.

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Chapter Six

It was raining. Khy was cold, wet, and sore, but he couldn't bring himself to be miserable about any of it. The fact that he could feel anything was miraculous, and he'd take cold and wet over drugged into oblivion any day. Now that the drug Rikard had been feeding him had worn off, all of his senses were alive: colors were brighter, noises were sharper, and food had taste again.

His thoughts, which had only been able to move in tiny circles like fish trapped in a bowl, were suddenly free to roam. They might sometimes turn to dark and frightening things, but at least he had the ability to think and reason for himself once more.

The rain had started soon after sunrise, and it hadn't let up. Khy had been following the road south all morning, walking by the side of the dirt track to avoid the puddles forming in the ruts left by the wagon wheels. The way his legs hurt and his ass burned, he wasn't sure how much farther he could go without a rest. The clean breeches and tunic Mara had found for him yesterday were soaked through, and hung heavily on his slender frame.

Thinking of Mara—and then of Jaedin—made his stomach hurt. They'd both seemed genuinely concerned about him last night, and he'd repaid their kindness by... by doing whatever it was he'd done to Jaedin and then leaving the man lying on the floor of his cottage.

He stopped and turned to look back up the dirt track toward Rosefire. The little village had long since disappeared in the mist. He couldn't even see the smoke rising from the chimneys anymore.

He hoped Jaedin was all right. He'd checked the man before he'd left the cottage. Jaedin had been breathing, and he hadn't appeared to be hurt. Khy had guessed the big man would be furious when he woke, and hadn't wanted to face his wrath. Now he wondered if maybe he should have stayed until Jaedin woke up, or at least stopped and asked Mara to check on him.

Except then he would have had to explain to Mara what had happened.

Khy shook his head, cheeks burning even though there was no one to see. Done was done. He couldn't go back now. Rikard probably knew by now that Baine was dead. He'd send someone else, or worse, come and fetch Khy

himself. It wouldn't take Rikard long to discover that Khy was no longer a virgin, and once he did...

Khy shuddered at the thought of the Master's rage. The more distance he could put between himself and Rikard, the better. Although if Mara was right, he wouldn't be safe until he got rid of the collar. If Rikard could use it to track him, it wouldn't matter how far or how fast he ran.

He turned to look up at the Fireskye. It was only a dull glow above the mountains through the gray curtain of the rain. The leythari Mara had spoken of might be able to help him, but Khy wasn't sure how he was going to manage the dangerous journey into the mountains when he could hardly make decent progress along a muddy dirt track. It would be weeks before the collar was removed, and that was assuming this Varian could—or would—help him.

It was going to take far too long.

He'd have to try to get the thing off himself before Rikard could track him. It would hurt—it always hurt when he touched the collar, and he'd never been able to find so much as a seam in the smooth, cold metal before the pain forced him to stop. Maybe now that he wasn't taking the medicine, his fingers would be nimble enough and his mind quick enough to figure out how to open the thing.

That decided, he started walking again, scanning the area ahead of him. The trees here didn't grow as thick and close as they did in the Skarwood, but there were still scattered patches of forest on either side of the road. Khy headed into the next one he saw, hoping to find a place to get out of the rain and see what he could do about the collar.

As he moved deeper into the trees, the heavy canopy of leaves overhead blocked some of the rain. Not that it mattered; he was already soaked through and shivering with cold. He thought longingly of the little campfire Jaedin had built the other night. Khy had no idea how to get a fire started even if he had been able to find some dry wood.

A short distance into the trees, Khy found a big pine with large, sheltering branches that swept the ground. He ducked underneath. The space was a little cramped, but mostly dry. A thick bed of pine needles covered the ground. He sat huddled in a miserable knot with his back against the trunk, wishing the rain would stop.

When he'd recovered a little from the morning's walk, Khy turned his attention to the collar around his neck. His fingers moved toward it, but he didn't touch it yet. Instead, he tried to think back to his last attempt to remove it.

He wished he could remember more clearly, but his memory, it seemed, was still a tricky thing. While the details of his life before he'd gone to the tower had come back, sharp and clear, his memories of his time with Rikard were still dim and confusing. Mara had said he might never get those memories back. Khy wasn't sure he wanted most of them back, but it would have been useful to remember what he'd already tried when he'd attempted to remove the collar.

He drew in a deep breath and lifted his hands to the jewel-studded metal. The catch would be at the back, the most difficult place for the wearer to reach. His hands shook, and his fingers brushed against the icy surface of one of the stones. Something slick and unpleasant twisted in his head. His whole body went cold in response.

Khy closed his eyes and steeled himself. His fingers scrabbled against the cool, smooth metal, seeking a clasp or a hook, anything that felt different. There was nothing. He couldn't even feel a seam where the thing might come apart. The collar was an unbroken band around his neck.

The cold inside him intensified until it became an icy burn that he could no longer ignore. Sweat broke out on his skin, and the cold radiated out from his core until it had reached every part of him.

He was running out of time. The pain would only get worse until he was forced to stop. His movements grew more frantic and less coordinated as he began to panic.

Khy gritted his teeth. He pulled and yanked at the collar, desperate to get it off and end the pain. Nothing worked, but he continued to struggle, his breath coming in choking sobs. The cold bit deep into him, burning him with every breath, every movement.

One last pull and the ice flared through him, hot and cold at the same time. Fire shot up his spine and exploded in his head. Khy's body went rigid. He screamed, and then he was falling and falling into icy blackness.

The rain made tracking difficult, though Jaedin could guess that Khy would probably avoid the Skarwood, which rather narrowed his options. North and east would both take him back into the forest, and the Fireskye blocked the way west, with no easy path into the mountains until one got beyond the South Trade Road. That left south, and the occasional boot print in the mud by the edge of the road encouraged him in thinking he'd guessed right.

By midmorning the rain became heavier and appeared to have set in for the day. The mist was so thick that the light of the Fireskye was only a sullen orange glow over the dark bulk of the mountains. Jaedin kept his eyes open, scanning both sides of the muddy road for any sign that Khy might have left it to head into the shelter of the trees.

He found a faint trail through the long, wet grass only moments before a hoarse cry issued from a thick stand of pine and oak just off the muddy track. Jaedin readied his bow and plunged into the trees, his only thought to reach Khy.

The tracks were easier to follow under the canopy of leaves, and they led him to a large pine tree. In the dry cavern formed by its sheltering branches, he found Khy face down on the ground.

There was no sign of any assailant, human or otherwise, and Khy didn't appear to be injured. When Jaedin turned him over, his eyes were open, but Khy stared right through him. The young man was shivering violently, and no wonder—his skin was icy cold, his clothing soaked through.

Jaedin dropped the packs and his bow. He gathered Khy up in his arms, wrapped them both in his own cloak, and leaned back against the trunk of the tree.

Some time passed before Khy jerked to awareness with a strangled cry. Jaedin tightened his arms around the man as he started to struggle, afraid that Khy's first instinct would be to run.

"Hush. It's all right. You're safe now."

Khy stared up at him, blinking.

"Can you tell me what happened?" Jaedin asked. "I couldn't see how you were hurt, but the way you screamed..."

"It was the collar," Khy whispered. "I tried to take it off."

“You can’t, Khy. Mara said it was leythe-locked.”

“I had to try. I don’t want Rikard to find me.”

“Mara also said Varian might be able to remove it.”

“I... I don’t know if I can find Varian by myself. The Fireskye is so big, and I... I don’t know how to build a campfire or find food, or... or anything.” Khy lowered his eyes, but Jaedin saw the pink blush staining his cheeks.

“Ah, but I do. I’ll teach you.”

“You... you...” Khy lifted his gaze once more and stared up at Jaedin with wide eyes, as if Jaedin’s presence was just now registering in his mind. His brow wrinkled in a frown. “What are you doing here?”

“Well,” Jaedin said in a gruff voice, “it occurs to me that you and I both need to go to the same place. You to get that collar removed, and me to get this infernal voice out of my head.” He wasn’t about to admit to Khy that the voice was no longer driving him, not when he could hardly admit it to himself. The last thing he wanted to do was give Khy the wrong idea. He was only offering his help out of a sense of duty. Not because... Well, he wasn’t, that was all.

“But—”

“And it seems to me that since we’re headed in the same direction, we might as well travel together.”

Khy stared up at him, frowning.

“Besides,” Jaedin said, pointing to the packs lying on the ground nearby, “you left so fast last night, you forgot your pack. Wouldn’t get far without any gear. Especially up in the Fireskye.”

Khy wasn’t at all sure what to make of Jaedin’s offer to travel with him. Not that he was complaining; with Jaedin along, things had suddenly become a lot more comfortable and a lot less frightening. There was something to eat besides the scant handful of berries Khy had thus far managed to find, and there was dry clothing and a bedroll of his own to spread beneath the boughs of the pine tree Jaedin found for them to shelter under.

They hadn’t gone very far after Jaedin had found him. Khy had been too shaky after his attempt to remove the collar, but Jaedin had insisted that they put a little more distance between themselves and Rosefire.

Khy couldn't quite reconcile the two sides of Jaedin that he'd seen in the last day or so. When Khy had come around after his failed attempt to remove his collar, Jaedin had been holding him close, warming him with his own body heat. And yet, the big man had been furious last night when he'd accused Khy of working the leythe against him. Khy had been certain then that Jaedin would be just as glad to see the back of him.

He still wasn't sure what had happened that night. The more he thought about it, though, the more it worried him. That light he'd seen right before Jaedin had come after him had looked a lot like the light that Master Rikard pulled out of Khy's body during those sessions in the workroom.

The only difference was that the light he'd seen moving from himself and into Jaedin hadn't hurt the way the light in the workroom did. It had certainly done something to Jaedin, though, and Jaedin knew it.

Khy was sure the only reason Jaedin had followed him was because Jaedin believed Khy was responsible for the voice in his head.

And now that he thought about it, maybe he was.

He hadn't meant to put a voice in Jaedin's head... but then, he hadn't meant to set fire to the stable, either, and everyone had been convinced that he had.

Now, Khy lay snuggled down in the bedroll Jaedin had brought for him and listened to the big man breathe in the darkness. Jaedin had set his own bedroll on the other side of the tree from Khy. Whether that was because he was giving Khy his space or because he was wary of what Khy might do, Khy had yet to determine.

He hoped it was the former. He didn't want Jaedin to be afraid of him, didn't want *anyone* to be afraid of him.

"Jaedin?" he whispered into the night.

There was silence, then a soft grunt, followed by a quiet, "What is it, Khy?"

"About last night..." Khy swallowed hard. "I don't know what happened. I mean, it wasn't... it wasn't anything I *tried* to do, I was just... I was afraid. And I didn't want Rikard to be able to hurt me again. If I made you do something you didn't want... I mean, if it was somehow my fault, I'm sorry."

There was another long silence followed by a heavy sigh. "Thank you." Jaedin's voice sounded thick and husky in the darkness. "I... loved someone

once. Loved him with every breath of my being. He was taken from me, and I... I swore I would never touch another man. What happened last night... felt like a betrayal of the worst kind.”

Khy squeezed his eyes shut. He might not have meant to, but he'd done the worst thing possible to Jaedin. “I'm sorry. I didn't... I didn't mean to. I didn't know that I *could*. I thought... I thought Mara said the collar would stop me.”

“Mara is a healer.” Jaedin's voice was a low, comforting rumble. “She'll be the first to tell you she knows little of the leythe beyond its use for healing. I spent ten years fighting in the north. I've seen more things done with the leythe than Mara can probably imagine.”

“Do you think Varian would teach me?”

“I don't know, but I think you should ask him. It seems to me that if you possess that kind of power, you owe it to the people around you to learn how to control it.”

Khy felt his face burning in the darkness. He knew Jaedin was right. He didn't want to hurt anyone else the way he'd hurt Jaedin last night. “Jaedin?” His voice sounded very small in the darkness.

“Yes, Khy?”

“Rikard was supposed to teach me, but he didn't. What if Varian is the same?”

Jaedin huffed out a soft breath. “Not everybody in the world is going to hurt you. Mara's teacher, Chavi, knows Varian, and I know Mara. She wouldn't knowingly send us into danger.”

Khy didn't think she would either, not really. It was that *knowingly* part that worried him.

The rain continued on into the second day, and by afternoon, they came across a travelers' shelter set back in the trees a little way. Jaedin could tell from the way Khy moved that he was sore and nearing the end of his endurance.

“I know we've a few hours of light left,” he said to Khy, “but I think I'd like to call it a day. Sleep dry tonight.”

Khy gave him one of those suspicious, sideways looks. "You don't have to stop for me. I can keep going."

Jaedin raised an eyebrow. "I'm sure you can, but I can't. My boots are soggy, my clothes are damp, and I'm getting tired of being rained on. If we go on too much longer like this, I'll have moss growing between my toes. There won't be another travelers' shelter for quite a way. If we don't stop now, we'll be sleeping under a tree again."

Khy narrowed his eyes, clearly chewing over all the possible implications of Jaedin's words. Now that the leythe-bane was out of his system, the change in Khy was nothing short of miraculous. Those intense blue eyes were clear and sharp, and missed nothing. The mind behind them was quick and bright, and Jaedin was quite sure Khy saw right through his attempts to make the journey a little easier on him.

"Besides," Jaedin added before Khy could comment, "I'd like to take the time to put together a decent meal. You could do with a bit more meat on your bones."

Khy shot him a scowl, but shifted his pack and started down the path that led to the shelter. "Well, we can't have moss growing between your toes," he said as Jaedin caught up to him. "That could be disastrous." Jaedin was certain he saw a glint of humor in those expressive eyes, and the shadow of a grin on Khy's face.

In the shelter, Jaedin busied himself with lighting a fire and heating some water so they could both wash up. Khy stripped out of his wet clothing as soon as the water was warm. Jaedin started to turn his back to give the young man some privacy, but stopped when the dark bruises on Khy's hips caught his eye.

"Oh, Khy..." he murmured, before he could stop himself.

Khy turned to look at him, brow creased in a frown. "What?"

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "I never meant to hurt you."

"It's done," Khy said, turning back to the fire. "At least Rikard will have no more use for me now."

"Your first time shouldn't have been that way."

"A lot of things shouldn't be, but they are," was Khy's reply. "Rikard shouldn't have stolen the last ten years of my life, but he did."

The bitterness in Khy's voice cut Jaedin to the quick. He wondered if Khy had ever known kindness or pleasure, and part of him longed to show him those things. Another part of him was screaming for him to change the subject to something less dangerous. Just looking at Khy and thinking those thoughts was—

Was what?

Betrayal?

Of a man five years dead?

Jaedin cleared his throat. "Are you... can I... do you need something for pain? I should have asked before, I didn't realize..."

Khy turned to face him again, completely unashamed—or perhaps unaware—of his nakedness. "It's nothing," he said with a shrug. "I'm used to pain. You hurt me a lot less than Rikard ever did."

Jaedin winced at the thought, but he couldn't tear his eyes away from Khy's body. The firelight shifted and flickered, dancing over his pale skin. Khy turned his attention to washing himself. Jaedin found himself helpless to do anything but watch the way Khy's hands moved over his body, the way his wet skin glistened in the firelight...

The man was beautifully proportioned; slim, but not scrawny, with a narrow waist and lean hips. A bit on the small side, perhaps... Then again, Jaedin had always been attracted to men who were small enough to give him the illusion that they needed his protection, but strong enough not to break. The combination of strength and vulnerability that he saw in Khy was a heady mix, and more than enough to set Jaedin's blood on fire.

Jaedin closed his eyes. He remembered only brief snatches of the night he'd taken Khy, but he was fairly certain there had been no pleasure for Khy that night. Part of him desperately wanted to make up for the pain he'd caused Khy. To show him that it didn't have to be that way...

His cock twitched at the thought of laying Khy down across the bunk and showing him just how good it could be.

When he opened his eyes, Khy was watching him, an enigmatic half-smile playing across his face.

With a muttered curse, Jaedin headed for the door of the shelter. "Have to check the... the..." his mind stumbled, searching for some chore he could

legitimately be going to do. "Pump," he said finally, and walked out into the rainy evening.

Outside, Jaedin turned his face to the sky and let the rain cool his heated skin. The sun would be setting soon, and with the heavy cloud cover, the gray light of evening would slide quickly into night. It would be a dark one, with the Fireskye shrouded by the rain.

He heard the shelter door bang shut behind him and turned to see Khy walking out into the rain, stark naked except for the jeweled collar around his neck. His eyes were fixed on Jaedin, his cock half-hard.

"Show me," Khy said softly. "Show me what it should have been."

"Gods..." Jaedin went hot all over.

Khy's pale skin was luminous in the dim light. He watched Jaedin with half-closed eyes. Jaedin couldn't look away. Was Khy manipulating him through the leythe? Making him want? Making him need?

Mara's words echoed in his head: *Whatever you're feeling, it's not coming from any leythe-working. It's coming from your own heart, Jaedin.*

Jaedin found himself moving slowly toward Khy. Those eyes burned him to the core, a dark fire in the misty half-light. Jaedin moved in closer, so close he could feel the heat pouring off of Khy's body and sinking into his own skin. The air was suddenly far too warm, and Jaedin hauled his own shirt over his head and flung it toward the shelter.

Khy stared up at him and licked his lips. That was all the invitation Jaedin needed. He bent to capture that sweet mouth in a possessive kiss. Khy pressed himself against Jaedin, moaning as he eagerly returned the kiss.

Not entirely unschooled, then. Jaedin found himself wondering who had tasted Khy before he had. His fingers threaded through Khy's hair, and he pulled the man's head back, exposing his throat so he could leave his mark there. The metal collar hampered his progress, so Jaedin skipped down to Khy's chest. He flicked his tongue over a nipple, hot blood filling his cock at the sound of Khy's husky groan. When he drew the nipple into his mouth, Khy ground himself against Jaedin's thigh.

That was all Jaedin could take. He dropped to his knees at Khy's feet so he could press a kiss to one of the dark bruises he'd left on Khy's hip. Khy stared down at him, eyes wide, body trembling.

Want or fear?

Jaedin couldn't say which, wasn't sure he wanted to know, given what he remembered of his own role in Khy's first and only experience. Well, he'd make up for that now.

Raindrops rolled across Khy's bare skin, tracing glistening paths down his body. Jaedin chased one all the way down Khy's belly with his tongue.

Khy let out a moan. His hands settled on Jaedin's shoulders. "Please..." he whispered.

It would take a stronger man than Jaedin to resist that breathless plea. Jaedin lapped at the head of Khy's cock and listened to his sharp intake of breath, felt the tremor that went through Khy's body. When he took the whole slender length into his mouth, Khy's hands tightened convulsively on his shoulders, fingers digging in hard.

Jaedin looked up to see those eyes staring down at him, hot with need. Khy's hips jerked and he thrust himself deeper into Jaedin's mouth. In response, Jaedin lifted his hands to Khy's hips, holding him still while he pulled back slowly, exploring the length of him with lips and tongue.

The moans, sighs, and incoherent words falling from Khy's lips sent lightning racing through him. Jaedin freed one of his hands to loosen his own breeches and stroke himself as he pleased Khy.

Khy was too far gone to notice. His grip on Jaedin's shoulders was hard enough to leave bruises and his hips jerked frantically as he fucked Jaedin's mouth.

When Khy finally stilled and came in Jaedin's mouth, his strangled cry of pleasure shattered the silence around them. Jaedin held him tight, half-supporting him as the force of Khy's climax sent shudders rippling through his slender frame. The tremors finally ebbed away, and Khy's body relaxed and melted against him.

Jaedin pulled him down in the wet grass beside him. He groaned as Khy pushed aside the fabric of his breeches and wrapped his hand around Jaedin's rigid, straining cock. Intense blue eyes locked onto his, and Jaedin found himself caught up in a maelstrom of heat and need such as he hadn't experienced since... since...

He came with a hoarse shout, the climax so intense the world turned white. The next thing he was aware of was cool, wet grass against his back and the warm, gentle fall of rain mixing with sweat and trickling over his skin.

A hand lazily explored the lines of his body, mapping the smooth swells of muscle across his chest. Jaedin looked down at the man beside him, expecting to see Talon's white-blond head. The reality of Khy lying beside him, exploring his body with hands that seemed to grow more certain with every stroke, sent a sharp stab of guilt through him.

Khy lay in the grass next to Jaedin. He felt sleepy and relaxed, and didn't even mind the fact that he was soaking wet again. The rain was warm, and the body next to him was fascinating. He slid a hand over the slick skin of Jaedin's chest, feeling the hard muscles flexing as Jaedin shifted.

He wasn't sure what it was that had possessed him to offer himself like he had. Maybe it was because Jaedin's mouth said one thing, but his eyes said something else entirely. Maybe it was because the way Jaedin had looked at him in the shelter had started Khy's own blood racing, and his own need to be touched had pushed aside all sense. Or maybe it was just that Khy knew what it was to be alone in the world, and he'd wanted to comfort Jaedin, maybe ease that loneliness, even if it was just for a little while.

The smooth curves of muscle he'd been exploring suddenly tensed under his hand, and Khy looked up to see Jaedin staring at him with wide eyes. "No... gods... Talon..." The words were harsh and broken, as if they'd been torn from Jaedin's throat, and the big man rolled away from Khy and scrambled to his feet. He bolted straight for the shelter, leaving Khy naked and alone in the long, wet grass.

Khy waited a little before venturing back inside, giving Jaedin time to gather himself. When the growling of his stomach and the rapidly cooling air finally drove him in, Jaedin was busy at the hearth, preparing something for them to eat. Khy dried himself off in silence and slipped into clean clothing from his pack. The wet things he'd removed earlier were already hanging near the hearth to dry along with Jaedin's clothes.

"Thank you," Khy said.

“For what?” Jaedin’s voice was gruff, and he didn’t turn from the pot he was stirring.

“Giving me a good memory. So little of what I remember is good.”

Jaedin twisted around to stare at him. “You’re so like him in some ways, it’s unreal,” he muttered, then turned back to the fire.

“Your Talon?”

Jaedin grunted in reply.

“I’m sorry,” Khy said quietly. “Sorry that you lost him. Sorry for your pain.”

There was no response from Jaedin but for a tightening of his shoulders.

Supper was a silent affair. Several times during the meal, Khy caught Jaedin watching him, but every time their eyes met, Jaedin would look quickly away.

After they’d eaten, Jaedin rolled himself up in his bedroll and pressed himself close to the shelter wall, his back to the room. He’d left enough space on the double bunk for Khy, but Khy spread his own bedroll on the floor, not wanting to intrude or encroach.

The silence in the tiny shelter was so thick Jaedin could hear every shift of Khy’s body as he settled himself on his bedroll. Jaedin felt a little bit guilty when he realized that Khy was going to sleep on the floor. He didn’t feel quite guilty enough to invite him up onto the bed, though.

The last thing he wanted to do was encourage the man.

Well... the last thing his *conscience* wanted, at least. His body wanted something else entirely. Just remembering the way Khy had responded to his touch made it difficult to focus on anything other than burying himself to the balls in that tight little ass.

Jaedin shifted, uncomfortably aroused.

Damned if he was going to do anything about it, though.

Chasing after Khy had been a mistake. He should have stayed home and left well enough alone. Once the voice was gone, there had been no reason for him to pursue Khy, and he found himself wishing that he hadn’t.

Except... he couldn't stop seeing Khy lying helpless under that pine tree. Couldn't stop thinking about the relief and the gratitude in those deep blue eyes when Khy had finally understood that Jaedin was serious about coming with him and helping him find Varian.

Khy needed him.

The thought of what Rikard might do to him if he fell back into the leythari's hands gave Jaedin the cold shivers. Khy would be defenseless against Rikard. Even if Khy did have some power over the leythe, he was, by his own admission, completely untrained.

Jaedin couldn't desert him now, though he wished he could. That intoxicating mixture of strength and vulnerability that he saw in Khy disturbed his hard-won equilibrium. He didn't *want* to find Khy attractive or irresistible, and it infuriated him that he did.

He shouldn't feel this way, not when he'd sworn he wouldn't. His guilt at betraying Talon's memory the way he had was almost overwhelming. The first time, back in Rosefire, it could be argued that he hadn't had a choice. But what had happened tonight, out in the rain...

That had been entirely the result of his own desires.

He could have refused Khy.

Should have.

Jaedin squeezed his eyes shut and reached for that quiet well of inner strength that had gotten him through the worst of the times after Talon had died in his arms.

This was no different. A bump in the road, that was all it was. His strength and his resolve would serve him as they always did. He could turn off that fierce urge he felt to protect Khy, ignore the need and the fire he saw in those eyes. He could cloak himself in an icy veneer of indifference, and keep his wounded heart locked away from further hurt.

He would see Khy safely to Varian, and then he would turn around and head straight home to Rosefire. He would settle back into the quiet routines of the life he'd built for himself, and find his precious balance once more.

Alone.

That decided, Jaedin finally closed his eyes and drifted off into a fitful, restless sleep.

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Chapter Seven

It took them three more days to reach the South Trade Road. Half a day beyond that, they found the trail into the Fireskye that Mara had spoken of. At first, the going was easy, but by late in the second day, the gentle slope of the foothills gave way to steeper stretches. The path was still clear, but they were in the mountains now, and the constant uphill hiking was a lot more strenuous than anything Khy was used to doing. He hated the fact that every time they stopped, it was for him. Jaedin hadn't complained, not once, but Khy knew he was slowing them down.

Khy hoped they would take a break soon, but there was still plenty of light left, and he didn't want to be the reason for stopping this time. He pushed himself until his legs were burning, every muscle screaming for a respite, however brief. When the trail finally leveled out for a short stretch, Khy stumbled to a stop to catch his breath and wipe the sweat from his brow. He stared up at the shimmering sheets of light that hung over the mountain peaks.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Jaedin said softly.

Khy tore his gaze away from the fiery light to scan the outline of the peaks ahead. "It is. I thought we'd see the Fireshard by now."

"It's behind Crystal Peak at the moment." Jaedin lifted a hand to point out the dark mountain that dominated the view. "It lies on the other side of Crystal Pass. You won't be able to see it until we reach the top of the pass."

The mountain loomed over them, tall and imposing, the sheer rock faces of the higher reaches clearly visible in the afternoon sun. Khy swallowed hard. "Will we have to climb all the way to the top?" he asked faintly.

The warm weight of Jaedin's hand came down on his shoulder. Khy shot a sideways glance at him. Jaedin hadn't touched him at all since that rainy evening in the travelers' shelter. Khy was sorry now that he'd gone to him the way he had. The things they'd done in the rain had upset Jaedin, and Khy had no idea how to make it right between them.

The big man met his gaze and snatched his hand away, turning his face back to the mountains. "See that gap there, between Crystal Peak and Mordin's Tooth?"

“I see it,” Khy said, impressed that Jaedin knew the names of the mountains.

“That’s Crystal Pass, and that’s as high as we’ll need to go. This trail will take us right to it. It will be a long climb, but we won’t need to scale sheer rock surfaces or cling to the edges of cliffs, if that’s what you fear.”

“You’ve made the journey before?”

“I’ve hunted in these mountains before, and I’ve been as far as the top of Crystal Pass once, a few years ago.”

“How long will it take us to get there?”

Jaedin shrugged, and turned to give Khy an appraising look. “You’re getting stronger by the day. A week, perhaps?”

Khy frowned. “I’m slowing you down. You could probably be there in a few days if it wasn’t for me.”

“Perhaps, but that isn’t the point. We both need to get there in one piece.”

“Do you think Rikard could have followed us?”

“Rikard may not even know that the men he sent after you are dead yet.”

“He knows,” Khy said softly. “I’m sure of it. He knows everything that happens in the Skarwood.”

Jaedin’s pale eyes narrowed as he studied Khy. “Would he come after you himself?”

Khy considered that. Would he? He couldn’t imagine Master Rikard braving the mountains with only a backpack. The Master seemed far too fond of his comforts to undertake a difficult journey into the wilderness. When Master Rikard did leave the tower, he traveled by carriage. “I don’t know,” Khy said finally. “If he wanted me back badly enough, he might.”

Jaedin’s hand dropped to his bow, and he stroked the smooth wood, his expression hardening into something like grim determination. “Then we’ll be ready for him. The nice thing about leythari is that they bleed and die like anyone else.”

Khy was about to reply when he heard a low growl coming from behind him. He spun around to see a huge, black creature stalking across the rocky ground toward them. It had the look of a wolf, with a long, pointed muzzle, but it moved with a slow, deliberate grace that made him think of a cat. “Jaedin—”

“I see it.” Jaedin’s voice was calm.

A moment later, Khy heard the hiss of an arrow as it shot past him. The animal jerked when it hit, then let out a scream and sprang. Khy didn’t even have time to think before it was upon him. He put his hands up out of instinct, but he wasn’t strong enough to push the creature away. The impact knocked the breath out of him, and he found himself flat on his back with a heavy, snarling animal on top of him.

Khy had only a moment to see the wicked, curved claws slashing through the air toward him. He screamed, and the world went white and then red.

Jaedin watched in horror as the rhyx shifted to the left at the same moment he let his arrow fly. The shot went wide, the arrow burying itself in the beast’s shoulder instead of its chest. The rhyx screamed in fury and charged onto the trail, leaping upon Khy with enough force to crush him.

Khy put his hands up in a futile attempt to ward off the animal. Jaedin readied another arrow, torn between taking careful aim and not looking too closely. The last thing he wanted to see was the rhyx tearing Khy apart.

The arrow buried itself in the creature’s other shoulder. Jaedin pulled another arrow from his quiver, then stopped, staring, as the rhyx began to glow. It lifted its muzzle to the sky and let out a bone-chilling cry that sounded more like pain than rage or hunger. Every hair on the animal’s body stood on end. It let out a final whimper, shuddered, and collapsed on top of Khy.

Under the heap of black fur, Khy lay very still.

Jaedin dropped his bow with a sob and hurried to Khy’s side. It took all his strength to shove the animal’s body off of Khy. Jaedin pressed his ear against Khy’s chest, listening for his heart. He finally heard it, slow and steady. He patted Khy down, checking for broken bones, and when he found no sign of injury, gathered the man against him and held him.

The thought that he’d nearly lost Khy today was terrifying in a way that it shouldn’t have been. Something in his chest that had been tight and painful for far too long loosened a little, and Jaedin blinked back the tears that stung his eyes.

Khy’s eyes fluttered open, and he stared up at Jaedin, a small smile quirking his mouth. “This is getting to be a habit,” he said in a shaky voice. “What am I going to do when you’re not here to rescue me?”

Jaedin shook his head. "I didn't rescue you." His voice was rough with emotions that he couldn't even begin to sort out. "You... you saved yourself. I don't know what you did, but... the rhyx started to glow and then it just... collapsed on top of you."

"Ah," Khy said with a groan. "No wonder I feel like I've been trampled."

Jaedin took a few deep breaths and tried to pull himself together. They weren't out of danger yet. Rhyx tended to hunt in packs. The fact that their attacker had been a lone male was somewhat reassuring; given the time of year and the size of the animal, Jaedin thought it likely that he'd been roaming alone in search of a pack to join. All the same, a defensible campsite would make him feel better.

When he thought he could trust his voice again, Jaedin said, "We'd best stop for the night." The rocky area the rhyx had emerged from was bordered by sheer rock walls. Jaedin scanned the rough stone, noting a dark pool of shadow that might be a cave. "Do you think you can stand?"

With Jaedin's help, Khy struggled to his feet. He stretched and twisted, testing the integrity of bones, muscles, and joints, then said, "I think I'll live. I'll probably be bruised from head to toe tomorrow, though."

The shadow Jaedin had spied turned out to be a shallow cave, which proved to be the best campsite he could find that didn't involve making Khy walk any farther today. In the wooded area across the trail, Jaedin found enough deadfall to build a campfire. Once it was burning, he pulled a pouch from his pack and tossed a handful of herbs into the flames.

Khy wrinkled his nose at the acrid scent. "What is *that*?"

"Up north, they call it rhyx-bane," Jaedin said with a grin. "It's a mixture of dried herbs—mostly tansin leaves, blueflower and sweet-seed. They say rhyx can't stand the smell. When I was fighting in the north, we used it when we camped anywhere near the mountains. We'd set up braziers all around the camp to burn the stuff."

"Did it work?"

"Maybe," Jaedin said with a shrug. "I don't recall any of our camps being attacked by rhyx... but then, rhyx tend to avoid large groups of humans as a matter of course, so who knows? You'll get used to the smell after a while."

Jaedin didn't want to leave Khy alone for the time it would take to hunt, so he dug some of the dried trail rations from his pack while Khy spread out the bedrolls and settled himself down on his. Jaedin noticed that he left plenty of space between them.

After they'd eaten, Jaedin sat back to watch the fire. The sun soon disappeared behind Crystal Peak, leaving only the glow of the Fireskye and their small campfire to chase away the shadows.

"I felt it this time," Khy said.

"Felt what?"

"The... the leythe, I think. I felt it moving through me, and I saw light moving out of me when that—that *thing*—landed on top of me."

Jaedin frowned. If Khy was able to feel the leythe moving through him, then either Mara had guessed wrong about the collar's function, or it wasn't working properly. If what had happened to the rhyx was any example of Khy's strength, Jaedin shuddered to think what else he might be capable of. Getting Khy to Varian suddenly seemed a lot more urgent than it had before.

"I thought a rhyx would be bigger," Khy said. "The stories the monks told made them sound huge."

"Your monks probably wanted to stop adventurous young boys from braving the mountains in search of trouble," Jaedin told him. "That was a young male, though, not yet full grown. An adult would have been half as big again."

"Why do you think it went for me instead of you?"

"Rhyx use the leythe to hunt their prey. I'm told they prefer leythari."

"Ah." Khy gave him a shy grin. "That explains it. If it wasn't for that, you'd probably make a much better meal than me."

Jaedin raised an eyebrow. "I don't know about that... even if you didn't taste of the leythe, it might have decided you looked tender and sweet."

Khy snorted. "Easy prey, more like." He shuddered, then frowned again. "These things with the leythe seem to happen whenever I'm scared. Back in Rosefire, when Baine and his men attacked. And then that night... when I... when I forced you." He ducked his head, but not before Jaedin saw the pink stain creeping across his cheeks. "I was so afraid that Rikard would find me."

And then when that thing came at me this afternoon, I thought I was dead. I don't think I've ever been so scared."

"Did things like that ever happen before you went to Rikard?" Jaedin asked.

"No. Well... maybe when I set fire to the stable."

"Were you afraid then?"

Khy's eyes became distant. "I... no. I was angry." He ducked his head again, and Jaedin saw the pink blush on his cheeks darkening. "Arin... he kissed a girl. I thought... I thought he cared about me, thought I was special, but... I guess I was just someone to pass the time with."

"Did you see the light then?"

"I don't remember any light, but... but someone must have seen something. That was why they sent me to Rikard in the first place."

"But instead of teaching you to control it, he put that collar on you and drugged you into slavery." A slow burn started in Jaedin's belly at the thought of all that Khy had endured at Rikard's hands. "If I ever get my hands on him..."

Khy looked away. "I was stupid. If I'd understood what he was doing, I'd have run. He told me the collar would prevent any accidents, and the medicine was to protect me. That was all he ever said about it. Once I started taking the medicine, it was so hard to think that I never questioned anything."

"Khy... it wasn't your fault," Jaedin said softly. "How could you have known what he would do?"

"I don't know. I feel like... like I should have. It seems so obvious now, but at the time everything was so shadowy and hazy. I knew something was wrong... but I couldn't hold onto my thoughts long enough to figure out what. And... it didn't seem to matter."

"That was the leythe-bane."

"The first time it wore off... Master Rikard was gone. Seb and Nida were supposed to watch me, but they had to leave, too. I was alone and I was supposed to take the medicine before bed, but I forgot. When I woke up, it was like everything up to that point had been a bad dream. I could think again, and I knew I had to get away. When Baine caught me in Rosefire... that's when things started happening." He glanced up at Jaedin. "I'm sorry. About the voice

in your head. When we find Varian, I... I'll ask him if he can teach me how to get rid of it for you. If he can't, then I'll just have to find someone who can. I promise I'll do whatever it takes to put it right."

Jaedin's conscience sent a sharp twinge straight to his gut. "I... the voice is gone, Khy. I should have told you before. It's been gone since that night in Rosefire."

"It's *gone*?"

"When I woke up that morning and found you'd run off, the voice was gone, too. Mara checked. She couldn't find any trace of the leythe-working."

"Then..." Khy frowned at him. "Why come after me at all?"

In answer, Jaedin shifted closer to the bedrolls, leaned forward, and pressed a gentle kiss to Khy's lips. When he drew back, those intense blue eyes were fixed on him, hungry and full of fire.

"Show me?" Khy whispered.

That was all the invitation Jaedin needed. A slow, lazy heat rolled through his body at the thought of all the things he could show Khy. He pushed the man down on the bedroll, hauled off his own shirt, and bundled it up so he could slip it beneath Khy's head.

Khy stared up at him, a glint of amusement in those deep blue eyes. "You taking care of me?" he asked.

"After your adventure with the rhyx, I thought you might need a bit of coddling," Jaedin said, leaning over him to kiss him.

"I don't *need* it," Khy said against his mouth. "But I might like it."

Jaedin took his time undressing Khy. He unlaced the shirt and laid it open, then bent to flick his tongue over first one nipple and then the other.

Khy's eyes drifted shut, and he let his breath out in a soft moan. "Gods... Jaedin..."

The breeches were next. Jaedin pulled them down over Khy's hips, freeing his already hard cock. When he had Khy naked, he paused for a moment, drinking in the sight of his lover lying ready for him.

His lover...

Talon had been his lover for so long... but now Khy stared back at him, eyes glazed with desire, and there was no room in Jaedin's thoughts for Talon. All Jaedin could think of was how close he'd come to losing Khy today.

Jaedin stripped off the rest of his own clothing and lay down beside Khy, taking him into his arms and pulling him close. Skin on skin, heat on heat.

The moment Jaedin began exploring Khy's body with hands and mouth, Khy turned to liquid flame in his arms, hot and writhing, crying out with every touch, every stroke. Jaedin had never had such a responsive lover. Khy's moans and whimpers of pleasure quickly drove Jaedin's own need to the breaking point.

It wasn't long before he rose up on his knees and positioned himself between Khy's legs. He fumbled in his pack for a jar of salve to grease himself up with. Khy's eyes were wide and hot as he watched Jaedin slick the salve over his cock.

Those expressive eyes grew even wider when Jaedin slipped a slick finger into him. Khy moaned and squirmed, pushing against Jaedin's hand.

When Jaedin added a second finger and brushed against the spot he knew would drive Khy wild, Khy did not disappoint. He arched off the bedding and let out a keening cry that trailed off into incoherent words.

Jaedin decided that Khy was more than ready. He lined himself up and eased himself into Khy's body. Khy's hands clenched the bedding beneath him, and his head thrashed back and forth. Jaedin struggled to keep his eyes open, wanting to see every shift of expression on Khy's face.

When he'd pushed himself all the way into Khy, every instinct screamed at him to move. Jaedin forced himself to be still, to let Khy get used to him. He'd hurt Khy that night in Rosefire, and he was determined to make up for the pain he'd caused. This time, it would be slow and easy. This time, Khy would enjoy the long slide into ecstasy, and Jaedin would have the pleasure of watching him come apart.

"Please... please, Jaedin... please," Khy begged.

Jaedin trembled with the effort of keeping his movements slow and careful. With gritted teeth, he pulled back and then thrust deep. Khy pushed back to meet him, groaning as their bodies met. One hand crept down to stroke his rigid cock. Jaedin pushed Khy's hand away and replaced it with his own. Every

stroke had Khy bucking against him and crying out. Jaedin's own control began to slip as he watched the man beneath him slowly come undone.

A few firm strokes and Khy came in his hand, a hoarse cry tearing from his throat as he let go. That tight heat squeezing and stroking him as Khy shuddered in the throes of orgasm set off Jaedin's own climax. Bright white stars exploded with every pulse of pleasure.

When it was over, it was all Jaedin could do not to collapse on top of Khy. He rolled to the side instead and pulled Khy into his arms to hold him.

Khy seemed to like being held. He pressed gentle kisses to Jaedin's neck and face, then snuggled himself as close to Jaedin as he could get, closed his eyes, and let out a contented sigh.

That night, after Khy drifted off to sleep, Jaedin lay staring into the flickering firelight with Khy warm and alive in his arms, and bade Talon a last good-bye.

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Chapter Eight

The approach to Crystal Pass was far more beautiful than Jaedin remembered it. He'd only been this way once before, nearly five years ago, and guessed that his sense of wonder must have been dulled by grief.

As the way grew steeper, a sheer rock wall rose on their left. The dark stone was shot through with veins of brilliantly colored crystal that glistened in the morning sunlight. Khy stopped to trace a line of sparkling emerald-green with his finger.

"It's so smooth," he said, glancing back at Jaedin. "You'd think it'd be all dirty and weathered, but it looks so clean and bright."

Jaedin raised his own hand to brush his fingertips over a dark, ruby-red band, too high for Khy to reach. "Some of these veins of crystal even glow at night."

Khy stared up at him, eyes wide. "I'd like to see that."

"We'll try to make camp close to some of the exposed veins," Jaedin said with a smile.

As the morning wore on, Jaedin noticed that Khy seemed to be having more difficulty keeping up than usual. Jaedin made no comment, but slowed his pace accordingly. Toward midday, the path leveled out for a short stretch, and Khy stopped and leaned against a boulder. He looked pale and drawn enough to worry Jaedin.

"Khy? Are you all right?"

Khy lifted his head, brow creased in a frown, eyes unfocused. "I feel funny..." he said. His words sounded slurred and dull, like they had when he'd been under the influence of leythe-bane.

"Funny how?" Illness was the first thought that came to Jaedin's mind, though it wasn't the right season for mountain fever.

"In my head," Khy said, waving a hand about his face. "It feels like... pressure. Something building up inside me. Like a storm, maybe, only..."

Jaedin glanced at the sky. It was a clear lavender-blue, though there was no guarantee it would stay that way for long. The high concentration of leythe

energy in the mountains made the weather tricky and unpredictable. The fair weather they were enjoying now could change in the blink of an eye. Jaedin bent to press his cheek to Khy's forehead. His skin felt cool and dry. "You don't feel feverish," he said.

Khy rubbed his cheek against Jaedin's and leaned into him, wrapping his arms around Jaedin's waist. In response, Jaedin drew him closer and stroked Khy's back in soothing circles. He liked having Khy in his arms as much as Khy seemed to like being there.

Since the night Jaedin had said his last good-bye to Talon and welcomed Khy into his bed and his heart, Khy had quickly worked his way under Jaedin's skin in a way that would have left him feeling angry and resentful only a week ago. Now, he couldn't deny the fact that having Khy in his life felt right. Khy filled a space in Jaedin's heart that had been empty for far too long. Talon would never be replaced or forgotten, but Jaedin had found that his heart was big enough to hold his feelings for both of them. He would always treasure his memories of Talon, but he could imagine building a life with Khy.

He thought, perhaps, that Talon would approve.

"What if it's Rikard?" Khy whispered, a tremor running through his slender frame. "Mara said he could use his leythe-lock to find me. What if he can use it to work the leythe on me, too?"

"If it is Rikard, we'll deal with him." Jaedin tried to sound confident, though he wasn't at all certain of his ability to protect Khy from Rikard. He'd seen firsthand what a powerful leythari could do on the battlefields of Vakarra, during the long civil war that had raged in the north. If Rikard's power was of that caliber, they were both in trouble.

Khy pulled back a little and stared up at him. It was clear from his expression that Khy harbored the same doubts. Instead of voicing them, he gave Jaedin a small, sad smile.

Jaedin unhooked the waterskin from his pack and offered it to Khy, who took a few sips. "That's better," Khy said, handing him back the waterskin. "We can go on now."

"We can stop for the night if you're not feeling well," Jaedin said.

"I'm fine." There was an underlying note of stubbornness in Khy's voice. "We need to keep moving. The sooner we find Varian and get this damned

collar off of me, the happier I'll be. The back of my neck keeps prickling, like somebody's sneaking up behind me."

As the sun rose higher in the sky and the day dragged on, Khy found it harder and harder to hide his discomfort from Jaedin. What had started as an uncomfortable pressure flickering at the edges of his awareness was now too intense to ignore. Something was wrong, and Khy feared that Rikard might be the source of it.

The path grew steeper, and it took all of Khy's strength just to stay on his feet. He longed to stop and lie down, but he dared not suggest it. The worry he could see creasing Jaedin's brow would have Jaedin stopping for the night, and that was far too dangerous. Rikard was out there somewhere, Khy was certain of it. The thought of running into the leythari he had once called *Master* struck a chord of terror deep in his heart.

When he'd first escaped the tower, that terror would have been solely for himself. Now, he was far more concerned about what Rikard might do to Jaedin. Stopping was simply not an option. Khy's world narrowed until all his attention was focused on the next step, and then the next.

A twist of green light writhed along the trail in front of him and then winked out. Khy stopped, blinking. Was this some trick of Rikard's? He glanced back over his shoulder. There was no sign of anyone on the trail behind them, but the back of his neck was prickling again, and he couldn't help but feel vulnerable and exposed. He wanted something solid at his back, and maybe a weapon in his hand, even though he didn't know how to use one.

"Khy? Are you sure you're all right? We can stop if you need."

"I'm fine." It was all he dared say. He didn't trust his voice not to convey his distress.

Jaedin's eyes narrowed as he studied Khy's face. Under his scrutiny, Khy tried to relax his features and loosen his shoulders. Finally, Jaedin gave a little shake of his head and turned to survey the path ahead. "It's all right to say if you need to stop."

In answer, Khy started off up the trail. He kept his eyes on the ground and steadfastly ignored the sinuous wisps of light that circled around him. Jaedin made no comment about them, so Khy wasn't sure if they were a normal part of

the strangeness of Crystal Pass, or if Jaedin just couldn't see them. He decided it was best to keep his mouth shut. The last thing he wanted to do was give Jaedin yet another reason to stop and make camp early.

His determination to show no weakness lasted only until the pressure in his head increased to the point of pain. Every step became a fight. Khy was about to suggest that maybe they should take a break after all, when Jaedin suddenly stopped and pointed to a wide cleft in the rock wall running alongside the trail.

Khy took the opportunity to sag against Jaedin. The big man's arm went around him and supported him, and Khy gratefully leaned into him and let Jaedin take some of his weight. The pressure in his head was almost unbearable now, and the lights swirled around him constantly. He caught glimpses of things moving within the light, twisting forms he couldn't quite identify. He followed a bright swath of blue with his eyes, squinting as he tried to make sense of the sinuous shapes writhing within it. It almost looked like—

"Khy? Khy, what's wrong?" The urgency in Jaedin's voice shook him back to reality and the path in front of him.

"It hurts," Khy said between shallow, panting breaths. "All the time. In my head. It feels like something inside me is breaking. And the light is everywhere, swirling around me. Don't you see it?"

"The only lights I see are the sun and the Fireskye," Jaedin said, giving Khy a dubious look.

Khy shivered and backed away a little, frowning as he cast his gaze about. Why couldn't Jaedin see the lights? Was Rikard doing something to him through the collar? Working the leythe to make him sick or mad?

Jaedin peered into the crevice in the rock beside them. "This looks clean and dry, and it doesn't look like it goes too far back. We'll have to sleep close, but I think it'll do." When Khy didn't say anything, Jaedin added gruffly, "Gave my ankle a bit of twist back there. I need to stop, even if you don't."

Khy barely heard him. He was transfixed by the colors pouring off of Jaedin, rippling and shimmering in the air around him. It looked almost as if the Fireskye had come down and buried itself inside him. As Khy watched, a snakelike shape, clear as glass, glided through the air and wrapped itself around Jaedin. Khy caught glimpses of sinuous coils, wicked claws, and sharp, crystalline teeth. When the creature dove through Jaedin's body as if it wasn't even there, Khy let out a shout of warning.

“What? What’s wrong?” Jaedin asked quickly.

The creature was gone, but the light inside Jaedin burned so bright Khy couldn’t bear to look at it. He closed his eyes and whimpered.

Jaedin wasn’t sure what to do for Khy, other than pulling him into the dubious shelter of the crevice and making him rest. There was no sign of fever or sickness, but by the time the sun began to sink, Khy was hallucinating badly. He shivered in Jaedin’s arms, speaking to voices Jaedin couldn’t hear, and shying away from things Jaedin couldn’t see. His periods of lucidity had become shorter and less frequent even in the short time since they’d stopped.

Jaedin guessed it might have something to do with Rikard. When a cloaked, hooded figure appeared out of the twilight shadows and filled the entrance to the narrow cleft in which they’d taken shelter, he was certain of it.

“Get back, leythari,” Jaedin said, edging forward to place himself between Khy and any threat the figure might pose. “You’ll not have him without a fight.”

He was answered by a chuckle. The man pushed back the hood of his cloak to reveal long blond hair. The rest of his features were difficult to make out in the fading light. “I’m no leythari, though if I wanted him, I could take him from you without a fight. My name is Tor, and I’m here to help you, Jaedin. Varian asked me to guide you to safety. There’s a leythe-storm coming, although I see that Khy is already well aware of that. I’ve a shielded shelter prepared. Come. It isn’t far.”

Jaedin stared up at him with narrowed eyes. “How do I know you’re not one of Rikard’s men? Or Rikard himself?”

“Ask Khy,” Tor said.

Jaedin glanced back at Khy, who had stopped shivering and was blinking up at the man with more awareness in his eyes than Jaedin had seen since they’d stopped.

“He’s not Rikard,” Khy whispered, edging forward until he was beside Jaedin.

“Be sure, Khy,” Jaedin murmured. “It could be both of our lives if you’re wrong.”

“If he is Rikard, it’s already both of our lives,” Khy said. “I can’t fight him and neither can you. He doesn’t feel like Rikard, though.”

Tor merely waited in silence for Jaedin to decide. Before Jaedin could make up his mind, Khy went rigid beside him, then shuddered. His body was suddenly rocked with violent convulsions, and Jaedin could do nothing but pull Khy against him and hold on tight.

When Khy finally went limp against Jaedin’s chest, Tor said quietly, “We need to get him shielded before it’s too late. The storm is building quickly. Soon it will break, and he will have no defense against it. Neither will you. We need to be inside before that happens. I don’t have the power to protect either of you out here.”

The fact that this Tor seemed to have some idea of what was wrong with Khy was what finally decided him. That, and Khy’s apparent conviction that Tor had nothing to do with Rikard. He lifted Khy in his arms and followed Tor farther up the steep incline. They hadn’t been going long when Tor stopped and indicated a dark hole in the rock face. Its edges were too smooth, too perfect, to be natural. Jaedin peered into the blackness, still not entirely convinced that Tor meant them no harm.

“If I’d wanted to harm you, I would not have gone to all this trouble,” Tor said. “Come. Khy is in pain, and it isn’t much farther. He’ll be much more comfortable once we’re safely in the shelter.”

With a sigh, Jaedin shifted Khy’s weight a little and followed Tor into the darkness. The air grew thick, and a strange, tingling sensation shivered over Jaedin’s skin. It felt almost as if he were passing through a barrier of some kind.

Between one step and the next, a warm, yellow glow enveloped them. Jaedin found himself in a small, round cavern. The stone floor was unnaturally smooth and free of debris. In the center of the cavern was the strangest looking fire he’d ever seen, made of a pile of ordinary gray stones topped with a crown of golden flames.

Near the fire was a nest of cushions covered with blankets.

“Lay him here and cover him,” Tor said. “He feels the cold burn of the leythe deep in his bones.”

Jaedin set Khy down gently. Khy opened his eyes and gazed up at him, his expression dazed and confused. “What... where...?”

“You’re safe now,” Jaedin said. He eased off Khy’s boots and covered him with a blanket.

“I’m so cold,” Khy said in a shaky voice.

“It’s the leythe-storm,” Tor said. “Leythari are particularly vulnerable to its effects.” He shrugged out of his cloak and Jaedin noted the long sword belted at his hip. The man was built like a warrior, and moved with the same easy grace as the most skilled swordsmen Jaedin had known in the army.

Tor crossed to the far side of the cavern where crates, packs, and waterskins were piled against the smooth, stone wall. He returned with a wooden cup, which he handed to Jaedin. “If you can get him to drink this, it will help.”

Jaedin sniffed at the stuff. The smell was familiar. He recognized it as a drug that the healers of Rhane’s Raiders gave to their own leythari when they’d overextended themselves. Satisfied that Tor wasn’t attempting to poison Khy, he slid an arm beneath Khy’s shoulders and helped him sit and drink the stuff.

When Khy had finished the drink, he curled on his side, as close to Jaedin as he could get. He fell asleep quickly. Jaedin stayed beside him, stroking Khy’s back and studying Tor through lowered lashes.

Tor set a pot on top of the stones, then settled himself across the fire from them, as if he was well aware of Jaedin’s lingering uncertainty. Calm, silver-gray eyes settled upon Jaedin. “Ask your questions,” Tor said. “I’ll answer the ones I can.”

“You said Varian sent you,” Jaedin said.

“He did.”

“How did he know we were coming?”

Tor shrugged. “He reads the currents of the leythe. He sensed the storm building and knew you would be in danger.”

“Who are you? His... his apprentice?”

Tor’s lips quirked in a wry grin. “His conscience, more like.”

Jaedin frowned. “If Varian already knows we’re coming... does he also know why?”

“Probably. He sees much that is hidden from human eyes.”

“He’s not human?” Jaedin asked, his frown deepening as he wondered just what they had gotten themselves into. If this Varian proved to be an enemy, they might have been better off taking their chances with Rikard.

“He’s human. When he needs to be.”

“And when he doesn’t?”

Tor shrugged again. “Then he is the breath of the stones, the blood of the earth, the soul of the stars.”

Jaedin snorted. “You make about as much sense as any leythari I’ve ever met. Half mad, the lot of you.”

Tor gave him an enigmatic smile, but said nothing.

“Will he help Khy?” Jaedin asked quietly.

“He will try. But in the end it will be Khy who helps Khy.” And that was all that Tor would say on the matter.

When the contents of the pot had heated to Tor’s satisfaction, he served Jaedin a bowl of thick stew. After they had eaten, they roused Khy, and Jaedin fed him small bits of meat and vegetables. Khy was dazed and half-asleep, chewing and swallowing when told. As soon as he’d eaten enough to satisfy Jaedin, he drifted back to sleep.

“We might as well sleep, too,” Tor said once Khy was settled. “The storm will last far into the night, but it should be safe to continue on in the morning.”

“What about Khy? Will he be all right?”

“Khy will be fine once the storm has passed. He has the power to touch the leythe, which makes him sensitive to the disturbances the storm creates. The sensations are... uncomfortable, to say the least.”

Jaedin gave him a dubious look. “You’re sure? He was hallucinating for hours before you showed up. And those seizures...” He shuddered, not wanting to think about how helpless he’d felt with Khy convulsing in his arms.

“He was not hallucinating,” Tor said. “The things he was seeing do exist, but they are things that only a leythari can see. As for the seizures... that was his body’s reaction to sensory overload. The leythe-storm scrambles the senses. You taste colors, see emotions, hear textures... it’s quite a frightening experience, even when you understand what’s happening to you. If you had

stayed out in it, eventually, you would have experienced those same sensations. And it might well have driven both of you mad. A leythe-storm is not to be trifled with.” Tor passed a hand over the flames. The fire dimmed, leaving just enough light to see by. “Sleep now, Jaedin. You need rest as much as Khy does.”

Jaedin settled himself in the nest of blankets, curling his body protectively around Khy. Tired as he was, sleep did not come easily. He couldn't stop thinking about the things Tor had said.

In the end, it will be Khy who helps Khy.

What, Jaedin wondered, did Tor think Khy could do against Rikard?

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Chapter Nine

When Khy woke, he felt almost normal. His head no longer hurt, and those strange wisps of colored light were nowhere to be seen. He lay on his side in a soft nest of cushions and blankets, his back pressed against Jaedin's chest. Jaedin's body was curled around him, and from his slow, even breathing, Khy guessed that he was still asleep. He looked around, trying to remember where he was and how he'd come to be here. The place reminded him of a natural cavern, but the floor and walls were too smooth, and there was no way out that he could see.

There was a fire burning in the center of the round space. Beyond the fire sat a man with hair as blond as Jaedin's, and eyes like silver rain. "Good morning, Khy," he said. "I'm Tor."

Khy frowned. The man looked familiar, but Khy's most recent memories were a tangle of odd, confused sensations that he couldn't make sense of. "I'm sorry, but I don't... I don't remember... I feel like I should know you, but..."

Tor's smile was gentle. "You were not in a fit state to remember much of anything when I found you last night. Varian sensed the storm coming and sent me to guide you to safety. When you are ready, I will guide you the rest of the way to the Fireshard. Let me know if you need anything." Tor got to his feet and moved across the cavern to a pile of supplies, where he busied himself with what looked like breakfast preparations.

Jaedin shifted, his arm tightening around Khy. "Are you all right?" Jaedin's deep voice rumbled in Khy's ear, his breath warm on Khy's neck.

"I'm fine," Khy said, turning in his arms to press a kiss to Jaedin's lips. "It doesn't hurt anymore. And the lights are gone."

"Good." Jaedin pulled him close. "I was worried about you."

After a breakfast of porridge with butter and cream and honey—Khy didn't dare ask where those came from—they set off on the final leg of the journey to the Fireshard.

Khy accepted Tor's presence and his offer of help without question. He couldn't explain exactly why, but he knew right down to the marrow of his bones that Tor could be trusted. Something about the man struck a chord of recognition deep within him.

Jaedin wasn't nearly so accepting. As they toiled up the last, steep section of the trail that led to the top of Crystal Pass, Khy caught another of the suspicious looks Jaedin kept shooting Tor's way.

He nudged Jaedin with his elbow. "You don't have to keep looking at him like that," he said softly. "He's what he says he is."

Pale green eyes turned on Khy and fixed him with a narrow stare. "You trust too easily, Khy. You've been isolated and abused for so long that you mistake any show of kindness for good intention."

Stung, Khy turned his attention back to the trail and struggled to move ahead of Jaedin. A hand on his sleeve pulled him back.

"Khy—"

"Just because I was Rikard's prisoner doesn't mean I'm stupid or naive," Khy whispered fiercely. "I *feel* it inside me. Like I felt the storm coming yesterday. It's the same kind of feeling. I can't explain it to you any better than that. I don't have the words for it, but I *know* I can trust him. And believe me, I have far less reason to trust him—or anyone—than you do."

Jaedin's mouth opened and then snapped shut. "I'm sorry, Khy. I never meant to imply that you were stupid or gullible. I just... I fear for you. That makes me distrustful." He lowered his voice even further. "I also fear that if this Tor were a powerful enough leythari, he could *make* you trust him. And he could make you believe that you could. Like you do."

"If he could do that, then why wouldn't he make you trust him as well?"

Jaedin had no answer for that, and fell silent, though Khy could tell from the set of his shoulders that his tension hadn't eased at all. Khy guessed that the argument was far from over.

Tor walked a little ahead of them, giving no sign that he was aware of their whispered disagreement. When he stopped at the top of a steep rise, his expression was as bland and neutral as it had been all morning. "The top of Crystal Pass," he said gravely. "Beyond it, you can see the Fireshard in all its glory."

Khy climbed to where Tor waited. The trail dropped sharply as it headed down the other side of the pass. In the center of the wooded valley below, the Fireshard rose up into the fiery curtains of light in the sky, a spire of clear red-

orange crystal. Streamers of orange and gold light flowed from the top of the spire, blending into the rippling sheets of color that gave the Fireskye its name.

The lower half of the spire still lay in the shadow of Crystal Peak, but the morning sun was high enough that the top half glowed as if it were lit from within.

“Stunning, isn’t it?” Tor murmured. “I’ve lived here for... for a long time, and I still find it so beautiful it makes my heart hurt.”

“I saw it once, five years ago,” Jaedin said softly. “It’s even more beautiful than I remember it.”

“What is it?” Khy whispered. “It looks like a piece of crystal, but it’s as tall as a mountain.”

“Pure leythe-stone,” Tor said, glancing down at him. “Stones like this are what generate the leythe-light that hangs over the mountains.”

“It’s beautiful,” Khy said. “How close will we get to it?”

“Probably a lot closer than you want,” Tor said with a grin that was decidedly wicked.

The forested floor of the valley was bright and sunny, nothing like the dense gloomy tangle of the Skarwood. In some areas, the tree cover was sparse enough that large patches of wildflowers grew. Khy dragged his feet, drinking in the sight of it. In his mind, *forest* had always meant dark and frightening, but this place was nothing of the sort. He wished there was time to explore, and hoped that once they’d seen Varian, there would be.

Tor led them right to the base of the crystalline spire. By the time they reached it, the sun was high in the sky. The Fireshard in full sunlight was glorious to behold, glowing from the inside, as if a fire raged within the confines of its crystalline walls. Light moved within it, writhing and twisting in all the colors of flame. Khy couldn’t take his eyes off of it.

“Here’s where things get strange,” Tor said with a grin. “I know this looks like a wall of solid crystal, but I’m going to ask you to trust me, and walk right into it.”

“Magic,” Khy breathed.

Tor snorted. "It certainly looks like magic. But don't let Varian hear you call it that. I don't think I can stand listening to another lecture about the evils of the rampant distribution of misinformation about the leythe."

Khy started forward, but Jaedin grabbed his sleeve. "Khy—"

"What?" He turned to face Jaedin, whose eyes flicked briefly to Tor and then back to Khy.

"Are you sure...?"

Jaedin's face was pale and strained. Khy could almost feel the tension pouring off of the man, could hear it in his voice. He stretched up to press a kiss to Jaedin's lips. "It'll be all right," he whispered, reaching for Jaedin's hand and giving it a squeeze. "If you don't want to go in, I can do this alone, but I'd rather you were with me."

"If it makes it easier, you can close your eyes," Tor said to Jaedin. "The path into the Fireshard is keyed to my aura, so as long as I'm with you, we'll be able to walk right through. It'll feel a little odd, like entering the shelter did last night, but I assure you, it's perfectly safe."

Khy kept a hold of Jaedin's hand. "Come on," he said.

Jaedin stared down at him for a long moment, pale green eyes searching Khy's face. Finally, he huffed out a little sigh and nodded his head.

They moved forward together. Khy meant to keep his eyes open, but closed them at the last minute, fully expecting to end up with his body pressed against the cold, glassy surface of the Fireshard. There was a moment of pressure in his head, not unlike the feeling he'd had when the leythe-storm had been building. Another step and the pressure eased. A tingling sensation whispered over his skin and was gone again before he could even shiver.

Khy blinked in surprise. Instead of pressed flat against a solid stone surface, he found himself standing in a hallway made of plain, gray stone. Jaedin stood next to him, frowning as he stared about. Jaedin's hand was squeezing his own so tightly, Khy could hardly wriggle his fingers.

He gave Jaedin what he hoped was a reassuring smile and turned his attention to his surroundings. Glowing chunks of crystal mounted on the walls illuminated the hallway, their hazy, golden light casting soft shadows. A brilliant blaze of orange ahead of him caught his eye. Khy squinted at it, trying

to decide what it was. It looked as if the hallway ended in a wall of fire, and he wondered if Tor expected them to walk through that, as well.

A moment later, Tor stood beside them. He motioned toward the orange glow. "Come on. He's expecting us."

Khy exchanged a nervous glance with Jaedin as they followed Tor down the hall. The glow proved to be a curtain of shimmering orange light. Up close, it looked more like the Fireskye than a wall of flames.

"You can walk right through it," Tor said, and demonstrated.

Khy followed him without hesitation, pulling Jaedin along after him. He felt Jaedin's hand clench around his. A moment later, they were through the curtain and standing in a room that looked nothing like Khy had imagined the living quarters of a powerful leythari to look.

It reminded him of the simple, cozy visitors' room of the monastery he'd grown up in. The walls and floor were made of a light-colored wood, polished to a high sheen. Instead of wood in the hearth, there was a pile of stones like there had been in the cave, only these were crowned with emerald-green flames rather than golden-orange ones. Colorful pillows were scattered about the floor in comfortable groupings, some near the hearth and others around a low table.

All in all, it looked like a welcoming, comfortable place to entertain guests. Master Rikard, who didn't like to encourage visitors to stay any longer than was absolutely necessary, would definitely not have approved.

Khy saw two other exits, but both were blocked by shimmering curtains of blue light. He stared up at Tor. "Are we inside the Fireshard?" he whispered.

"Not the way you think of *inside*." Tor smiled down at him. "It might be easier if you think of the Fireshard as a doorway. A portal."

"A doorway to what?" Khy asked.

"A doorway into the leythe." The voice came from across the room, a low, husky growl that sent shivers through Khy.

Jaedin tensed beside him, his hand tightening around Khy's again. Khy glanced at him. Jaedin's face was pale, and his lips were pressed together in a thin line. Beads of sweat glistened on the big man's brow. Khy wished he could help Jaedin feel some of his own calm.

The moment the thought had formed in his head, Jaedin's hand relaxed in his own. When Khy looked at him again, Jaedin's brow was smoother, his expression less strained. He gave Khy a smile and squeezed his hand. Khy frowned. Had he just...?

"Nicely done, Khy," said that same voice.

Khy scanned the room, seeking the speaker, and found him sitting cross-legged on a cushion before a low table. He was the finest looking man Khy had ever laid eyes on. Long black hair cascaded down his back like a cape. His eyes were a brilliant violet, set in a face so perfect it had probably broken more than a few hearts.

The man rose gracefully to his feet and winked at Khy, then turned his gaze upon Tor. "You found your lost sheep, then."

"I did," Tor said. He gestured to Khy. "This is Khy, and this is his protector, Jaedin. Khy, Jaedin, this is Varian."

"The breath of the stones, the blood of the earth, the soul of the stars," Jaedin murmured to Khy. "At least, that's what Tor called him last night."

"Did he, now?" Varian arched an eyebrow at Tor. "How poetic of you, Toryn."

Tor shot him a scowl. "Thought it might appeal to your overdeveloped sense of the dramatic, but if you're going to get all critical on me..."

"I would not dream of it," Varian said softly. His full lips quirked in a grin and his violet eyes sparkled with a look Khy might have called mischievous if he hadn't felt quite so intimidated. When those brilliant eyes focused on Khy, however, they narrowed dangerously. The smile faded and turned grim.

"Toryn... what have you brought me?" Varian murmured. "A leythari, yes, but..." He crossed the room to stand in front of Khy, staring down at him with the unfocused expression of a leythari concentrating all his attention on something beyond the ken of normal human senses.

Khy stared up at the man, only now realizing just how tall he was. He towered over Khy, and was easily a full handsbreadth taller than Jaedin.

"The leythe lies heavy and dark around this one," Varian said. He lifted a hand to brush his long fingers against Khy's collar. Khy flinched, but Varian's touch wasn't painful. "Leythe-locked." He glanced over at Tor. "It has the same foul flavor as the seeking that has drifted through the leythe these past days."

“Rikard,” Jaedin said in a grim voice.

Varian’s eyes sought Khy’s. “Is Rikard the one who put that collar on you?” he asked.

Khy nodded.

“*That* one I have watched for some years,” Varian said with a curl of his lip. “It is high time someone put him down.”

Khy didn’t like the way Varian’s speculative gaze settled upon him.

“There will be time enough to discuss that later,” Tor said. “We’ve been traveling since morning, and our guests have had a difficult journey. They need food and a chance to sit and rest before we turn our thoughts to more serious matters.”

“Food and rest. Of course,” Varian said with a faint smile. “Human things. Call me when you’ve seen to their needs, then. I shall see what the leythe can tell me.”

Varian settled himself on a pile of cushions in the far corner of the room, and closed his eyes. Tor led Jaedin and Khy to the low table near the hearth. “Make yourselves comfortable,” he said. “I’ll bring food.”

Tor brought them fresh bread and cheese, slices of cold meat, and a bowl of berries. Khy wasn’t feeling very hungry, but Jaedin piled food on a plate for him and glared at him until he picked up a chunk of cheese and nibbled at it.

While Khy feigned interest in the food, he studied Tor from under his lashes. Though he was almost as tall as Varian, he didn’t seem nearly so imposing.

Eyes of pale silver met his across the table. Khy felt his face heating and started to look away, but Tor only smiled. It was an easy, friendly grin, and Khy’s shoulders loosened a little more. “You have questions?” Tor asked. “I can see them almost bursting from you. Ask them now. You may not get another chance; Varian has little patience with human curiosity.”

“What do you do here?” Khy asked. “This place is so far away from everything.”

“Distances in the human world are meaningless within the leythe,” Tor told him.

Jaedin snorted. "Typical leythari answers," he muttered.

Tor turned that silver gaze upon Jaedin. "I do not have the language to make myself clearer. The concepts I would need to explain are not within the realm of human experience, and so the words to describe them do not exist." Tor's pale eyes returned to Khy. "As to what we do here, we are Guardians."

Khy frowned. "What do you guard?"

"The balance of the leythe. In this time and place, we protect the Fireshard and those who would be hurt if its power were to be misused. It would only take one misguided leythari attempting to tap into the power of the Fireshard to do irreparable damage to this world and to the leythe itself."

"Who... *what* are you?" Jaedin asked softly. "Not human."

"Not quite," Tor agreed. "Khy caught a glimpse of my true form yesterday, as you toiled toward Crystal Pass."

Khy stared at him, remembering the sinuous, crystalline creature that had writhed and twisted through the light. "That was you? The... the dragon?"

Tor laughed. "Yes, the dragon, for lack of a better word."

"And Varian? Is he... is he a... a dragon, too?" Khy asked.

"He is. Though *dragon* is just the interpretation that makes the most sense to your human mind. Our natural forms are so far beyond your human experience that your senses cannot perceive all of what we are."

Khy stared down at his plate, no longer even pretending to eat. "If you're so far beyond human, why would you help us at all?" he whispered. "We're nothing to you."

When he glanced up at Tor, the other man's expression was very serious. "Don't be too certain of that, Khy. Varian will do whatever he feels is necessary to preserve the balance of the leythe."

They finished their meal in silence. Tor was clearing away the dishes when Varian roused himself from his corner and joined them at the low table. He settled himself across from Khy and gave him a long, appraising look. Khy met his gaze steadily, but under the table, his hand crept across the cushion he sat on, seeking the comfort of Jaedin's firm grip.

“What did you see in the leythe?” Tor asked as he took a seat next to Varian. “Anything helpful?”

“Nothing that surprises me,” Varian said, “given what I know of human ambition and human cruelty. The leythe gathers thickly around Khy. He has the potential to be a powerful leythari. Most of that potential is bound by the leythe-chain he wears. As for the rest... Well. What the collar is not strong enough to bind, Khy seems to be making instinctive use of, as I observed when you first arrived and he calmed Jaedin’s fears.”

Jaedin turned to stare at Khy. “*You* did that?”

Khy swallowed hard and bit his lip. “I... I didn’t mean... I was just... I wanted to help. I wished that I could make you feel less afraid. And... and then it happened.”

Varian’s brilliant eyes focused on Khy again. “Do things that you wish for often happen? Perhaps at times of extreme emotion or stress?”

Khy shot a brief glance at Jaedin. “Yes,” he said in a small voice. “But... all of them... just happened. I didn’t try to... I didn’t *mean* any of it.”

Jaedin stirred beside him. “If the collar isn’t strong enough to bind his power completely, that would explain why Rikard kept him drugged with leythe-bane.”

Varian wrinkled his nose. “Foul stuff. Leythe-bane would certainly prevent Khy from working the leythe. It would also dull his mind and keep him from understanding what was being done to him.”

A shivery feeling rippled up Khy’s spine. Jaedin’s hand tightened around his. “What was being done to him?” Jaedin asked, his voice almost a whisper.

“Call it rape, for lack of a better word,” Varian said. “Rikard stole Khy’s power, used Khy as a power source for his own workings.”

“Mara said something like that,” Jaedin said. “I didn’t understand what she meant. Or how she knew.”

“The process is incredibly painful for the one being used. The echoes of Khy’s pain are there to be read in his aura. I see the scars left behind when the raw power of the leythe was drawn through his body at the call of someone else. Khy is not Rikard’s first victim. Rikard was expelled from the Lord and

Protector's court in Andar some twelve years ago for doing the same thing to his apprentices."

Jaedin nodded his head slowly. "Mara told us that, too."

"That's what he was doing to me in the workroom?" Khy whispered. He swallowed hard, shivering at the strength of the fear those dark memories evoked. "When he pulled the light out of me?"

Varian's grim expression softened when he turned his gaze upon Khy. "It is."

"He won't be able to do that anymore. I made sure of it." Khy felt his face heating. "I'm not... I'm not a virgin anymore."

Varian's eyes flicked to Jaedin and then back to Khy, and he shook his head slowly. "Oh, Khy," he said softly, sadly. "Is that what he told you? That wouldn't stop him from using you as a power source."

Khy blinked at him and frowned as he tried to wrap his mind around it. "Then why would he order his men to bring me back untouched?"

"Perhaps he feared they would injure you."

"They... they tried. One of them wanted to... and another said that I'd be useless to him if they did..."

Varian rolled his eyes. "*Humans.*" He spat the word out, as if the taste of it displeased him. "Most of the dogma and superstition surrounding the manipulation of the leythe is only in place as a means of controlling an ignorant population. Your virginity—or lack thereof—has no bearing on Rikard's ability to use you."

Khy turned to look at Jaedin, eyes wide. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I thought... I really thought..."

Jaedin's hand squeezed his gently, and the big man smiled down at him, no trace of anger or regret in his expression. "You believed it would save you at the time, Khy. And I've already forgiven you. I thought you knew that."

Khy couldn't meet his eyes any longer. He stared down at the table, feeling sick and empty inside. Jaedin might have forgiven him, but the more he came to care about Jaedin, the longer he thought it would be before he could forgive himself. His fingers crept toward the collar again, but he didn't touch it. He

lifted his gaze to Varian and said, "The healer in Rosefire said Rikard could track me through the collar. Please. Can you take it off of me so he can't find me?"

"I could." Varian's expression was grave. "But the shadows I see in the leythe tell me that I should not."

"But—"

Varian held up a hand and Khy fell silent. "That task is left to you, Khy. You have it within you to do what must be done. And it is vitally important that you do. Far more than your own life is at stake."

A feeling of despair washed through Khy. "But even if I do have power, like you say, I have no idea how to use it. Those times when I did things... they just *happened*. I don't... I don't know how to control it."

"Perhaps not consciously... but the things that happened all helped you in some way, did they not?"

"Maybe, but—"

"Instinct is a powerful force. It can shape the leythe as surely as all of Rikard's years of training can. You need to trust yourself, Khy."

Trust himself? He'd come all this way and that was all the powerful leythari could offer him? "Can't you teach me? Show me what to do?"

"It takes years to learn to manipulate the leythe, and time is something we are very short of. Rikard has come to the Fireskye, and he awaits you."

"He's *here*?" Khy's stomach clenched.

"He is."

Khy's fingers twitched, moving closer to the collar. "I can't take it off," he whispered. "I've tried."

"I know," Varian said. "I have sensed the echoes of your pain rippling through the leythe."

Khy didn't know what to say to that. He stared down at the table again.

"Come." Varian reached across the table to lift Khy's chin with a gentle finger. "I may not be able to teach you how to destroy Rikard, but I *can* show you how to keep what is yours."

Khy turned to Jaedin, who leaned over to kiss him. “Go with him,” Jaedin whispered. “Learn what you can. Whatever happens, we’ll face Rikard together.”

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Chapter Ten

Varian led Khy through one of the shimmering curtains of blue light. Khy found himself in a room furnished with only a few pale green rugs on the floor. Large windows looked out over the mountains on three sides of the room. They were high enough up that the Fireskye hung right outside, the rippling light almost close enough to touch. Khy approached a window and swallowed hard, a wave of dizziness washing over him when he realized just how far down the floor of the valley was. He took a few steps back. “Are we inside the Fireshard?” he whispered.

“In a manner of speaking,” Varian said from behind him. “Does the view disturb you?”

“It’s so high...”

“I find it rather peaceful. This is a good place for you to learn how to clear your mind and focus your thoughts.”

Khy turned away from the window to face the leythari. “I don’t see how that’s going to help me against Rikard. If I have power, don’t I need to learn how to work the leythe? I don’t understand why you can’t just take off the collar and teach me how to fight him.”

“I could,” Varian said simply. “I could show you exactly how to destroy Rikard. And I have no doubt that you could do it.”

“Then—” Khy started, but Varian held up a hand and he fell silent.

“I have learned through bitter experience that what looks like the easy, obvious answer is not always the best answer, or even a good one. I fear that if I should do as you ask, I would be setting in motion a chain of events that may have potentially disastrous consequences. Consequences that may not even manifest until well after you have lived out your life. Would you condemn the generations to come after you to darkness because you sought the easy road?”

A shiver rippled through Khy as he recalled what Tor had said: he and Varian protected the Fireshard and preserved the balance of the leythe. What meaning would something as small and insignificant as Khy’s life have for a creature like Varian, who wasn’t even human?

The silence grew between them, and Varian studied him for what felt like ages. Those eerie eyes looked so deeply into him, it seemed that they searched Khy's very soul, peeling back all his fears and hopes to reveal his most secret heart. A heart that felt very small, and very afraid.

"Let me show you something," Varian said softly, gesturing to the window Khy had drawn back from.

Outside the window, the landscape shimmered and shifted until, instead of looking out over the wooded valley to the distant peaks beyond, Khy found himself staring at a desolate forest. Black, skeletal branches rose up into a sky that was heavy with dark, lightning-laced clouds. A sickly green mist floated just above the scarred ground. Nothing grew there. Nothing moved.

Khy's stomach churned. The land itself looked as if it had been poisoned or cursed, everything dead and rotting. "What is this?"

"The Skarwood," Varian said. "As it will look if I remove your collar."

"I don't... I don't understand."

"There are certain points in time where the smallest of actions can have far-reaching effects, rippling out into the leythe and echoing through time. This particular nexus appears to be centered upon you, Khy. Your choices here will set in motion events that will affect the future of this world."

"You can't do that," Khy whispered, shaking his head in denial. "You can't make me responsible for the future. It's too big... and I have no power..."

"You have far more power than you think," Varian said gently. He moved forward. "And everything you need to use it is already within you. Here—" he brushed two fingers across Khy's forehead—"and here." Varian pressed his palm flat against Khy's chest, right over his heart.

"But... but I'm nothing. I'm nobody. I don't even know who my parents were. How can I be that important?"

"The how and the why of it do not matter. What matters is what you do with the tools and the time you have been given."

Khy's chest tightened and he shook his head. "If this is the future you see, then why won't you help me?"

Varian stared down at him, compassion softening his expression. "Believe me, Khy, if I could take this burden from you, I would. But I cannot. These are

human choices—and they must be made by you. My interference will bring this about—” Varian gestured toward the dead forest and the sickened land beyond the window—“just as surely as your refusal to act. We both have a part to play in this, and unfortunately, mine is the part of noninterference.”

“But you’re already interfering by showing me this, aren’t you?”

“The future is a funny thing,” Varian said, “always shifting, always in motion. The smallest things can affect the fate of an entire empire. And the biggest, most cataclysmic disaster you can imagine can have all the effect of a pebble dropped in the sea. All my showing you this will do is tip the balance slightly in favor of you doing what you must. And that is as much influence as I am allowed in this matter.”

“What if I refuse? What if I turn around and run as far and as fast as I can?”

Varian’s expression became sad. “Then Rikard will find you and you will return to being his prisoner and his slave. He will continue to abuse you and to take what is rightfully yours, and a deeper darkness than you have ever dreamed of will cover this world.”

Khy considered that. While he wasn’t entirely convinced that the fate of the world hung upon his actions, he knew that as long as he wore the collar, Rikard would be able to find him. Khy bit his lip and stared up at Varian. “All right.” He squared his shoulders. “Show me how to keep what’s mine.”

Varian sank gracefully to the floor and sat cross-legged on one of the rugs. He motioned for Khy to join him. “The first thing you must learn is to clear your mind of all outside distractions.”

The mental exercises Varian showed him were very like the meditations the monks had made him do as a child. None of them posed much of a challenge to Khy, and he couldn’t understand why Varian was so pleased that he picked the techniques up so easily. How could calming his mind possibly help him against a leythari who could call lightning down from the sky?

“You’re doing well,” Varian said after Khy had proved his mastery of yet another breathing exercise.

Khy scowled at the man sitting in front of him. “I’ve done nothing that’s going to help me against Rikard,” he said, trying to keep the bitter edge out of his voice. He found it difficult to accept the idea that Varian, who possessed the

power to see the future, could arm him with nothing more than a few meditation techniques in preparation for facing Rikard.

Varian raised an eyebrow. “You think not? Focus is the key to all leythe-workings, no matter how small. You are powerful enough that if you can focus your mind, not even leythe-bane can hold you.”

“The collar can, though,” Khy muttered.

“Your acceptance of your captivity and your belief that you are helpless will fetter you as surely as the collar you wear. Sometimes it is better to let the current take you than it is to fight it—even if you think it is taking you in the wrong direction. You must trust yourself, Khy.”

“Trust myself,” Khy repeated dutifully. “I’d trust myself a lot more if you could show me how to kill him with the leythe.”

“I cannot teach you how to destroy him. We do not have that kind of time, and even if we did, the collar you wear would prevent you from drawing the power you would need.”

Khy stared down at the floor. “I know. Go on. I’m sorry.”

“I will show you all that I am permitted to show you, Khy. And I will help you as much as I am allowed. Believe me when I say I want you to succeed as much as you want to.”

The conviction in Varian’s voice was almost enough to convince him. Almost.

After a long, heavy silence, Varian continued speaking. “While the collar prevents you from accessing the leythe, it does not prevent the leythe from affecting you. What that means is that I can manipulate the leythe to show you how to protect yourself if Rikard should try to draw power from you. I can show you what to do, what to look for, and what it will feel like. But because of the collar, I will not be able to actually draw the power from you and you will not be able to practice stopping me.”

Khy wasn’t sure whether he should be relieved or worried by that explanation. “So... whatever you’re going to show me... I won’t be able to use it unless he takes the collar off of me.”

“That is correct.”

“That means... I can’t do anything unless he captures me?”

“Exactly so,” Varian said with a brief nod. “Understand, Khy, what I’m showing you is defensive. You cannot attack him this way.”

Khy nodded. “I understand.” He didn’t, not really. Rikard capturing him was exactly what he wanted to avoid. Then again, if Rikard did capture him, and Khy was able to prevent him from stealing his power...

Would he set Khy free?

Probably not. Rikard was very fond of his things.

Jaedin’s words as they’d hiked toward Crystal Pass came back to him: *The nice thing about leythari is that they bleed and die like anyone else.* Perhaps if Varian wouldn’t show him how to use the leythe as a weapon, Khy could use something else. A knife, perhaps?

“All right,” he said in a steady voice. “I’m ready to learn.”

“Lie down, then.”

Khy lay down on the rug and stared up at the leythari. Varian knelt at his side and raised his hands over Khy’s body. When he drew the first swath of light into the air, Khy went rigid and opened his mouth to scream.

The cry died in his throat the moment he realized that there was no accompanying pain. Whatever Varian was doing, it wasn’t real.

Varian grinned down at him. “Illusion, Khy. This is the only way I can show you.” His smile faded, and he added, “When it is real, it will hurt like it always does. That is where the meditations may help you. You will need to concentrate in order to hold onto your power. Now watch and learn...”

In the workroom, Khy had never been calm or coherent enough to examine the light. Now, as he watched Varian work, it became clear that the swaths of light drawn from his body were not as simple as he’d believed. They had structure... bumps and ridges, striations and holes, and places where the color changed entirely.

Varian drew a long, violet wisp into the air and held it above Khy. “See here? And here?” He pointed out the holes and ridges. “When Rikard tries to pull the light from you, these are the places to focus on, the places to grab, as it were. As long as you are holding on, he will not be able to draw your power away.”

By the time Varian had finished showing him all the different ways he could take hold of the light, the sun had slipped behind the mountains. Only the soft glow of the Fireskye lit the room.

Khy got to his feet and stretched. Brilliant streamers of orange and gold poured into the night sky from somewhere above the window. He moved slowly toward it, staring up at those twisting ropes of light. "That's the leythe, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes. The part that is visible to human eyes, at least." Varian came up behind him and set a hand on his shoulder.

"This place... the Fireshard... Tor talked about leythari tapping into its power. Could someone like Rikard take its power? Like he took mine?"

"He could. It is one of the reasons Tor and I chose to settle here. The power of the Fireshard in the hands of a single leythari would be bad for the balance."

Khy frowned. "You're a single leythari."

"But I am not human," Varian said with a faint smile. "I am... how did Toryn put it? *The breath of the stones, the blood of the earth, the soul of the stars*. That's really quite lovely... and far more poetic than I thought him capable of. Come, then. They'll be waiting for us, and I'm sure you're more than ready for food and rest."

Khy hesitated. "What about Jaedin?"

"What about him?"

"If Rikard finds me... Jaedin will try to fight him. I can't let that happen."

"No? I thought Jaedin was your protector."

Khy shook his head. "Jaedin can't stand against a leythari. And I can't risk Rikard using me to hurt him. I couldn't live with that." He looked up at Varian, meeting his gaze steadily. "I have to do this alone. That's a human choice, too. My choice. Tell me where to find Rikard."

Varian's eyes locked onto Khy's, and he nodded once. "If you head north out of the valley, you will find a trail. Follow it and it will take you to the ruins of a fortress, high on a ridge. He is camped there."

"Thank you," Khy whispered.

“Be aware, Khy, that the moment you leave the Fireshard and the safety of my shields, he will sense you through his leythe-lock. You will not be able to avoid him.”

“No. As long as I wear the collar, it doesn't sound like I'll ever be able to avoid him. I have to face him,” Khy said, giving Varian a grim smile. “And if I have to do that, I'd rather do it without putting Jaedin in danger.”

It would have to be tonight, Khy decided. Varian could show him no more, and the longer he stayed here, the more likely it was that he would argue himself out of facing Rikard alone. The idea of confronting his tormentor without Jaedin's strong, steady presence terrified him, but as much as he wanted Jaedin with him, he wanted Jaedin alive even more.

Jaedin would not survive an encounter with Rikard, of that Khy was certain.

That night, in the guest room Tor showed them to, Jaedin took Khy in his arms the moment they were alone. “Are you all right?” he asked, holding Khy at arm's length and looking him over. “You were so quiet during supper, I was afraid maybe something had happened.”

“Nothing happened,” Khy said, trying to keep his unease from his face and his voice. “He showed me how to clear my mind and focus. And how to protect myself.”

“That's all?”

“He said... he said I can't work the leythe with the collar on, and he can't take it off.”

“More like he won't,” Jaedin muttered.

Khy stared down at the floor. He didn't want to explain about the bleak future that Varian had said would surely come if Khy ran away like he wanted to. “Even if he did take the collar off, there wouldn't be enough time for me to learn what I'd need to defeat Rikard.”

“So coming here was a complete waste of time,” Jaedin said.

“I don't know. Maybe. I don't want to think about it right now.” Nor did he want Jaedin asking too many awkward questions about what they would do next. “Can we talk about this tomorrow? I'm scared and I need you to make me

forget. Please?" He pushed himself against Jaedin, rubbed a hand between Jaedin's legs.

Jaedin groaned and bucked his hips a little. "Gods, Khy..."

Khy dropped to his knees in front of Jaedin and unlaced his lover's breeches, freeing his already hard cock. He stared up at Jaedin, eyes tracing the lines of his face as he committed every detail to memory. Khy was well aware that if he carried out his plan, this might be their last night together. By this time tomorrow, he could be dead or enslaved.

If he failed in his bid for freedom, he doubted he'd remember Jaedin. Rikard would drug him again, and Khy's mind would sink back down into the murky depths he'd been trapped in for so long, chained once more by leythe-bane.

Jaedin would remember him, though. If memories were all that Khy had left to give to Jaedin, he wanted them to be good ones.

Never taking his eyes from Jaedin's face, he leaned forward and licked him from root to tip. Jaedin shivered in response, a low moan escaping his lips. His hands settled on Khy's shoulders.

Khy might be inexperienced, but he learned fast, and he had paid close attention to the things that made Jaedin moan and sigh. Using his lips and his tongue, he explored Jaedin's entire length.

Jaedin cursed under his breath, shuddering with need. When Khy took him deep into his mouth, Jaedin's hands tightened on his shoulders and his hips surged forward. Those pretty green eyes rolled back in his head, and Khy shivered at the sounds of pleasure his lover made.

Knowing that he could reduce a strong man like Jaedin to incoherent cries and whimpers gave Khy a heady rush of power. He might not be good for much else, but he could make Jaedin's body sing.

He knew the signs, knew Jaedin was getting close when his rhythm faltered and his breath became ragged and uneven.

Khy pulled back. "Don't come," he whispered. "I want to feel you inside me."

Jaedin groaned and panted. "On the bed then." He quickly stripped out of his clothing while Khy did the same.

"Lie down," Khy told him.

Jaedin did as he was told, and Khy reached for the little pot of salve that Jaedin had placed on the table beside the bed. Khy applied the salve to Jaedin's cock with light, feathery strokes that soon had Jaedin groaning with need. When Khy had Jaedin ready, he pushed a slick finger into his own body. He couldn't help the moan that tore from his throat. Jaedin watched him, clearly mesmerized by the sight.

"Khy... I've never wanted anyone so much," Jaedin murmured. "Come on. Come to me."

That was all the invitation Khy needed. He straddled Jaedin and carefully lowered himself onto his lover, eyes fixed on Jaedin's face. If this was all he could have, if this was to be their last night together, Khy wanted to remember every single moment of it. Every breath, every sigh, every touch, every kiss... He would cherish these moments for as long as he could remember them.

Strong hands gripped Khy's hips, helping to support him as he slowly lowered himself. His body stretched and burned as Jaedin entered him. Khy groaned and moved as slowly as he could, wanting to savor this connection he might never have again.

When Jaedin was buried deep inside him, Khy paused, watching his lover's face, memorizing every detail. Jaedin began to rock his hips, gently at first, and then with more speed, more power. Every thrust brushed over that spot that made Khy see sparks. His body shuddered and burned, and when Jaedin wrapped a hand around his cock, Khy's eyes drifted shut in spite of his vow to memorize every moment.

The sensations were too intense, the bittersweet combination of love and sorrow filling his heart too hard and too real. A hot tear leaked out and slid down his cheek.

It was wiped gently away and Khy opened his eyes to see Jaedin watching him, an expression of tenderness on the big man's face. "Khy... don't cry. Please. It'll be all right. I'll be with you. I'll always be with you."

Khy's throat tightened, and he couldn't speak.

Jaedin's next thrust hit that spot just right, driving all thoughts of the future from Khy's mind. The climax built inside him, hot and bright like the Fireskye itself. Jaedin's hand moved faster, and Khy stopped thinking, and slid into a world of pure sensation. His release tore through him, leaving him shattered and limp. Jaedin cried out as he followed Khy into that blinding white light.

When Khy came back to himself, he was lying on top of Jaedin, with Jaedin's hand stroking his back in soft, lazy circles. "I love you, Khy," Jaedin whispered, his voice already slurred with sleep.

Khy's chest tightened, and he choked back a sob. "I love you, too, Jaedin," he whispered back. *With all my heart...*

When Jaedin's breath came slow and deep, and the hand that had caressed Khy so tenderly had fallen limp at his side, Khy slipped off of the bed and dressed himself in silence.

Their packs still sat by the door. Khy found Jaedin's hunting knife and slipped it into his own pack. He took one last look at Jaedin's sleeping face, then picked up his pack and walked out into the hallway and through the curtain of light that led to the main room of Varian's home.

"I thought I might meet you here," said a deep voice from across the room.

Khy started and looked up to see Varian standing by the hearth, his back to Khy. "I... I was just..."

Varian turned around to face him. "Protecting your lover, if you can, in spite of your own fears and your desire to keep him by your side?"

Khy nodded mutely.

"You have a good heart, Khy." The leythari moved forward. "Come. You will not be able to leave the Fireshard without Tor or I to help you."

Varian led him out into the stone hallway they had entered by. Had it only been that afternoon? It seemed like weeks. When they reached the end of the hallway and the fiery curtain of light that blocked the way out of the Fireshard, Varian turned to face him. He placed his hands upon Khy's shoulders and said gravely, "Remember, Khy, you already have everything you need to defeat him. Here." He bent to press a gentle kiss to Khy's forehead. "And here." He pressed his palm against Khy's chest.

Khy nodded. He swallowed hard and faced the curtain of light. Varian's words warmed him, but they didn't comfort him. He knew his chances of success were slim.

At the last moment, he turned back to look at the leythari. "Take care of Jaedin for me. He... he won't understand that I have to go alone." With that, Khy plunged through the curtain to face his destiny.

Jaedin woke early the next morning, and found himself alone. His breath caught in his throat, and his heart lightened as he recalled the words Khy had spoken to him the night before: *I love you, too, Jaedin*. With a smile on his face, Jaedin rose to face the day.

Only to discover that Khy's pack was gone from its spot by the door.

He dressed quickly and went out into the main room to find Tor setting food on the table for breakfast. There was no sign of Khy or Varian.

"Is Khy training with Varian?" he asked.

Tor shook his head and averted his eyes. "No."

"Then where in the Black is he?"

Tor bit his lip. "He left in the night."

"And you let him go? Alone?"

"I did not. Varian did. He said that Khy had made his choice."

Jaedin didn't believe that. Khy had been so frightened and he'd wanted Jaedin with him. He'd said so last night... hadn't he?

No... Jaedin had told him he'd be with him... and Khy had said nothing to contradict him, but nothing to indicate agreement, either.

"He's gone to face Rikard, hasn't he?" Jaedin said softly.

"He's gone to do what he must," Tor said.

"Alone."

"Perhaps he did not wish to drag you into danger. You are no leythari, and Khy knows that."

"Khy is no leythari, either," Jaedin spat out. "Damn it. I'm going after him."

Tor said nothing as Jaedin turned back and headed to the guest room. He took up his bow and slung his quiver of arrows over his shoulder, but he couldn't find his hunting knife. After searching through his pack twice, Jaedin finally conceded that Khy must have taken it.

It should, perhaps, have comforted him that Khy had at least thought to take a weapon. Instead, it struck an even deeper fear into his heart. The thought of Khy facing his tormentor with nothing but a hunting knife turned Jaedin's blood to ice.

When he returned to the main room, Tor hadn't moved from his spot. He merely gave Jaedin a questioning look. "Are you certain this is the right thing to do?"

"Of course I'm certain. Khy needs me."

Tor cocked his head, a slight frown creasing his brow. "You don't trust Khy to be strong enough?"

"I trust Khy just fine," Jaedin retorted. "It's Rikard I don't trust. Now are you going to show me the way out of this leythe-trap or not?"

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Chapter Eleven

Khy saw the jagged, broken lines of the ruins up on the ridge long before he reached them. The trail Varian had suggested he take had climbed steadily up out of the valley where the Fireshard stood. By late morning, it had leveled off, giving him a much-needed respite.

Now, as the sun edged toward midday, the trail had begun to climb again, leading up to a high cliff that was crowned with the dark, hunched shape of the crumbling fortress. The prickling sensation on the back of Khy's neck had been growing stronger all morning. He wondered if Rikard was watching him even now. If Varian was right, Rikard was up there, waiting for Khy to finish toiling up the path.

Khy paused a moment to wonder at the wisdom of his plan. The collar he wore guaranteed that Rikard would know he was approaching. He might even know that Khy planned to attack him.

He stared up at the cliff top, scanning the area for movement. There seemed little point in hiding or creeping. He might as well just walk up to the ruins and get it over with. He pulled the knife out of his pack and wrapped his hand around the hilt.

Khy hadn't ever been taught how to handle a knife, except in the kitchen at the monastery; the brothers frowned upon weapons of all types. He thought about Jaedin's words, about how a leythari would bleed and die like anyone else, and took comfort from the thought. Jaedin would know. He'd fought for ten years in Vakarra, and had even fought against leythari.

The thought that there was even a possibility that he could kill Rikard gave him courage. He had the element of surprise on his side. Even if Rikard knew he was coming, he wouldn't have any idea how much his former slave had changed. The long days on the road had toughened Khy, made him stronger, and his growing feelings for Jaedin gave him a reason to fight for his freedom. With his mind no longer dulled by leythe-bane, Khy thought maybe he could actually pull this off.

He only hoped that Jaedin had slept late, and that by the time Jaedin figured out what Khy had done and came after him, it would all be over.

There was no doubt in Khy's mind that Jaedin *would* come; Jaedin had said he loved Khy, after all, and had promised he would be with Khy. Jaedin was the sort who would do whatever was necessary to keep Khy safe, even if it cost him his own life.

Khy was *not* going to let Jaedin die trying to protect him. Not when it was Khy's fault that Jaedin had gotten tangled up in his problems in the first place. With that thought in mind, Khy drew in a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and continued on up the trail.

It was early afternoon by the time he reached the fortress. Khy left his pack in a thick tangle of weeds, and worked his way to the edge of the structure. He moved quietly along the perimeter of the ruin until he came to a place where the high outer wall had collapsed inward. After scanning as much of the interior as he could see for any sign of movement, he slipped through the opening, careful to keep to the shadows.

He never even saw the leythe-bolt coming until it slammed into his chest, the icy burn shocking in the warm summer air. The world was washed in light and ice, and Khy fell into darkness.

Perhaps he did not wish to drag you into danger. Tor's words echoed through Jaedin's mind during the endless trek to the ruins that lay perhaps half a day's hike from the Fireshard.

Much as he cared about Khy and admired the sentiment that had driven him to take off by himself, Jaedin couldn't help but think of all the reasons why Khy facing Rikard alone was a very bad idea.

Not the least of which was that Rikard was a trained leythari. One who'd had the power and the skill to be admitted to the court of the Lord and Protector of Andarra.

It occurred to him to wonder if Khy had any idea of what that might mean. If Khy had spent the last ten years drugged stupid with leythe-bane, it was unlikely that he'd been able to learn anything about Rikard that would help him now. It was also unlikely that Khy had any real idea of what kind of power Rikard wielded.

Back in his mercenary days, the idea of anyone going after a trained leythari armed only with a hunting knife would have been a source of vast amusement for Jaedin and his cohorts.

He didn't find the thought nearly so funny now.

As he hurried along the overgrown path, Jaedin couldn't help but wonder if he hadn't been a bit hasty in his decision to leave his pack behind. Certainly he could move faster without it, but what if he arrived at the ruins only to find Khy hurt and in pain? Without his supplies, he'd be able to do nothing. The thought of being helpless in such a situation gave Jaedin the shivers.

He'd just have to get there before Khy did anything stupid.

Setting his mouth in a grim line, Jaedin picked up his pace.

Khy woke to a pounding headache and a deep chill that had settled into his very bones. He opened his eyes to find himself in a dimly lit stone chamber. He was lying on a hard, cold surface, his wrists and ankles held fast. When he turned his head to look, he saw that his bonds were made of blue light. He twisted and strained to free himself, but the light held him as securely as the leather straps that had bound him in Rikard's workroom.

Grit and sand dug into his bare back as he squirmed, and Khy realized with a sinking feeling that his shirt was gone. That was bad. Rikard always stripped him to the waist when he planned to tear the light from Khy's body.

A familiar, low chuckle froze him. He turned his head to see Rikard leaning against the wall, watching his struggles. A grim smile twisted the leythari's thin lips. "Really, Khy, you've a lot to learn about leythari if you thought this would do you any good." Rikard held up Jaedin's hunting knife so Khy could see it, then dropped it to the floor. The clatter of steel on stone was shocking in the still, quiet air.

"You've led me on a merry chase, Khy," Rikard continued, and though his words seemed light, his tone was not. "Imagine my surprise when I returned to the tower to find you gone, and Seb and Nida in a panic, tearing the place apart to find you."

Khy continued to struggle against the bonds of light that held him.

"You think to escape me, boy?" Rikard asked, his cruel smile broadening. "Where would you go, then? Back to your lover? He's no match for me. I'd squash him like an insect and take you back to the tower, where you belong."

"I don't belong there," Khy whispered. He hated the way his voice trembled, but he couldn't stop himself from shaking. The cold and the fear were almost overwhelming.

"Oh, yes, you do, boy. I'll be quite happy to remind you of your place just as soon as we're back." Rikard moved toward him, uncapping a vial that Khy recognized immediately.

His medicine.

"No," he moaned, redoubling his efforts.

A blow to the side of his head stunned him. He froze, ears ringing, mind clanging with shock.

Rikard took advantage of his confusion to force the vial between his lips. Icy cold liquid filled his mouth. Khy shuddered and tried to spit it out, but Rikard pinched his nose shut, forcing him to swallow what he'd been given.

When Rikard was satisfied that he'd had enough, he patted Khy's cheek and said, "We'll just wait for that to work, and then you'll help me open a gate through the leythe to take us home."

Tears burned his eyes. Khy summoned Jaedin's image into his mind, trying to etch the man's face into his memory before it slipped away into the fog. As soon as the leythe-bane took hold of him, the bright quickness of mind he'd enjoyed since escaping the tower would be gone. He'd forget what it felt like to be free, to be loved, to be capable of making his own decisions...

He wouldn't remember Rosefire or Jaedin. He wouldn't remember the rhyx or the Fireskye. He wouldn't remember making love in the rain or Varian's home in the Fire shard...

He would have nothing but the foggy half-life leythe-bane forced upon him.

With a whimper, Khy focused his entire being on Jaedin. "I'll never forget you," he whispered. "I love you, Jaedin, I'll always love you... even if I can't remember you..."

Eventually, inevitably, the fog closed in, muffling his senses in a heavy cloud. Khy felt the world shrinking around him. The thoughts that had darted through his mind like bright silver fishes became heavy and pondering. He couldn't hold onto them, and they slipped through his fingers and sank down into the mud. Tears left cold tracks of wetness on his face, but he couldn't remember why he was crying.

“This is your place, boy. If you remember nothing else, remember that.”

He opened his eyes to see Rikard looming over him. The leythari's long fingers reached for the collar around his neck. There was a flare of green light and a moment later, the collar was lifted away.

Khy lay utterly still, waiting. He wasn't supposed to move when the Master took his collar off. He was supposed to lie there and wait for the Master to begin the important work that Khy was lucky to be helping him with.

Something whizzed over him, so close he felt its passage as a breath of cool air across his bare chest. Master Rikard held up a hand and there was a flare of light so bright Khy had to close his eyes for a moment.

“Khy!” Someone shouted his name.

Khy frowned. He didn't know that voice. It was a man's voice, but it wasn't Seb, and nobody else would dare to bother the Master when he was doing important work.

“Khy!”

He turned his head to see a tall, blond man standing in the doorway of the room. The man held a drawn bow aimed almost right at Khy.

Why would anyone need a bow in the workroom? Khy gritted his teeth and thought hard. It didn't help. He tried to hit the side of his head with his fist to make himself think better, but his hand was stuck fast. He couldn't free himself no matter how hard he pulled.

A bolt of blue light sizzled through the air. The light hit the blond man square in the chest. He let out a strangled cry and crumpled to the floor where he lay, unmoving.

An icy hand squeezed Khy's gut.

There was something he should remember...

Something important...

Khy closed his eyes. The fog drifted through his mind, making it impossible to think. Dimly, he recalled intense violet eyes burning into his, and a voice instructing him on how to relax and focus. The words rolled through his memory, the voice deep and soothing. Khy relaxed and did what the voice told him. He let the fog move over and through him, and instead of concentrating on the fog, he tried to focus on what it hid.

A face appeared against the darkness of his closed eyes. The blond man looked up him and smiled gently. *I love you*, he whispered.

Jaedin...

Something in Khy's mind shifted. The fog parted, and in a blinding flash, Khy remembered. He snapped his eyes open to find Rikard standing over him, hands poised, ready to begin his working.

The pain started deep inside him, an icy, burning cold that slowly feathered out until it engulfed his whole body.

“No... no, no, no...” Khy moaned. He had to get up, get to Jaedin.

Rikard pulled more light from him, his hands moving over Khy as he began to weave the swaths of light into a pattern.

Khy shuddered and struggled against the glowing bands that held his limbs in place. The fog pushed at the edges of his mind, trying to smother his thoughts. Icy pain burned through him until every part of him was on fire. He fought to escape, fought the light, fought the pain, fought the fog. He heard screams, and the pain got sharper and colder until it was enough to overwhelm all that he was—

—and then that voice cut through the chaos, deep and certain, barely a whisper, but Khy heard it through the fear and the pain and the screams: *Sometimes it is better to let the current take you than it is to fight it—even if you think it is taking you in the wrong direction. You must trust yourself, Khy.*

He didn't remember whose voice it was, but he knew it was a voice he could trust.

Khy let go.

He stopped fighting and let the light slide through his body.

The pain eased at once. As Khy studied the light flowing through him, he realized that it wasn't as smooth as it looked. It was jagged and rough and there were holes and ridges where it looked like he could grab on and get a hold of it.

Someone had shown him this...

Someone...

He focused on the light, imagined himself reaching out with a hand and taking hold of it.

Above him, Rikard grunted.

Khy yanked the light away from him, pulling it back into himself.

“What are you doing, boy?” Rikard demanded.

Khy was too busy to answer. He pushed the light into the fog, burning away the clouds that had smothered his thoughts. Once the fog was gone, he followed the light back to its source, back to the place Rikard had taken it from.

It came from deep inside him, deeper than pain or fear, deeper, even, than memory or dream... There at the very center of his being was a core of pure light, glowing so bright and so hot that Khy could barely look at it.

He reached into that core and pulled out a swath of the white-hot light. It didn't hurt when it was his own hands and his own will doing the pulling. Khy stretched the light, shaping it with his will. When he'd formed it into a glowing ball, he hurled it at Rikard.

There was a scream followed by the sound of shattering stone. The earth shivered and shifted with a deep, rumbling growl. Fine dust sifted down from above and then the world came crashing down around him.

When Khy opened his eyes, he was lying on the ground in the only rubble-free spot he could see. Of Rikard, there was no sign but a thin, long-fingered hand protruding from a pile of broken stone.

Light of every color imaginable surrounded him, dancing in the air. Khy followed the streamers of light with his eyes, turning his face to the sky to see where they came from, and froze.

The ceiling was gone. The force of what he'd done to Rikard had brought the roof down around him.

He hoped he hadn't hurt—

Jaedin.

He looked about frantically, and when his gaze finally came to rest upon the man who lay in the partially collapsed doorway, Khy's heart seized in his chest. The light was in Jaedin, too, but it flickered weakly, like a dying candle flame. Even as he watched, it faded, slowly growing dimmer.

“No...” Khy struggled to his feet and clambered across the rubble to where Jaedin lay.

Jaedin was too still, too pale, the light inside him fading faster now. Khy dropped to his knees beside him. There was blood on Jaedin's head, darkening his golden hair.

"No..." he sobbed. "You weren't supposed to be here. Why did you follow me?"

Tears burned his eyes and slipped down his cheeks. He couldn't watch the light that was Jaedin's life fade into darkness. With a sob, he turned his face to the sky so he didn't have to watch his lover die.

The Fireskye rippled and shimmered above him, its colors pure and strong. It was blindingly bright, burning with a cold fire so intense that Khy could feel it even on the ground.

Without the collar to bind him or the medicine to blind him, Khy saw exactly where he could grab onto that light. Could he put some of that light into Jaedin, use it to chase away the darkness that threatened to snuff out Jaedin's life?

Khy reached for the Fireskye and pulled it down into himself.

The moment he took hold of the Fireskye, Khy knew it was too much, too strong. It burned deep inside, like what Rikard did to him, only far worse. It would burn him to ash if he held onto it for too long. Not that it mattered—saving Jaedin was all that mattered. He just needed to figure out how to get some of that light where he needed it.

He knew instinctively that the raw, burning light of the Fireskye was far too strong to push into Jaedin. The colors were too hard and too bright; they would burn and destroy, killing Jaedin as surely as doing nothing would. Khy would have to use only the colors of life and healing.

He focused all his attention on the light, peeling away the colors he wanted—the soft, gentle shades that would heal rather than hurt, caress rather than burn. When he had exactly the right mix, he *pushed* the light into Jaedin, willing it to blend with Jaedin's own fading life, to chase away the darkness. The energy flowed from Khy into Jaedin, a gentle stream of soft, healing light, nothing like the brilliant, raging torrent that was pouring into Khy from above.

Keeping his hold on the Fireskye hurt far more than anything Rikard had forced him to endure. Khy gritted his teeth and hung on, determined not to let the source of the light go until he had taken all that Jaedin needed. He

continued separating the colors, pushing the healing, life-giving light into his lover. By the time the colors inside Jaedin glowed bright and clear with life, Khy could barely think through the pain.

It was easy to stop the flow of light from himself to Jaedin, but letting go of the Fireskye was another matter entirely. With the last of his strength, he tried to *push* the light back up toward the sky, tried to close the channel he'd opened into himself. It didn't matter how hard he pushed, he couldn't let go, couldn't stop it. The Fireskye kept pouring into him, burning him until he was certain there was nothing left of him but ash.

He barely heard the screams that rang through the air before he fell back into the blazing inferno of leythe-light he'd called.

Jaedin woke to a familiar, gentle warmth flowing through him. For a moment, he was back in the infirmary tent on campaign with Rhane's Raiders. He'd been injured, and the healer was looking after him, using the leythe to heal his wounds so he could fight another day.

When he opened his eyes, there was no tent and no healer. Instead he was surrounded by broken walls and shattered stone. The roof of the room where he'd found Rikard was now open to the sky. The light of the Fireskye above him was all wrong. Instead of gently rippling and shimmering above, the Fireskye twisted and roiled as a great swath of its light was sucked down toward the earth.

Jaedin followed the path of the light, and his eyes came to rest upon Khy, who stood in the center of the broken stones, wreathed in lightning. His head was flung back, hair whipping wildly about his head as the Fireskye poured into him. Khy's body writhed and convulsed with the force of it, as if he were a rag doll being shaken by a dog.

"Khy... stop! What are you doing?" Jaedin struggled to his feet and took a step toward Khy, then stopped dead.

Khy glowed with the light of the leythe. Jaedin had never seen such an overt display of power, not even in his soldiering days. As he watched in horror, the lightning around Khy crackled and snapped as it was drawn into his body. Khy shuddered violently, then let out a scream that sounded more animal than human. The sound cut off abruptly, and Khy collapsed in the rubble.

The moment Khy hit the ground, the glow dimmed and the light of the Fireskye lifted back up into the sky in ragged streamers.

Jaedin hurried to Khy's side, dropping to his knees and gathering Khy to him. Khy lay limp in his arms, breath coming in harsh, labored pants. Sullen flickers of light moved in sluggish circles beneath his skin. Even if he'd had his supplies, Jaedin wouldn't have known what to do for him, but he knew who might. He rose carefully to his feet. "Hang on," he whispered. "I'm taking you to Varian."

When he turned to carry Khy out of the wreckage, Tor appeared in the doorway.

"Where were you when Rikard grabbed him?" Jaedin demanded.

"Within the Fireshard, letting Khy play the role he was meant to," Tor said mildly. "Now that he has, it matters little to the balance whether he lives or dies." Those silver-gray eyes lifted and locked onto Jaedin's. "But it matters a great deal to you."

They wrapped Khy in Tor's cloak, and Tor led the way out of the ruins and back to the path. Jaedin shook his head. "It took me hours to get here. He's fading fast... I don't think he'll last that long."

Tor raised an eyebrow and indicated a shimmering patch of light hanging in the air. "Step through. It will take us back to the Fireshard. Varian is waiting, and he will know what to do."

For the first time since he'd woken and discovered Khy was gone, hope stirred in Jaedin's heart. He held Khy close against him and stepped into the light.

Khy's dreams were dark and laced with burning pain and icy cold. When he woke, he wasn't certain at first if he was caught up in another dream. Eyes of brilliant violet set in a face so perfect it couldn't possibly be real stared down at him. The black brows were drawn up in a frown as those beautiful eyes studied him.

"What... where...?"

Varian's full lips curved in a smile. "You are in my home in the Fireshard, Khy, and you have done well." He leaned back, and Khy saw that he was sitting

in a chair drawn up close to the bed. A blanket was draped over his shoulders, and the leythari looked tired and drawn. Tor stood behind Varian's chair, his hands on Varian's shoulders, his expression one of concern.

"You wouldn't believe the dreams I've had..." Khy trailed off, blinking as the events of the past few days unfolded in his mind. He felt different, lighter, and the familiar weight of the collar he'd worn for so long was gone. His hand crept up to his throat and he hesitated for a moment before brushing his fingers against his neck. They touched bare skin. "They weren't dreams... were they?"

"No, they were not." Varian gestured toward the window, where the Fireskye shimmered in the deep purple twilight. A ragged hole had been torn in the curtain of light, a space where the lavender-blue of a clear sky showed through.

Khy frowned. He didn't remember anything happening to the Fireskye, all he remembered was—

Jaedin, lying limp and still on the ground, all the light inside him fading to darkness as his life bled out.

"Jaedin," he whispered, tears burning his eyes. "He came for me. And Rikard..." He couldn't go on. Grief welled up inside him, constricting his throat and washing him in emptiness.

"He tried," said a familiar voice from his other side. A voice Khy had not expected to hear again in this life.

Khy turned his head to see Jaedin perched on the edge of the bed. "I thought you were dead," he whispered.

"You healed me." Jaedin reached for his hand and pressed it gently between his own. "Nearly at the cost of your own life. According to Varian, you called down the power of the Fireskye itself, and used it to heal me."

He didn't remember that part clearly at all. He remembered the emptiness that had consumed him when he'd believed Jaedin was dead, remembered looking up at the Fireskye and seeing right where he might grab onto it. He hadn't even given a thought to what would happen if he tried to use it, or whether or not he'd be able to control it.

Khy turned his gaze back to the window, to the ragged edges of the hole torn in the coruscating sheet of gold and orange light that rippled across the sky. "I did that?"

“I saw it with my own eyes,” Jaedin said softly. “You glowed, Khy. All that light, all that power...”

“And I felt it as a powerful disturbance in the leythe,” Varian said. “Right after my sense of Rikard’s foul presence disappeared from the leythe. Once I knew that Rikard was gone, and could not interfere with my own workings, I constructed a gate and sent Tor out to fetch you both back here. By that time, you had already channeled the Fireskye through yourself, and there was nothing to do but bring you here and heal you as best I could.”

Khy stretched, testing his limbs. “I don’t feel hurt,” he said.

“You were not hurt in your body, Khy. But the channels inside you—the ones that carry the leythe energy and allow you to manipulate it—most of those are gone. Burned out by the sheer strength of the power they were forced to carry.”

“What does that mean?” Khy whispered.

Jaedin’s hand squeezed his. “It means you don’t have that kind of power anymore, and you won’t have to worry about people like Rikard trying to use you. Nobody can steal what you no longer possess.”

“It also means there will be no more accidents,” Varian told him. “No more uncontrolled outbursts of leythe energy when you feel threatened or afraid.”

Khy sank back against the pillows, a feeling of relief settling over him. He could hardly miss something that had, for the most part, only caused him trouble, something that had never been his to control in the first place. He especially wouldn’t miss something that had caused Jaedin pain, and had reduced Khy to nothing but a valuable piece of property in the eyes of Rikard. He mulled over Varian’s words, then lifted his gaze to meet the leythari’s. “You said *most* of the channels are gone. What does that mean?”

“The ability to heal remains yours,” Varian said.

“I’m a healer?” Khy asked.

“You could be an extremely gifted healer if you take the time to learn,” Varian told him.

Behind him, Tor stirred. “And now that you’ve seen for yourself that Khy is well, it’s time for you to seek your own bed,” he said to Varian in a tone that brooked no argument.

Varian gave Tor a fond look and winked at Khy. "Toryn enjoys being in charge. He does not get the opportunity very often."

Tor rolled his eyes and started to help the leythari to his feet. Varian shrugged him off with a scowl. "I am not as weak as all that, Human," he said, more than a hint of a growl in his voice.

"Right. And the passing out earlier was all for show, was it?" Tor asked drily.

Varian muttered something under his breath and allowed Tor to lead him from the room.

At the doorway, Tor paused. "I'll bring food for you both after I tie this one to his bed."

"I heard that, Toryn," Varian's voice came from beyond the doorway. "It sounded rather like a challenge."

Tor rolled his eyes again and flashed them a grin. "Rest now. You still need to regain your strength, Khy, and Jaedin has spent the last two days at your side, worrying instead of sleeping."

When Tor had closed the door behind him, leaving them alone, Khy turned to Jaedin. "You did?"

Jaedin rubbed his eyes and gave Khy a tired smile. "I feared you might slip away while I slept, and I couldn't bear the thought," he said softly.

Khy regarded him soberly. "I'm sorry I left you behind. I couldn't stand the thought of Rikard using me to hurt you."

"I admit that I was angry when I found you gone, but I was more frightened. I understand why you needed to go alone, though." Jaedin frowned at him. "Do you remember any of it? Do you remember healing me?"

Khy shook his head. "Not really. It burned like cold fire. I hope it doesn't always feel like that." He shivered at the thought.

"I don't think it does, if you do it right. I've never heard Mara complain."

"Do you think... do you think Mara would teach me the right way to do it?"

Jaedin smiled. "I imagine she would. She's been talking about taking on an apprentice ever since I first met her. She just hasn't been able to find anyone with the talent who's willing to settle in a village as small as Rosefire."

Khy's eyes sought Jaedin's. "Then... I could stay in Rosefire," he said softly.

"With me," Jaedin said.

Khy threw his arms around Jaedin, pulling the man down next to him on the bed. "I'd like that," he said against Jaedin's neck.

"So would I. Very much."

"Show me?" Khy whispered.

Jaedin's strong arms engulfed him in a warm hug. "I'll show you, all right," Jaedin whispered back. "Every moment of every day."

Khy relaxed against that strong, familiar body, and knew all the way down to the bottom of his heart that here in Jaedin's arms, he'd found a home.

The End

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Author Bio

Jaye McKenna was born a Brit and was dragged, kicking and screaming, across the Pond at an age when such vehement protest was doomed to be misinterpreted as a paddy. She grew up near a sumac forest in Minnesota and spent most of her teen years torturing her parents with her electric guitar and her dark poetry. She was punk before it was cool and a grown-up long before she was ready. Jaye writes fantasy and science fiction stories about hot guys who have the hots for each other. She enjoys making them work darn hard for their happy endings, which might explain why she never gets invited to their parties.

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LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

ON EDGE

T.C. Blue

ON EDGE

By T.C. Blue

Photo Description

Fan art of Dean/Castiel from *Supernatural* almost kissing beneath a streetlight against a cityscape backdrop.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

~They are enemies.

Always have been. Always will be.

Nothing can change that. Nothing. ~

Something changes that.

Please write a contemporary enemies-to-lovers, slow-burn story with an HFN or HEA ending. There should be strong character motivations for hating each other and strong actions to help redeem their past wrongs.

The quote above should be included in the story.

Sincerely,

Anyta

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: college, first time (sort of), enemies to lovers, rampant assbattery, frat house, men being stubborn, non-cheating promiscuity, past betrayal

Word Count: 50,765

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ON EDGE

By T.C. Blue

Chapter One

August 2010

“So, what about high school? Do you miss it?”

“Not really. It was... an experience, I guess, but not the kind I'd want to repeat, you know? But...”

The last thing—the very last thing—Shane Parks missed was high school.

“I was thrilled when it was over.” He didn't even like thinking about it, but the question brought back all sorts of memories, most of them bad. “It's kind of a long story, but...” Shane spoke on, though he was mostly talking to himself.

By midway through senior year, he'd known several of his one-time friends back home were already lamenting their shitty luck at either not being accepted to the colleges they'd applied for, or discovering they couldn't afford the schools they did get into. The rest, who hadn't planned on going to college at all, had been less disappointed with their lots in life. Most of those kids were either working or training in various professions as apprentices, of sorts.

The ones who hadn't ditched Carter, Wyoming, just as fast as they could, anyway. Shane's sort-of friend, Tommy, had shown up at graduation with everything already packed and piled up in the ragged-looking old Honda he drove. Tommy had bought the thing at age fifteen and spent the next three years fixing and replacing everything possible, on the mechanical side. The cosmetic aspect of the car had never mattered much to Tommy, whose motivational mantra “as long as it gets me the hell out of here and at least close to Hollywood, I couldn't give a crap how it looks” came as a surprise to those who didn't know him well.

Much like Shane, Tommy was the kind of kid who wasn't entirely welcome in their smallish town of four thousand or so, even if nobody ever said it out loud. It was a given, though, and everyone in Carter knew it—if you were different, by which people meant the nasty-wrong-bad G-word, you either made sure no one ever knew, or you left as soon as you were able. Preferably both. For Tommy, it had been both.

If Shane were asked and truly had to answer, he would admit that Carter hadn't been a bad place to grow up. He'd had a great childhood, full of the

usual things kids loved. He'd played softball for the little league team his stepdad's car dealership sponsored, then baseball in school. He'd had a spot on his school's bowling team, too, and the entire countryside had been his playground. Things could have been much, much worse, right up until his junior year of high school.

Even then, it hadn't been so bad. Not like what he'd read about on the internet, with kids like him cutting or killing themselves. He'd been beat up a few times, sure. Suspended for fighting when he responded in kind. If he never tasted toilet water again, it would be too soon, and sure, he'd bought more cans of spray paint than seemed reasonable, to cover the crap some of the other kids wrote on his locker, but he'd handled it. He'd been lucky, really. His mom worked for the town's mayor, so Shane hadn't gotten as much shit as others.

So Shane didn't miss high school at all. He might miss his mother and stepdad, Rob, a little, but he didn't miss anything else about Carter. If he was lucky, he'd never have to go back there again, except for semester breaks and holidays, of course. His mom was a big fan of family holidays, though Shane didn't really know why. It wasn't like they had much family to catch up with, but it made her happy, and she and Rob had been really good about the whole G-word thing. Rob claimed that he'd known for years before Shane ever admitted it, while his mom... Well, Mom hadn't been happy about it, right at first—she still wasn't, really—but one night when she'd had a glass of wine or three too many, she'd flat-out said, or slurred, that at least Shane's sin wasn't likely to have him in prison like his father.

His dad had died there, too, and while Rob was only his stepfather, the man had been more honest with Shane than Mom. Yeah, Dad was stabbed in prison and died, but he would have ended up dead anyway. Prisons didn't supply condoms to inmates, and Shane's father had been in for almost ten years when he died. Rob said it was probably a blessing by then, considering.

His father's criminal tendencies hadn't been an issue until after Shane became *out*, when someone, he still didn't know who, had dug up that bit of the past and spread it around. Like his biological father being in prison somehow explained Shane's bent. As if.

“Oh, man. That's messed up. My experience was nothing like that bad.”

Tyler, who Shane kept wanting to call Taylor, due to his resemblance to the wolf guy in the *Twilight* movies, sounded almost as freaked out as he looked,

and Shane was pretty sure he'd just blown any chance he'd had of pledging the unofficial GLBT fraternity.

It was unofficial in that it wasn't sanctioned by whatever body ruled over frats and it didn't have any freaky Greek letters, but the University College of the State of Nevada recognized unofficial frats and sororities, as long as those organizations had at least one recognized, official chapter at an accredited school, and LKNG had chapters with at least six colleges that Shane knew of.

"Well, you're local, right?" he asked, cocking his head. "I mean, Vegas isn't anything like the same as Carter, Wyoming, you know? For one thing, it's way bigger. For another... I'm guessing there's no shortage of people here who are... different. Local is good. For you, anyway."

"Yeah." Tyler nodded, smiling a little. "I mean, I'm not 'gonna drive home for dinner every night' local, but it's only, like, forty minutes away. So that's your story, then."

Shane snorted. He'd already blown the *story of your life* portion of the hazing. He might as well finish it. "As if."

Tyler frowned, the tiny smile vanishing. "Huh?"

"There was this boy," Shane said quietly, leaning over the narrow coffee table between his chair and Tyler's. "I met him a little after I started junior year, and he was... God, Tyler, he was perfect. He lived in the next town over, so we didn't go to school together or anything, and he was a senior, so I knew it wouldn't last."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Shane forced himself to smile, though he suspected it looked fake as all hell. "How many high school relationships last after graduation? You see it all the time, right? Kids graduate and move on with their lives. Even when they swear they're never gonna change, and that's just if they're still together by the time someone graduates."

"I guess that's not what happened with you and your guy," Tyler said, pouring Shane another drink while the rest of the fraternity brothers remained in the background, watching and listening.

Shane wasn't exactly thrilled that his confession was being witnessed by the entire group, but it was the final step of the hazing. He was supposed to be

completely honest, to prove that he trusted the men he would hopefully be able to call brothers one day soon. He wasn't sure that he really did trust them, but he believed Tyler when he said none of them would repeat anything Shane said. Even if they did decide to tell people his truths, he wasn't ashamed of himself, for the most part. It was only the end of his story that he felt both satisfied with and slightly guilty for. Only slightly, though. Not enough that he lost any sleep over it.

"It's a long story," Shane said after a few seconds and a long swig of rum. "The short version is... I went to meet him at this diner in his town, and it turned out a bunch of guys from his football team ran into him before I got there. When I did, one of them started calling me a fag. Then he said if I was a fag, the guy I was seeing was a fag, too, and he wasn't out, you know?"

Tyler groaned. "Oh, this has clusterfuck written all over it."

Shane chuckled, even though there wasn't anything funny about it. "You know it. So there I was, standing in this diner, confused because the guy I was seeing was just taking this kid's bullshit, and I started to get pissed off. Then the guy I was there for was laughing with his buddies, saying that yeah, I must be a fag, but how was he supposed to know that since I played baseball and bowled. Next thing I knew, he and his friends got up and crowded me to the back of the diner, where the bathrooms were."

Tyler didn't say anything, but Shane saw the knowledge in the guy's eyes and nodded.

"Turns out," he said, "if a bunch of assholes decide to give you a swirly in a toilet that hasn't been disinfected well enough, or possibly at all, there are a bunch of germs that can find their way into your system. Some of them can cause things like... Oh, completely unexpected explosive diarrhea during English class. And I do mean *explosive*."

"Shit..." Tyler's eyes were wide, his voice so hushed the guy might as well have been in church.

"Literally," Shane grumbled. "For the next year and a half, I was shit-boy, or my personal favorite, *Come-Farts*. The rumor was that I'd taken so many loads up my ass, my body rejected them, and that was why I'd humiliated myself at school. Never mind that I had to go to the hospital in Cheyenne to find out what was wrong with me. Never mind that I was on three different courses of antibiotics to get well again, or even that I missed two weeks of

school. I was suddenly out, even though I'd never really been in. I'd just never said anything and my best friend was a girl, so people kind of assumed we were together. So school wasn't fun after that, and I think that's the part that sucked the most. I *liked* school before it got so... mean."

It had been even more difficult when Carrie cut him off, too. It still felt like one day she'd been his biggest supporter, and the next, she'd been... no. She hadn't gone from encouraging him to insulting him. He couldn't claim that. What she'd done was worse. One day, he'd been her best friend, but when he'd returned from Cheyenne with a clean bill of health, she'd acted like he didn't exist. It wasn't even because she'd just found out he was gay, because she'd known that since she'd tried to kiss him when they were twelve. He'd been unable to hide his discomfort, and when she'd asked what was wrong with her, he hadn't been able to let her think anything was.

He'd told her he didn't like girls that way, but if he did, she'd be the one he would like, but since she wasn't a boy... She'd kept his secret, too. Even when the rest of the school, including other former friends, had ganged up on him, tried to hurt him, Carrie hadn't added any fuel to the fire. She'd just pretended they'd never met and that Shane was invisible. He couldn't even hate her for it, after loving her like a sister for so long, damn it. He also couldn't forget that she'd left him to deal with the bullshit alone.

"So what happened to the guy you were seeing? The one who shoved your head in the toilet?" Tyler didn't seem to be asking out of pure curiosity. Shane had spent enough time with the guy to recognize the difference between idle curiosity and purposeful interest.

He almost lied. Almost made up some bullshit that would make it seem like he'd taken the high road by trusting fate or the universe or karma to punish the fucker who'd ruined his life, but he didn't. He wanted to be a part of the LKNG brotherhood, and if that was going to happen, it couldn't be under false pretenses. His father had been a habitual liar, even after going to prison. Shane refused to be like him. He just wouldn't.

"He called me the day after the swirly," Shane said, doing his best to sound merely factual and not at all like he was still pissed off. "Said he was sorry, but what else could he do when his friends were right there, egging him on. He wanted to know when we could hook up again." He snorted. "I told him 'never.' Then I got sick a few days later, and he texted me, like, fifty times, wanting to see me. So when I was better, I went to meet him."

God, he didn't want to say anything more, but he had to. First, he needed more rum, so he held out his glass and offered as much of a smile as he could when Tyler poured him another few inches.

Shane sipped quickly in small batches, then finally steeled himself and went on.

"He wanted to make up, or so he said, but he wasn't actually sorry. And he wanted to fuck me, which we hadn't actually gotten around to before, but he... God, he said it didn't have to mean anything, because I'd let so many other dudes at my ass that—" Shane frowned. "He didn't care if I'd had so much cock that fucking me would feel like throwing a hotdog down a hallway. His words. Because the story about the diarrhea had made it from my school to his, you know? And when I told him no, he got mad. I had to kick him in the junk to get away."

He'd run faster than he'd ever done rounding third. Run so hard and fast that when he'd reached his car and thrown himself into the driver's seat, it had taken him a good fifteen seconds to be able to fit the key into the ignition, his hands had been shaking so badly. Then he'd driven the forty miles home, heart still racing even after he'd passed the Carter Township limits.

"After that," Shane said bluntly, staring right into Tyler's eyes, "I was done playing nice. I outed him. Deliberately and undeniably. I had a picture on my phone of him blowing me. I don't think he even knew I took it, but I'd wanted it just so... I don't know. So I could look at it and know I wasn't dreaming when we couldn't be together, you know? And I did, right up until... what I told you about.

"So I had this picture, and even though his eyes were closed, there was no question about who it was or what he was doing. I posted it on the internet, tagging him and everyone I could think of, from my school and his."

Tyler's eyes went wide, and Shane nodded, closing his own for a moment.

"I took it down the next day. Deleted the post. Not because I'd changed my mind, but because I was still seventeen at the time, and I saw some show where a girl who posted a picture of herself in her underwear was somehow charged with child pornography. He was eighteen, so he couldn't sue me, but I didn't want to go to jail for posting a shot of my own cock in someone's mouth."

"What happened to your boyfriend?"

That was one of the other guys. Shane couldn't be sure, but he thought it might be William. Or possibly Greg.

"He wasn't my boyfriend, no matter what I thought before swirly-night," Shane grumbled. "He was my... closeted hook-up, I guess. And I was his, but not quite so afraid. There's no way to mistake that for being boyfriends. At least, I hope not, because when I do have a boyfriend, it'd better be way more than sneaking around to get off and the very occasional softy at DQ."

He heard a few mutters but they seemed to be agreeing, so Shane didn't react to them. Instead, he took another swallow of rum and leaned back in his chair as he continued, saying, "As far as I know, he became a joke at his school, but he told some lies about me. In the end, he didn't lose his football scholarship. Not that he needed it. His family is loaded." Shane shrugged. "Either way, I'm sure he's fine. Probably dating some girl from an appropriate family by now. That was always his plan, from what I found out later. Marry well, have kids, work for his dad's company, and have guys on the side. Many, many guys. I wish him luck with that."

Not really. Shane actually hoped his asshole ex would be miserable. Forever. It just wasn't nice or polite to say so.

"And what do you want? For yourself, here at UCSN?" Tyler's head was cocked in the way that announced sincere interest. Shane honestly wanted to play poker with the guy, because God, Tyler had about a million and one tells.

Shane sighed and drained his glass before setting it down on the low table.

"I want to do well in my classes. Pre-med is a tough curriculum and I'm not even sure it's right for me, but I'd rather kick ass at something I change my mind about later than do badly at something I decide I really want, you know?" Shane let the corner of his mouth twitch up in a wry sort of half-grin. "I want to be surrounded by people who won't judge me for *what* I am, but for *who* I am. And if I ever manage to find five spare seconds to have a personal life, I want it to be in a place like this house, where the only comments that'll be flung at me and any prospective boyfriend will be about how hot he is and how we should try to keep it down after midnight. I know I probably totally destroyed every chance I ever had of that by telling you how I outed the asshole, but it'd be cool if we could be friends and stuff, even without being brothers."

Shane was facing away from all the frat guys except Tyler, so he couldn't be sure what was happening when Tyler looked past him and arched a brow. He

was completely baffled when the swarm of white ping-pong balls, and just a few blue ones, started to fly over his head. Many of them hit Tyler, who laughed and batted at the missiles.

“Anyone abstaining?” Tyler asked before nodding once. “Noted, and I understand why. I also appreciate your sense of fair play. So the votes are cast and Shane Parks is accepted into our band of brothers. That makes four this year. Awesome! Shane, welcome to LKNG. We all hope you’ll be happy here.”

He wasn’t sure if it was the rum or just the fact that he’d been so certain he’d be sent away, but for some reason, Shane found himself staring at Tyler, even as the rest of the guys surrounded him, offering hugs and high-fives. A few stood back and Shane somehow grasped that they’d been the ones to toss the blue balls, which presumably signaled a no vote. He couldn’t blame them, but he did hope that they’d become closer over the coming years. Outing people wasn’t his go-to, but they had no way of being sure. Not that they needed to worry. If they lived in the LKNG house, chances were good that everyone already knew they were gay. Even so...

“I. Are you serious?” He stood quickly and almost toppled over when the motion had all the booze rushing to his head. “Whoa. Head rush. Um, are you sure?”

William, the LKNG brother who Shane thought had asked about the ex, laughed and wrapped a long, lithely muscled arm around his shoulders. “We were pretty sure even before tonight, man. Most of us, anyway. I voted yes, in case you’re wondering. It’s not that I think it’s cool that you outed that dude, but I like that you were honest about it. And I guess I can’t say I wouldn’t do the same in that situation. I mean, he sounds like a total douchelord.”

Shane sighed and leaned against William’s side, the liquor hitting him harder by the moment. “He wasn’t always, but yeah. At the end? Yeah, he pretty much was. Um, I should go. I need to get to bed, or fall down or something.”

William chuckled and turned him, until Shane was staring at William’s nose. It took a second for him to realize he could tilt his head and meet the guy’s eyes. The guy’s light brown eyes.

“You’re tall,” Shane said, as though he’d just noticed. “Six-three?” Something like that. Way taller than Shane’s own five-eleven, anyway.

“Six-four,” William answered, grinning in a way Shane wasn’t sure he liked. He didn’t dislike it either, though. “You could crash here. In my room. My bed is big enough for two.”

Tyler appeared beside them and laughed. “Your bed is big enough for *four*. I know because there have been four people in it on more than one night. Now stop trying to seduce our new brother while he’s drunk. You know that’s against the rules, man.”

Right. Rule six. Something like that. *Thou shalt not take advantage of the drunk or otherwise impaired*. It was a good rule, and while Shane wasn’t quite drunk, he wasn’t far from it, either. It would be better to invoke the rule than tell William that no matter how attractive he was, and how funny, he just wasn’t Shane’s type. Some guys took that as a challenge, and Shane kind of thought William might be one of them.

“Can you call a cab for me?” Shane asked Tyler, trying to seem as sober as he wished to be. He’d been fine until he’d stood up, damn it, and the last thing he needed was to try walking back to the monthly rental across town.

“I can,” Tyler answered, prying William’s arm away from him and replacing it with his own. Shane smiled when he realized they were the same height. Less neck strain, thank God. “Or—and don’t take this the wrong way, because I don’t mean it the way William did—you can crash with me tonight. I can’t swear there won’t be any cuddling, because I’m totally a cuddler, but any snuggling will be totally innocent. Mostly innocent.”

Tyler grinned, and it set Shane’s mind at ease.

“Okay. I’ve never cuddled, but it sounds like fun. You can be my Yoda.”

October

School was fun, and hard, and the more he studied, the less sure he was that he wanted to go into medicine, but he wasn’t the sort to give up without truly applying himself. It was when he realized that he was applying far more effort to hitting the gay bars and collecting phone numbers—though not actually calling them—that Shane accepted the truth. His mom’s dreams for him, and his stepdad’s, too, weren’t *his*. Becoming a doctor sounded really cool, but the more he thought about it, the more he knew it wasn’t his calling. He just didn’t know what was, and he’d already started the curriculum, so he could finish out the year, couldn’t he?

He might as well, especially with Tyler and William helping him study. They'd even made flash cards. It would be rude to change curriculums right then, after all the effort they'd put in.

He still slept with Tyler every once in a while, in the sense of actually sleeping. Hard as Shane tried, he couldn't quite manage to be interested in Ty. He wanted to be—God, did he ever want to be—because Tyler was smart and hot and all sorts of nice, but for whatever reason, the attraction just wasn't there. On Shane's side, anyway. Tyler had made it more than clear that if Shane gave him a shot, Ty would be the best boyfriend ever.

Shane couldn't swear that he'd never feel that way, but he didn't think it was likely. He'd even said so, more than once. "I don't want you to wait for me, Ty," he'd said softly but seriously, just the night before. "You're a great guy. You should find someone who'll treat you right, and I'm pretty sure that's not gonna be me."

Tyler always smiled and shook his head. "Pretty sure isn't the same as a hundred percent certain, is it? So, no. I mean, I'm not exactly waiting. If I meet someone and it seems right, I'll be all over that. But for now, I... Just let me have this, okay?"

Shane's agreement was reluctant, but familiar to him. He liked Tyler; liked the comfort he felt with him. He was almost sure that Ty's feelings were similar to his own, too. Comfortable affection, rather than any sort of... grand passion, as the romance novels his mother read called it. There wasn't any sort of sex going on between them, in any case. No matter how many times Shane woke up in Tyler's bed with Ty's cock hard and pressed tightly against his spine.

Shane wasn't having sex at all, with or without Ty. He wanted to, of course, because he was almost nineteen and tired of his own hand, but... He wasn't his father, he wasn't his ex, and he wasn't William.

As nerdy and uncool as it might be, when he had sex, he wanted it to mean something. He wanted it to be special, damn it, and while he was sure Tyler or William would make him feel special during the act, he wanted his first foray into full-on penetration to be with someone who made him feel special *all* the time; not just when they were getting down to the bump-and-grind.

Ty would try. Shane knew that. But while Tyler did always make him feel special, it wasn't the right *kind* of special. Probably because Shane didn't see

Ty that way. At some point, he hoped, Tyler would recognize the deep, abiding friendship Shane felt for him and stop hoping for more.

In the meantime, Shane was happy to accept the kindnesses Tyler extended—the nights snuggled together under Ty's blankets when Shane couldn't sleep, he was so anxious about the courses he didn't even want to be taking, or those times when Ty just didn't want to be alone.

There would be a reckoning someday, Shane was sure, but he'd never lied to Ty. Never said anything to imply that they would be more than friends. With any luck, they would be best friends for the rest of their lives. At least, that was what Shane hoped.

And thus passed his first year at the University College of the State of Nevada.

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Chapter Two

May 2011

“Peckerbinge! What the hell are you doing in town, *Peckerbinge*? Run out of cocks to suck in Miami?”

Chance turned slowly, free hand clenching into a fist at his side as he stared at Jimmy Hopkins, who'd nearly shouted the words. Fucking asshole was the one who'd come up with that nickname after the photo incident. It had made the rounds like wildfire, too, until the only people not using it by high school graduation had been the teachers. It still pissed Chance off almost as much as the way god damned Shane Parks had outed him, but Chance's last two years at Mid-Miami State University had taught him to hold his temper. That, and he had bigger things to worry about. Like his scholarship, after the bicycle accident that had blown out his knee just two months before summer break.

The doctors he'd seen were good, but neither they nor his surgeon could say for sure whether it would ever recover enough to play again at the college level. He was under strict orders to follow his physical therapy schedule and not overdo it, but there was no way of knowing how things would turn out until he returned to school in the fall.

Coach had been nice about it, but the truth was, if Chance couldn't play, MMSU wouldn't be able to continue his scholarship past the next semester. Fuck knew what he'd do if that happened. His family could afford to pay his tuition, but the family money always came with strings; he had no reason to believe tuition costs would be exempt from that rule, and the possibility would decrease even more if he got in a fight with Jimmy fucking Hopkins in the middle of the grocery store.

“What do you want, Jimmy? Or do you just think it's cool to shout at people in public?”

Jimmy smirked, as though he'd wanted Chance to say exactly that, though he also seemed disappointed. Time was, Chance would have yelled back at the mention of cock-sucking, though, so maybe disappointment was understandable.

“I think it's way *un-cool* for you to be walking around town like you own it. Nobody wants you here, *Peckerbinge*.”

Christ, he wanted to wrap his fingers around the shithead's neck and squeeze. His fisted hand clenched harder, and Chance shifted onto his good leg before offering up a smirk of his own. "My parents do," he answered, still smirking. "You remember my parents, right? Brian and Mindy Breckinridge? Oh, wait. That's the name of the town, too. Huh. So maybe I get to walk around *Breckinridge* like I own it because... I kind of do, don't I? I guess you forgot, but that's okay. Too much information for you to hold in that tiny little thing you call a brain, right? I mean, did you even get into the community college over in Bensonville?"

Jimmy hadn't, which Chance knew from the previous summer. His kid brother Jasper had mentioned it like it was divine retribution, but Chance thought that was because Jasper was stuck being the brother of *Peckerbinge*. That was the worst part of things... or not the worst-worst, but it was right up there. Chance's kid brother still caught shit because of Chance's so-called *choice*, no matter how he and his parents had tried to spin things. Some people—like Jimmy, and most of the other kids at Chance's high school—didn't want to believe the lie.

Who the fuck would *choose* to be gay when it only got them laughed at, spit on, and sometimes beaten or killed? Who would ever want to be bullied so badly that they considered killing themselves, or even worse, went through with it? That was the part Chance still didn't get, and probably never would.

"Fuck you, *Peckerbinge*. I didn't want to go to college anyway. Too many fags and queers and cocksuckers there. I bet that's why you're using that stupid cane. You fucked your knee up sucking every Miami cock you could find, right?" There was something so petty and snide in the way Jimmy said it that, when combined with the glare-and-pout the guy was giving him, it somehow defused the anger Chance had been holding down.

He couldn't say whether he or Jimmy was more surprised by the loud laugh that left Chance's mouth. He felt just as startled as Jimmy looked. Jimmy's shocked surprise turned to fury a few seconds later, after Chance stopped laughing and shook his head, saying, "You know, Jimmy, you seem to be really fucking interested in how much cock I suck. Jealous?"

He didn't actually suck cock all that often, but fuck it. If the shithead wanted to think Chance's time at school was a giant orgy of sucking, let him. Chance fucked more than he sucked, but as much as he was so suddenly enjoying pissing Jimmy off, he didn't feel any need to share that bit of info.

“You wish!”

As comebacks went, that one was crap, and even Jimmy knew it.

“I’m pretty sure you’re the one who wishes.” Chance grinned, tightening his grip on the silver handle of his cane. “You know I was passed-out drunk when that picture was snapped, but I’m not the one who decided to stand in the middle of Miller’s Grocery and yell about sucking cock. I bet you think about it all the time, don’t you? Hoping I wasn’t just trashed and might do it for you, right? Or is there some other reason you wanted to talk to me, closet-queen?”

It was a term he’d heard a few times over the last couple years, but Chance hadn’t used it before. It felt dirty, in a way, but good, too, because Jimmy turned a brighter red than Chance had thought possible.

“I! That’s! Fuck you!” Jimmy glared, actually shaking before he turned and stalked away so quickly, it looked more like a sprint.

“And let that be a lesson to you,” Chance muttered. “Don’t get into a battle of wits when you’re so totally unarmed.”

He ignored the hard looks from the other customers as he grabbed a hand basket from the stack near the door. He’d only planned to pick up a few avocados and possibly some pistachios, but fuck it. If the people in Breckinridge were so set on thinking the worst of him, then Chance would help them along and have a good laugh while he was at it.

Ten minutes later, he limped up to the register and unloaded his basket of avocados, pistachio nuts, cucumbers, condoms and Crisco, and when the guy ringing up the sale started to look ill, Chance laughed. He didn’t know what the guy was thinking, but that look was priceless. He needed to remember to tell his surfer buddies about it, too. They’d laugh their asses off.

“How is Rebecca? And her family?” His mother’s smile didn’t reach her eyes, but that wasn’t anything new. Ever since the photograph, she hadn’t given him a real smile; not even once.

Chance shrugged, cutting a large chunk from his steak. “She’s fine. Her dad’s company did pretty well last quarter.” That was what Mom really wanted to know. “They decided to take a family trip to Scotland for the summer, so she won’t be able to come by this time. I’m sure she’ll send a card.”

Rebecca would, especially since she had as much reason to promote their farce of a relationship as he did. "Her mother's looking forward to buying some of those Scottish wool sweaters," he added.

"You're still seeing her." His father made it a statement rather than a question, but Chance nodded. "Good. We've done our best to make sure that mistake of yours doesn't hurt your reputation, but it's just the sorta thing that could destroy your future. Phillip Gallow isn't the kind of man who'd accept a... well, you know... for a son-in-law."

Chance sighed and shook his head when Jasper made a sound that might have been a laugh or a cough.

"Um." Chance looked down at his plate and cut another piece of meat before spearing the first with his fork. "Rebecca already knows, Dad." His father started to respond, but Chance cut him off. "I had to tell her. She understands what happened and she gets it."

Boy, did she ever. She was the perfect girlfriend for him. Smart, funny, pretty, loaded, and didn't want to have sex with him any more than he wanted to do that with her. And his parents were right. He would probably marry her someday.

"I still think we should have had that boy arrested." His mother always said that, on the rare occasion that the picture thing came up. "Getting you drunk and taking advantage that way. It's criminal."

Dad frowned and shook his head. "He was a minor, Mindy. We'd have looked like fools, trying to send a child to jail. Even for something like that."

"And all you had was Chance's word," Jasper piped in, sounding just as emotionless as their parents. "A halfway decent defense attorney, even a public defender, would have been able to throw all kinds of reasonable doubt at the judge. It would have been a spectacle, and we all know how much you like avoiding those."

Fuck, Chance thought as he shoved the forkful of steak into his mouth. Jasper had grown even smarter since the last time Chance had seen him. Then again, that wasn't exactly a surprise. Jasper might only be sixteen, but he'd already started taking classes for college credit. Football stereotypes aside, Chance was no meathead. Jasper still made him seem like a drooling idiot without even trying.

“Yes. Well. I suppose it’s just as well that you were honest with Rebecca, Chance,” Mom said as she picked at the grilled asparagus on her plate. “That whole distasteful situation will be less likely to...”

“Bite you on the ass later,” Dad finished when Mom trailed off, and if Chance hadn’t had a mouth full of meat, he would have laughed. As it was, Jasper laughed for both of them, even while their mother tried to chastise Dad for using that sort of language at the dinner table.

“She’s your beard, right?”

Chance did his best not to jump at both the fact that Jasper had entered his room without Chance noticing, and what Jasper had said.

“What?” Okay, he sounded squeaky. “What are you talking about? Do I need to shave?” Better, but Jasper didn’t look like he was buying it. “Why are you in my room, anyway? Knock, you derp!”

Jasper snorted and closed the door behind him, then moved to sit on the end of the bed, cross legged. “Rebecca,” he said, like Chance was stupid. “She’s your beard. I mean, I figure she has to be, because you’re not enough of a douchebag to pretend you like a girl when you really don’t. I mean *like-like*, not just like.”

Chance rolled his eyes. “You’re a smart kid, Jas, but I always forget how young you are until you say shit like ‘like-like.’ Makes you sound like you’re about twelve.” He grinned. “Rebecca’s cool. I *like* her. Seriously, man, do I need to shave?”

Shit. The last thing he needed was to have his kid brother figure things out. Jasper was smart, yeah, but he’d tell their folks, and then Chance would be screwed.

“I’m not stupid.” Jasper seemed offended.

“Yeeeahhhh... Pretty sure I just said you’re smart. Or did I imagine that part?” Chance smirked a little, but not the way he’d done earlier at Jimmy Hopkins. This time he used his big-brother smirk.

“That guy didn’t get you drunk and use you while you were passed out. I’ve seen the picture. It’s still out there, you know.” Jasper made a face that was usually reserved for chili-from-a-can. “And I’m totally fine with never seeing

proof that anyone wants to have sex with you ever again, but... That wasn't slack-and-passed-out face. So the drunk thing is a lie, and that means you're gay, and *that* means Rebecca is your beard. Um, that's a girl who pretends to be your girlfriend so you can pretend you're not gay."

"I know what a beard is! Jesus! How do you?" Fuck! If Jasper had it all figured out, who else did? Everybody? Was that why Jimmy had been so... Christ. He was screwed. He was also pissed off that Jasper had seen that fucking picture. Someone needed to beat the shit out of Shane Parks for that, and soon. Hell, Chance would be happy to do it himself, if he ever ran into the fucker again.

Jasper shrugged, looking uncomfortable for the first time Chance could remember since Jas had a stomach bug at six years old. "There's this thing called the Internet. Anyway, I just wanted to let you know it's okay with me. You might have to keep lying to Mom and Dad, but I know the truth. So maybe we can really talk about stuff, okay?"

Chance shook his head, trying to let go of the fury even thinking about Shane caused. "I'm not..." Shit, he didn't want to lie to Jasper. It was one thing to lie to the world and let Jasper believe it, but deliberately lying to his little brother? That felt wrong, somehow.

"Oh, man, you so totally are." Jasper grinned. "Need a hug? You look like you're about to cry. Is that something you gay guys do a lot?"

Chance groaned, but opened his arms wide. "Come here, kid." Jasper seemed torn. "You might be shooting for irritating-kid-brother-of-all-time right now, but yeah. I could use a hug."

"Just don't feel me up. That would be weird. And incestuous," Jasper joked, moving into the hug. "Besides, you're totally not my type."

He ignored the tightness in his knee and the intensifying spikes of pain. It was more important to hug his brother right then. Even with Jas being a smart-ass.

"I'm not gay," Chance said against Jasper's riotous curls, but even he didn't believe himself. Fuck, he really sounded like he was lying.

Jasper snorted. "Right. That's why you never slept with any of your old girlfriends. Not even Sheila Moss, and she's a total nympho. I hear it's not healthy to live that deep in the closet. At least, that's what the guys in the chat

rooms say. They say a lot more, too, but I think they really think my 'asking for a friend' thing is me asking for myself. Either way, I don't really think fisting is my thing. That's what you do, right? Fists and... things?"

"Oh, gross!" Chance cringed and pulled back to see Jasper smirking. The little shit was teasing him! "Not that it's any of your business, but no. I have a girlfriend, remember?"

"A fake girlfriend. I'm not sure that counts." Jasper pushed away. "I mean, I kind of get why you're bothering, but wouldn't it just be easier to... be yourself?"

Chance sighed. "I *am* myself. So what about you? You're old enough to have a girl. So do you?"

"As if. I don't have time for that. I love Mom and Dad, but the sooner I get out of here, the happier I'll be. She cut my steak for me earlier, Chance. Seriously. I'm sixteen, and Mom thinks I need my food cut up for me. I'd rather spend my time on expediting my high school education than on dating. Especially in Breckinridge." Jasper's lips twitched up into a smile. "So if Rebecca's not coming to visit, does that mean we can hang out more? I mean, I know it's not cool to spend a lot of time with your 'kid brother,' but maybe sometimes?"

Chance grinned and reached out, ruffling Jasper's hair. "Count on it, Jas." It wasn't like he had any friends in town anymore, anyway, and Jasper could be good company. When he wasn't being a smart-ass pain, which wasn't all that often, Chance finally remembered.

Damn.

September

Fall term was already difficult. It hurt to watch his former teammates striding around campus in their jerseys when Chance no longer had the right to wear his own.

He hadn't even needed to hear the doctor's speech. His knee hadn't felt right by the time school started, even though he'd done everything he'd been told. It didn't feel bad, exactly, but it for damned sure didn't feel like it had before he'd decided to show off on a friend's mountain bike and proved that his mouth was really good at writing checks his body couldn't cash.

It was his own fault, too, which left Chance with no one to be mad at but himself.

He could only count himself fortunate that he'd never really considered football as a career. Yes, he loved the game, and he'd loved playing—the admiration from his peers had been even nicer than when he'd been on the high school team—but it wasn't his only option. He didn't need to make the decision to either give up his dreams or risk crippling himself for good.

The football scholarship had been an opportunity to learn what he wanted to, as opposed to what his father wanted him to study, but there were worse things than getting a business degree. Chance figured he could still read whatever he wanted, and write in his free time once he took over the ranch. His knee was good enough to ride with, as long as he stayed away from bulls and broncs.

As far as consequences went, he'd been lucky. Hell, he could even still surf—which was something he'd been dared into within a week of first arriving at MMSU—as long as he was careful.

His parents had committed to paying for the rest of his college as long as he studied business, but they hadn't said that he could *only* take courses within the business curriculum, which was exactly why Chance spent hours poring over the class catalogue for the spring semester once he got back to Miami after Christmas. He needed to have his plan in place early so he could get the classes he wanted as well as those his new major required.

It was three a.m. when his phone rang, and while Chance groaned, he forced himself to sit up enough to see the display. *HOME*.

He frowned, then slipped out of bed, avoiding the arm that tried to pull him back.

“Hello?” he mumbled, voice still hoarse with sleep. “What’s wrong?”

“Talk to your brother.” Mom sounded frustrated and distressed, which was never a good combination for her. “Tell him he needs to forget this ridiculous idea and just—”

“Tell *Mom* that I’m right!” Jasper seemed more high-strung than usual. “And she’d be stupid to stop me from—”

“Don’t you dare call me stupid, young man! You got your brain from me, not your father!”

“Hey now, Mindy...”

“Shut up, Brian! You know it’s true! He’s not ready!”

“What the fuck is going on out there?” It was only after he heard his mother gasp that Chance realized he’d not only cussed the big-bad-cuss, but yelled it into the phone. “Um. Sorry, but it’s three o’clock in the morning, here. What the hel... heck is going on?”

It took a while for Chance to figure out what was happening. Mostly because Mom, Dad and Jasper kept trying to talk over each other. Eventually, he thought he’d grasped the meaning, though.

“Okay!” He shouted it in an effort to be heard, and apparently succeeded because there was a sudden silence on the other end of the line. “I’m not sure I really know what’s happening, but *let me finish* before you all start talking again, okay?” Chance took the silence as a yes.

“Okay,” he said again. “What I think I heard is that Jas has enough credits to graduate early, and that he has universities that want him for the spring. Mom is worried that he’s too young and wants him to stick with high school through senior year, even though he’s tested out of his high school classes, and Dad...” Chance frowned and shook his head. “I’m not sure you have a position, Dad.”

“I want whatever will end this late-night argument,” his father said bluntly, and Chance laughed when he heard Mom sputter.

“I want to stop wasting my time in this tiny town where I know more than my teachers do, if that makes any difference,” Jasper announced, sounding irked enough that Chance could picture his expression. “Seriously, I keep having to correct them on things they’re supposed to be teaching *me*! I don’t see how having to put up with that until next June is going to do me any good!”

Chance smiled and opened the fridge in what’s-his-name’s kitchen. “I don’t either, Jas,” he said, pulling out a bottle of water and closing the appliance door. “Mom? I get that you’re worried about Jasper going out into the world, okay? You were kinda like that when I left for Miami, remember?”

God, she’d done her best to guilt him into staying in Breckinridge and working the ranch instead of taking the scholarship and getting a real education.

“You’re going to have to let him go sooner or later,” he went on. “Send him here. I’ll look after him.”

“You’ll watch over him while he’s in college?”

There was something in his mother’s tone that bothered him, but Chance was just so tired. He’d been woken from sleep after less than two hours, following a twenty-hour day. And his latest friend, who Chance had left in bed, chose that moment to move up behind him, strong but slender arms wrapping around his waist while a stubbled cheek pressed against his shoulder.

“I’ll watch over him like a guardian angel,” Chance promised, neck arching to give his friend better access. “I won’t let anything bad happen to him. And like I said, it’s late here.” He forced himself to swallow a groan as teeth scraped the crook of his neck. “Let me call you tomorrow.”

He barely heard his mother say good-bye.

He was too caught up in the way the guy—what the fuck was his name again?—kept touching him. Then he felt the hand on his stomach slide lower, while the one on his ribs moved to his back before sliding up into his hair, and Chance stopped caring about anything but the moment... and possibly the next few hours.

November

“No.” That was all he could say, even though it hadn’t gone over well the first twenty times. “No, Mom. I can’t!”

The dramatic sniffing from across the table was manipulative and insulting. Chance knew that. Advances in equality or not, tears had always been one of the main weapons in his mother’s arsenal. They’d worked well on him in the past, but not this time. No way, damn it.

“But you promised!” Mom hissed the reminder, but not so loudly that people at other tables would hear. The Peppermill Restaurant wasn’t all that busy at five o’clock on Tuesdays, but they didn’t have the place all to themselves, either. “You swore you’d watch over your brother if we let him leave home at such a young age, and now you’re telling us no! Chance, you can’t!”

Christ. Not this again. “Like I told you on the phone about a hundred times, I already registered for classes. Dad already paid. It’s not my fault you didn’t listen to me and send Jasper *here*, is it? I can’t just... pick up and change schools, Mom! It’s more complicated than that!”

“Well, you can just *unregister*.”

Chance frowned. Time to try a different approach. “What about Rebecca?” he finally asked. “You want me to... what? Just tell her I have to go wherever the hell Jasper’s going, and she can either come with me or wait for me? That we can see each other twice a year? Mom...”

“Mindy, the boy’s got a point.” Thank fuck Dad finally had something to say. “It’s not fair to him or Rebecca to spring this on them so last minute. Now, the waitress is headed this way. Do we all know what we’re having?”

Mom glared and sniffled some more, then pushed herself back from the table and stood. “You two can do that. I’ve lost my appetite. Brian, I’ll be in our room.”

Dad shook his head as Mom stalked away. “She’ll be ordering room service inside half an hour. Now, let’s order up some beef and figure out what to do about school and Rebecca and your brother while we eat.”

January 2012

It came as no surprise to Chance that Jasper was settling in well enough in Nevada. Their parents weren’t thrilled that their youngest was so close to Vegas, but even Mom hadn’t been able to argue that with as young as Jasper looked, no fake ID on the planet would get him into a bar, much less a casino.

“I still can’t believe she hired my roommate to be my friend.” Jasper sounded just as disgusted as Chance would have been in the same circumstances. “I’m almost eighteen, but here I am with Nelson following me to all my classes. It’s embarrassing!”

“At least he’s not Mom.” Chance felt it needed to be said. “Just imagine how much worse it would be if Mom followed you there, and be glad she let you go at all.”

The long, deep sigh Jasper let out then almost challenged their mother for most-dramatic-exhalation-in-a-family-drama. “She wouldn’t last more than a week. It’s desert here. Too much dry heat for Mom. She’d look like a mummy in like a day.”

“Or she’d have you chipped and track you on her phone from the comfort of a tub full of moisturizer,” Chance suggested. It might be a little bit wrong to

make fun of their mother, but she did have some strange habits and fears. “I think you’re better off with your roommate. As Dad would say, he can keep you out of trouble. Even if I’m not sure how much trouble you can get into between math classes and whatever science stuff you’re taking.” Bleh. Chance didn’t know how Jasper could stand it. It all seemed so *boring*. Then again, so were the business courses Chance would be starting, next semester.

Jasper groaned. “Never mention that whole tracking chip thing to Mom, okay? She’d probably do it. And Nelson’s into sports. I don’t think he’d be spending any time with me if Mom wasn’t paying him. He’s already failing his remedial math class, and we’re only two weeks into the semester. Ugh. Why are you jocks so stupid?”

Chance burst out laughing at the obviously teasing tone. “Why can’t you science kids lift more than a laptop? So what does your new best friend play?”

“Shut up. We’re not best friends. And I can so lift weights! Nelson’s making me do it after dinner every night, and it sucks!” Jasper didn’t really sound upset, though. “He’s on the fencing team. I guess it’s kind of a big deal since he’s only a freshman, but...”

The laughter Chance had managed to master mere moments earlier came back with a vengeance. “F-fencing team? You mean those skinny dudes in white suits swinging sticks at each other?” He chuckled even more. “I bet he would totally be hanging out with you without Mom’s money, man. Waving a stick around doesn’t make someone a jock. Pathetic, maybe, but not a jock.”

“Whatever,” Jasper grumbled. “I’m gonna go. Later, Chance.”

Chance frowned and stared at the phone, almost unable to believe Jasper had hung up on him. What the hell?

“Hey, everything okay with your little bro?” Jason—at least Chance thought that was his name—didn’t really seem interested, but Chance nodded anyway. “Cool. So did you want to get some pizza or something? Or we could catch a movie.”

Chance wrinkled his nose. “Nah. My girlfriend’s coming over to study.” The guy just stood there and stared at him, and Chance made a mental note that this particular surfer wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed. “So you should probably get dressed and go do whatever it is you do on Friday nights. See you sometime.”

Jason or Jake or John, whatever, blinked slowly, like he was stoned or something. Then he turned away and went to Chance's bedroom. He returned a couple minutes later in T-shirt, board shorts and flip flops, then stopped to watch Chance drinking an illicit beer.

“What?”

Jason shook his head. “You should have said you had a girlfriend, man. I don't do closeted guys.”

Chance shook his head. “I'm not gay.”

The guy rolled pale green eyes. “Your dick in my ass pretty much says you are, but whatever, man.”

“You know the way out.”

Christ, he was getting sick of people calling him gay. Even though he was.

“He has a point, Chance,” Rebecca said close to an hour later. She sat on the couch sipping a glass of white wine, and Chance couldn't help wishing he was attracted to her. He thought she was beautiful, sure, but she didn't do anything for him, physically. “And you topped this time. That's... unusual for you, isn't it?” She grinned. “I'm so proud!”

“I don't always bottom,” Chance grumbled, even while wondering—for about the fiftieth time—how it was possible to be so comfortable talking to his girlfriend about his... whatever they were. Fucks. “Okay,” he went on, smiling sheepishly at her disbelieving laugh. “Maybe I usually do. Sorry, but it feels good. But this guy, um... Jason? He just wanted it so bad, and... For real, Rebecca, he wasn't a grower *or* a show-er. I'm pretty sure he's a total bottom-boy just so he can avoid explaining that no, that's not his finger, it's actually his cock. I felt bad for him, y'know?”

Partly true. At least, he wasn't lying about Jason's cock. The poor guy had four inches at most, and Chance had seen fatter thumbs. The guy's ass had been damned tight, though. Nice and...

Fingers snapping in front of his face pulled him from the memory.

“No pervy on your latest hook up,” Rebecca ordered kindly. She was always kind, even when she was being a bitch to him for his own good. It was

incredibly annoying, but he loved it almost as much as he loved her. He just wished that love could turn him straight. It couldn't, but Christ, he wished. Not that it would matter, because Rebecca was just as same-sex oriented as he was. That was part of the reason she'd agreed to be Chance's girlfriend in the first place. That and the way they really did just *get* each other.

"Fine." Chance shrugged and went into the kitchen for a beer. "We should probably talk about next year, anyway. I told you what my dad said, so... what do you want to do, Becca?"

She shrugged and patted the sofa cushion beside her. "Not everything has to be figured out right now, you know." Her sweet smile was entirely genuine. Chance could tell. "Sit down. We'll finish our drinks, then we'll take a look at your business plan for your fictional company, okay?"

Chance sat, sighing softly as her arm wrapped around his shoulders. "I'm just... I don't want to do it, Becca. But Mom's right. I promised."

"And you'll keep your word. You always do. It'll be fine. And maybe you'll be able to stop pretending you're straight. New school, new people, new you."

Chance wasn't so sure about that. He liked his life as a straight guy. Nobody messed with him, and he got plenty of action with guys by keeping things subtle and casual. He never wanted to go through the being outed process again. Straight was easier.

"Doubt it," he muttered, but he drank his beer and started to think on his business plan. At least Dad would be happy that he was taking his new major seriously.

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Chapter Three

March 2012

“Shane! There you are!” Tyler seemed excited. “Oh, man! I’m glad I ran into you! I’ve been dying to tell someone and you’re the first one of us I’ve seen! You’ll never guess what happened!”

Shane blinked, but he smiled, too. “Slow down, Ty. I’m sure it’s amazing, whatever it is, but don’t give yourself a heart attack, okay?”

Tyler laughed and flung himself down in the chair across from him at the cafeteria table, setting his tray down so hard, the small bowl of cottage cheese almost went flying. “Sorry! I mean, sorry.” Tyler made an obvious effort to rein in his enthusiasm. “I just heard, though, and it’s a complete win for us.”

Shane laughed. “Okay, so Dave didn’t propose, because that wouldn’t have anything to do with me.”

“Please. If that happened, we’d be having a wake to both celebrate and mourn that relationship. It’s way too soon to even talk about marriage.” Tyler’s eyes were soft, though. Like he was seeing the world through a soft-focus lens, all of a sudden. It might be too soon for Ty and Dave to be talking about something that serious, but they’d been together for a good six months and seemed to be deep in that love thing.

Shane was glad, even though he couldn’t sleep—in the literal sense or any other—with Ty anymore. He sometimes missed the comfort of it, but after two years at UCSN he was a lot less needy. Thank God. His frat brothers had been very good to him. Even William, who still couldn’t believe Shane didn’t want to have sex with him. Then again, William thought *everyone* wanted to get naked and sweaty with him, and from the seemingly endless parade of walk-of-shamers Shane had seen since moving into the house, William wasn’t entirely deluded about that.

“Okay, so what’s this really good thing that has you doing the verbal equivalent of the pee-pee dance?”

Tyler jumped slightly, as though he’d been startled, then blushed. “Sorry. It’s just... remember Nellie?” Shane didn’t, which must have shown on his face because Tyler went on quickly. “The fencer whose coach said he couldn’t join

even an unofficial frat until his sophomore year. Shorter than both of us, blond, brown eyes... Body by 'fuck yes, please yes'?"

That actually sounded familiar. "I think so..."

"He has that really strange but cool accent, remember? Like... Southern and German with some Australian mixed in." Tyler was going for his Masters in Linguistics, which Shane figured was why he remembered the specifics of the guy's accent. Shane remembered it too, but as sexy, rather than by the various regions that may have spawned it.

"Right!" He nodded, trying not to show how much he enjoyed the reminder. Nellie had been insanely hot. Unfortunately, after declining to join their group when his fencing coach forbade it, Shane had only seen the guy across campus once or twice. He couldn't remember what Nellie was studying, or even if he'd declared a major yet, but he definitely remembered that fencing-does-a-body-good form. "What about him?"

"Remember how we extended him an invitation to join next year, since he'd already been through all the hazing? Well, he left me a voice mail while I was in class. So I just got off the phone with him, and he wants to be a brother. How cool is that? I mean, he's on the fencing team! He'll be LKNG's first official athlete at UCSN!"

Shane laughed at how excited Tyler still was. "So I guess we don't have to worry about making him feel welcome. If you're gonna be like this until pledge week, he'll know exactly how much you want him. I mean *we*. The guys. All of us. For the house. Not for... you know, anything else."

Tyler grinned. "Except William," he said at the same time Shane said that exact thing.

That led to more laughing, of course, but then Ty went on. "The only thing he asked is that we consider his roommate, too. Not take the kid, but just consider it."

Shane frowned and picked at the pizza crust on his plate. "Why? Are they a couple or something? Not that it would be a bad thing, but—"

"No! I mean, it sounds like they're just good friends, but Nellie says the kid needs some friends and doesn't give a shit that Nellie's gay. He's also really young. He only turned sixteen a few months ago, according to Nellie. But smart. I mean, he'd have to be to be accepted mid-year, right?"

“I guess.” Actually, Shane knew. It was rare enough to border on mythical that someone was allowed to start their first year between semesters. “What’s his major? The kid, I mean.”

Tyler shrugged. “I didn’t ask. Why bother? We know the kid’s a kid, and either smart as all hell or from a family with enough money to ‘donate’ a new gym or library or whatever. I’m going with smart, since I haven’t heard anything about new construction.”

Shane rolled his eyes. “Fine. If you can get the guys to go along with it, I won’t block Nellie’s roommate. Is the kid even gay? Because it sounds like you don’t know. Do we take straight guys?”

“We haven’t yet, but that doesn’t mean we can’t. As long as they’re not assholes about us being gay, why not let them in?” Tyler’s teeth indented his bottom lip for a moment before he went on. “The world is changing, but it’s still a good thing to have allies. If this kid is as smart as Nellie says and really doesn’t get his panties in a wad over guys who dig guys, then what could it hurt? The more people there are who know that gay doesn’t automatically equal predatory and scary, the better.”

Shane laughed softly and leaned across the table. “Better keep this kid away from William, then. If he’s cute, anyway. William could have made me question my own sexuality when I was sixteen. If I hadn’t known way before, anyway.”

Tyler stared at him, eyes wide, for a good five seconds. Then Shane smirked, and they both broke out laughing. What were the odds that some mid-year admission whose family hadn’t bought his way in would be attractive?

No, the kid was probably some reedy, pimple-faced little guy who loved... astronomy or chemistry or something like that, but Shane didn’t care. As long as he turned out to be as GLBT-friendly as Tyler thought, the kid could be the Elephant Man for all it mattered.

August

Shane hadn’t gone home for the summer. Not really. Oh, he’d flown from Vegas to Cheyenne, but he’d known he’d only be in Carter for a few days. Mom and Rob were finally taking a real vacation, after a good ten years of only weekend getaways—mid-week three-day trips, really.

Weekends were prime time in the car business, from what Rob had always said, but the assistant manager was capable enough, after three years, that Rob felt comfortable taking a month off to spend with Mom in the sun and fun of Nassau.

Rob had rented a house for them, and while Shane wished they'd been able to go while he had classes instead, he wasn't upset that he'd be spending the majority of the summer at the LKNG house by himself.

He'd told Mom exactly that every single time she started to get anxious during the five days he was back home.

"It's fine," he'd said, meaning it. "You'll have a great time, and there are about a million things I can do in Nevada. If you really want to, I'll let you make it up to me at Christmas."

Then Rob came home from the dealership with a car for him, two days before Shane was supposed to fly back to Vegas.

"It's not new," Rob said of the 2006 Mazda, "but it's mechanically sound, and the mileage is low. My guys in the shop checked it out, and if you're good about standard maintenance, it should last you a good ten years. You'll probably want to sell it before then, so check the glove box. The title's in there. You might want to put it in your wallet, for now. There's a dash-mounted GPS. I programmed it for the best routes back to school, but you can change that if you want to wander a bit. And your mother left the number to the house we're renting, too. It'd be nice if we heard from you once or twice, even without an emergency. Think you can manage that, son?"

Yeah... Rob might not be his real father, but the man for damned sure acted like Shane was his kid. Which was fair, because Shane definitely felt like Rob really was his dad, blood aside. He hadn't always felt that way, but lately—especially since going away to school, oddly—Shane had figured that out.

He'd driven Mom and Rob to the airport in Cheyenne to catch their first flight, and when he hugged and kissed his mother, he'd turned and hugged Rob right after. "Thanks," he'd murmured, "she handles like a dream."

After that, it was easy to get back to school. He stopped a lot, checking out things that sounded interesting. The fourteen-hour drive ended up taking three days, but Shane wasn't in any hurry.

Tyler and Dave were at the LKNG house when he got back, and while he was surprised, Shane didn't mind. He was honestly more concerned that they

might feel uncomfortable with him there. He'd thought they were planning to go away, but apparently their plans had changed.

Judging by how loud they were at night, they didn't feel at all self-conscious with Shane in the house. If anything, Shane was the one who was embarrassed. Mostly because of the natural physical reaction he had to their sounds... and the fact that he took care of himself while they moaned and sighed. Not that he ever said so, but he was pretty sure Tyler, at least, knew.

By the time the rest of the guys started trickling in from wherever they'd gone for the summer, Shane was almost as immune to Tyler and Dave's noises as he'd become to William and *everyone's* sounds.

When pledge season finally started, Shane was more than ready for it. He'd enjoyed being on the other side of things at the start of his sophomore year. He figured he'd like it even more as a junior.

September

Nellie'd made it in with flying colors. Of course he had. He'd even apologized to Shane and the other guys for his roommate bowing out of consideration. The kid, Jazz, apparently had a brother with an off-campus apartment who Jazz was going to be living with instead of trying for LKNG.

"It's probably a good thing," Tyler said later that night, after Nellie had gone for the evening. "Jazz is still pretty young for some of the stuff he'd see in the house. Maybe next year."

Shane shrugged. "Whatever. I need to get going, man. I have a date, sort of."

Tyler rolled his eyes. "Yeah, okay. So you'll be back in what, two hours? Seriously, man, it's good that you're actually dating, but maybe you should try going out with someone you really like. Man does not live by masturbation alone. I respect your determination to die a virgin, but—"

"I haven't been a virgin since last year. I just didn't see any need to make an announcement. And I like Tom." Shane smiled. Unlike the question of his virginity, liking Tom was true. "He's hot. I just get pissed off when guys think that just because we're going to a movie, it means I'm willing to fuck. Then they get all pissy when I say no. I mean, I'm cool with kissing, or even some

heavy groping, but fucking after spending a couple hours sitting in the dark and not even talking? It's just a movie. It doesn't even count as a real date."

Of course, the one time he'd truly dated and had a real boyfriend, it hadn't gone well. It also hadn't been as true or real as Shane had thought. Fucking Chance. Asshole.

"Well, try to have fun." Tyler grinned. "Maybe forget the movie and hit a club or something. A few drinks might loosen you up. God knows you're wound way too tight, most of the time."

"Whatever. I'm not gonna slut it up just to make you happy."

Tyler laughed. "Trust me, I know that really, really well. No matter how much I used to hope you would. And that's exactly why I don't believe you about last year. Now, go get changed. I'm thinking Dave might be up for watching a movie, now that I'm thinking about it. Groping in the dark sounds like fun."

"Jackass," Shane said affectionately, but he hugged Ty and headed off to change into something a little nicer than jeans and a T-shirt. With any luck, Tom would prove to be worth the effort.

Sadly, Shane told himself later—because Tyler really was all wrapped up with Dave and thus unavailable for comment—Tom *wasn't*.

November

It was at an off-campus kegger that Shane finally met Nellie's friend Jazz. Shane wasn't entirely sure of why or how a seventeen year old had been invited, but that wasn't his problem.

Jazz wasn't quite what Shane had pictured, though he was just as smart as Shane had assumed. He wasn't very tall, but he still had growing to do, and while Jazz wasn't bulky or anything, he had the start of some nice shoulders. Then Shane remembered that Nellie spent time at the gym with the kid, and maybe that explained it. Jazz was good-looking, though Shane didn't look too closely. The kid wasn't legal and probably wasn't even gay. Hair the color between brown and blond, just long enough to brush his shoulders, and hazel eyes. There was something about the kid that seemed familiar, sort of, but Shane was sure he'd remember if they'd ever met. He'd probably just seen him around campus.

“I’m not sure,” Jazz said when asked about his major, though he didn’t sound really hyped. “I know I need to declare soon, since I’m going for a double, but I don’t know if I want to go with mechanical engineering and chemistry, or math and architecture. My folks will be happy with either, but I might want to be a veterinarian, too.” He shrugged. “I’ll get it figured out soon. Nelson said you’re pre-med?”

“Yeah. It’s kind of a bear.” And he still wasn’t sure about becoming a doctor, though he hadn’t gotten around to telling his mom and Rob. “So where did Nellie disappear to? I thought he’d be... you know.”

“Babysitting?” Jazz grimaced. “Between him and my brother, I might as well be wrapped in bubble wrap. The kind with the big, *puffy* bubbles. I’m young, but I’m not some *kid*.”

Shane shrugged. “Okay. I was gonna say I thought he’d be right back, but whatever, man. I’m gonna go find a drink. Maybe I’ll see you later.”

Jazz grinned. “Cool. Later.”

It was two hours later that Shane saw Jazz again, and it wasn’t because he’d just run into the guy at random.

No, it was because there was shouting coming from the front entry area of the house in which the party was being held, and one of the voices he heard was William’s. William was absolutely the poster child for casual sex, but he didn’t get into shouting matches. He was a lover, not a fighter. Shane had witnessed William being insulted so viciously by a few former acquaintances, meaning fucks, that *Shane* had wanted to hit them, but William had only ever looked sad, shrugged, and walked away. If William was yelling, there was something seriously wrong.

Shane handed off his beer—it would be his last before his twenty-first birthday in five days—to a sorority girl passing by, then pushed his way through the other guests to find William holding up a seemingly drunk-off-his-ass Jazz, while some other guy yelled loudly, trying to pull Jazz away.

“...hands off my fucking brother! I don’t know what you did to him, but he’s not *gay*!”

“I know that!” William, shouting even louder than moments before, looked both serious and angry. “I’m just trying to get him outside!”

“Why? So you can take him somewhere private and fuck him? Put him the fuck *down!*”

“Jesus! I don't fuck kids! Not since I was one, anyway! Fucking homophobes, always thinking the gay guy's looking to rape a kid! He's Nellie's friend! I'm just trying to look out for him!” Yeah, sincere and furious.

Jazz started flailing a little then, like he was trying to get away from William, except that wasn't it. Well, it was, but only because he was apparently trying not to puke on William or the other guy, the one Shane had still only seen the back of. In other circumstances, it might have been kind of funny—the underage kid, trying to be cool, drank too much and humiliated himself by puking at a party—but the color and sheer volume of vomit took it from possibly amusing to entirely shocking.

“Get him outside,” Shane ordered, pushing past the angry guy. The brother. He thought the guy had shouted something like that, anyway. “Now, William. Get him outside, where there's room. Someone call 911. Tell them we have a minor with symptoms of possible poisoning. Move, William! *Now!*”

“You don't get to—” The fucking brother again. God.

“Shut the fuck up,” Shane ordered, forcing a path through the assholes who were just standing around and staring. “Let us out, you shits! Fuck, someone remind me never to drink enough that I can't understand English! *Move!*”

“Oh, fuck this.” The words, snarled from somewhere behind him and William, who still held the puking Jazz up, were followed by the loud-ass guy pushing past them and shoving people aside until they reached the open door of the house. “What's wrong with him? Did you just say poisoned? What the fuck?”

Shane ignored the guy and helped William maneuver Jazz down the front steps and onto the walkway that led to the street. He looked around quickly and breathed a sigh of relief. “Over there, William. The bench that goes around that tree. Sit him down, but hold him up enough that he can't aspirate on his own vomit. I need to find a flashlight or something. If I can check his eyes, maybe I can at least figure out what this *isn't*.”

“What the fuck are you doing to my—”

William made a sound that was some odd mix of growl and hiss. Then he spoke loudly, but at least he wasn't shouting anymore. “He's a pre-med student,

you asshole. He's the best we've got until the EMTs get here. If you want to help Jazz, go find a light or something. I promise I won't run off with your underage, puke-monster of a straight brother while you're gone."

"And a bottle of water. Unopened," Shane added, still trying to get a good look at Jazz. "See if you can find Nellie while you're in there, too. He might know what happened. Seriously, man, *go!*" God, the guy was a moron. "Okay. Okay, Jazz," he said, once William and the kid were settled on the curved bench, "I'm not gonna make you move around anymore right now, and I know you feel like crap, but—" Jazz let loose another volley of bile. "Okay, that's nasty, but I know you don't usually hurl all over the place. Nellie wouldn't hang out with you if you did, right? Can you tell me what you drank inside? Did you take anything? Smoke something you shouldn't have?"

"I'm pretty sure he can't talk right now, man." William sounded completely freaked, even though he looked calm. "I don't think he was drinking, though. I would have smelled it when he first started falling down. The puking is recent. Comparatively. You know."

Shane nodded. "Yeah, I know what you mean. And I know he can't answer me, but those are all questions the EMTs are gonna ask him. At least he can be thinking about it, even while he's sick." Shane frowned and shook his head. "Plus, it really sucks when people talk about you like you're not even there."

"Oh my God, what the hell happened?" The question started from the porch of the house, but by the time it finished, Nellie was there by the tree. He dropped to his knees in front of William and Jazz, and Shane winced at the wet sound he heard. Nellie, to his credit, didn't seem to care that he'd just knelt in puke, though Shane did see his nose wrinkle in the dim light coming from the windows of the house and the half-full moon.

"That's what I was gonna ask you." Shane held up his hands when Nellie glared. "No! I don't mean you did anything to him, okay? Jeez! But you're his friend. I was hoping you'd know if he took something, or if someone maybe *gave* him something without him knowing it. I only saw him for about five minutes, and that was right after I met him. I thought you might have seen him more recently."

"He started wobbling and staggering like ten, maybe fifteen minutes ago. It wasn't too bad at first, but then he couldn't walk." William still sounded freaked.

Shane nodded to Nellie's questioning stare, though he had only been present for the last little while. "William was trying to get him outside for some air when some asshole who says he's Jazz's brother started accusing him of wanting to rape Jazz, or... something like that. Then Jazz started to—" Another gush of foul-smelling bile hit the grass. "He started to do *that*. I... think he may have been drugged with something, but I've never seen this sort of reaction to a recreational substance. Unless he's allergic to whatever it is, or to some part of it. Do you know what..."

Nellie was shaking his head before Shane even finished. "Well, damn."

"Uh, guys?"

Shane frowned. "Maybe that brother of his will know—"

"Guys!" William was shouting again, and that couldn't be good. "Shane! Help me! He's not... I don't think he's breathing!"

"Oh, fuck..." Shane discovered real quickly that he didn't care about puke on his own pants, either, because William was right. Jazz either wasn't breathing or was doing it so shallowly, Shane couldn't tell. "Okay, get him down on the bench. On his back."

"But you said—"

"I *know* what I said, but if he's not breathing, he won't be choking on his own puke, will he? Do it, William! Nellie, do you know CPR at all?"

Thank fuck Nellie did, though he admitted to never needing to use it.

"Okay, you do the compressions, and I'll take care of the breathing. Just straddle him and lean forward. That'll be your best angle." Shane took up a similar position, but well above Jazz's head, where he could lean down and breathe for the kid at the appropriate times. It was awkward, due to the way the bench curved, but faster and better than trying to move Jazz onto the ground, where he'd be lying in his own sick.

They were just getting started when the homophobic brother came back, waving a flashlight and bottle of water.

"What the fuck! Get your faggot hands off my—"

Shane didn't see it. He was too busy counting with Nellie. Even so, he was fairly sure the loud sounds of flesh on flesh and surprised grunt were the result of the usually peace-loving William punching the dick. "They're doing CPR,

Einstein, not staging some public sex-show with your jailbait brother. Stay back, unless you really *want* Jazz to die. No? Good, asshole! Shane, how's it going?"

"He still has a heartbeat," Shane answered after the first round of breathing for Jazz. "Where the fuck is the ambulance? Did they even call? Shit!" He stopped and bent over again, lips sealing over Jazz's.

"I called while I was getting the light," the brother said, but this time he sounded less fiercely angry and suspicious. Less so, but still pissed off as he added, "That bunch of drunks were partying like nothing even happened, except someone threw towels and a couple sweatshirts over the puke. If they couldn't remember Jasper getting sick, I figured they couldn't be bothered to call the fucking cops. I hope they all get arrested or something. Fuckers." And that explained the pissed off.

By the time flashing lights turned onto the street, Jazz was breathing on his own again. They'd shifted him onto his side on the bench to let the frequent but less copious drizzles of bile fall to the ground, and Shane was carefully coaxing the boy into taking small sips of water, though they might be part of why Jazz was still puking a little.

"Why are you—" The fucking brother again. God, the jerk needed to keep his mouth shut and let Shane work.

"Because dehydration's an issue," he snapped, watching Jazz carefully. "It can lead to all sorts of things you don't want Jazz to go through. If it lasts long enough, it can even cause brain damage, and with as smart as he is, that'd be a tragedy."

It was only when the EMTs were shifting Jazz from the bench to a gurney that Shane realized the brother had called Jazz *Jasper*. It was only when he heard that same brother reciting Jazz's information and telling the EMTs that he'd drive himself to the hospital with Jazz's insurance information that Shane realized he'd never heard Jazz's last name before.

His entire body, which had just relaxed from being able to hand Jazz off to the professionals, tightened again, and he swore he could feel his blood pulsing in his head as he finally—much too late, damn it—looked away from the boy on the gurney and realized that he hadn't gone crazy. Jazz really was Jasper Breckinridge... and the homophobic brother was... No way. Shit. "Chance, you fucker. What the hell are you doing here?"

Shane *saw* some sort of nasty response trying to fight its way out, but he also saw Chance force it back. He didn't know what he expected Chance to say, but it definitely wasn't "I guess I should thank you." He rallied quickly, though.

"And yet, you didn't. Shocker." Shane smirked. "But if you really want to show me some appreciation, you know what I'd like most?"

"Fuck you, Parks. I wouldn't blow you again if you paid me." Chance was obviously furious again, and that was good. The asshole deserved to be angry all the fucking time.

"Oh, good. Because I'd only pay you *not* to touch me." He meant it, too. "Tell you what," Shane said bluntly. "If you really want to thank me, how about you stay the hell away from me and we'll call it even. If I never have to see you again, in this lifetime or any other, it'll be too damn soon."

"Fine," Chance snarled, glaring as though he wanted Shane to burst into flame. "Nelson? You coming?"

Nellie's eyes were wide as his gaze flicked back and forth between Shane and Chance. After a few seconds, during which Shane wondered if there was some sort of invisible, high-stakes tennis match going on, Nellie licked his lips, looking nervous. "Um, no. I think I'll go back to the house. I'm not family, anyway, so the chance..." He coughed and blushed before going on. "The *chances* of being able to see Jazz before sometime tomorrow are pretty much nonexistent. So, I'll... you know. See you."

Oh, shit. Really? Well, yeah, it looked like it, Shane realized, doing his own version of Nellie's back and forth-ing, but between Nellie and Chance. It was Chance's disgusted-sounding "Whatever," that convinced him, though.

God. Chance was an even bigger asshole than Shane had thought.

By the time they made it back to the LKNG house, Shane was just as pissed off at Nellie as Chance had seemed. The problem was that Shane didn't know why. He should be feeling sorry for his friend and house-brother, yet he wanted to... something. How could Nellie be foolish enough to get involved with someone like Chance Breckinridge? The minute someone even seemed like they might think Chance was gay for spending time with Nellie, Chance would betray him.

No matter how good the blow jobs and hand jobs and frottage might be, it wasn't worth what would happen later. Except Nellie wasn't sixteen, and he for damned sure wasn't any kind of virgin, so maybe the actual sex *was* worth it, except... *no*. Nothing was worth that. Not that Chance would have told Nellie that he'd back off like Nellie had a raging case of facial herpes if anyone found out about them, so... Yeah. Anger wasn't the right response. Pity, on the other hand? Deserved.

"Hey, Nellie?" he asked quietly, before going up to his own second-floor bedroom, "if you ever want to talk about... anything... I'm here, okay?"

God knew he'd already been through the heart-broken-by-Chance-Breckinridge thing, complete with the given-an-intestinal-bacteria-by-Chance-Breckinridge bonus. Even if Nellie was fine with whatever was going on between him and Chance, Shane was willing to listen. Because Nellie was family, in a way... and there was no possibility that Chance wasn't just fucking with Nellie. Probably literally.

"Let's have lunch tomorrow," Nellie suggested. "We can go into town, if you don't mind driving. It'll be a nice change. And it's Saturday, so we won't need to hurry back."

"Cool," Shane said with a nod. "I'll meet you down here around eleven, I guess. Um, are we going someplace with a dress code?" Because Nellie just had that vibe, what with the accent and the fencing, and the way he never seemed to worry about money. Shane didn't mind it—he wasn't exactly strapped for cash himself, because he had partial scholarships, loans, and grants out the wazoo, plus Mom and Rob were helping out—but he'd rather know ahead if he needed to dress better than usual.

Nellie laughed. "Nice jeans, a polo shirt, and bring a jacket. Oh, and no flip flops. That's not a dress code. I just don't like ratty things with holes in them, or naked feet at a meal. The jacket is just in case the air conditioning is set too cold. See you at eleven."

Chance fucking Breckinridge. God. Shane had been sure Chance was in Miami, or at least had gone there for college. What the hell was he doing at UCSN, and how long had he been so close? God, he wished Chance would just go back to Florida and get the hell out of the way.

That didn't seem likely, no matter how much Shane wanted it, though... And there was no way in hell that he was listening to the tiny voice at the back

of his mind that was trying to say Chance being there—in Nevada instead of Florida—meant something. It didn't. Unless it meant Chance wasn't finished fucking Shane over, which was always possible, damn it.

It took him forever to fall asleep, and when he did he was plagued with memories of what had been, and even worse, what *could* have been.

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Chapter Four

December 2012

As far as their parents knew, Jasper's trip to the ER was for a previously unknown allergy to a combination of over-the-counter medications. Chance and Jas had agreed that it was for the best. Neither of them particularly wanted Mom yanking Jas out of school just because he'd been careless enough to accept non-alcoholic drinks from people he didn't know. Fuck knew they weren't planning on mentioning that it had been Shane Parks—the bane of Chance's existence, who Mom still wanted in jail—who'd been instrumental in Chance still having a brother.

Jasper really was allergic to something in whatever half-assed drug he'd been dosed with, though even the doctors at the hospital weren't sure what that drug had been. One of them had theorized that it might be something whipped up on the sly by an overly ambitious and possibly broke chemistry student. It seemed like a reasonable idea, borne out by the fact that after Jasper's attempt at the puke-monster-of-all-time crown, there was one other, much less severe case... then nothing.

Either whoever it was had stopped making the shit or they'd changed the recipe so they *didn't* almost kill anyone else. If Chance ever found out who it was, he thought he might kill *them*.

Jasper was fully recovered, though, and that was the important thing. He hadn't sworn off parties, but he planned to bring his own drinks or make sure nothing he drank had been previously opened. No red or blue plastic cups for him, ever again.

Chance figured that was good enough, especially since he had no intention of letting Jas, or Jazz as he was calling himself, out of his sight until at least Jazz's eighteenth birthday. Even then he would worry, but at some point he had to trust his brother to look after himself.

Mom wouldn't agree, of course, and that was exactly why she could never know about what had happened. Even if Shane hadn't been a part of things, they could never tell her.

Fucking Shane. The guy who'd outed Chance and was directly responsible for his last year in high school being hell on Earth. Slutty fucking Shane who'd

frozen him out even before posting that damned picture. Like Shane was too good for him or something.

“All because of a fucking swirly. Fucker.” Except Shane had probably saved Jasper’s life, or at least his mind. That’s what the same doctor with the chemistry-student-making-drugs theory had... not said, but implied really well. That Jasper might not have recovered so well or so fully without the CPR Shane and Nellie had performed.

That was another thing. Nellie. Chance had been enjoying some fairly regular nights with the fencer, right up until Shane realized who Jazz was. Chance had no idea what Shane had said to Nellie, but that little arrangement had officially ended two days later.

“Fuck, this sucks!” Chance glared at the basketball that had just rebounded with attitude from the backboard.

Dad chuckled from behind him, and Chance jumped a little. “You were always a little better at football. That’s why I didn’t bother trying to change your mind when you decided to give up the hoops in... what was it? Eighth grade?” He arched his brows and scooped up the ball, then dribbled it twice and lobbed a picture-perfect arc that swished the net. “Besides, your grades were slipping between basketball and football. If you hadn’t decided to quit one of them, your mother and I would have had to make you choose. Come on, boyo. Take your shot.”

Chance rolled his eyes, but he collected the ball and ran a loop around his father, dribbling. “Breckinridge coming in for the winning basket. The crowd is so quiet, it’s like being in church. Look at that deceptively simple dribble, folks! And here he comes, here he comes... he shoots! He—” Chance set up the shot on the fly and released, watching the pale brick-orange ball crest and drop toward the basket, only to hit the rim and shoot off toward the side. “He shoots, and... *he tanks it*, ladies and gentlemen! Breckinridge loses the State Championship, single-handedly!”

“And the crowd goes wild?” Dad chuckled again, then jogged over to retrieve the ball. “I remember when you could make that shot with your eyes closed, boyo. You still could, last time you were home, so that begs the question—What’s wrong?”

“It’s cold, and this coat makes me clumsy,” Chance said, gesturing to the down-filled parka he wore.

Dad shook his head and lofted another perfect shot before replying with, “Nice try, but you’re better at basketball than I ever was. Something’s on your mind, and you know how I hate to see either of my boys struggling. So you can either tell me now or wait until it’s so big and ugly, it breaks free all on its own. Up to you.”

Shit. He couldn’t tell his father, and yet he wanted to. Wanted Dad to tell him what to do about how fucking conflicted he felt. If he did, though, he’d have to explain about Shane and where that damnable picture really came from—or rather how it had really come about—and Chance wasn’t ready for that. He never would be. Not ever. Fuck, Dad would be so disappointed if he found out. Disgusted. Disturbed. A whole lot of dis-es, some of which Chance couldn’t even think of yet.

“C’mon, boyo,” Dad said, and it sounded more like an order than a request. “Grab the ball, and we’ll hide out in the guest house. Start a fire, have a couple beers, and you can tell me what really happened this past semester. You and your brother have both been acting strange, and at least *one* of your parents should know why.”

Fuck. Why couldn’t he have one of those fathers who didn’t give a shit as long as their kids brought home good grades? It just wasn’t fair. Then again, Mom was the one who was relatively hands-off with Chance, while she doted like hell on Jasper. They just seemed to get each other way better than Chance and his mom ever had. It didn’t much matter, he’d decided around ten years old or so. As long as he and Jas each had a parent who understood them and paid attention, it was all good.

At the moment, Chance wasn’t so sure, but most of the time? Yeah.

Chance lit the fire already laid in the fireplace of the guest house’s living room, then shucked off his coat and hung it over the back of a chair while Dad talked on the phone with Mom in the attached, open kitchen. He wasn’t really eavesdropping, but Dad wasn’t trying to talk quietly.

“So you’ll see what Gillian and Nancy are doing, baby. It’s just been a while since all us men have been home at the same time without plans. Chance and I decided it’d be a good time for a boys’ night.”

Dad chuckled, probably at something Mom said. Then Chance knew it, because Dad went on, saying, “I’d love that, babe, but then it wouldn’t be a

boys' night, would it? Last time I checked, you didn't have the parts that'd make you a boy."

Another pause, then, "Well, yeah. Of course he is. So, yeah." Followed by, "Uh-huh," and "That'd be great, darlin', long as she don't mind..."

Damn. Mom must be dragging out the neglected-wife voice, because Dad only got all country like that when she did, dropping his Gs and saying don't instead of doesn't.

Dad's smile was wicked as he opened the fridge and handed a beer across the top of the counter between the two areas, then he opened one of his own. "Of course not," he said a few seconds later. "I would never ply our kids with beer. That'd be wrong."

Fuck knew what Mom said after that, but Dad got a look on his face that no one his age should ever wear, as far as Chance was concerned. Then Dad said, "I'm gonna hold you to that, Mindy. You just keep that in mind for later, babe." Chance shuddered at the words, expression, and tone. Ew.

"Your brother'll be coming soon, just so's you know," Dad said after ending the call. He took a big sip of beer and swallowed slowly. "Ahhhh... See, there's nothing like a cold beer on a cold night, when you're inside with a fire, boyo. You'll see what I mean if you ever open that bottle. Damn, what the hell have they been teaching you at those schools if you're just standing there with a perfectly good beer goin' to waste?"

Chance had always known his father was pretty cool, but he'd never seen him quite so... not father-like. More like a friend who'd known Chance his whole life. Maybe it was an age thing, as Chance was almost twenty-two, or something to do with Chance having been away for so long.

Whatever it was, Chance wasn't sure he liked it.

That didn't stop him from opening his beer, though, and when he took a large swig, he discovered that Dad was right. It felt really good to be having a beer with his father in the warmth of the guest house while it was so damned cold outside.

Jazz tipsy was funny, but only because he wasn't acting anything like the way he'd been at that fucking party. He'd only had two beers so far, but Chance was fairly sure that his brother was either a total lightweight or had never truly

had anything alcoholic before. He didn't know which would be better, when he thought about it.

Getting deeply buzzed from just two beers was kind of pitiful. By the time Chance had turned seventeen, he'd been to numerous parties where many kinds of drinks had been available. Then again, as the little brother of *Peckerbinge*, Jazz might not have been invited to many parties, if any. Of course, even if he had been, he probably wouldn't have gone, considering how... jazzed... Jazz had been to get away from home. Or from Mom's smothering. Same thing, really.

"But see, that's the thing," Jazz was saying, voice too loud and gestures broader than usual. "It was *him!* I mean, I knew Nelson had a frat brother named Shane, but who the heck would think the Shane in flipping Vegas was the same Shane from Carter, who had pictures of Chance sucking his cock, right? But it was. *Is!* And he's pre-med, and he saved my brain!" Jazz hiccupped, and Dad looked like he was trying not to laugh while Chance groaned.

"So, you're going to school with your old boyfriend, and he saved your brother's life," Dad said a few moments later, like it was nothing. No big deal. "That's gotta be awkward."

Chance literally spit beer across the living room. He was blushing hotly before he managed to say anything more than, "I'm not..." Dad's level stare derailed him, though he managed to finish with a mumbled, shameful, "gay." Followed immediately by a much stronger, "*I'm not!*"

Jazz laughed. "Liar-liar, pants on fire. Our walls are thin and Nellie screams like a choir. Hey, I rhymed! M'be I'll switch to writing an' be the next Dr. Sooze. Seuss. Go, me!"

Chance groaned. "Can I die now? Please? And I'm really not. I have a girlfriend! You've met her, and Mom loves her! So I can't be gay. See?"

Dad smiled a weird sort of smile and got up from the couch. When he came back from the kitchen he had three more beers in his hands, and Chance finished off the one he'd been sipping.

"I know what I am, boyo," Dad said after a moment or two. "I'm mostly country. I vote conservative. I'm not the sharpest tool in the shed, either. Your mother's right when she says you boys got your smarts from her. Sure, I

manage to keep the ranch going and in the black, but she's the smart one. But I did go to college. I would have finished, too, if my folks hadn't had that accident. I only had one more year to go, but their foreman was in the truck with them and there was no one else I trusted to take care of things, so I never got to do that last year or get a degree."

Chance cocked his head. "Okay..."

Dad laughed. "The point is, boyo, I spent three years at San Diego State. It was a hell of a shock to my system, but I got over that. I knew me some gay fellas out there, and there wasn't anything wrong with most of 'em. Can't say I get the whole 'attracted to guys' thing, but far as I can tell, it's no different than being into women for other men. And most of them—the gays, I mean—were good folk. Never saw anything evil or wrong about the majority of them, anyway, no matter what our preacher says. So when you're sitting there saying you're not gay, and your brother's pretty much saying you are, I have to tell you what I feel about that."

Oh, fuck. This couldn't be good. Unless it was. Chance couldn't be sure. It sounded like Dad had known some gay guys who *were* evil and wrong, in addition to those who weren't. "Uh. Okay."

"I think you're a jackass if you're stringin' that girl along," Dad said bluntly. "Nobody deserves to be lied to that way. If she knows about you, then I'm guessin' y'all have some kind of agreement, and if so, that's fine. But you're a grown man. It's up to you to decide what kind of life you want to live. I can't speak for your mother in this case, but for me?"

Dad shifted closer on the couch and wrapped his arm around Chance's shoulders, and it felt nice. Good. Like he could really believe his father wouldn't hate him if he came out. "Y-yeah?" he stuttered, so softly it was almost a whisper.

Dad shrugged. "I want you to be happy, boyo. If that means you come home one day with some fella, then so be it. Hell, Raul and Bradley are gay together, and it hasn't stopped me or your mom from welcoming them into our home for the holidays. If we can do that for them that work for us, why wouldn't we be able to do it for you when we love you. When we *made* you."

Jazz made a sound Chance couldn't identify. Then again, Jazz was halfway into a third beer. It was amazing he could even sit upright, considering the way he was starting to slur. "M'be Chance's bi like me," he somehow managed to

mumble loudly. “Was gon’ try for Nellie, but Chance beat me to ’t. Stupid hot brother...”

Chance blinked rapidly, as though that would change what he’d heard, but sadly it didn’t work. “What the fuck?”

Dad didn’t seem fazed, though. He just sipped his beer again, then shrugged once more. “Maybe he is, Jasper. Sorry. Jazz. That’s what you’re going by now, right?”

Jazz grunted, and Dad went on, saying, “Maybe so. If he is... *if you are*, boyo, that’s fine, too. I can’t say I wouldn’t like you to have kids someday. This ranch has been in the family for over a hundred years, and I’d like to keep it that way, but that’s no reason to pick one side of the fence over the other. They got all kinds of ways for people to have kids now, and I knew a few kids with two dads or two moms, back in the day.”

His mind was spinning enough that Chance wondered whether he’d been drugged the way Jasper had been at that party, but that didn’t stop him from making a noise even *he* couldn’t identify. It was part snort, part laughter, part groan and part gasp, really, but it just sounded like some weird attempt to cough up a hairball made of steel wool and carpet tacks.

What the fuck was his dad even saying? And Jasper claiming to be bisexual was just... “Jas can’t be bi!”

Dad surprised him yet again by laughing. “I don’t see why not. Your mother’s mother, Granny Rose, was a lesbian in the end. She didn’t bother saying so until after your Grandpa Phil died, but still. And your Great Uncle Emmett, my mother’s brother, was a card-carrying friend of Dorothy, as they used to say. If Jazz is bisexual, then he is. You kids always think you invented sex and sexuality, but you didn’t. You might want to remember that.”

“I also might want to scrub my brain with bleach,” Chance muttered.

“Good luck with that,” Dad said, chuckling yet again. There should be a law against a father being so accepting of his kids when even one of those kids wasn’t expecting it. “So Shane Parks goes to school with you.” Fuck, he’d hoped his father had forgotten that part. “And he saved Jazz’s life.” That part, too. “I hope you thanked him.”

Chance groaned, even as Jas—Jazz—announced in a loose, boozy voice, “Of course not. Cuz they’re enemies. They’ve always been enemies. Always will be. Nothing can change that. Nothing! Right, Chance?”

“We weren’t *always* enemies,” Chance said before he could stop himself. “But yeah. We are now.” At least Shane thought so, judging by the way he’d suggested Chance thank him for saving Jazz by staying the fuck away. Chance wasn’t so sure, himself.

He didn’t have any particular urge to seek Shane out, but he kind of thought that maybe he could stop hating the slutty fucking dick if given the chance. Maybe.

It was later, after Dad headed back to the house to wait for Mom—and Chance still had icky-wrong feelings about what he thought they were planning—that he and Jasper talked more.

Jazz said a few things that convinced Chance his brother really might be bisexual, which Chance didn’t know how to feel about, and Jazz somehow teased the truth about Chance’s senior year of high school from him. Including the rumors about Shane’s too-fucked diarrhea. Chance blushed through that entire portion of their buzzed slumber party in front of the dying fire.

He blushed even more when Jazz spoke, his voice still loose and easy from the beer.

“Oh, man. That’s so stupid. Who would even say that? I mean, we went to the same high school, so I know you took biology. Not AP, but still. So you know—” Jazz belched loud and long. “Sorry. You know it doesn’t work that way, right? I mean, even if you ignore science, fifty guys dumping cum into someone wouldn’t cause explosive diarrhea. That sounds more like some kind of parasite, or a disease from some weird bacteria.”

Jazz frowned deeply, probably because he was drunk. “Unless he was rimming a bunch of guys. That might explain it. Did he rim you a lot when you guys were... you know? I mean, if he didn’t with you, he probably wouldn’t with strangers, right? Or... fuck. I don’t know. It just seems weird, especially ’cause Nellie, I mean *Nelson*, said... Never mind.”

It took another beer and the promise of pizza three times a week on Chance’s dime before Jazz would elaborate. Even then, it wasn’t anything Chance could believe.

There was no way Shane was still a virgin. Not even possible. Shane was much too hot and much too comfortable with himself for that.

Even so, Shane had never rimmed him. Not even close. They'd sucked each other off and done a whole lot of stroking. They'd even rubbed against each other, naked, until they'd painted each other's skin with hot, milky seed. Shane had spilled hard between Chance's thighs more than a few times, too, but they'd never put mouths to anything behind each other's balls. Chance had found the idea kind of gross, back then, and Shane had thought... Oh, fuck. Shane had thought it was too intimate when they weren't really ready to go all the way, as juvenile as that had sounded even then. They'd touched each other there a few times, but more from curiosity than anything else. Even then Shane had seemed experienced. More than Chance, anyway. But there had never been any rimming, damn it.

"He must have loved it, even if he never did it with me," Chance said insistently. "How else could someone get whatever kind of thing you're talking about? If it's something that comes from someone's ass, then he must have had his mouth on... someone's ass, right?"

Jazz shrugged and finished off his beer. "Dunno. Maybe if he drank contaminated well water or something. Water that hadn't been filtered or treated could have—" Another belch. "Sorry. Dirty water coulda done it, but I don't know when or how he woulda drank dirty water. It would prolly take a week for whatever it was to hit, anyway, so never mind. Hey, can we watch *Lost Girl*? It's still early and I think I DVR-ed the first season. I'm usually too busy for TV, but we're on break, and Nellie says it's pretty cool."

Of course Nellie did. Chance had been the one to introduce the Southern-German-Australian-sounding guy to *Lost Girl*. It was one of the few shows with gay content that Chance could admit watching—mostly because so much of the sexual action was either girl-on-guy or girl-on-girl. He'd had straight friends in Miami who'd become addicted to the show because of the female same-sex scenes.

"Sure," Chance agreed, even while his mind was going a mile a minute. "You want a Coke before we get started?"

Jazz grinned a sloppy sort of grin. "I want another beer."

Chance laughed. "Not if you want to remember watching the show, you don't. You can have Coke, water, or ginger ale. Unless you really want to spend another night puking."

“Ginger ale,” Jazz said, still slurring a little, and Chance smirked as he got up and headed into the kitchen. It was always cool when he could outwit his younger, smarter brother.

It was only when he was at the fridge, grabbing himself another beer and the ginger ale for Jazz that Chance truly realized what Jazz had said.

Shane had somehow been exposed to untreated water.

Chance had helped put Shane’s head into a none-too-clean toilet.

A week or so later—Chance didn’t remember exactly, but it had been something like that, just like Jazz had said—Shane had been in the hospital, after numerous episodes of explosive diarrhea at school. He’d been kept there for weeks, and when he’d been discharged...

“I called him and... Oh fuck.” Chance felt sick, all of a sudden, but it passed quickly. Whatever the true cause of Shane’s illness, it didn’t matter. He didn’t really want to be responsible, but maybe he was.

That still didn’t excuse Shane for outing him, though, and Chance couldn’t forgive that. Ever.

He felt better once he’d decided that much, and by the time he sat down on the couch in the guest house again and handed his brother a can of ginger ale, then opened his own beer, Chance felt... Normal.

Not happy. Not sad. Not good or bad, but just... normal. And that was good enough. For the moment, it was good enough, right up until Chance fell asleep and couldn’t manage to wake up while diarrhea burst from his ass like water from a fire hydrant shooting through a truck’s hose.

All his one-time friends were there, watching and laughing, and when he tried to say it was because he was sick, they laughed and made up their own stories.

When he did wake, he found himself drenched in a cold sweat that had nothing at all to do with the sub-zero temperatures outside, but he didn’t care about that. He didn’t even care that his cock was hard and he was thinking about Shane.

Maybe he’d been stupid, back in the day, for believing the rumors about Shane’s physical... issue. But that didn’t change the fact that Shane had shared a photo with the world—a photo Chance hadn’t even known about—and tried to destroy any possibility of a normal life that Chance might have had.

Still, Chance sort of thought he might owe Shane an apology.

Not for the swirly, but for buying into what the results of it had possibly caused.

Yeah. He would apologize to Shane for assuming Shane was a slutty, whorish fag. Maybe Shane hadn't deserved that. But he wouldn't pretend to be sorry for the swirly. It wasn't his fault that the diner didn't sanitize things for their patrons' protection.

He deliberately ignored the reality that the diner's manager probably never considered that someone would have their head shoved into the toilet, much less that any head shoved in the bowl would be flushed.

It didn't matter. Shane Parks's illness wasn't his fault. It was the fault of the diner for not cleaning well enough.

If they'd been going to court, Chance figured he'd have a good chance of convincing a jury. As it was, though, he couldn't even manage to convince himself.

January 2013

“You're being an asshole.”

Jazz seemed sincere enough, though Chance didn't know what he was talking about.

“I didn't get it until Nellie told me some stuff, but you're being an asshole. Did you really shove Shane's head in a toilet because some other Varsity jerks said he was gay? I mean, he was from *Carter*! How would they even know he was anything but a friend from the next town over?”

Chance hadn't even wondered at the time, but looking back, he couldn't remember Shane showing any overt signs. Chance had known, obviously, because they'd been messing around together, but why would anyone else have suspected?

He'd been in the diner, waiting in a booth for Shane to get there, but Shane was running late. Then the guys had shown up and they'd said what they'd said when Shane strolled in a few minutes later. One of them, though Chance couldn't remember which, suddenly insisted that Shane was gay and that Chance had to be too if he was hanging out with Shane, and...

“I was stupid.” That was something Jazz should understand. Most people were stupid compared to Jazz. “I was more worried about how my so-called friends saw me than I was about how I saw myself.” He grinned at the stunned look on his brother’s face.

“You remember that my girlfriend’s a Psychology major, right?” Chance asked, being deliberately annoying. “Becca’s a big fan of ‘it’s not your fault unless you caused it,’ and I guess I did cause it.”

“Well, good.” Jazz nodded. “Maybe that’s something you should tell Shane. Because I’m really tired of seeing him at the LKNG house and not knowing what to say when he saved my brain and all. Other than ‘hi,’ because that’s just polite. And he’s kind of mad at Nellie, too, but not a lot. I don’t know why, unless it’s because you guys used to fuck. You and Nellie; not you and Shane. Unless you did, but I don’t think Tyler—he’s the Lord High Poobah of LKNG—would be so sure Shane’s a virgin if you guys ever did that.”

It wasn’t the first time Chance heard about Shane’s questionable virginity. It was a dubious claim, considering how many times Shane had stroked fingers against Chance’s hole, his mouth and body making promises that had never been kept.

“By the way,” Jas—Jazz—added, “unless Rebecca’s a total moron and doesn’t know you’re a big queer, you might want to tell her before she finds out on her own, bro-mo.”

It was either sweet or messed up that Jazz was calling him bro-mo; Chance couldn’t decide. He hadn’t even known Jazz knew the term.

“I’ll let you in on a secret,” Chance said softly. “Rebecca’s just as same-sex oriented as I am. So you were right when you said she was my beard, but the truth is, I’m just as much *her* beard. Or whatever it’s called when it’s a dude doing a friend a solid.”

Jazz grinned and shook his head. “Thanks for the history lesson, but it doesn’t have anything to do with right now. I like Shane, and I like Nellie and the LKNG guys. I think I’m going to try to pledge their house next year, if it’s even called pledging when they’re not in the Greek system, but whatever. It’d be good if you could stop being a dick to them.”

It didn’t escape Chance’s notice that Shane was included in the *them*. “I’ll try,” he said after a few seconds. “Seriously, Jazz. I’ll at least apologize to the

fucker and thank him for keeping you from becoming any more of a drooling idiot than you were before.”

That would have to do, because there was no way Chance was ever going to forgive Shane Parks. Not even if Shane begged him to.

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Chapter Five

February 2013

“I think William likes you,” Shane said softly, one hand stroking slowly up and down Nellie’s side in the darkness of the bedroom. “And I’m not trying to end this... whatever it is we’ve been doing, but...”

“But you’re not in any danger of falling for me?” Nellie’s lips curved against Shane’s neck, and Shane smiled, too, though the sparse bit of moonlight coming through the blinds probably wasn’t enough for Nellie to see by. “I know that, thanks. I don’t expect this to last forever. I do like you, but that’s all it is. I’m honored to have been your first, of course, but that was months ago. At this point, we’re... convenient to each other, and that will pass, sooner or later. Though I’ll admit I like your bed far better than my own.”

God, Nellie might be younger, but he was definitely more experienced. Then again, pretty much every guy over the age of fifteen was more experienced than Shane had been with actual, fully penetrative sex. He was making up for lost time with Nellie, though he couldn’t quite figure out why he hadn’t felt comfortable doing so with Tyler, back before Ty-and-Dave.

“So you don’t want to see someone else?” He was truly curious. He enjoyed the time he spent with Nellie, but he didn’t want the guy to feel like he in any way owed Shane.

Nellie chuckled softly, the air tickling Shane’s skin. “You mean William? No, thanks. I prefer guys who actually want more than a night or two, and we both know that’s not him. Besides, I have my eye on someone already. Not for anytime soon, but eventually.”

Shane had his suspicions about who the mystery-man—or boy, if he was right—might be, but it was none of his business. If he was right, then Nellie was obviously waiting for something; possibly a birthday. *If* he was right, and he was sure he was, Shane had a feeling that Nellie wouldn’t be disappointed, either. He’d seen the way Jazz watched Nellie when the kid thought no one was looking, and vice versa.

“I’ll just wish you luck, then,” Shane murmured. “And it’s getting late. We should probably go to sleep. Don’t you have a match tomorrow?”

Nellie laughed and rolled onto Shane, his eyes wide enough to sparkle even in the dim light. "I have a different kind of swordplay in mind right now."

Shane chuckled and pulled Nellie's lips closer. "So I guess we're gonna duel. I'm up for that."

Nellie's lips brushed his, even as Shane reached for the box beside his bed. "Yes. Yes, you are."

"I'm sorry."

Not only was Chance Breckinridge the very last person Shane ever expected would show up in his bedroom, but to be there saying *that*? So unlikely that Shane pinched himself, frowning at the small pain. Or maybe at Chance.

"What the hell are you doing in my room? Get out!"

Chance shook his head, looking just as unhappy to be there as Shane was to have him. "I'd love to, you fucker, but my brother wants to be part of your little homo-hut next year. I figure he has a better chance of not being black-balled if I make nice. So I'm sorry, okay? I shouldn't have called you a whore."

Shane knew he was standing in his own room with his mouth hanging open, but he couldn't seem to move. Or speak. Or do much of anything other than stare at Chance for close to a minute.

"Wow. That's the most offensive apology I've ever heard." It was. "And wait. *That's* what you're sorry for? Calling me a slutty whore?"

Chance shrugged. "What else?" God, he looked so smug and disinterested. It was infuriating.

"How about shoving my head in that toilet, you asshole? Giving me some kind of intestinal bacteria? Or what about going along with calling me gay when your friends started in on me? I may not have been as deep in the closet as you apparently still are, but I wasn't exactly out, either. Not until you and your stupid jock friends made an example of me, then told everyone!" God, it felt good to let go. Shane only wished he could hit Chance with more than words, but that would have consequences he wasn't willing to face.

"What about harassing me non-stop with your stupid calls, and telling people I got you drunk and forced you to suck me off? How about ruining my

last year and a half of high school? Do you have any idea..." Shane laughed, a loud, bitter bark. "You know I spent that whole time bullied, knocked down, finding chocolate sauce all over the inside of my locker when it wasn't squirted on the back of my pants in the halls? My clever-as-hell classmates decided to call me *Come-Farts* instead of Shane Parks! They almost got it put into the yearbook, you shit, and all you think you have to be *sorry* about is calling me a whore? Fuck you!"

"No, fuck *you*!" At least the asshole didn't seem so cool and above-it-all anymore. That was a plus. "My whole life went to hell! You fucking outed me! Jesus Christ! Do you have any idea how hard it was to convince even my *parents* that I wasn't gay? I still get called *Peckerbinge* every time I go home!"

Shane stared for a moment, wide-eyed. "Oh, hell no. You do *not* get to play the victim, here." He wasn't shouting anymore, but he wasn't far from it, either. In fact, Shane felt oddly calm but still furious, somehow. He suspected that Nellie, at least, might be in the hall listening, but he didn't care.

"You had to survive a whole eight months of whatever bullshit went on for you," he continued, stalking closer in the large-ish bedroom, eyes locked hard on Chance's. "I had to live through that and a whole other *year* of being called names! Having kids warn their friends not to invite me anywhere because I'd drug and *rape* them... Having even my *teachers* look at me with disgust and suspicion because of your damned lies! Hell, my stepdad's business took a hit too, because people didn't want to buy a car from someone who'd support a *raping faggot*! The last thing you are is the God damned *victim*!"

Chance glared but didn't back down. "You should have just said you weren't gay! But no! Shane fucking Parks is too good to lie! *All of it*—even that damned swirly—*is your own damned fault*, and I don't give a shit if you hate me! I just don't want you taking it out on my brother!"

"I guess you'll have to wait 'til the fall to find out, asshole." Shane would never vote against Jazz—he was a good kid, no matter who his brother was—but he liked the idea of Chance sweating it out for months. "And I don't hate you. Hate is like ten miles behind me. I've moved on to whatever comes after hate, just in the two minutes since you walked into my bedroom like I invited you. Now get the fuck *out*!"

God, his heart was racing. His palms were sweating, too, and he couldn't seem to get enough air, no matter how he tried. Then Chance's eyes narrowed, the hazel almost invisible, and Chance laughed.

“I say when I leave, and since you’re past hating me, I bet you’ll ten-miles-past-hate this even more, you fucker.”

What the hell was that supposed to mean? It didn’t even make any sense.

It made even less sense when Chance licked his lips—Shane hadn’t realized he’d looked away from Chance’s eyes, but he for damned sure saw that slick tongue slip out—and when Chance suddenly closed the foot or so between them, Shane couldn’t move fast enough. Hell, he was so stunned by what was happening, it had already started by the time he realized he *should* move. Slug Chance, or knee him in the junk, or... something.

By then, though, it was too late, and Shane fell into the angry mash of mouth on mouth, lips hard and punishing even while tongues stroked and stabbed and fought in a way that wasn’t really a battle at all.

Shane lost track of exactly what was going on; mostly because his body and mind were sending extremely conflicting messages. One was screaming for him to stop and think about what he was doing, while the other seemed intent upon strangling that thinking part and drowning in the odd mix of pleasure and anger coursing through him.

His skin felt too hot, too tight, throbbing with excitement every time the teeth and tongue assaulting him went harder, deeper, and yet it was no more an assault than his own insistent possession of that mouth.

Hands gripped roughly at his skin and Shane returned the favor, though he didn’t know when their shirts had been removed, and he wasn’t at all reluctant when nimble fingers fumbled at his jeans. Hell, he already had his hands down the back of similar, open pants, fingers digging hard into muscled globes of flesh.

The world spun for a moment, and Shane found himself on his bed, fabric bunched around his knees, and he wanted to say something—he didn’t know what—but that mouth was still on his own, hot and wet, and taking but also giving, until somehow his jeans were gone.

He bucked against the equally naked body pressing down on him; felt the denim clinging to those legs, and it was the work of moments to maneuver the heavy material past ankles with one foot. Then... oh, then it was on.

They fought for dominance, all the while grunting, groaning into each other's mouths, and when they wound up with Shane on top, body firmly wedged between strong, nearly hairless thighs, he tried to stop. Hell, he tried to slow down, to remember why what he was doing was a bad idea, but his body overrode his mind yet again.

God, he was so hard. So fucking hard, leaking pre-cum all over soft, smooth skin. He wanted... fuck, he knew what he wanted, and there was nothing in the way the body under him was moving that said *stop* or *no*.

More dribbles of fluid left him, slicking the tender, lightly haired sac and the skin beyond, and Shane didn't stop, couldn't have even if he'd wanted to, and he didn't want to. He wanted exactly what he was going to have, and there was no more than token resistance as he rested on one elbow and took himself in hand, then placed his seeping tip right where it wanted to be.

Oh, God. God, so tight! Not *too* tight, but just right.

His heart seemed to skip a beat, though that wasn't likely, and Shane shoved all the way in with one rough snap of his hips.

He swallowed the loud, moaned cry that fed into his mouth, answering it with his own equally muffled roar, territorial as all hell and loving it, and... God, there was so much to love about the wild, wickedly soft-but-hard grip around his cock and the flexing of the hands his own had tangled with once he was fully seated. And still their mouths remained sealed together, though tongues no longer slid. It seemed like only one part of him could thrust at a time, somehow, and that was fine. That was good. It was enough that he could breathe while pistoning in and out in long, hard strokes, planting himself fully each time he shored up against that stretched hole, tight balls resting atop his thrusting cock while his own sac drew up, firmed almost to the point of becoming painful... but it was a good pain, a wanted pain. The kind of pain that felt so very, very good because it would feel even better when it passed into bliss.

He tried to hold on for as long as he could, but he was obviously doing something right because that hole was tightening rhythmically, flexing around his intruding cock, bearing down on him just right. The body beneath him rocked; rolled wildly. The fingers tangled with his own squeezed hard. Another shout fed between his lips as the hard cock between them spurted, the scent of cum intensifying even as the pulsing around Shane's cock became harder, going tighter, holding longer...

“Oh, fuck,” Shane groaned, dragging his lips from the ones that had tormented him so well, so perfectly, and spilling himself deep inside... Chance.

“Oh, fuck,” he said again, finally able to hear his mind, now that the intense physical need had passed. “Jesus fucking God. What the hell did we just... Oh, fuck, I’m gonna be sick!”

Chance was gone by the time Shane finished puking in the hallway bathroom. Thank God for that. Shane didn’t have a single clue about what he could have said to the guy.

“Sorry, but I hate you so much I just had to fuck you” probably wouldn’t have gone over well. Nor would “Yeah, sure you’re not gay” or “Nice ass.” He was pretty sure “I can’t stand you, but I want to fuck you again” would be even worse. None of which changed the fact that he wanted to say all of them... and do the last. Repeatedly.

Oh, God, Shane realized, looking at his room, which didn’t appear any different than usual, even with the rumpled bed... Oh, God. He’d just fucked Chance Breckinridge. Without a condom or even lube, for God’s sake, and how had that even happened?

The few times Nellie’d pushed into *him*, only with a couple fingers... Didn’t matter. Chance was obviously not as untried as Shane still was, and that just pissed him off. Then it scared him. God, if Chance got fucked enough that Shane could fuck him without anything but the lubricant provided by the fluids Shane had been leaking so copiously, who knew what Chance might have been exposed to? What Shane might have exposed *himself* to by dint of the small head speaking louder than the big one?

He couldn’t even blame Chance, damn it. That was the part that sucked. Sure, Chance hadn’t stopped him—and with two inches in height and probably close to twenty pounds more of muscle, Chance could have—but Shane was the one who’d gone there.

Maybe Chance had started it, but Shane had for damned sure finished it. Bare. In Chance’s ass. And it had felt better than any orgasm Shane had ever experienced in his life.

It had to be because he’d gotten some of his own back after Chance had stolen the last of his teen years. That had to be it... Didn’t it?

Tyler and Dave were still going strong, which made talking to Ty out of the question. It wasn't that Shane didn't like Dave—he did—but it was a given that anything Ty knew, Dave would know within hours, if not sooner, and Shane for damned sure didn't want his stupidity to become common knowledge. Meaning he didn't want more than three people to know about it. One was Shane himself, the second was Chance, and the third... well, that would be whoever Shane ended up using as a sounding board.

He considered Nellie for about a split second, but that just seemed wrong. How could he tell the guy he'd been sleeping with that he'd not only slept with someone else—someone Nellie had slept with, too—but that he'd done so bare? That was like... rule one of being gay. Never fuck bareback unless you were willing to deal with the consequences. Shane had known that even when he and Chance had been messing around back in high school, and yet somehow he'd done exactly the wrong thing. Hell, having any kind of sex at all with Chance was pretty much the *definition* of the wrong thing.

It didn't even matter that Shane hadn't planned on doing it, or that it'd been a heat-of-the-moment mistake. What mattered was that he'd done it, and it freaked him out. God knew Nellie would probably freak, too.

Unfortunately, whether he was going to tell Nellie or not was out of his hands, as Shane found out the morning after fucking Chance... and sleeping so poorly, he might as well not have bothered trying.

"The walls aren't all that thick," Nellie said quietly as he sat down next to Shane at the kitchen table, a bagel in one hand and a glass of orange juice in the other. "They seem thicker when you close the bedroom doors, though."

Oh, God. Could things get any worse?

"I wasn't trying to spy on you," Nellie went on, not looking at him, which was a little upsetting, "but I'm right down the hall, and I had to use the bathroom, so..." He coughed, then sipped his juice. "All right. I have to say, that was unexpected. But I closed the door. I thought you might not want to have to explain why you were fucking your archenemy. To everyone else, I mean, because you already know you need to explain it to *me*."

Yeah... apparently things *could* get worse. Exponentially.

"It was an accident!" Okay, that sounded just as lame as the skeptical gaze Nellie gave him implied. "I mean... I don't know what happened, okay? One

minute we were yelling at each other, and the next, he was kissing me, and..." Shane shrugged helplessly.

"And the next thing you knew, you were balls-deep in what I happen to know is a stellar ass? Is that what you're saying?"

God, if he blushed any hotter, Shane figured he'd have permanent burn scars on his cheeks. Even so, he had to go on. He owed it to Nellie, considering. "Pretty much," he said with a sigh. "But it gets worse. I. It was so. I mean, I didn't expect to ever. Not with *Chance*! And it was so in-the-moment, and... Hell!"

That hadn't made any sense at all. Shane knew it. But he couldn't quite manage to say it again. He had a feeling the words would be just as garbled, anyway.

"Ah," Nellie said, after staying silent long enough to eat half the bagel, finish the juice, and oh, yeah, have Shane convinced that his friend-slash-lover-of-sorts never planned to speak to him again. "So you're worried about... things. Little, tiny things. Like viruses and organisms. Those sorts of things."

Shane swallowed roughly, though he hadn't even touched his cereal. "I. Yeah. And I'm sorry, Nellie. I didn't plan to... you know. Anything. We've been good with each other, and I seriously don't know what the hell happened. It was just so messed up, and I couldn't *think*!"

Nellie cocked his head, and Shane tried to steel himself to whatever rant his probably former-friend might let loose with. Then he saw something, a glint in Nellie's eyes that surprised him almost as much as Nellie's words.

"Chance doesn't have any infections you need to worry about. At least, he didn't last October." Nellie looked sheepish. "Even when you use condoms, they can break. So we went to the campus health center and we were both fine. I can't say what he may have been up to since Jazz's near-death experience," a visible shudder went through Nellie then, "but before that, he was always safe, as far as I know."

It was strange to see Nellie so pale, but the when and why of it only reinforced what Shane had already thought. As such, he pushed aside his own worries and leaned closer to his friend until their shoulders were pressed together, then asked what he'd been wanting to know for well over a week. "If you love him so much, what the hell are you doing with *me*?"

Nellie frowned but didn't lean away. "I don't love Chance. Why would you even think that?"

Shane rolled his eyes. "Chance isn't the Breckinridge I'm talking about. At the risk of sounding like Alicia Silverstone in *Clueless*, 'Oh, my God, you're, like, totally butt-crazy in love with Jazz!' And yeah, I know I paraphrased, but that's not the point. Why aren't you with *him*?"

"I'm not. I mean, Jazz is... It doesn't matter. He's bisexual, not gay. And he's seventeen. Why are *you* pretending to hate Chance?"

Shane snorted. "I'm not pretending. He's a shit. He didn't even really apologize for anything, and..." He went on, telling Nellie what he could recall of the argument that had led to the fucking. The argument Nellie had apparently not been listening to, after all.

"Maybe I had some kind of feelings for him back then, before everything got all fucked up, but I can't stand him now. He's an asshole, and that's the last thing I need." Shane shrugged and changed the subject. "So why does it matter if Jazz is bi instead of gay? Or are you one of those gays who thinks bisexual guys are just pretending until they meet the right girl?" Shane arched his brows, silently demanding an answer.

Nellie groaned. Softly, but Shane heard him. "I think he's *seventeen*," Nellie finally said. "I knew I was gay by the time I was ten. I told my parents when I was twelve. I'm never going to have a wife, and that's fine. My older sister will continue the family line soon enough. But I can't see myself with someone who isn't fully committed to me, and how can he be when he has such an easy, more acceptable option? It's one thing to 'experiment' in college, but what happens when the real world refuses to accept that? When Society makes it clear that the other route is not only expected but preferable?"

"I swear I want to smack you right now," Shane muttered sincerely. "What's to stop a guy who's full-on *Mary*-gay from ditching you because people might say mean shit? Nothing! It doesn't matter if he's gay or bi, Nellie! It only matters whether he loves you! And from the way he watches you whenever you two are in the same room, Jazz does. So wait until he's eighteen—it would be wrong not to, I'll agree with that—but don't pass on what could be the best thing in your life just because you're scared. If you do, you'll regret it forever."

Nellie frowned and set down the remaining knob of bagel, shaking his head. "Please don't take this the wrong way, Shane," he said, and there was

something in his gaze and voice that had Shane's stomach twisting around itself, "but you should probably figure out your own twisted psyche before giving relationship advice to anyone else. And now I'm going. I have things to do, and since my ears are no longer ringing from hearing you and your archenemy *fucking*, I'm fairly sure I can manage."

Damn. He'd really pissed Nellie off, and that couldn't be a good thing. Especially not if Shane wanted to spend more nights in bed with the guy, and he did.

The whole thing with Chance was just an aberration. It was. He didn't feel any urge to get naked and sweaty with the asshole again. Not ever. He didn't.

I don't!

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Chapter Six

March 2013

Chance still got angry every time he thought about what had happened with Shane. He didn't even know how it had happened, except... he did. What he didn't know was *why*.

What was there about Shane-fucking-Parks that had led to Chance spreading himself for the guy? Letting Shane do him *bare*?

It wasn't that Shane was even better looking at twenty-one than he'd been at sixteen, though Chance couldn't deny that was true. It wasn't even that Chance had always wondered—since even before he'd had real sex—what it would be like to be naked and fully intimate with Shane.

Back then he'd imagined that he'd be the one doing the doing, rather than the one being done, but it had only taken a long weekend with that first Miami surfer-boy to show Chance where his true interest lay, and it wasn't exclusively in doing the do. He loved his prostate, and his prostate loved cock. More specifically, after the night two and a half weeks earlier, Chance's prostate loved *Shane's* cock.

He was still pissed off about the whole no-condom thing, but he wasn't as worried as he could have been. Nellie had gone out of his way to let Chance know that Shane was negative for everything that might be a concern, and Chance had gotten himself checked out, yet again, at the health center. He wasn't sure he believed that Shane had been a virgin, because he for fuck's sake hadn't fucked like one, but maybe *virgin* only meant he hadn't been fucked yet, as opposed to doing the fucking. Whatever.

The truly horrible part of things was that nobody Chance had taken to bed since that night had been able to give him anything like the mind-shattering, blindness-inducing, spine-bending orgasm he'd experienced with Shane's cock stabbing hard into his ass, and Chance had tried. Fuck, he'd tried!

Jazz kept suggesting he install a revolving door on his bedroom, and after close to three weeks, Chance was ready to agree with him. The volume of one-night, no-arrangement guys who'd wandered through the apartment was staggering even to Chance, and yet none of them managed to turn his crank the way Shane had.

A few had come close, but ultimately fell short.

It didn't help that he kept running into Shane at various events—parties and other gatherings that Chance attended to keep an eye on Jazz, at which he couldn't help noticing Shane. That Shane seemed to find him mostly invisible was more disturbing than Chance wanted to admit, even to himself.

But fuck, Shane looked fine. *Fine*. Hot and cool. Special and unattainable. Like a fine wine or a beautifully configured piece of art. Except Shane wasn't a *thing*. He was a man.

A man Chance hated. A man who'd done his best to ruin Chance's life.

Unfortunately, that didn't make any difference to his cock, which was exactly why most of the times he saw Shane and Shane studiously ignored him, they eventually ended up in a bathroom or a bedroom, or one time in a closet, the irony of which still made Chance laugh when he wasn't shuddering and shooting from his own hand. His own touch.

Still, they got each other off, but then it was right back to hating. The only problem was, Chance couldn't quite swear that he still felt as bitter and angry as he'd been before. If anything, he felt... He didn't know what.

The anger was still there, because Shane really had outed him, at least amongst Chance's fellow students who'd never really believed the drunk story. But after everything—after his father saying all the stuff he'd said about Granny Rose and Uncle Emmett and not seeming disgusted that Chance might be gay—he wasn't sure that he had any reason to still hate Shane. Hell, who knew? Maybe if he'd just said it was true back then, that he was gay, he'd be more comfortable with people knowing about him. Maybe if he hadn't been so resistant, he and Shane could have figured their shit out and wouldn't be playing this stupid fucking game.

It really was stupid. Chance knew that much, after the interlude he and Shane had both indulged in earlier that night. He could still smell Shane's enjoyment of their encounter all over his own skin, and he liked it, for fuck's sake.

He heard his phone ringing out in the living room of the apartment, where he'd left it to charge, but he didn't care enough to go out there to answer it. Jazz clearly had different priorities, because he banged on Chance's locked bedroom door a few minutes later.

“What?” Jazz might be his brother but Chance didn’t feel any particular need to open the door at one in the morning.

“Nellie wants you to know they got home okay.” Jazz sounded far too happy about it for Chance’s liking. Sure, he’d slept with Nellie for a few months and the guy was pretty cool, but he didn’t like hearing that tone in Jazz’s voice, especially when he was pretty sure Nellie was fucking Shane, which pissed him off for some reason.

The whole thing was borderline incestuous, for fuck’s sake, with Chance having slept with Nellie, Nellie sleeping with Shane, and Shane and Chance having their... whatever the fuck it was. Jazz getting involved with Nellie would just be too much. Chance didn’t have any idea how he’d explain it to anyone, much less their parents. Yeah, that was why it bugged him.

He wished he could believe that, because it sounded so logical, but he didn’t. Believe it. At all. Fuck, he was screwed.

“Good for them,” Chance answered. “Go to bed, Jazz. You have a whole bunch of stuff to study in the morning for... classes.” Fuck if he could remember what Jazz had chosen, if anything. He had a vague recollection of talking about it a week or so earlier, but he’d been slightly buzzed from liquor, and completely drunk on having had his hand around not only his own cock, but Shane’s, too, at the party they’d been to. Yet another party, yet another night. Fuck.

“Night, bro-mo,” Jazz said through the door, and Chance found himself smiling.

“Night, Jazz. Don’t forget to make coffee when you get up.”

Jazz snorted, so loud and long that Chance knew he was meant to hear it. “As if. Trying to talk to you in the morning without coffee is like banging my head against a brick wall. Night, again.”

Chance smiled and stripped out of his pajamas. Jazz was going to bed, so there was no reason to stay clothed. Besides, it would be easier to replay the most recent hand job with Shane if he were naked and in bed.

Then he was, and he did, and it was nowhere near as good as the actual event, but it still got the job done, thank fuck. Maybe he’d be able to sleep without dreams of ass-explosions and laughing kids who taunted him and called him *Come-Farts*, even though that hadn’t been his own life, but Shane’s.

Sadly, he wasn't able to do that at all.

April

Chance arched hard, using the wall in front of him as leverage to shove his ass back; to take Shane's covered cock as deep as possible. This time they were using a condom, thanks to Chance's realization that there was no way around it.

When he and Shane were in the same place, they were going to have some kind of sex. That usually meant jerking each other off, or one time—Jesus fuck, that had been awesome—Chance sucking Shane so hard and good that he could still feel the memory of Shane's fingers digging into his scalp.

Sure, mouths and hands were their usual thing, but Chance had thought they both wanted more. At least *he* did, and that was exactly why he'd made sure to bring supplies and have them handy when he'd decided to attend the party at LKNG house.

Shane had been running around during the event, which wasn't all that unusual, and Chance had nearly given up on being able to get him alone. It was Nellie who'd intervened, sending Chance to Shane's bedroom. Listening to Nellie had been the best thing Chance had ever done.

"Oh, fuck." Chance could barely hear himself under Shane's labored breathing. "Harder. Please, ba... Shane. Harder!"

"Fuck you." Shane sounded smug but also uncertain, in some strange way Chance couldn't define. "You'll get what I give you and like it."

Yeah. Yeah, he would, because as much as he didn't want to admit it, Shane always managed to give him exactly what he needed. Even with the full-on fucking for the first time since their non-condom event, Chance couldn't say his stolen moments with Shane weren't perfect.

Perfectly fucked up, but still perfect.

They hadn't done anything on or in a bed since that first time, but Chance wanted to again. He wanted to feel Shane on him, thrusting hard... or under him, letting him bounce on the cock that was long and felt thicker in his ass than in his hand, but was somehow just right. Shane, however, seemed determined to deny him that by keeping him against the wall.

“I’m gonna come in your fucking ass,” Shane gasped out against the side of his head. “Better touch yourself if you want to come, too.”

The thrusts became harder, faster, each punctuated with a muffled grunt, and Chance did what Shane said. He repositioned one hand on the wall, dropping the other to his straining cock. One stroke of his own flesh was almost enough to have him shooting against paint and plaster, but not quite. Then Shane gripped tighter at his hips, fingers digging in hard enough that Chance thought—*hoped*—he might be bruised later, and one more stroke, fingers tighter around his own shaft, had Chance shoving back as he spilled, painting the wall with wild splashes of seed, the force of which was echoed by the throbbing, pulsing sensation of Shane’s cock unloading into the condom deep inside Chance’s ass.

“Damn, Peckerbinger,” Shane mumbled, “you really do have a nice ass.”

The combination of orgasm and hearing that fucking name—from *Shane*, of all people—had Chance speechless until Shane finished pulling away. Even then, he couldn’t quite manage to speak. He was too torn between cussing the guy out and basking in whatever afterglow might remain following their... what?

It was only when he’d managed to bend down and pull his jeans up that Chance found his voice.

“Fuck you,” he said quietly, suddenly too tired to be angry. “I like that nickname about as much as you like *Come-Farts*, and I bet you know it.” He fastened the denim, taking his time with metal button and zipper, not looking at Shane but at the floor, he suddenly felt so ashamed of thinking... whatever the fuck he’d been thinking. “This was a mistake. I get that now. I’ll just stay away from you like you wanted me to, okay? Because I can’t do this. I can’t. Not if you’re going to call me that.”

Shane snorted. He actually *snorted*, like he thought Chance was funny, for fuck’s sake. “But it’s true, isn’t it? I mean, I’m kind of impressed by how many guys you’ve managed to bang in the last two months. If there’s a dictionary definition of a *peckerbinger*, I’m pretty sure that’s it. Besides, the more I insult you, the sooner you’ll feel like you’ve done whatever fucked-up penance you’re shooting for.”

“I’m... What?” That didn’t even make sense. “Penance?” He didn’t have anything to make up for, damn it, and even if he did, he wouldn’t choose

having sex with Shane Parks as a method of achieving whatever kind of redemption Shane thought he was after. “Are you crazy? Certifiably crazy? Because that’s fucking insane, man!”

“Why else would you be here?” Shane seemed angry, but also curious, though Chance didn’t know how he recognized the curiosity. The anger, on the other hand, he was familiar with. “Why else would you keep finding me and dragging me into closets or bathrooms, or even into my own room to make me feel good if you didn’t think you were atoning for something?” Shane glared, and it was only then that Chance realized he’d looked up from the floor to meet Shane’s eyes. The glare.

“I—”

“Shut up!” Shane shouted it from less than a foot away, and Chance shut up, wondering what the hell else Shane was going to say to hurt him. To belittle whatever the fuck was going on between them. Then he found out, because Shane went on.

“You hate me, Chance! I know, okay? And I hate you, too, but even with the way you keep throwing yourself at me, it’s like you don’t get it. You don’t understand *why*! And yeah, I thought ‘so what? So what if he’s completely clueless? I’m still getting some good orgasms from it while he works out whatever his issues are,’ but it’s bullshit. All of this is bullshit!”

“Shane,” Chance started, more than confused by the words that had just vomited forth. They made no sense to him.

Shane’s glare grew stronger, which Chance hadn’t thought possible. He figured that piercing stare should have set him on fire or at the very least singed him.

“You really don’t get it.” Shane seemed surprised. Still furious enough to be hissing, but surprised. “I hate you. I hate that I keep waiting for you to haul me into anywhere private. I hate that I can’t keep myself from wanting to touch you. I hate knowing how you sound when I first shove into you, and how your eyes roll back when I’ve got our cocks pressed together in my hand, and I *hate* knowing that the only reason you’re even doing those things is because you feel like you owe me, because you *do*! You *do* owe me, Chance. Because I outed you, sure. But with the truth, and only after you destroyed me with a *lie*. A lie based on what happened after you shoved my head in that *toilet*. So this whole... ‘lie in wait for Shane and give him orgasms’ thing has to stop. *Now*.

It's fun, but it's not helping. Maybe you feel like you're working off some sort of karmic debt, but I'm done. Giving me what you keep giving every other guy with a pulse doesn't do anything but make you even more of a slut than you already were."

Chance gasped. He couldn't help it. He also couldn't help falling back. He would have ended up on the floor, except the wall he'd been leaning against earlier—while Shane fucked him so perfectly—was right there behind him, ready and willing to support him when his shoulders met it.

"I." Fuck, that was all he had. He felt sick and confused and wrong, somehow. Lost in a way he couldn't explain even to himself, but he didn't have the words or desire to say so. Shane already had far too much power over him, though Chance didn't know when or how that had happened.

"The funny thing," Shane said, sounding like he was just having a friendly conversation as he turned away, fastening his own pants, "is that I'm the one you called a whore, back in the day... and you're the one who's had sex with at least half of the gay male population of UCSN, while I've been with exactly two guys, and one of them—by which I mean you—doesn't count. I don't mean it's funny ha-ha. It's funny *strange*. Odd. Just like the idea that you and I could ever be anything more than..."

Shane stopped and shook his head. "Never mind. The point is... I'm done, and you should go."

Fuck. He really should. Chance still wasn't sure why he'd been seeking Shane out, but the idea that he'd been trying to make amends with his own body was ridiculous. That Shane seemed to believe it, was... yeah, ridiculous. Ludicrous. A whole bunch of other ten-dollar words his mother would be thrilled he knew, too, though she'd likely be horrified if she ever found out the circumstances of their use.

"Fine." It was more a shaped breath than a spoken word, but Chance didn't have it in him to force more volume. He just made himself push away from the wall and stand for a second, making sure his legs would hold him. Then he turned toward the door and opened it.

He almost wanted to say something then. *Have a nice life* or *fuck you*. Something. But he didn't. He just stepped through the doorway and turned again to close it behind him.

He deliberately chose to ignore the way Shane sat on the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees, fingers threaded through longish, slightly shaggy hair that Chance knew felt like fine silk. He'd touched it in the past, many times, and yeah. Silken. But he wasn't thinking about that. Couldn't.

He closed the door and walked away.

Chance was nervous when he finished telling Nellie about what had happened in Shane's bedroom. He hadn't gone into any great detail, but only said enough to get the point across, so that wasn't what had him feeling anxious. It was that Nellie and he hadn't been alone together since they'd stopped... keeping each other company, as his mother would say.

Jazz had always been there with them since the casual arrangement between Chance and Nellie had ended, and technically, Jazz *was* there. In the apartment. He was asleep in his room, but Jazz was *technically* there. He just wasn't conscious at the moment, and Chance wasn't sure how to feel about the whole unspoken Jazz-and-Nellie thing, anyway.

Nellie was cool. Chance couldn't deny that. Hell, Nellie was smart and funny and damned good-looking. He was also good in bed, as Chance had reason to know, and seemed to be willing to wait for Jazz to be ready, which in no way set Chance's mind at ease when they had a small bit of heated history between them, which meant...

He still didn't like the idea of Nellie being with his kid brother, but Jazz wasn't the average kid. If Jazz could deal with knowing Nellie and Chance had slept together, it wasn't Chance's job to interfere, but that had nothing to do with anything at the moment.

"Fuck you," Chance said, though there wasn't any heat in the words. "There's no way. Hate is hate, and Shane and I have lots of it."

Nellie arched one blond brow and took a sip of wine before shaking his head. "Hate is hate when it's between people who don't know or understand each other. Like the way certain religious types hate us for our very natures. What you and Shane have is more personal, and..." Nellie frowned slightly and sipped again.

"I can't remember how much I've told you about my family," he went on, "but my father didn't get to spend much time with my grandfather. Granddad

was always working or deployed. One of the few things they did have together was watching old TV shows Granddad liked, and there was this one, from back in the seventies—*Kung Fu*—that Dad loved and made me watch when it came out on DVD.”

“Um. Okay?” What did that have to do with anything?

Nellie smiled a knowing smile, as though he could hear what Chance had thought. “One of the episodes had this line in it. Something about love and hate being horns on the same bull. Pretty much the same thing as love and hate being two sides of the same coin.”

Chance frowned hard. “So?”

“So... You can't hate someone personally unless you've also loved them, or at least thought you could.” Nellie smiled a quirked grin. “I'm not saying you and Shane are destined to be together. I'm not even saying that you would have lasted forever if things had gone differently, back when. But for you guys to still hate each other the way you do? That takes a whole lot of juvenile, adolescent love that might have burned out years ago if none of that shit ever happened.”

Chance laughed. “Shows what you know. I don't hate him like I used to, but I for damned sure don't love him!”

Nellie's smile grew. “And you just admitted that you don't hate him.”

Fuck, he really had. It felt strange, but he couldn't deny that he meant what he'd said. He didn't hate Shane, and while he'd sort of suspected as much, he hadn't been sure. Now, though, he was. Which had nothing to do with Shane still hating *him*.

“Sometimes you flip a coin and it lands on its edge,” Nellie said when Chance expressed his concerns. “Not often, granted, but it happens. And who can say what external influences can contribute to a coin landing on edge? Between me, Jazz, Tyler, William, and whoever else we rope in, I'm betting we can manipulate the odds for *your* coin. And by 'coin,' I mean you and Shane forgiving each other.”

Chance frowned. “I don't want to forgive him.”

Nellie rolled his eyes dramatically enough that Chance noticed, then shook his head. “Of course you do. You've worked your way past hating him, and

now you don't know what to do. The first thing is to forgive him. Out loud, instead of just inside your head, but that's fairly obvious, isn't it?"

How Nellie could know to say that wasn't something Chance figured he'd ever figure out, but it didn't matter. Nellie was wrong. He had to be. Even if Chance had imagined himself in love with Shane five years earlier, there was no way he could still be that deluded. He just didn't want to disappoint Nellie by saying so.

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Chapter Seven

May 2013

The semester couldn't be over soon enough for Shane. Not because he didn't like his classes, because he did. Mostly, anyway. There were a few that he wasn't all that fond of, but that was because they bored him. Still, he was doing well enough that he was sure he'd not only pass, but do so near the top of his class.

It wasn't that he was anxious to go home, either. It would be nice to spend some time with Mom and Rob, but being back in Carter for the whole summer was going to be very different from the shorter visits over the holidays. Shane suspected he might have outgrown the small town, due to having Vegas so close by, and knowing people from all over the country... or even the world, in Nellie's case. Carter was still home, but home had grown smaller, somehow. Too small to really contain the man Shane hoped he was becoming.

Mom and Rob would only be at the house for the first few weeks, though. Their vacation the previous summer had been amazing, from what Mom said, and they'd decided to travel again, which meant Shane would be on his own, most of the time. He figured he'd just keep an eye on the house and possibly drive into Cheyenne when he felt the need for human companionship. Lord knew he wouldn't go looking for company of any sort in Carter, even just friendly company. Most people his own age were too afraid of being branded a fag if they spoke to him with anything but insults, or so it had seemed over Christmas.

So, no. He wasn't exactly looking forward to spending the summer in Carter. He just didn't have anywhere else to go, and even though the prior summer had been okay, he didn't really feel like wandering around the mostly empty LKNG house, trying to avoid unexpected glimpses of Ty and Dave going at it.

He was still telling himself that when finals were done and he was packing up the things he thought he'd need for a couple months back home. He still had clothes and stuff in his old bedroom, as Mom reminded him every time they talked, but most of it was at least a couple years old and his tastes had changed some, thanks to Nellie. Nellie for damned sure knew how to dress, but that

made sense since his mother was some kind of international ambassador. Shane figured he should have known that before finally asking Nellie about the accent, but he hadn't.

It was a good thing Nellie didn't get offended easily, because between Shane's classes and the incredibly irritating distraction that was Chance Breckinridge, Shane had been a crappy friend. That asshole Chance had made him a crappy friend.

"And I don't even believe that myself. Shit."

"Believe what?" The voice came from the open door of Shane's room, and he was already grinning as he turned.

"That my mom really trusts me not to throw a kegger while she and Rob are in Hawaii," Shane lied cheerfully. "I mean, that was never my thing, but some of her friends were... unpleasantly surprised when they got home from even a few days away. Their perfect little angels were more demonic than they'd thought."

Nellie laughed. "That's a shame. Now I'll have to find something else to do for fun this summer. I'm guessing the thriving metropolis that is Breckinridge, Wyoming, might be a bit short on fencing clubs and gay bars, though Jazz says there are plenty of horses, so I suppose that's something."

Shane groaned. "God, I *wish* there was a thriving metropolis closer than Cheyenne. Wait. You're coming to Wyoming for the summer? I thought you were meeting your folks in Vienna! What happened?" Nellie had been looking forward to it. Something about the philharmonic something or other.

"I changed my mind," Nellie said, looking just a tiny bit uncomfortable. "My sister got engaged two nights ago, and my parents are already wrapped up in that. As I'm not terribly interested in wedding plans, I've decided to impose upon my friends and visit your home state. It's all a bit last minute."

"And you're staying with Chan... Jazz's family? Really?" That sounded like a whole lot of *not*-fun, considering that Chance was definitely not out to his family, and Jazz probably wasn't, either. God only knew what Mr. and Mrs. Breckinridge were going to think of their sons' openly gay friend.

Nellie quirked a tiny smile and shook his head. "According to the Internet, there are two rather nice hotels nearby. I plan to book a suite for the duration, as I don't think I'm really the 'ranch' type. It sounds unpleasant, aside from the horses."

Shane laughed, grinning. “You obviously haven’t asked too much about the house. Think ‘country estate with livestock nearby’ and you’ll be closer to the reality than what you’ve got in your head. But you could always come stay with me in Carter. That could be fun. Um, my house *isn’t* any kind of estate and we don’t have cows or horses, but it’s comfortable, and I’ll be all on my own once Mom and Rob take off.” He shrugged, trying to seem less happy about the idea of Nellie visiting than he actually was. “You don’t have to come, but I wouldn’t mind the company. I’m not really used to being alone anymore, you know?”

“Do you mind if I think about it?” Nellie bit his lip, and Shane closed his eyes for a moment, trying to forget that Nellie always did that right before he came, too. “I appreciate the offer, but I might fall in love with the hotel’s room service. Hot and cold running food is very important.”

Shane laughed again, rolling his eyes. “Says the guy who’s trained even the restaurants that don’t deliver here to make an exception for him. Color me shocked. But yeah. Think on it. It’s fine. Hey, maybe we can do something even if you don’t want to leave the lap of questionable luxury for the middle-class pleasures of my no pool, no hot tub, no tennis courts house.”

Nellie blinked once, blond brows rising. “Well, of course. That’s a given. Actually, I was wondering if you’d let me ride with you. Chance offered, but the way he drives that Jeep of his scares me enough during a ten minute trip. I’ll probably die of fright if I have to go all the way to Wyoming in it. Also, I don’t really want to spend twelve hours listening to Chance bitch and moan about having to do one more year to finish his degree. It’s his own fault, anyway. But mostly, it’s the driving.”

Nellie shuddered, and it was only by sheer force of will that Shane didn’t laugh yet again. Instead, he stomped down the impulse and nodded.

“No problem. But I’m planning on heading out first thing in the morning. Can you be packed and ready to go by... let’s say eight?”

“I can be ready by seven if it’ll spare my life,” Nellie said sincerely. “I’d rather not die of terror. My face might freeze like that, and there go all my hopes of an open casket service.”

Shane shook his head. “Go pack or something, man. And stop acting like you’re gonna die soon. Then again, considering the way Chance used to drive... Yeah. You should definitely ride with me.”

He didn't really think Chance would be at all careless. Not with Jazz in the car, anyway. Whatever else Shane might think of Chance, the guy did love his brother. Chance would probably be extra careful driving home.

Shane was still happy to have Nellie ride with him, though. It would be way less boring, for one thing, and for another... maybe he could find out what Chance had been doing since the last time Shane had seen him. The night he'd told Chance to stop trying to make up for things.

He was just curious, really. He didn't miss seeing Chance at all, and he definitely didn't miss the sex. Shane could have all sorts of sex if he wanted to. He just didn't feel like it.

"It looked different on the website." Nellie seemed unhappy, though Shane couldn't tell why. The Breckinridge Arms looked just like it always had. A little old, sure, but nice enough. It was where people with money stayed when they wound up in Breckinridge for whatever reason.

"It's better than the Lakeside Inn," Shane said, shrugging. "Which isn't anywhere near a lake, by the way. I'd say you should stay at the Carter B and B, but it's nowhere near as nice as this. I'm not even sure if they have Wi-Fi at the B and B."

Nellie sighed. "Maybe I should just go to Los Angeles or New York."

Shane snorted. "Maybe you should stop pretending you're some elitist asshole. If you've managed to survive sharing a house with fifteen other guys, I'm pretty sure you can handle the Breckinridge Arms, man. I've heard it's better on the inside. Maybe you should check it out before you make me drive all the way back to Cheyenne so you can run off to the big city." He smirked playfully while Nellie acted offended.

"Seriously," Shane added, "if you don't like it once you go in, there's always my house. Mom and Rob aren't expecting you, but I don't think they'd care if you came now instead of after they leave. They're pretty cool for parental types."

Nellie nodded slowly. "That might be best. If you're sure they won't mind."

Shane cocked his head, suddenly concerned. "Are you okay? I mean, you know my house isn't anywhere close to being a nice hotel, so what's up?"

The small tinge of rose that colored Nellie's cheeks was unexpected, but so were his next words. "I just haven't stayed anywhere on my own since I was fourteen, and after the last year, I think I might be... lonely... without other people around. I can stay here if your parents aren't prepared to entertain, though. I'm just not used to solitude anymore."

"Well, we don't have room service, but there's a guest room," Shane said quickly. "We also don't have a maid to make up your bed every morning, so it'll be pretty much like being at UCSN, but on a smaller scale. Let me call Mom real quick. Then if you're sure you don't want to check out the hotel, we can head over to Carter."

Mom actually sounded happy that Nellie wanted to stay at the house right away, going so far as to tell Shane to take his time on the road so she could tidy up the guest room, which was Mom-code for changing the sheets and opening the window to air out the room. "I'll let Rob know we'll have company for dinner, too. Maybe he'll stop at Ruby's on his way home to pick up a pie for dessert. Does Nellie like pie?"

Shane laughed. "He's a college student, Mom. If it's on a plate and doesn't fight back when he stabs it, he'll eat it. But I'll check. Nellie, you like pie, right?"

Nellie's brow furrowed. "At the risk of sounding like an 'elitist asshat,' I like *good* pie. Not those horrible things they sell at the grocer's."

"Then you'll love Ruby's pies." Shane was sure of it. "They're the best. Did you hear that, Mom? We're a go for pie."

"Wait!" Mom sounded worried, suddenly. "Nellie isn't your vegan friend, is he? It's fine if he is, but I already put a roast in for dinner. If he needs something else, tell me now, while there's still time to plan for something less... meaty."

He almost mentioned just how much Nellie liked meat, but at the last possible moment remembered that it was his *mother* on the phone. God, that would have been awful. Not that Shane thought his mom was unaware of that kind of joke—he got his sense of humor from her, after all, so he knew she had one—but it might be kind of weird to say something borderline sexual about the gay guy he was bringing home to stay for the summer, even though there was no chance that he and Nellie would be hooking up. Again. And that wasn't something Mom needed to know, either—that he and Nellie had been very-close-friends for a while.

“No,” Shane finally managed to say. “You’re thinking of Ty’s boyfriend, Dave. Nellie’s a total omnivore.”

“Oh, good.” Mom sounded relieved. “I’ll just go ahead and call Rob, then take care of Nellie’s room. Drive carefully and I’ll see you boys when you get here. Oh, there’s a speed trap on 108, so keep it below sixty. Love you, honey. Bye!”

Shane was grinning as he ended the call, but he couldn’t help it. Mom sounded so excited to have someone other than him to take care of. It was pretty cool. Or maybe she was just looking forward to meeting one of his friends, now that he had some again.

“Your mother is lovely. She doesn’t seem old enough to have a son your age.”

Shane grinned as he put the third of Nellie’s bags down in the guest room. “I know, right? But she was only a year older than I am now when she had me, so maybe that explains it. She’s, like, forty-four. But don’t tell her I told you.”

Nellie rolled his eyes. “As if I would. A gentleman never mentions a lady’s age, even if he has reason to know. It’s impolite. All women are ageless, once they’ve passed the urge to seem older than they really are. Or so my father says. This room is nice.”

Shane looked around the guest room, which Mom had apparently redecorated since Christmas, and shrugged. “Yeah, but it’s smaller than your room at LKNG.”

“True, but our brotherhood’s house is enormous, for what it is. We have sixteen people living there and only four rooms with more than one person. Aside from Roger and Thomas, the shared rooms belong to couples, but even so. For a house that isn’t part of the official Greek system, ours is truly huge. We’re lucky to have it. But I don’t mind this room being smaller. It’s cozy.”

Shane figured that was just a nice way of saying tiny, but if Nellie was cool with it, there was no need to keep harping on it. At least he didn’t have to worry about Nellie being upset at sharing a bathroom. Aside from the two master suites at LKNG house, everyone shared bathrooms, and Nellie didn’t have one of the masters. Ty and Dave did, of course, and William had the other. Seniority worked in their favor, though Shane had to admit, silently at least,

that, considering William's ongoing attempt to break the world record for man-slutting, he wouldn't really *want* to share a bathroom with the guy.

"I'm glad you like it," Shane finally said. "Dinner's usually around seven, so I'm gonna go unpack. I'm right down the hall, second door to the left. The door in between is the bathroom. It's cool if you want to come hang out in my room when you're done getting settled, okay?"

Nellie smiled. "I will. I'd like to hang up a few things and I really should call Jazz and Chance to let them know about the change of plans, but I'll come look at the alleged shrine to your teen years soon."

Shane laughed. "It's not that bad. A few baseball trophies, and maybe some ribbons from elementary school. You'll see."

He waved and headed back downstairs to grab his own bags. He really did need to unpack, and maybe lie down for a bit. He loved driving, but damned if it wasn't exhausting. Having Nellie in the car had been fun, though. Shane couldn't remember what they'd talked about, but there had been lots of laughter, and that was always good.

June

During the drive to Cheyenne to drop Mom and Rob at the airport for their flight, Mom started talking about how great Nellie was. How smart and well-mannered. How good he and Shane looked together, and how much she and Rob liked him. Shane still thought it was kind of cute that she'd asked if he was *sure* he didn't want to date Nellie. She'd seemed disappointed when he'd expressed his absolute certainty, followed by the information that Nellie was already taken. Shane hadn't mentioned that the relationship Nellie was involved in wasn't exactly romantic as yet; mostly because he didn't want to get her hopes up.

He couldn't swear that Nellie and Jazz would be great together, but Nellie for damned sure seemed to think so, and Jazz had still been shooting those extremely interested and more than slightly intrigued glances at the guy before they'd all left school for the summer. Even so, Mom might consider that to be an opportunity, and while Shane loved Nellie, he didn't *love* Nellie. There was no point to encouraging his mother to hope for something that would never happen.

“Well, I really am something of a catch,” Nellie said, once Shane got back and shared selected parts of the conversation with him. “I’m smart, athletic, reasonably good-looking, and I come from a good family.” He grinned. “Also, I’m fluent in five languages, including English. You could do worse.”

Shane chuckled. “I *have* done worse. Or do I need to remind you of your future boyfriend’s asshole brother? Because he’s pretty much the definition of worse.” But not worst, damn it. Shane had heard some pretty horrific ex-boyfriend stories from some of the guys at the LKNG house. All things considered, Chance was still the asshole who’d caused Shane’s exposure to the intestinal bacteria in the diner’s toilet, but that part of things hadn’t been intentional. The goal had been to humiliate Shane by flushing his head. The bacteria had just been a super-fun bonus.

Chance hadn’t raped him or beat him, or tried to pimp him out for drug money, so yeah. Worse-but-not-worst pretty much covered it.

“Yes, all right.” Nellie rolled his eyes. “He buckled under fear and peer pressure and treated you badly. At least he didn’t treat you the way Jeffrey’s ex did him. And I’m sorry if I’m overstepping, Shane, but it was five years ago. That’s a quarter of your life, give or take. Don’t you think it may be time to let go of old hurts and move on?”

“Fuck you.” Shane tried to glare, but he couldn’t quite manage to work up enough anger to pull it off effectively. “He apologized. Did you know that? Of course you did. I told you about it. About how Chance-fucking-Breckinridge apologized to me. But only for calling me a whore. He didn’t think he had anything else to be sorry about.” He sighed. “Maybe if he’d said he regretted everything from the night of the swirly on, I could let it go. But he isn’t sorry, so you’re right. It’s been over five years, and it’s so damned exhausting to keep hating him, but if I stop, what does that make me?”

Nellie smiled the quirky little grin that meant he was only slightly amused. “If you decide to stop hating him and actually forgive him? That makes you the bigger man. The more *mature* man, who’s willing to let it go. Also, I’m not entirely sure how you can claim to still hate him so much when you two were having sex for months, because that’s not usually something a guy does with someone he hates.”

Yeah, Shane already knew that, or he knew it intellectually. Emotionally knowing it—believing it—was another matter. Of course, the way Nellie had

said that last part implied that he wasn't only talking about Shane, and that was wrong. So very, very wrong.

“The sex was Chance’s way of trying to make amends,” he said after a few seconds. “For calling me a slutty whore. Sure, it was fun getting off most of the time, but it just confused both of us. That’s why we stopped. I think. Whatever. The whole sex thing was a bad idea, anyway.” He wasn’t really sure, though. Something about... something. God.

“Fine. It was a bad idea. So don’t do it again. But you’re my friend, and Jazz’s friend, too. And Chance is Jazz’s brother. We’re going to be thrown together more and more over the next year, and I’d appreciate it if you could make some effort to at least *get along* with Chance. I’m not saying you have to declare undying love, but it would be nice if you two stopped presenting sides and acting as though Jazz and I need to choose.”

God, Shane didn’t know if he could do that. Nellie had said it himself—Shane had spent a quarter of his life hating Chance. He didn’t think it would be all that easy to *stop* hating. Except... He’d been balls-deep in Chance, and while he couldn’t claim to have felt like the sun rose in Chance’s eyes on those two occasions, he also couldn’t say there was no emotional component to those moments. It hadn’t been love, of course, but Shane couldn’t remember *hating* Chance then. Not even after, or not really.

Yeah, he’d been mean to Chance, but now that he was thinking about it, Shane had to admit that every kiss, every hand job, every blow job, and both times they’d fucked, had left him hating Chance a little bit less. Like the furious anger was draining from him a little at a time, along with his seed.

It was weird. There was no way around that. “I’ve never heard of fucking your way to forgiveness. Is that even a thing?” Shane blinked. “I just said that out loud, didn’t I.”

It wasn’t a question, but Nellie’s lopsided little grin grew. “You did. And I can’t say I’ve heard of it either, but that doesn’t need to matter. The point is, you and Chance have more to think about than just each other. There’s me, and I love you both, though not the way I suspect I’m going to love Jazz... and there’s Jazz, who loves his brother but also loves the guy who saved his life at that awful party.” Nellie shuddered, like he was remembering how close they’d come to losing Jazz.

“As I said,” Nellie went on, softer than before, “maybe the sex was a bad idea. You guys decided to stop, anyway, so obviously neither of you want that anymore. But for my sake and Jazz’s, don’t keep this whole war going. Please.”

Shane thought he could agree to that. He really did. Except he wasn’t sure about the sex part, or rather the *lack of sex* part. He’d absolutely told Chance to go away, and Chance had gone, but Shane still remembered how right it felt when it was just the two of them in a closet or a bathroom, or against the wall in Shane’s room at UCSN. Their past had still been there, at the back of his mind, but it hadn’t mattered until they’d finished, each and every time.

Shane had never been the type to remember his dreams, but he’d woken more than a few times in the last two months with Chance’s name on his lips and his own seed slicking his skin. He was reasonably sure he’d been replaying those encounters in his sleep and finding satisfaction in the memories, and if so... Was it so impossible that he might be able to not *forget*, but set the past aside in favor of a present in which he could at least look at Chance Breckinridge without cringing or sneering? Or getting hard, because just thinking about the ways he and Chance had touched each other had his cock firming, damn it.

“I guess I can try,” Shane muttered grudgingly. “No promises.”

“Oh, good!” Nellie sounded far too bright and pleased with himself. “And since you’re willing to give it a shot, there’s no time like the present. I told Jazz we’d meet him and Chance for dinner in an hour. Let’s go see whether you two can be in the same place without fighting or fucking, shall we?”

“You’re such a dick,” Shane grumbled, but if Nellie was going to make him do it, it would be best to get it out of the way. Shane was willing to give it a good try, but he doubted Chance would. Hell, he kind of hoped Chance *wouldn’t*, though Shane wasn’t sure why. There was still something strangely appealing about letting the past be the past, though, so he would give it his all and see what happened. Yeah.

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Chapter Eight

June 2013

Jesus Christ. Chance had agreed to have dinner with his brother, Nellie, and Shane, of all people, but he hadn't realized that Jazz wanted to go to the Golden Diner. He'd even tried to tell Jazz that they should go somewhere else, but he'd been too ashamed to say why. At the moment, sitting in a booth with his brother while waiting for Nellie and Shane to get there, he figured this attempted pseudo-friendly meal was going to go about as well as the last time he'd been there with Shane, which was to say not well at all.

Not. At. All.

Five years earlier, give or take a few months, the plan to have a late night snack together had ended with Shane's head in a toilet and Chance laughing while he made it happen. If *he* remembered it that clearly, the chances of Shane's memory being faulty were between nil and not a single possibility.

"We could still get a table at the Breckinridge Arms," Chance tried for about the fiftieth time. "I'm pretty sure that's more Nellie's speed."

Jazz rolled his eyes in that exaggerated way only teenagers could manage. Chance remembered doing that himself when he was seventeen-going-on-eighteen, thinking he was so cool.

"Nellie likes freezer-section corn dogs," Jazz said bluntly. "He likes prime rib, too, but he's not really a food snob. As long as whatever he's eating is good, he's happy, and the food here is awesome!"

Chance sighed silently and smiled in response to his brother's contagious grin. "Okay. Fine. You're right about Nellie. He's pretty down to earth for an international traveler. I guess I mean I don't think Shane will like it." Fuck, Shane wouldn't like it even a little bit.

"What's not to like?" Jazz looked baffled. "Everybody in a fifty mile radius likes Golden Diner! They have the best chili cheese fries in the whole state!"

That was true enough, or had been three years earlier when one of the dining guide companies had put out their Wyoming volume. The company had changed ownership the following year and started profiling higher-end venues, so that award hadn't been repeated, but based on taste and portion size, the

Golden Diner still deserved the accolade. One order of chili cheese fries could easily feed three people as an appetizer or a snack, and they were so fucking tasty.

“And now I know what I’m having for dinner.” He deliberately ignored the real question, and while Jazz didn’t press, Chance was sure his brother hadn’t missed that.

“I’m torn,” Jazz said, sounding just as much older than his years as usual. “I don’t know whether I want the meatloaf or the turkey club.”

Chance arched his brows. “You love meatloaf. Especially the meatloaf here.” It was the only thing Jazz ever ordered at the Golden Diner. Ever.

Jazz grinned and went back to looking over the menu. “Yeah, but... I hate to say this, and you can’t tell Goldie, but I think the meatloaf I had at the Luxor spoiled me. It was really, really good. Like, almost a religious experience.”

Oh, well that made no sense at all. Jazz had never been to the Luxor that Chance knew about, and if he didn’t know, then, “When were you at the Luxor? You’re not old enough to—”

“Gamble?” Jazz laughed. “I didn’t. I just sort of tagged along with Nellie, Shane, and William last month, right after finals. There was no gambling. Statistically, the numbers are way skewed to the house’s benefit, and I’m not into sucker bets. So we had lunch, caught an afternoon show, got dinner—that was when I had the most amazing meatloaf *ever*—and went to New York New York to ride the roller coaster a few times. Then William met some guy and decided to stay in town, but whatever. I was home by midnight. You were busy.”

Okay, that was more than one load off his mind. Jazz hadn’t been gambling, and Shane hadn’t been on a date with William. It was only when he felt relieved at realizing it that Chance knew it had been a concern. If anything, he was more relieved about that than he was at hearing Jazz hadn’t gambled, and that was fucked up.

“So you’re going to get the sandwich?” Better to pretend he didn’t care about Jazz’s trip to Vegas than examine why he gave a shit if Shane was dating someone. Besides, it was a reasonable mistake, considering Jazz and Nellie had been there. They were a couple, even if neither of them were admitting it or acting on what was plain as day.

Chance wasn't sure whether it was admirable or pathetic that Nellie and Jazz were so obviously waiting for Jazz's eighteenth birthday before actually going out. Fuck knew that by seventeen, Chance would have been balls-deep in some guy—any guy—if he'd had the opportunity. Except he hadn't been, had he?

There had been other gay guys at his school. He was sure of it. He might even have gone for one of them if he'd been clear on who they were. Or not, because while he'd been a horny little shit, he hadn't seen anyone he'd wanted badly enough to find out. Right up until he'd seen the sixteen-year-old Shane Parks walking around Breckinridge with that girl. The one Shane hung out with back then. Mary? Sherry? Terry? Whatever. Something like that.

The point was, he'd seen Shane one day, and he hadn't known whether the guy was gay, straight, or bi. Hadn't cared. He'd just wanted him.

He'd followed Shane and... Carrie? Yeah, that sounded right. Carrie.

He'd followed Shane and *Carrie* around Breckinridge for hours, trying to get up the nerve to talk to the guy, and finally, when he'd been about to give up, the girl had come flouncing out of the organic baths shop and given him a look. The kind of look Chance still suspected she would have given to a confused child.

She hadn't said anything at first, but her expression spoke loudly enough, and the next thing Chance knew, he'd been inside the shop and starting up a conversation about eucalyptus versus lemon verbena bath scrub, of all things.

He'd never seen the girl again, but he'd for damned sure seen Shane. All of him, eventually, and they'd been headed toward something special, he'd thought. Right up until Bob, John, Charlie and Mike had wandered into the Golden Diner that night so long ago. The night Chance had given in to his own paranoid terror at being found out.

His palms were sweating as he dragged himself from the past, and he shook his head slightly, muttering, "Sorry. I was just thinking about how close I came to failing one of my classes," when Jazz looked concerned.

Jesus. How could he be so completely on edge just because Shane was coming to have dinner? How could he feel so suddenly guilty for what he'd done?

Because Shane was right.

Chance didn't like admitting it, even just to himself, but Shane was *right*. If Chance had been stronger, braver, less petrified that someone might find out about him... He wouldn't have gone along with his teammates. He wouldn't have been such a dick to Shane. He wouldn't have let the guys goad him into giving Shane that fucking swirly...

And Shane never would have gotten sick. Never would have been *Come-Farts*. Never would have hated Chance at all if Chance had just been tough enough to stand up to the bullshit, or even to lie. It would have been so easy to flip the guys off and introduce Shane as a friend from Carter, yet he hadn't done that. Instead, he'd let himself be terrified. He'd buckled and given in to the fear that his friends would hate him, which they'd ended up doing anyway.

"He's right," Chance whispered, mostly to himself. "I really *am* an asshole."

"And now you remember I'm here. Yay." Jazz sounded annoyed, but he was smiling when Chance looked up from the scarred top of their booths table. "You're my brother and I love you, so don't take this the wrong way, but I've been talking for the last few minutes and you didn't even bother to grunt or throw me an 'uh-huh.' I don't know what's been going on in your head, but I'm going to agree with you. Yes. You're an asshole. There. Feel better?"

Chance laughed, Jazz's playfully sarcastic tone pulling him from his funk. "No. I think maybe I will once they get here. But they're late. Are you sure they're coming?"

Jazz's grin grew. "They'll be here. Nellie would have called if they weren't going to make it. Shane's probably letting him drive. That would explain the lateness. Nellie's not used to driving. His family has a service in Europe, so he knows how but never really had to. He wants to get a car next year, though, so he's trying to talk Shane into letting him drive as much as possible."

Well, that explained a lot. It also had Chance feeling a little intimidated. Sure, he'd known Nellie's family was involved with diplomacy and stuff, but he hadn't realized they were important enough to have drivers. Hearing that made him wonder why the hell Nellie had decided to go to UCSN in the first place. The guy could have gone to any number of Ivy League schools, what with the fencing and stellar grades. It wasn't any of Chance's business, of course, but he still wondered.

Jazz sat up straighter as headlights shone through the window, but a few seconds later he groaned and leaned back. "I hope you're ready for blast-from-

the-past night, because some of your old football buddies are here. Can we pretend we don't know them? Please?"

"Only if you know how to turn us invisible," Chance said, grimacing. The last thing he wanted to do was talk to any of those bastards. Especially... Christ, of all his old teammates, it just had to be Bob and Mike walking into the diner. They hadn't actually started everything that night back in high school—that had been John, if Chance remembered right—but they'd for damned sure been there and kept it going. And as an added bonus to Chance even seeing them at all, they had that little fucker Jimmy Hopkins with them.

Maybe they wouldn't see him and Jazz, or if they did, maybe they wouldn't be in the mood to start anything. Chance figured he would have left right then if he and Jazz hadn't been waiting for Shane and Nellie, but as it was, they were sort of stuck. Turning invisible was sounding better and better. Then that shithead Jimmy saw them. Chance saw his eyes light up as though he'd just been offered free beer and endless hot wings.

"Shit."

Jazz cocked his head. "What?"

Chance was going to answer, but Jimmy beat him to it by striding down the aisle in the center of the dinner, calling out, "*Peckerbinge!* You come in for the sausage special?"

Oh, for fuck's sake. "You know, Jimmy," Chance said, smiling slightly though he really wanted to slide out of the booth and hit Jimmy until the guy couldn't even think straight, much less talk. "I'm starting to think you have a crush on me, what with how happy you always are to see me. Or do you just like the abuse when you try to match wits?"

"Yeah, I'll crush you, all right. Fags can't fucking fight. Come outside and I'll kick your ass for free!"

Jazz made a sound that was as close to a giggle as Chance had ever heard from him. "So you usually charge?"

Jimmy looked confused. "Screw you, Peckerbinge Junior."

"Wow." Chance shook his head. "You really haven't gotten any smarter since the last time I saw you. Not that I care. Why don't you just go sit with your friends, Jimmy? I'm not in the mood for your bullshit." He also didn't

want to have to hit the guy. For one thing, Jimmy would probably try to have him arrested. For another, Goldie didn't put up with people fighting in his diner. Chance might not spend much time in Breckinridge anymore since he was usually away at school, but he liked being able to hit Goldie's for coffee or pie or a plate of chili cheese fries when he was home. He didn't much want to be banned for the rest of the summer.

“Fuck you, Peckerbinge. I'd be in college too if my folks was rich enough to bribe my way in! Everyone knows you wouldn't have got in without your family's money and all that liberal bullshit about equal rights for fags!”

Jazz didn't giggle again. He full-out laughed. “Yeah. That's why Mid-Miami State U offered him a full ride for football. You're right that Chance wasn't the best student ever, but he still had a solid B average for high school.” Jazz grinned. “I know he did because I used to track our grades for fun. Does that mean you're going to start calling me a geek now? And... Wait. You know what? Chance is right. Go eat with your friends, Jimmy. We're waiting for *our* friends and I'm not sure I want them to get here and think we hang out with people like you.”

Chance chuckled. “And you don't want the ‘liberal bullshit’ to rub off on you. If you spend too much time around me, you might find yourself using hair products and moisturizing. Then everyone will be *sure* you're gay instead of just suspecting it, closet-queen.”

Yeah, that phrase still felt dirty, and Chance wasn't really sure Jimmy deserved it. Every preacher Chance had ever seen, either in person or on TV, said to turn the other cheek and feel sorry for those less fortunate. Chance figured that applied to people who were intellectually less fortunate, too.

“Jimmy.” That was Bob, coming down the aisle with Mike right behind him. Shit. Except Bob didn't sound like he was backing the little fucker up, especially when he said, “You need to chill out, man, or Goldie's gonna make us leave.”

Jimmy glared at Chance, which wasn't at all frightening, then he turned, looking at Bob and Mike over his shoulder. “Goldie can't make us do anything! He's just some nig—”

The choke hold Mike put on Jimmy then apparently stopped him mid-word, and Chance thought that was a good thing. He knew his own eyes were wide at what he thought Jimmy had been about to say. So were Jazz's and Bob's.

Mike, on the other hand, just looked pissed off, even while Chance snapped out, "Hey!" Had Jimmy really been about to call Goldie a...? Christ, Chance couldn't even think it without cringing.

"You better not have been about to say what I think you were about to say," Mike said, the words coming out growly and sharp, like he was talking around broken glass, "because Goldie will back me up if I kick the shit out of you and say you fell down, and I *will* if you don't shut the fuck up and *stay* shut. We all know you're a racist asshole, but we put up with you because your brother was our friend. That doesn't mean you can come into a man's business and use the n-word without consequences. Or the f-word, now that I think about it. So I'm gonna let you go and you're gonna apologize to Chance for being a homophobic dickhead."

"Fuck you!" Jimmy screamed it as soon as Mike let go, but he looked just as shocked as Chance felt. "I'm not sorry! Peckerbinger is a fucking faggot, and he's trying to make everyone else just as gay as he is!"

Bob frowned and stepped into Jimmy's space. Chance had to admit that... unlike Jimmy's glare, Bob stepping up to him with that look on his face would have had him pissing himself just a little. If Jimmy wasn't intimidated, he was even stupider than Chance thought.

"It's none of your business unless he's hitting on you," Bob said, looking both serious and angry. "And I doubt Chance or any other halfway decent-looking dude would ever want to do that, once you opened your mouth. Now either apologize for being a dick or go the fuck home. Either way, Mike and I are staying for chili cheese fries."

Chance honestly had no idea about what was going on. Bob and Mike, who had called him names and been instrumental in what Chance had done to Shane... were defending him? Sure, they'd been friends once, sort of, but that had ended after Shane outed him, yet now they were... How was that even possible?

His mind was spinning so much, Chance felt dizzy. He darted a glance at Jazz, and yeah. Even his much smarter kid brother seemed baffled. Then things got worse. Or better. Chance wasn't sure.

"Tell me we're not late for the party, Chance! I hate being late." Nellie's voice came from beyond the cluster made up of Bob, Mike, and Jimmy-the-

shit. "Well, not entirely. I absolutely love to make an entrance, but I generally prefer to be noticed when I do." Christ, Nellie sounded extra-flamey.

Chance slid out of the booth then, just as Jazz did. Once he was standing, he could see Nellie behind the other guys. The other guys who were only then turning to look at the new arrival, who was backed by Shane Parks, though Shane was being oddly silent.

"Who the fuck are you?" Jimmy couldn't seem to keep his mouth shut.

Nellie arched one brow, even as Chance watched Bob and Mike shift to one side of the aisle, whether to let Nellie past or get a better look, Chance didn't know. What he did know was that even in low-slung black skinny jeans, pointy-toed black boots, and a sapphire blue T-shirt that skimmed close to his body, Nellie looked almost as classy as he really was.

"Nelson Mayhew Fontaine," Nellie said. "Of the Dallas Fontaines, though my branch of the family is a bit more international than the rest. And you?" Jesus, Nellie did upper-crusty well, especially with his unusual accent. Chance should have expected as much, but he'd never seen it before. Even so, he was pretty sure he was nowhere near as surprised as Jimmy.

"You sound like a fag."

Nellie laughed a soft, tinkling laugh. "Well, I do believe there should be truth in advertising. Is there a reason you're being so incredibly rude, or is that simply your natural state? Either way, I'd appreciate it if you would leave now. I'd like to enjoy a nice meal with my friends."

"Your *fag* friends, right?" Jimmy just didn't know when to walk away, apparently. Chance almost felt sorry for him, but he didn't. "I so want to kick your ass for coming out in public like you're real people. You're just a bunch of sick pervs."

Nellie arched that same blond brow again and Chance almost laughed, Nellie seemed so amused; so intrigued. "You want to fight? Really? With me?" Nellie grinned. "I've never been in a real fight before, though... I'm not sure there's enough room in here."

Jimmy glared. "Outside, faggot. Duh. We can't fight inside. If stuff gets broken, we can get arrested and shit."

"Nellie," Jazz said, sounding concerned as he stepped forward, but Nellie just smiled more and wrapped his arm around Jazz's shoulders. It was sweet,

and Chance finally realized just how right his brother and Nellie looked together.

"It'll be fine," Nellie said softly before pressing a kiss to Jazz's hair.

"That's sick!"

Nellie looked thoughtful for about a second, then shrugged. "To each his own. So where would you like to fight... I'm sorry, but you still haven't introduced yourself."

"He's Jimmy Hopkins," Mike said. "I'm Mike Jackson, and my friend is Bob Andresen. We're not really with him," Mike added, sounding ashamed.

"Lovely to meet you all. Oh, my silent friend is Shane Parks, but perhaps you know him. He's from Carter. Now, shall we find a place to have this altercation? I do believe I'm looking forward to it."

"Christ," Chance muttered as he and Jazz followed the others outside. "I hope he knows what he's doing. Jimmy has two inches and at least thirty pounds on him."

Jazz laughed quietly. "He's *my* future boyfriend, and I'm not worried now, since he's not. Unless that Hopkins dick pulls a gun, Nellie should be fine."

Chance hoped Jazz was right, but Nellie wasn't a fighter. He was a fencer, for fuck's sake. The chances of Nellie *not* taking some serious damage were pretty damned slim. But Nellie was a grown man—over eighteen, anyway—so Chance couldn't really interfere. He was just glad Shane was there. Hell, Shane had kept Jazz from dying; maybe he'd be able to at least slow the bleeding when Jimmy kicked the shit out of Nellie.

"I told you so." Jazz was way too happy about Nellie winning the fight, though fight wasn't the right word, as far as Chance was concerned. He wasn't sure there even *was* a word for how swiftly the confrontation had started and ended.

They'd all headed out to the parking lot at the side of the diner. Jimmy had been glaring at Nellie. Nellie had simply stood there, looking relaxed and calm and so very condescending.

Jimmy reared back, telegraphing his first punch so clearly, Chance was surprised it hadn't appeared as sky-writing, and then Jimmy let fly.

His fist shot out in a broad arc, Nellie sidestepped and spun around him, clocking Jimmy hard on the back of the head with an elbow... and Jimmy went down, moaning.

Bob and Mike had knelt, knees on the gravel-strewn pavement, while Jimmy continued to groan, curling in on himself like a potato bug.

Chance was almost sure he'd heard Jimmy sobbing while Nellie just stood over him, looking composed and unflappable. Then Nellie arched his brow again, asking, "Is it over? I thought there would be more to my first fight. I'm a little disappointed that I won't even have bruised knuckles to show for it."

Bob and Mike had laughed at that, even while trying to make sure Jimmy wasn't really hurt. Then Shane had stepped in, checking Jimmy over the way he'd done with Jazz at that party.

"He'll be fine," Shane said, sounding disgusted. "He's just stunned. He'll probably have the mother of all headaches for a while, but he isn't concussed and he's moving his neck just fine. Let him flop around on the ground for a while, then you guys can take him to the hospital if you want. I'm not sure he needs it, but it might be a good idea, anyway."

After that, Chance, Jazz, Nellie and Shane went back inside and sat down at the booth Chance and Jazz had abandoned for the fight that had lasted all of five seconds, start to finish, and Jazz... Well, yeah. Jazz had every right to sound smug as he said again, "I told you, bro-mo. Nellie can take care of himself."

"Because Nellie is short for Nelson, not a statement about my nature," Nellie replied without the overly dramatic tone he'd been using before. "Also, I know you football types like to think fencing is just... what was it? Oh, yes. Skinny blokes poking each other with sticks. But it's not. Someday, Chance, I'm going to get you to go through my daily workout, just once. Then we'll talk about what's a real sport and what isn't."

Shane smiled slightly, and Chance held in a sigh of relief. That small quirk of the lips was the first real expression he'd seen on Shane's face since they'd all reentered the diner.

"I don't know if his knee will hold up during one of your workouts," Shane said to Nellie. "You do way too many extended lunges and deep squats for it to be healthy for him. I mean, go ahead and break him if you want to. Just don't expect me to put him back together."

Chance wasn't sure what to make of that. It was kind of nice that Shane knew about his knee, but it was also a little depressing that the guy was divorcing himself from whatever outcome there might be. He didn't have to say anything, though, because Goldie was suddenly there at their table, setting down drinks they hadn't ordered.

"Margie gets scared when people get too loud," the truly enormous man said in his oddly soft voice. "She was headed your way when that little prick Jimmy started up with you, and she ducked down behind the counter, but she heard everything. I'm sorry he thought he could treat my customers like that, but thanks for what you did. All of you. I wish I could have been out there for the shortest fight ever. Cokes all around. Diet. I know how you athletes like to watch your weight."

Shane grinned up at the man, and Chance felt a small twinge of something that might be jealousy burning in his gut. "Thanks. And tell... Margie?" Shane waited and went on when Goldie nodded. "Tell Margie we don't blame her. People like that jackass can be scary. But if she'll come out here and be our waitress, we'll be really nice. Swear."

Goldie laughed. Unlike his so-soft speaking voice, his laugh was loud and rich and so happy, Chance couldn't help grinning.

"I'll tell her you said so," Goldie agreed, then Nellie added, "Also, tell her we tip well." And Goldie laughed again.

"What?" Nellie asked, once Goldie headed back to the kitchen. "We do. I've never had to wait tables for a living, but it can't be an easy job. It's only right to show our appreciation with cold, hard cash."

They'd been glancing at the menu but getting distracted by other things for close to an hour, and while Chance didn't mind that, he wished Shane would talk more. Not because he liked the sound of the guy's voice or anything, but because he didn't know how Shane actually felt about being there with him. With him, Jazz and Nellie, really, but Chance was fairly sure Shane didn't have any issues with Nellie or Jazz. Issues with *him*? Yeah, and Chance couldn't blame him.

After everything that had happened years earlier, and the stuff that had gone on in the last year and a bit, Shane had every reason to have problems with

being around him. Chance knew that. Hell, if Chance hadn't taken some time to think about things, with some pushing from Nellie, he'd probably have just as many issues himself. As it was, he'd made up his mind to forgive. To accept responsibility for the things he'd set in motion. To accept that Shane Parks had changed his life; maybe for the better, but maybe not. He couldn't be sure yet.

Either way, Chance had been involved in pushing Shane to out him. He accepted that. If Shane had experienced a similar epiphany, it would be easier. Easier to find out whether Shane missed him the way he missed Shane, even though missing Shane seemed weird. Then again Shane, or rather Shane's actions, had been a large part of what had shaped Chance's life over the last five years. Whether Shane felt Chance had been that important in the years since their initial... situation... remained to be seen. Or heard, because Chance was for damned sure going to ask.

It might not be cool, or proper gay-etiquette, but fuck it. He was just going to put it out there and see what Shane said. As soon as they ordered dinner, damn it.

Chance had almost decided on the fried artichoke hearts stuffed with spinach, mushrooms and buffalo mozzarella, when Bob and Mike returned. Without Jimmy, thank fuck. They sat down on two of the stools across the aisle from the booth and Chance steeled himself for whatever they were going to say.

When Mike started talking, he didn't say what Chance had expected, and he didn't say it to Chance. Instead, Mike spoke to Shane, and from the look on Shane's face, he hadn't anticipated Mike's words, either.

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Chapter Nine

June 2013

“I’m an asshole. Bob, too.”

That was the last thing Shane had thought he’d hear. Hell, he hadn’t actually thought either of the guys who’d been with that shit Jimmy would come back. When they had, he’d figured they would pretend they’d never seen Shane before in their lives.

They’d changed some, sure. People did a lot of growing between eighteen and twenty-three. But he’d still recognized them the minute he’d seen them, earlier. Before the so-called fight, which was really Nellie *ending* the fight before it began. The guy hadn’t even worked up a sweat.

“Um. Okay.” He didn’t mean it. It wasn’t okay. Hell, okay was about fifty miles back, but he didn’t want to get into it. Not with Nellie and Jazz there, and especially not with Chance sitting right across from him.

“Bullshit, *it’s okay*.” Bob, this time. “Man, we were such dicks to you. You and Chance. I guess because we didn’t know any gay dudes, and you know how it is in high school. There’s all that pressure to fit in, and someone being gay... They don’t fit.”

“But it’s not just that.” Mike again, sounding way more serious than Shane expected. “It’s like... anyone who’s different is a target. Geeks, goths, stoners... they all have their groups, right? But when you can’t slap a label on someone or figure out why you’re not supposed to like them, ‘gay’ is kind of easy. It doesn’t even matter if they really *are* gay. It’s just something you say to give you an excuse to ignore them or bully them, and make sure no one else likes what you don’t.”

Bob nodded. “It sucks that we were such assholes to you and Chance, especially when Chance was supposed to be one of us. But John... Shit, it sounds so stupid now, but he was our team captain. We got really used to listening to him, and. *No*. That makes it sound like he brainwashed us or something, and he didn’t. We were just—”

“Young and stupid,” Mike said, cutting Bob off, and Shane wondered whether he’d ever be able to get a word in, edgewise. “And John was scared of

everything gay. I mean, *terrified*. Like he thought gay dudes were gonna jump out of nowhere and rape him or something, even though he never put it like that. So he was always testing people. Seeing what they would do. And his older sister used to date Jimmy's big brother, so when Jimmy said he saw Chance making out with some kid at the lake one night, John believed him, and he freaked."

"It was just bad luck that we were here the night you came to meet Chance." Bob again, and Shane wasn't sure he was still sane, they were switching off so fast. "John saw you come in, and I guess he figured you were the guy Jimmy saw with Chance before, and then... Yeah. We were assholes to you. Hell, we were even worse to Chance; especially if you two really were dating. I mean, I can't even imagine how I'd feel if a bunch of my girlfriend's friends all of a sudden pressured her into kicking me in the jewels, you know? I for damned sure wouldn't trust her again."

"Then that thing with your... digestive problems." Mike made a face. "We heard about that. Sorry. And there were all these rumors, but it sounded so fucking stupid to me that I asked our Science teacher, and he said we'd probably given you some kind of disease when we flushed your head. I didn't tell him we did that, but you know. A hypothetical. So I'm sorry. I was an asshole for listening to John."

"Me, too. Sorry, man."

What the hell? God, that was the longest and most detailed apology he'd ever heard. Shane kind of wished he'd thought to roll video on it, just so he'd be able to play it back later to see whether it had really been as lengthy as he thought.

At the same time, the apology made him sad. These two guys—Bob and Mike—were strangers to him, regardless of the fact that he remembered every single thing they'd said and done five years earlier, and their apology was so much better than the bullshit *sorry* Chance had so grudgingly given for calling him a whore.

It shouldn't bother him. There was nothing between him and Chance, no matter how much he'd wanted to see the guy while still wanting to stay away. But that wasn't relevant right then. What was, was that two of the guys who'd started the whole swirly incident were apologizing and making it sound like they'd been duped into it, and that didn't seem right. At all.

“So you never thought gays deserved to be bullied.” It wasn’t a question.

Bob and Mike exchanged a long look, then Mike sighed. “Sure, we did. It sucks to say it out loud, but yeah. It just seemed so wrong, you know? A guy liking other guys. I didn’t get it.”

“What changed?” Jazz asked, sounding like he was seriously interested, and that was fine. Shane was just as curious, if not more so.

Bob grimaced slightly. “A couple years ago I found out that my uncle’s best friend, the guy who saved his life in Iraq, is gay. A gay Marine. It totally screwed with my head, because Tony isn’t anything like what I always thought gay dudes were. He’s the opposite of Nellie. No offense, man.”

Nellie laughed. “That was largely an act, but none taken. Unless you want to be the next parking lot victim of a vicious but stylish elbowing.”

“I’ll pass.” Bob chuckled. “Anyway, Tony’s a good guy, and like I said, he saved Uncle Joey’s life. It got me thinking, and... if not for this gay Marine, Joey would be dead instead of just missing a forearm. And Tony did two tours and got all kinds of commendations. I’d probably shit a whole house-load of bricks if I ever had to shoot at people, so how could I keep thinking gay meant weak or bad?”

“My cousin out in California is gay,” Mike said, jumping in before Shane could respond. “One minute my folks were talking about how well Theresa was doing in school and with her dancing, and the next thing I knew, they’d cringe when I mentioned her name, then change the subject. I stopped even trying when I was twelve, thirteen?” He frowned.

“My folks went away last summer, so I was the only one home when the birth announcement came. She and her wife had just had a son and Theresa wanted to share the news. So I called her up, even though we hadn’t talked in like ten years. Turns out she’d sent letters all that time, and even a wedding invitation, but I never heard about it. So I told my folks I was going back to school early and went to see them. Theresa, her wife, and their son. Turns out, the little boy is their second kid. I have a niece and a nephew—not really, since they’re just cousins, but you know what I mean—and I never would have known. And they’re good people. Theresa choreographs for some dance company out there, and her wife is a psychiatrist. If Stephanie was Stephen, my whole family would have gone to the wedding. So I guess what changed is me. Me and Bob. Both of us.”

“No shit,” Bob said, obviously agreeing. “So are we gonna order, or... we can go find another table. I guess you guys are on a double date or something, right? Me and Mike shouldn't be horning in.”

The idea that he was dating Chance Breckinridge of all people shocked a real, true laugh from him. “As if! I mean, Jazz and Nellie might be thinking of this as a date, but Chance and I are just friends.” Then Shane realized what he'd said. “*Barely* friends. We wouldn't even be *that* much if Jazz didn't insist on dating my frat brother.”

Shane ignored the queasy sensation in his stomach when Chance gave him a hopeless look. Chance *should* look hopeless. Even if Shane was letting go of the past, that didn't mean he would forget it. Hell, he *couldn't* forget. He didn't even want to.

July

It still felt a little strange to be hanging out with Chance. Shane thought Chance might feel weird about it, too. Then again, maybe that was to be expected, considering their past and just how recent and fragile their ceasefire—and cease-fucking—was.

He caught himself forgetting to be angry on a regular basis, and while he thought that might be good, it had him on edge every time he remembered that he was talking with the guy who'd ruined his life, except... it wasn't all that ruined, when Shane thought about it.

Yeah, that last year and a half of high school had been a nightmare, but he'd survived, hadn't he? Thrived, even, and grown a thicker skin. He'd been so fully *out* by the time he'd graduated that he'd never even considered trying to hide his own nature after, and that had worked for him. Being openly gay had led him to LKNG house and to becoming friends with Tyler, William, Nellie and the rest. With Jazz, too, who was a good kid, and Shane never would have known that if he'd been hiding.

Chance was... possibly not as bad as Shane had wanted to believe. Bob and Mike saying the things they had at the diner close to a month earlier had gotten Shane thinking, too, and they were right. Neither he nor Chance were the same anymore. Time, experiences, whatever... life had shaped them and made them both grow up, it seemed, and maybe that was part of the reason Shane kept forgetting to hate Chance.

“Hey, Shane! You coming in?” Jazz yelled from the diving board of the pool behind the Breckinridge house. Shane still wasn't sure why anyone would want to have a pool in Wyoming when the climate only made it really usable for about five months of the year, but he had to admit that it was nice in the summer. He also wasn't sure what Chance's parents thought of Shane and Nellie coming around to swim and—at least in Nellie's case—get cozy with their son. Their younger son. Shane also didn't know whether they had any idea who *he* was, but he doubted it. If they had, he was sure they'd have run him off with a torch and pitchfork or two.

“Maybe later,” Shane called back. “I'm working on my tan!”

Nellie laughed from his spot in the shallow end. “You're not going to get much color if you keep wearing that one hundred SPF, you know.”

Shane grinned. “I'm also not gonna get much skin cancer, so I'll just settle for being less pale than usual. Hey, don't forget to reapply in another...” he looked at his phone on the table beside him, “twenty minutes. Both of you.”

Jazz chose that moment to run down the diving board and hurtle through the air in a tight tuck. The resulting splash was epic enough that droplets of water hit Shane even twenty feet away from Jazz's crash site.

“Hey!” Shane yelped, laughing as Jazz shot up from below the surface. “Nice one!”

“Thanks.” Jazz grinned, looking happier than Shane had ever seen him, and that was saying a lot. “And that, Nellie,” he added, turning away, “is how you do a cannonball.”

“Jesus Christ. Is there some law that he has to say that every single time?” Chance sounded amused. He looked it, too, when he set down a fresh pitcher of lemonade on the table and sat down in the chair beside Shane's again. “Or does he think Nellie can't remember?”

Shane laughed, shaking his head. “I think he's running out of things to say that don't start with ‘oh, yeah, right there,’ and he probably doesn't want his big brother hearing what passes as sex-talk for a seventeen year old.”

“It better be...” Chance stopped and grimaced. “Never mind. I was about to say ‘it better be just talk,’ but we both know what I was up to at seventeen, and talking a lot wasn't really my thing.”

Shane wasn't sure whether to laugh or be offended by that, considering he'd been the one Chance had been not-talking with. Then again, it had been good, in a young-and-stupid-and-inexperienced kind of way. It had only turned bad later. Shane was tired of thinking about the later, damn it, so he chose to laugh again. Not loudly, but still.

"Well, there were words." Shane poured some lemonade into his empty glass, pretending he didn't notice the surprise on Chance's face. They'd talked since their most recent diner adventure, but Shane had made a point of not mentioning the pre-bad past. Maybe it was time, though. "Mostly 'oh, yeah, right there,' and 'damn, that feels good,' though, so when I say Jazz might be embarrassed by young sex-speak, I know where he's coming from."

"Ugh. Can we *not* talk about my kid brother and sex? It was bad enough that I had to have the 'gay sex talk' with him. I really don't want to think about it ever again."

Shane laughed again, harder than before. "Oh, man. I can't even imagine. How the hell did you get stuck doing that? Jazz knows how to work the Internet. Couldn't he just look stuff up online?"

Chance sighed. "Dad insisted. He was worried that some of the information might be wrong, or that Jazz might end up on the wrong site or something. He said I should handle it since I'm the one who's done it before. Seriously, I think Jazz knows more than I do, just from reading, but I guess it wasn't a bad idea... except he had all these questions about how stuff feels, and that totally freaked me out."

"I'll bet," Shane answered, his voice barely above a whisper. "Wait. Your *dad* wanted you to do it. Because you have experience with the... gay sex. How the hell would *your dad* know that? I mean, you're not out, Chance! You have a girlfriend!" What the hell was going on? God, Shane couldn't even wrap his mind around any of it. "You're not *out*!"

"Maybe if you say it a few more times, it'll be true." Chance sounded irritated. "Dad's known since last Christmas. I didn't plan it, but Jazz can't hold his beer. So, yeah. I'm kind of out." His brow furrowed, but he still looked good, damn it. "I'm not sure if Mom knows," Chance went on, "but she only asked about Rebecca once when Jazz and I first got here for the summer, so either Dad told her or she thinks we broke up."

Shane took a deep draught of lemonade and tried to make sense of the conversation. He understood what the words meant, of course, but he couldn't quite believe they'd come from Chance's mouth. "Um."

"We didn't," Chance said, fast and hard, like he needed to get it out. "Break up, I mean. Rebecca's a great girl, but her parents are... strict isn't a strong enough word. And we were never really *together*, you know? I mean, let's just say that Rebecca and I have a whole lot in common, or we did until Jazz started spilling my secrets to Dad."

It took him a minute to figure out what the hell that meant, but finally the light came on, and Shane blinked, then said, "Oh. Ohhhhh. So Rebecca's..."

"Yeah. So we were pretty much perfect for each other. It was a very roomy closet, but now it's all hers." Chance smiled sheepishly. "Fuck, it feels good to say that out loud. I didn't think it would, but it does."

"Okay. As long as you're happy." Shane rolled his eyes. "Does she know you're out now?" He wasn't sure why he asked, but he kind of wanted to know. He also kind of didn't, but he couldn't un-ask the question.

Chance looked away and Shane followed his gaze to the pool, where Jazz and Nellie were laughing and having a wicked splash-fight on the far side.

"She knows that my Dad knows," Chance finally said. "I had to tell her. She says she's looking for another guy who'll be acceptable to her parents and be comfortable with a similar arrangement, but it may take a while. Or she might decide not to bother and just finish her degree before we officially break up. I don't know. But if that's what she wants to do, I can't really tell her no. I gave her my word when we started out, you know?"

Shane shrugged. "Okay. Whatever." He wasn't sure why he felt hollow all of a sudden. Maybe he was disappointed for some reason. It felt like it, anyway. "I think I'm gonna go work on my diving."

"Shane—" Chance started, but Shane didn't want to hear whatever he might say. He just got up and moved purposefully to the diving board at the deep end.

He couldn't be upset that Chance still had one foot in the *very roomy closet* because that wouldn't make any sense. He might have given up on hating the guy, and maybe they were becoming friends, at least a little... but he didn't give a single crap whether Chance was really out or not.

Shane told himself that as he walked to the end of the board and tested the degree of spring, though it hadn't changed since the last time. He told himself again as he strolled back to the beginning of the diving board. And he told himself a third time as he took five fast, bouncing steps and hurled himself into the air, tucking tighter than Jazz had done earlier.

He was already laughing through the shock of the cool water as he came up for air; then he laughed even more when Chance yelled at him, saying, "You did that on purpose, you dick!"

Shane couldn't even argue. He really had cannonballed on purpose. He just hadn't realized that Chance had followed him partway down the poolside, or that his leap-and-tuck would be powerful enough to drench Chance so thoroughly.

"So what if I did?" he called out, still laughing. "What are you gonna do about it? Pout at me?"

Chance snorted and peeled off the T-shirt he wore, which was a shame. It looked way better on him while wet, as far as Shane was concerned. Of course, shirtless was even better, though Shane wasn't going to say so. Ever.

"You're in so much trouble! Just wait 'til I catch you, jackass!"

Shane was already swimming away when Chance dove into the water, and it was touch and go for a couple minutes, but Chance caught him. Of course he did. The guy had a pool, for God's sake. He obviously swam more often than Shane had the chance to do.

"Fine," Shane panted, treading water to stay afloat. "What do you think you're gonna do with me now? Tell me more about your girlfriend? I promise that's way more torture than I deserve."

Chance grinned a smirky grin, though he was breathing just as hard. "I figured I'd drown you, shithead."

Shane let loose one sharp, unexpectedly bitter bark of laughter. "At least it's not in a toilet this time," he snapped, only realizing what he'd said when Chance's smile vanished as though it had never been. "Shit. Sorry. I didn't mean that." He was only partly lying.

"I. Yeah, you did. Fuck." Chance shook his head. "I should have known better. I'll just... You know, I think I'm done swimming. I'll go get some chips or something for later."

“Shit, shit, shit. What the hell is wrong with me?” Shane swam after Chance, reaching the ladder at the side of the deep end just a few seconds after Chance had climbed out. “Chance, wait!” he called at the guy’s retreating back, but Chance only moved faster. “Shit.”

Shane was even further behind when he made his way through the French doors to the kitchen, largely because he’d stopped to put on his flip flops and grab his towel. The last thing he needed was to piss off Mrs. Breckinridge if she happened to be around. He didn’t see her, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t there.

“Hey, Shane!”

He turned and tried to smile for Jazz as the kid caught up. “Sorry. I need to talk to your brother, but I’ll be back out in a minute.”

Jazz rolled his eyes dramatically. “Please. It takes way longer than a minute to talk Chance out of a sulk. Top of the stairs, go left, then turn right at the first hallway. Last door on the right. Don’t hurry back. I think Nellie and I can have fun without you.”

Damn, the kid’s smirk was funny. Like Jazz thought Shane couldn’t possibly know what he meant. He wasn’t *that* much older than Jazz. Then again, at seventeen, twenty-one had seemed both ancient and too far away, so whatever.

“Thanks. Try not to have *too* much fun. I hear it costs a lot to drain a pool and refill it when the water gets... sullied.”

Shane smiled slightly and walked away, ignoring Jazz’s blushing and sputtering. The kid might be smarter than average, but he was still a kid.

Up the stairs, then left, then right. God, Chance’s house was huge. It looked big from the outside, but it seemed *huge* on the inside, somehow. Kind of like the TARDIS.

The last door on the right was closed, but when Shane gingerly checked the knob, it wasn’t locked, and that was a good thing. He figured Chance wouldn’t let him in if he knocked, so screw it. He pushed the door open and walked inside, already talking.

“Look, Chance, I really didn’t mean that the way it soun... ded. Oh shit. You’re changing. Damn.” That was way better than saying Chance was naked

and looked even better than Shane remembered. Then again, he hadn't seen Chance fully naked in months. Even then, most of their furtive encounters at college had been at least partly clothed, aside from that first, condom-free mistake. "Daaaamn," he said again, because Chance naked was about as *damn* as anyone could be. "Um. Sorry. I'll just... Could you put some clothes on?"

"Could you stop staring at me?" Yeah, Chance sounded like he was sulking, all right.

Shane frowned and shook his head. "No, I don't think I can." It was the truth, but Chance seemed to take it as a joke because he smiled a little. Only for about half a second, but still. Then he leaned toward the bed very quickly and grabbed some folded fabric that turned out to be a long pair of basketball shorts.

"What do you want?" Chance demanded, holding the shorts against his groin, and Shane honestly wasn't sure whether that was better or worse. He still looked really, really good. Good enough to eat, even.

"Now, that's a question. What do I want?" Shane chuckled softly, amused by his own inappropriate thoughts. "I guess I want to tell you... You're right. I did mean it. But I didn't mean to *say* it. I just... Can you put those on? You naked is really distracting. Like *really*, okay?" Especially because certain parts of him seemed to be convinced that naked Chance equaled orgasms soon. Thank God he'd brought his towel, otherwise Chance would know exactly why Shane wanted him to get dressed. Then again, it wasn't much of a mystery, was it? There weren't all that many ways to interpret *your nudity is distracting*.

"Better?" Chance asked a few seconds later, and Shane nodded. "Good. I wouldn't want to make you *uncomfortable*. Any more than I already have, anyway. So, was that it? You meant it but you didn't want to say it? Because if that's all, I have things to do."

"Way to be an asshole, Chance. Good job." Shane frowned and moved closer. "But since you asked, no. That's not all. We've been really good about pretending lately, but I'm tired, okay? I'm tired of pretending, and I'm so fucking sick of trying to figure you out!" He was getting louder, but to hell with it. Maybe he needed to be loud if he wanted Chance to really *hear* him. "One minute, we're friends and joking around, and like a second later, you're being a dick! I already said I was sorry! I shouldn't have said that about the toilet, but I did, and I'm sorry, okay? God, am I sorry!"

“But you shouldn’t be!” Okay, Chance could be loud, too. “Don’t you get it? I *like* you, damn it, but every time I look at you, I remember what I did! What happened to you *because of what I did!* And I hate feeling so fucking guilty all the time, because you were right! Calling you a whore was the least of my sins, and I wish I’d never done it. Any of it! Fuck, I don’t think I could ever forgive you if you’d done it to me, so why the hell are you even talking to me? You should be itching to stab me in the eyes! *I would be!*”

“Well, I’m not you.” Shane felt calm, all of a sudden. Like they were finally getting somewhere. “And I’ll never forget. I can’t. That whole time, everything that happened, it changed me. I’ve only just realized that... it sucked, yeah, but I might just be a better person because of what I went through.” God, he sounded like an idiot. “I guess if... If you can get past the way I outed you with that picture, I can find a way to let go of what happened, and maybe we can be the kind of friends who don’t run away when one of us says something the other doesn’t like.”

He wasn’t sure he was actually mature enough to do that, but while he was still angry sometimes, that wrath wasn’t *always* there, as he’d realized earlier. “It’s worth a try, right?”

Chance looked like he’d just been smacked in the head with a board, but he kind of nodded, just a little. “Uh, I guess so.” He frowned, then shook his head, and Shane wondered whether he’d somehow broken the guy. “I mean, with what Mike said at the diner, about Jimmy seeing us at the lake and telling John, I figure I was already out, even though I didn’t know it. I guess I don’t know why you’d want to try, though. What I did was...”

“Way worse. Yeah,” Shane said bluntly. “But it was a long time ago, and I don’t want to spend the rest of my life being bitter and miserable. Plus, you sort of apologized just now, and...” Crap. Chance had been so damned honest over the last few minutes. Shane needed to be just as truthful or he’d feel like a wuss.

“The truth is, I kind of like you when you’re not being an asshole. I always did.” Man, that was way harder to say than Shane had expected. “So. We cool?”

“I. Yeah. Okay.” But Chance was smiling some, and for whatever reason, that had Shane feeling good. Hopeful, even.

It was after another twenty minutes or so of hashing and rehashing the past, no holds barred, no feelings spared, that Chance stopped talking and turned to face Shane where they sat on the edge of Chance's bed. He looked nervous, Shane thought, which probably meant some other awful revelation was coming. Maybe Chance had posted some shit about him online that Shane didn't know about. He couldn't figure what else it would be.

"What?" he demanded, already steeling himself for whatever bit of nastiness Chance was going to tell him.

Chance seemed even more anxious for a moment, but then he seemed to gather himself together. "I just... This."

The kiss was a surprise. It took Shane a good five seconds of Chance's lips on his own to decide whether that surprise was good or bad, and he still wasn't sure when he let himself kiss back. Then again, the fact that he *let* himself rather than *forced* himself to return the careful melding of mouths was telling.

It didn't last long because Chance pulled back after only the smallest touch of tongues, but he was flushed and breathing faster than before, and the small, uncertain smile he wore was matched by the tentative look in his eyes. "So, uh, when I said I liked you... Can we maybe do something sometime, without Nellie and Jazz? You know, if you want to."

Shane cocked his head and stared at Chance long enough that the guy started to fidget.

"What, like a date? I don't think so," Shane said slowly. "Not now, anyway." Chance blushed again and started to turn away, but Shane stopped him with a hand on his arm. "I think we need to... No, I think *I* need to take the rest of the summer and see how we do with being friends. We can talk about it once we're back at school, if you still want to by then. I just want to be sure we're really done hurting each other on purpose, you know?" He also wanted to see whether they'd be able to trust each other, considering their past. That was the part he really wasn't sure about. He thought it would be hard to do, if it was even possible at all.

Chance looked down at Shane's hand, then back up, and there was something in his eyes that Shane liked. Something he liked a lot, though he couldn't define it. It stayed there even while Chance agreed, seeming reluctant about taking the time, but willing, all the same.

It definitely felt strange to even be considering getting involved with Chance again, but considering wasn't the same as promising, and who knew? Maybe they wouldn't even want to date once they got to know each other better. Shane doubted it, because this older, more grown-up Chance became more appealing every day, but it was possible.

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Chapter Ten

September 2013

One more year of college for his undergrad, then Chance was hoping to be accepted into the MBA program. He hadn't wanted to study business at first, but once he'd started he'd discovered that it wasn't as dry and boring as he'd thought.

He couldn't say that he loved it, but he didn't hate it, either, and Dad was right about someone needing to take over the ranch someday. It wasn't going to be Jazz, so Chance figured it might as well be him. Besides, he loved the ranch. He could think of much worse futures than the one that would let him own and operate it effectively.

He'd tried to schedule his remaining business courses within one semester, but that hadn't been possible. The University College of the State of Nevada apparently frowned upon students taking an advanced class and its prerequisite course simultaneously, but he'd come to appreciate the time involved. It might take him the whole year to convince Shane to go out with him.

Chance laughed to himself, even as he strode up the walkway to the LKNG house. It might take a year, but Chance was hoping for much less. In fact, if everything went the way he'd planned, they'd be dating within the week. That was a big *if*, but he couldn't help feeling hopeful.

He stepped up onto the porch and rang the bell, already smiling when the door opened just a few seconds later. "Shane. Hey."

"Chance." Shane's gaze raked him from eyes to toes, then back again, and Chance swore he felt it like a touch. "You look nice. Where's Jazz?"

"Mom called right as we were leaving. He said he'd meet us there. Where's Nellie?"

Shane made a face. "He grew an inch and a half over the summer. Apparently that means he needed to be measured for a new... whatever they call that white suit fencers wear. So he's running late. He said we should go ahead and save him a seat."

Chance shrugged, though he was grinning on the inside. "Cool. So I guess we should go."

“Yeah, if we want our usual table. I’ll drive this time,” Shane said, stepping outside and closing the door behind him.

“Works for me. You drive, and I’ll captain the sound system.”

Shane groaned. “Don’t tell me. All Scissor Sisters, all the time. Seriously, Chance, you don’t have to embrace your inner gay quite so tightly.”

Chance laughed and walked to the street beside Shane. “Don’t blame me; they’re your CDs.” And Chance had never even heard of the band until the summer just past, when Shane had mentioned them and been horrified by Chance’s ignorance. He’d loved them right away, though. So did Shane. Chance thought Shane just liked giving him a hard time. In more ways than one.

The guy refused to go on a date with him, but sometimes he gave Chance a look that was just... Yeah. Hard times. Very, very hard.

They got into Shane’s car and were almost at the end of the block before Shane spoke again, saying, “I got into VUM.”

Chance stopped flipping through the folder of CDs from the glove box. “That’s Virginia, right? Or... Vermont?” Either one was too damned far away from UCSN. Fuck. He kept forgetting that Shane would be going off to medical school after the current school year ended. Maybe he didn’t want to remember.

“Virginia University of Medicine.” Shane didn’t seem happy, which was weird. “It’s a really good school. Some incredible doctors are alumni.”

“You said that about the other three schools, too. So why aren’t you excited?” It probably didn’t have anything to do with him. Chance knew that. He still couldn’t help hoping.

“I just... shit.” Shane sighed. “Hold on.” Chance arched his brows as Shane turned onto Winnemucca Boulevard, then pulled into the parking lot of a dry cleaner’s. He turned the car off and shifted in his seat while Chance matched the move, turning to face Shane.

“Shane?” he tried, after a very long ten seconds of Shane looking pensive and being completely silent. Chance couldn’t even hear him breathing, he was so quiet. “What’s wrong?” God, let it be something simple. Except Shane wouldn’t seem so on edge if it were simple. “Whatever it is, it’ll be okay.”

“I don’t think I want to be a doctor!” The words burst from Shane like he’d been holding them in for years, and maybe he had. The guy was pre-med, for fuck’s sake. How the hell could he not want to be a doctor?

Chance blinked. “Uh, you didn’t think of that before? I mean, you’re majoring in—”

“I know! Do you think I don’t know that?” Shane looked frantic, all of a sudden. “I had the grades, and it sounded like something I’d enjoy, and when I could help Jazz like that, it felt really, really good, but... I don’t know! I did some research last year, and a little bit already this year, and unless I go into private practice, I’ll end up working in a hospital, but there aren’t enough doctors and it’s years more school, then a residency, and I don’t think I can do it. Not like I’m not capable of it, but like I don’t think I want to! I’m just... I hate the idea of it. I think I always have!”

Christ. If Shane had been carrying all that around with him the whole time, it was fucking amazing that he hadn’t dropped out. Chance would have.

“Okay. So why are you still pre-med?” Chance held up his hands at the glare Shane gave him then. “I mean, how come you... No. I was right before. Why are you still doing it?”

Shane’s glare faded quickly. “I don’t want to disappoint Mom and Rob,” he said, his voice so small and shaky, all of a sudden, Chance had to strain to hear it. “I got my scholarships and grants and loans and stuff, but they’ve been paying the rest, and it’s a lot of money, Chance. A lot! So how can I just be like ‘oh, sorry, changed my mind’? It wouldn’t be fair to them.”

Chance nodded and rested one hand on Shane’s leg, letting the other drop to his side. “I totally get that. My big dream wasn’t to get a business degree. Hell, I don’t think I even *had* a big dream. But I think I’ll be happy running the ranch one day, so I cope. It sounds like you don’t like medicine at all, though, so I’m not sure where that leaves you.” Fuck. He was no help at all.

“I don’t hate medicine.” Shane sounded sincere. He looked it, too. “I’m just not sure about being a doctor. I was kind of thinking of... but it’s stupid.”

“I doubt that,” Chance said, smiling slightly as he moved his hand from Shane’s knee to tangle his fingers with Shane’s. “You’re not a stupid guy. I mean, you’re not as smart as Jazz, but who is, right?” Shane’s lips twitched into a tiny grin. “So, what’s this idea of yours?”

There were a lot of details that didn't make a whole lot of sense to Chance, but after ten minutes or so, he thought he had the general gist of things. He hoped so, anyway.

"If it matters at all, I think you'd be a great nurse. Especially if you're right about being able to transfer your pre-med credits to nursing school. You were awesome with Jazz that time. I noticed, even if I was being a dick."

Shane snorted. "If? There's no 'if' involved."

Chance chuckled. "Okay. That's fair. But you'd be great in Emergency Services. That's what it's called, right? Whatever. And it wouldn't be another ten years or however long it'd take to become a doctor."

"And I could go for being a Nurse Practitioner, if I wanted to," Shane added—or repeated, maybe, because the title sounded a little familiar. "NPs can... you know what? You can look it up online. I'll just say that being a Nurse Practitioner is the next best thing to a doctor and leave it at that. But I'm worried about what Mom and Rob will say."

"How about you make an appointment with your faculty advisor and see what they think before you go to your folks? That way you'll be sure of what you need to tell them and how it'll affect your schooling." Chance squeezed Shane's hand. "And since you can't make an appointment until Monday morning, how do you feel about letting it go for now and just enjoying dinner and the movie tonight?"

Shane took a deep, slow breath and exhaled with apparent relief. "Yeah. Yeah, I can do that. Um, you know, if my advisor thinks this'll work, maybe he'll help me apply to the nursing school here. It'd be nice to not have to leave my friends. And I'd miss LKNG house."

Chance's heart beat a bit faster at the idea that maybe he wouldn't be losing Shane in less than a year, after all. Not that he *had* Shane, but still. Having more time would give him more of a chance to wear Shane down. Assuming dinner didn't do it.

"That's something to consider, too," Chance agreed as Shane started the car and left the parking lot, heading down Winnemucca toward the restaurant. "So, are you feeling more like *Night Work* or *Magic Hour*?"

"You and the Scissor Sisters," Shane said, laughing. "I swear, if I ever hear about some hot young guy being arrested for stalking Jake Shears, I'll know it's you even before seeing the mug shot."

Chance snorted. "I like their music, but Jake's not my type." Because he wasn't Shane, but Chance couldn't say that. Not yet. Or mention just how much more hopeful he was at hearing Shane call him hot.

Chance pretended not to be too interested when Shane's phone buzzed. He acted surprised when Shane looked at it and said, "It's Nellie."

He didn't pay close attention to Shane's side of the phone conversation, mostly because he already knew what Nellie was saying. He still let Shane tell him once the call ended.

"After Nellie's fencing suit fitting, he ran into Jazz. They decided to hang out at the house instead of Jazz driving over here. Um, sorry." Shane bit his lip, and Chance nearly groaned. He didn't want to bite it for Shane or anything, but it bothered him that Shane seemed so flustered about Jazz and Nellie not joining them.

Chance shrugged, though he really wanted to reach across the table and take Shane's hand. To comfort or console him, one or the other. Maybe both. "It's cool. Seriously, I don't know why Jazz doesn't just move in with him, already. He'll be eighteen in like a week and a half."

Shane smiled, setting that lip free. "Because Nellie won't let him. He catches enough shit for having a boyfriend who's technically jailbait. The last thing he needs is Jazz moving in before he's legal. If anyone found out and wanted to make trouble, it could hurt Nellie's family. His mom's an ambassador, remember? And his sister's marrying that Lord Whatever of Somewhere."

Well, that made sense. Chance didn't know why Jazz wouldn't have told him that himself, but at least he knew, finally. "But once he's eighteen, that's the plan?"

"As far as I know. And you're way more anxious to pimp out your brother than I thought you'd be after all your 'he's only seventeen, they'd better not be sexing it up' talk this summer." Shane's smile became a teasing grin.

"I'm not pimping him out," Chance grumbled dramatically. "I just want him to be happy, and with the amount of moping around and pouting Jazz has been doing since we got back from Wyoming, living with Nellie is what's going to make him happy. I can tell you that Mom isn't thrilled, which is probably why

she called tonight. So are you cool with just the two of us having dinner and catching that movie?"

Shane's eyes widened slightly. "Yeah. Are you? I know we don't really do stuff alone, so if you'd rather not, it's okay." And there was that pensive look again, damn it.

Chance thought his own eyes might be wide, too. With disbelief, if nothing else. "Are you for real? I've only been trying to get you to go on a date with me since July. Trust me, I'm *very* good with it being just us. There's no place I'd rather be."

"I. Oh." Okay, stunned was a good look on Shane. "So you want this to be a date?"

"I do." Fuck, he hoped Shane wanted that, too. Nellie and Jazz said Shane was interested. That was the only reason they'd gone along with Chance's plan. Well, not the only reason. He was sure they were glad to be on their own, as well. "Uh, I guess it doesn't have to be if you don't want it to..." Shit, he sounded like a frightened kid. Time to man-up.

"I'd like to call this our first official date. There. I said it."

A slow smile grew on Shane's face, and those pretty eyes crinkled just a tiny bit at the corners. "Okay, then. We're on a date. Dinner and a movie. It's a classic."

Well, thank fuck! "I'll try to come up with something more original for future dates. So, do you want wine with dinner? I've heard they have a good house red, here."

Shane's nose wrinkled slightly. "No, thanks. I'm not that big of a drinker. Now, when you say 'future dates,' you mean you want us to do this again?"

"Not this exactly, but you know. Stuff. Together. Without Jazz and Nellie, or anyone else. Just us."

Shane looked thoughtful, then nodded. "Okay, we can do that. I think I'm going to have the fettuccini Alfredo and a Sprite."

Jesus Christ. If he'd known it would be that easy to convince Shane to date him now that they'd returned to UCSN, he would have asked the day they got back. Even so, it was nice to know Shane really was interested. And that they'd worked their way past their history, for the most part. That bit was best of all.

October

Four dates in the two weeks since their first, and Chance thought he and Shane were doing pretty well. Shane seemed more relaxed, anyway, though Chance figured at least part of that was due to clearing things up about his future. Shane's advisor had somehow worked things out, and the next fall, Shane would be starting classes at UCSN's nursing college. According to Shane, his folks didn't really understand, but they were going along with things. Chance thought they really just wanted Shane to be happy but were probably afraid Shane would regret his decision later.

The other part of Shane seeming less anxious was, Chance hoped, because of him, or more precisely, because of the relationship they were building. Their dates had been good so far, if not always date-like. They'd just finished a night of bowling followed by slices of piping lukewarm pizza at the one campus cafeteria that stayed open late on Friday nights. A lot of people would think that wasn't much of a date, but they'd had a good time together, and that was what counted.

The drive back to Shane's was fairly quiet, which was fine. They were getting good at spending quiet time together. Rebecca said it was a good sign that they were comfortable enough with each other that they didn't need to fill every second with random chatter, and Chance liked that idea. Hoped it was true for Shane, because it was for him. He liked just being there with the guy; enjoying his presence.

The car slowed and Chance pulled himself away from thinking... and staring at Shane's profile from the corner of his eye. He turned and stared more openly while Shane pulled into a spot by the curb.

"Do you want to come in for a while?" Shane's smile was tiny and seemed both hopeful and tentative. Like he wanted Chance to come inside but was also a little unsure. Chance wasn't sure, either, but they couldn't just sit in Shane's car in front of the LKNG house all night.

Usually, at that point, they would get out of the car and Chance would spend a few minutes leaning against it, talking with Shane about the date they'd just finished. Then they'd kiss for a little while, and Chance would go to his Jeep and head home, where he would relieve the inevitable outcome of spending time with—making out with—Shane. Shane asking him if he wanted to go inside was new. Not bad, but... new.

“You don’t have to,” Shane added, and Chance startled slightly. “Maybe it’s too soon. I mean—”

“No! No, I want to!” Fuck, did he ever want to. “I’m just... Okay, I don’t want to sound like a dick, but I’m not sure I can hang out and watch TV or whatever and not try to get you naked. Not on the living room couch, but... Fuck, you know what I mean!” And this was what happened when he tried not to lie to Shane. It would have been so much easier to just make something up. Like he had to get home, or go to the store. Something. Anything. Instead, he’d basically said he was too fucking horny to hang out. What the fuck!

“Oh.” The tiny smile Shane had been wearing grew, suddenly. “So when I said ‘maybe it’s too soon,’ you thought I meant too soon for TV. Really?” Shane laughed. “Okay. Let’s try this again. ‘Hey, Chance! I just bought a brand new box of condoms. Do you want to come inside and help me use them? And by the way, when I said come in *for a while*, I meant I’d like you to stay the night.’ Does that clear things up for you?”

That smug fucking tone was annoying as hell. So was the arched brow that implied Chance was slow, as in riding-the-short-bus slow. Chance didn’t know how a single brow could imply anything, but Shane’s for damned sure did. As irritating as both tone and brow were, the words they accompanied were the complete opposite of annoying. Those words were... hot. Clean-hot, but still dirty enough to have Chance feeling even more horny than thinking about kissing Shane already had him.

“Clear as fucking crystal,” he managed to say, even as he fumbled at his seatbelt. “Take that as a yes. Yes, I’m coming in. Or you are. I don’t give a shit who does what, man. I just need... What the fuck is wrong with this belt!” He tugged at it hard, almost ready to growl, but who growled? He was a man, not a dog, for fuck’s sake.

Shane laughed again and reached over. Less than two seconds later the seatbelt released, and while Chance felt a little bit embarrassed at needing Shane to set him free, he was fairly sure he’d only needed the help because the majority of his blood was involved in a mass exodus from brain to smaller head.

“Thanks,” he muttered, getting out of the car as quickly as possible. “Come on! We should get inside.”

Shane emerged from the Mazda much more slowly than Chance had done, and while he was still grinning, he didn’t seem to be in any rush. “Slow down,

okay?" he said, more of a demand than a suggestion. "I promise you I'm not gonna change my mind. Especially after what Jazz said the other day."

Chance frowned. Shane wanted to have sex with him because of Jazz? No. That didn't make any sense. It better be just as fucking stupid an idea as Chance thought, damn it. "What did he say?" That sounded way better than asking what the fuck Jazz had to do with anything.

"Just that we've really been dating for months, not weeks," Shane answered, coming around the car and stepping up beside Chance. Chance reached automatically for Shane's hand and held in a relieved sigh when Shane grasped his fingers without even a slight hesitation. "Your brother's position is that all those times the four of us went places or hung out this summer was really us double dating with them."

Chance blinked and squeezed Shane's fingers a little tighter. "Uh, okay. I mean, I didn't think we were... *that*, but uh..."

Shane nodded and started to move toward the house, slowly enough that Chance barely noticed moving along with him. "I know, right? But he had all these examples and stuff, and you know how he is. At some point, everything he says starts to make sort-of-sense and by the time he's done, you're confused but sure he's right."

Chance laughed. Yeah, that pretty much described it. Fuck knew how Nellie dealt with it when he couldn't really smack Jazz in the head the way Chance generally did, but that wasn't any of Chance's business. At all. Brother was very different from boyfriend, and... Chance would have to hurt Nellie, friend or not, if the guy ever hit Jazz, which was also not relevant right then. "Uh-huh," he muttered. "So?"

"So I decided Jazz was right, and that means we've been dating for months now, even if we didn't know it. So it's time." Shane stopped and turned to look at him, and even in the less than optimal light coming from the bulb in the porch fixture, Chance could see that Shane's face was red. "Well, that and I'm really, really horny. God, it's been *months* since the last time we... And there's only so much satisfaction I can get from my hand. I want *you*, Chance. Oh, God. Now I sound like a slut. Shit!"

Chance considered acting offended, but he just didn't have it in him. Not when Shane was offering a perfectly good excuse for both of them to do exactly what they wanted to do.

“You’re kidding right?” he finally said, leaning in until just a scant quarter inch or so separated their mouths. “You haven’t had sex with anyone but yourself since April, and you think wanting to do it now makes you slutty? Christ, Shane. We really need to work on your comprehension skills. ‘Slut’ is what you call someone who had so many random guys wandering through his place that his kid brother wanted to install a revolving door and one of those number machines they use at deli counters.” Apparently it was Chance’s turn to blush, because his face was warm, all of a sudden.

“Uh, I haven’t done that since *before* April, by the way. In case you were wondering.” *He* would have been wondering if he’d been Shane. In fact, Chance was kind of disgusted with himself for being so easy, or more like so desperate to forget the way Shane felt when they’d been going through their weird hate-sex phase.

Shane didn’t reply, or not with words. Instead, he leaned in, and Chance moaned quietly when those soft lips met his own. He returned the small, simple kiss. Of course he did. Then he sighed with disappointment when Shane pulled back.

“We should get inside,” Shane murmured. “Before we start something out here that’ll get us arrested.”

Chance couldn’t argue with that, and didn’t bother trying. He just let Shane pull him, unresisting, to the porch, then inside the house and up the stairs. He waved vaguely with his free hand when they passed the living room because there were people there, though he couldn’t have said who, or even what they were doing. He didn’t care. The only thing that mattered was getting to Shane’s room and closing the door. Pulling Shane close and melding their mouths, tongues playing more and more seriously, hands stroking skin as clothing was shed.

Yeah, that was what mattered. All that mattered.

It was strange, being in bed with Shane. Naked. Not hurried or frantic, though Chance was definitely feeling impatient. That was likely because he hadn’t gone more than a week without some sort of sex since his first fumbling encounter in Miami, right up until that last time with Shane. Porn and the slender dildo Chance had at his apartment weren’t the same. Neither of them ever had him feeling such a near-scary amount of anticipation. They couldn’t

touch him, taste his skin, or drive against him, hard cock slicking his thigh with fluids.

“Come on, come on, come on...”

“I kind of want to take my time,” Shane muttered against his neck, and that was when Chance knew he’d been the one begging for speed and action and heat, for fuck’s sake. “This means something. More than just fucking. Um, doesn’t it?”

Christ, the way Shane sounded so unsure actually hurt. It stabbed him in the fucking heart and had him bleeding on the inside, it felt like. “Fuck, yes,” Chance groaned, rolling them on the queen-sized bed. A king would be better, but fuck if he was going to stop so they could go to his place. Screw that. Shane might change his mind, and Chance figured he might die if that happened.

“It’s not just fucking,” he said plainly, staring down into Shane’s wide, worried eyes. “Sorry. I’m just having a hard time believing this is real. I keep thinking you’re going to come to your senses and kick me out. Don’t, okay?” He dove in, mouth attacking Shane’s, not letting him answer until they came up for air.

“Huh?” Yeah, Shane sounded like himself again, sort of. A little dazed, but not at all hesitant when he went on, saying, “Why did you stop? Chance...” He bucked up, arching from the mattress, and Chance groaned.

“Oh, fuck. Let me just...” The box of condoms was right there beside the bed, unopened, beside a brand new pump dispenser of lube. Chance had almost laughed when he’d first seen it, wondering whether Shane really thought they needed porn film quantities, but he hadn’t. Hell, with the way he felt right then, he thought they might go through at least half of the damned container.

It took only moments to tear open the box and yank out a strip of four rubbers. It took about the same to rip one off, open it, and apply it to Shane’s rampant cock. Fuck, Shane’s cock was thicker than Chance remembered. Then again, he hadn’t really seen it since they were kids. He’d held it, jerked it, felt it spill hot seed over his fingers, and throb hard inside him, since, but he hadn’t actually seen it. Not clearly. So, yeah. Thicker than he recalled, but not too much so. He could definitely handle it. Hell, he was looking forward to it.

Two pumps of the lube top, five seconds slicking himself up. Another squirt of slick, this time for Shane’s covered cock, and Chance stared hard into Shane’s shadowed eyes; Shane’s already ecstatic face.

He slung one leg over Shane's body, hands on those broad but not bulky shoulders. "Hold yourself for me, okay? I need you to. Just 'til I get your tip in."

Shane caught his breath, and Chance liked that. Liked that Shane was maybe just as shaky as Chance felt, though Chance was doing his best not to let it show. Everything felt so big, so important, and that was beyond strange. Sex wasn't supposed to feel momentous, was it?

Fuck supposed to, he decided, even as he sat back, shifting his hips, his ass, until he felt Shane's cock in exactly the right spot. "Yessss," he hissed quietly. "Right there. Let me just..." He shifted slightly, back and forth, not letting that slick tip escape, and finally he pressed down, a long, low groan leaving him as his body opened, taking Shane in.

"Fuck, oh fuck! Fuck, Chance, you feel... God!" Shane's eyes were squeezed shut, but that was okay. It only meant Shane couldn't see whatever was in Chance's stare. Chance suspected it wasn't anything he wanted Shane seeing just yet, anyway.

"Uh-huh." That was all he could manage as he pressed back and down further, his body objecting to the intrusion, though only slightly. It had been a while, after all, and if Chance was being honest, it hurt a little. If he was being *really* honest, he liked that it hurt. He liked that this time—being with Shane, with most of their history dealt with, and a relationship still developing but going well—would leave a mark on him, in a way. Liked that the small pain reminded him that this moment had been years in the making. That it was actually happening, considering how unlikely he would have thought it to be, even a year earlier.

He shored up against Shane's groin, skin on skin, fully impaled on Shane's cock. It felt huge inside him, and so fucking hot. Then Shane's hands found his hips, and Shane gasped when Chance started rocking a little, letting the motion loosen him a bit more.

"I want to ride you," Chance murmured, still shifting back and forth, side to side. "Fuck, man, I want to bounce on your fucking cock like it's a pogo stick." Shit, that sounded classy. *Not*. "I mean, that makes it sound cheap, but—"

"God, shut up!" Shane's eyes were open again. Open and hot. Open and laughing, somehow. Open and not at all upset. "I don't care if you want to call my cock the king of your bouncy castle. Just do something, Chance!"

He would have laughed at realizing just how little romance Shane needed, but he was too busy following the direction of the hands on him. Too caught up in lifting himself up and dropping back down while Shane guided him, his own cock bouncing along with the rest of him as he took Shane in again and again, short, sharp cries leaving him each time Shane was balls-deep.

It might have been minutes or hours of rising and falling, Shane's noises echoing his own. Time wasn't running smoothly for him right then. A single upward thrust from Shane seemed to go on forever, then the next three or four went by in a flash. However long it was, it couldn't go on forever. Chance knew that. It still came as a surprise when Shane surged up and slammed their mouths together, then pushed him over backwards.

Chance cried out again, louder, his head hanging off the end of the bed as Shane drove into him harder, faster than Chance could remember experiencing before, even when they'd been hate-fucking their way toward homicide.

"Fuck! Yes!" Christ, he sounded so damned needy. "Harder!" What the fuck? Harder? Was he insane? If Shane fucked him any harder, Chance figured he'd wind up on the floor after falling on his head.

Harder happened, but it didn't last long, which was just as well because the second *harder* thrust pegged Chance's prostate like a stronger, faster jackhammer, and that was all he could take. All his *body* could take.

He came with a long, shaky cry, seed spilling from his cock onto his own stomach, smaller spurts pulsing forth in time with Shane's thrusts, right up until Shane's stuttered cry intensified a good minute later. Shane stilled, buried deep, cock throbbing strongly enough that Chance felt each surge within him as Shane finally came, too.

"Jesus," Chance said on a happy but tired sigh, once Shane recovered enough to pull away and dispose of the latex. "This shit better work out, man, because I have to tell you. That was the best sex I've had in my life. Ever. *Fuck.*" It wasn't the sort of thing he would have admitted before, but somehow he could do it with Shane. He felt a little vulnerable at having said it, but he wasn't sorry. He was totally taking this thing between them seriously and that meant exposing himself in ways other than the physical, or so he'd heard. It felt... good.

Shane chuckled and settled on the bed again. "It was pretty great, yeah. Do you think you might want to stop hanging off the bed and maybe lie down with

me? I think there's something decent on HBO. Or I could go grab something to drink. Or snacks. Snacks would be good, right?"

Chance laughed and shifted until he made his way up the bed. "We can get drinks and snacks later. Right now, let's check out HBO. And I should probably get cleaned up. Lube always feels weird when you're not using it for anything."

"See, that makes it sound like you think we're done. But it's cool if you want to wash up. I wouldn't mind doing that, too. It'll be that much more fun to get you all *dirtied* up again later."

Chance shook his head and pulled Shane closer. "And I was worried you'd regret this. Fuck, I love surprises."

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Chapter Eleven

February 2014

“So what was this? Just some temporary fucking *game* to you? Mess with the guy who screwed you over, make him think you care, then tell him there’s a fucking *expiration date* on your relationship? Like this is all payback! It is, isn’t it? Some fucking long-term revenge!” Chance looked even more pissed off than he sounded as he jumped up from the couch in the apartment’s living room, and that was saying a lot. Even so, Shane wasn’t about to take that kind of shitty accusation from his boyfriend.

“Did you just air-quote *relationship* at me?” He wasn’t actually upset. He couldn’t be. “And did you really just say that the last six months—including the summer—have been a carefully plotted screw-you? Because seriously, Chance, I didn’t say anything like that. If you think about it, you know I didn’t.”

It had started out as a great Valentine’s Day, but it wasn’t turning out anything like as well as it began. With any luck, Chance would calm the hell down and listen. Shane wasn’t going to let his first Valentine’s Day with a special someone turn to shit. Especially not when that special person was Chance, damn it. Of course, Shane had been expecting Chance’s trust issues to come out eventually. They both still had them. He’d have preferred Chance’s to emerge on a different day, though.

“Bullshit.” Regardless of the word, Chance sounded less hurt. “You said you weren’t going back to Wyoming after nursing school. Since you know I *am* going back after I get my MBA, that means we’re breaking up. And you didn’t even talk to me about it! How is that not dumping me?”

Shane sighed. “See, this is what happens when you don’t let me finish. What I said was I’m not sure, okay? That I need to think about it. Fortunately, I have three years, give or take.” He still wasn’t sure how many of the classes he’d already taken would satisfy requirements for the nursing school—he might have to retake some, or possibly just take comprehensive exams each semester to see whether he could test out of some courses that were similar but not exactly the same as those he’d completed before—but he wasn’t concerned with that at the moment. He was more worried about Chance.

“But you might not go home.” Chance seemed to be stuck on that.

“I might not,” Shane agreed. “Carter wasn’t exactly good to me, and you know it. If it weren’t for my mom and Rob being there, I probably wouldn’t have *ever* gone back, even for holidays, once I escaped. But they do live there and they’re my family, so that matters. And you’re in Breckinridge, so that’s a factor, too. I’m not saying I’m gonna dump you, asshole, but I didn’t want to keep it all to myself, either.” He sighed again. “You’re a huge part of my life, Chance, and maybe we’ve only been together for what, four months, officially? You’re still important to me. Our *relationship*,” he air-quoted sarcastically, “is important to me. I’m not trying to give you notice. I just didn’t want you to be in the dark about what’s going on in my head.”

Chance frowned. “I guess I forgot how much you fucking hate it there. I mean, I had it pretty bad, too, but it was way worse for you. Fuck, why would you even be *thinking* about going back when it was such a fucking nightmare?” From sixty to zero in two-point-three seconds. God.

“And you’re saying ‘fuck’ a lot. Again.” Shane shook his head and pushed up from the couch, too, moving across the small living area to stand in front of Chance. “A lot of it is gonna come down to research, okay? Right now, there are lots of jobs for nurses in our part of the state. If I go for the nurse practitioner courses, those are graduate level, so it’d take a while longer. I might just get my RN, then see about taking those courses over a few years or something. But the point is, when I get closer to graduating from the nursing college, I’ll need to see what the job market is like back home *then*. That’s gonna be part of it.”

That and how people acted over the next few years when he went home to visit. He still didn’t have any great hope that Carter, Wyoming, would suddenly start flying a rainbow flag in front of Town Hall, but the few times he’d been out and about during vacations, there’d seemed to be less venom sent his way with both looks and comments. Maybe things were changing.

Chance’s old friends had for damned sure done a one-eighty since way back when, but that was Breckinridge. Breckinridge was way more cosmopolitan than Carter, though that wasn’t saying much.

Chance looked like he really wanted to still be upset and angry, but it seemed like Shane being reasonable had derailed that particular train, thank God. Chance didn’t lose his temper often, but when he did, it tended to be epic. This time, he’d calmed down a lot, and quickly. Enough to ask, “What’s the other part?”

“Huh?” Okay, way to sound like an idiot. Good going.

“The other part of deciding if you’re going home. You said the job thing is part of it, and I totally get that, but what’s the other part?”

Shane smiled and gave Chance what he hoped was a teasing but seductive look. “Oh, that. See, there’s this guy I’ve been seeing. He was a real *douchebag* when we were kids—”

“Hey!” Chance grumbled, but Shane saw his lips starting to twitch at the corners.

“So this *douchebag* turned out to be a pretty decent guy in the end, and it turns out that I really care about him a lot.” Shane grinned and rested his hands on Chance’s waist, moving just a bit closer. “So... if we’re still getting along by the time I finish school, I’ll definitely take that into consideration. He means a lot to me, even though he can be one hell of an asshole sometimes.”

Chance kept almost smiling, but was clearly doing his damndest not to. “You like my asshole,” he muttered, and Shane laughed. More than laughed, he cackled. God, he sounded like a witch from a bad TV movie.

“*Like* might not be a strong enough word,” Shane admitted once he was able to speak again. “I think I may love it almost as much as I love you.”

As sudden as it was, Shane didn’t mind having Chance’s lips on his within moments. He wasn’t sure what had brought on such a radical shift from reluctantly-amused-and-needing-validation to horny-as-hell-and-needing-Shane, but he wasn’t about to complain. Not even close.

Shane hadn’t been sure he was going to do it that night. Not until Chance reached for the condoms and lube. He watched Chance open one of the silvery packets and bit his own lip, then made his decision.

“Wait,” he said, one hand on Chance’s arm, stopping him from putting the latex on him. “I think... If you want to, you could wear that this time.” God, he felt like a dork. Could he be any more awkward?

“Uh, what do you—? I mean, you said you haven’t, and...”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Shane said with a rueful laugh, stealing one of Chance’s phrases. “We sound like a couple of morons. What I meant to say is ‘if you want to, you can be in me this time.’ God. And you’re right. I haven’t

done it before, but that doesn't mean I haven't thought about it. It's just... I almost did, once, but I wanted it to be with someone I was gonna be with for a while, and he wasn't that for me. You are. So if you want to, I'd like to." He frowned. "Okay, that didn't sound any less awkward and stupid, did it?"

Chance laughed, but it sounded breathless. "Not stupid," he said, and yeah. Breathless but smiling. That was probably good. No, it was definitely good. "We'll go slow," he added, and they did. They went so slow that Shane was almost ready to beg by the time Chance had two fingers inside him.

It felt strange, having Chance's fingers there. Good-strange, with a side of slightly painful burn because Chance's digits were thicker and rougher than Nellie's had ever been, but from everything Shane had heard and read, that was to be expected. He hadn't thought he'd like it so much—he hadn't with Nellie—but it was good that he did. He couldn't imagine having to tell Chance to stop when the guy was so obviously excited about what they were doing. Then again, any time there was nudity and a bed involved, Chance was into it, so whatever.

"Come on, Chance," Shane groaned, body starting to move, to beg silently for him. "I don't want to come without you in me, okay?" God, he hadn't even known he was that close. It was like saying the words made them true, damn it.

"I don't want to hurt you." That was sweet, though Shane would never say so. Chance didn't like to think of himself as sweet or cute or anything so fluffy-kitten-ish. That didn't change the fact that Shane found him to be those things. It just meant Shane never said them after the first few times.

"God damn it! You won't hurt me! Come on! Get your cock in me, asshole!"

Chance sniggered. "Really? What are you, a leprechaun? 'Get yer cock in me arsehole!' I swear I'm not after your lucky charms."

Shane glared, fighting a laugh at Chance's horrible Irish accent. "Fuck you. Just forget it. I *don't* want you to—Oh, hell!" The burn was hotter, all of a sudden, and Chance's fingers felt thicker, or maybe... God, he'd added one, and it was worse, but better, too. "Oh, God. Yeah, that's... Uh-huh." Crap, he was shivering, it felt so good and bad, all at once. Then Chance moved his fingers, and Shane felt the stretch. Less than a minute later, most of the bad had faded, and he shifted again, anxious for more.

“Chance,” he moaned, hands clenched in the sheets as he tried to hold out. “Please.”

Moments passed in a flash of motion, and Shane found himself staring into Chance’s eyes, then joining his kiss. He wasn’t sure when those fingers had withdrawn, but he for damned sure noticed it when Chance was poised at his hole, rubber slick and hot with the cock inside it.

“Just breathe,” Chance murmured against his lips before pushing his tongue inside to meet Shane’s own, swallowing the hiss as Shane’s body tried to refuse Chance entry.

He needed to relax, but that was easier said than done. Still, Chance was being careful. Maybe Shane just wasn’t meant to bottom. It shouldn’t be that difficult, but it was. Then Chance pressed harder and it started to hurt. More than the fingers, more than... Shane didn’t know what. He sucked air through his nose, trying to take enough in to tell Chance *no*, that he’d changed his mind, that Chance had lied because he so clearly *did* want to hurt him.

Another degree of pressure and Shane couldn’t take it, couldn’t stand it. It felt wrong and painful and there was no way he was supposed to be doing this, but he couldn’t break away from Chance’s mouth to say so. All he could do was flex his ass, shoving up to try to dislodge Chance, and that was when it happened.

Something eased, then gave, letting Chance in, and Shane wanted to shout at the sharp, piercing burn, but still couldn’t. Then Chance sank further into him and the pain went away but the burn remained, hot and somehow exciting.

“Oh, fuck,” Chance groaned against his cheek, and it was only then that Shane realized the kiss had ended. “Jesus Christ, you feel good.” That was followed by what felt like another foot of hard cock sliding into him, and Shane gasped. “Oh, yeah. Almost halfway there, Shane. Fuck, you’re amazing.”

Almost halfway? Only almost *half*? Hell, it felt like Chance’s cock was in his stomach already! That much more and it might come out of his mouth! “Oh, God,” he groaned, then cried out, sharp and short, when Chance pressed on, only this time the intrusion slid hard against Shane’s prostate and he changed his mind. “More, damn it!”

Chance chuckled and pushed up onto his hands. “And that’s the spot.” Then they were kissing again, and Chance was sawing back and forth, in and out,

tormenting the hell out of that place inside him, and they were only maybe a minute in before Shane felt the unmistakable sensation of building release that had mostly vanished during the penetration portion of the festivities.

“Oh! Oh, yeah. God, yeah,” he mumbled, moving again, body shifting to get more of Chance inside, to feel all of that incredible cock against his happy place, and just like that, Shane was coming. He lost track of the kiss, lost track of trying to breathe. Everything narrowed down to that one point of connection and the sheer satisfaction that pulsed from him in spurts that splattered between them. His back arched like a bow against the mattress, and all the while, Chance kept moving, pushing him through his orgasm.

“Jesus,” Chance panted, still going strong. “Jesus fucking Christ. Coming, Shane. I’m fucking coming. Coming in you. Fuck!”

Shane did his best to move with Chance, to bring him off as completely as Chance had done him. He rocked his hips into and away from Chance’s thrusts, shuddering and shaking as each slide against his prostate created shivery echoes of orgasm, and when Chance finally pressed even deeper and stayed there, body trembling, Shane thought he might just come again, as physically impossible as that was.

Chance’s arms gave out slowly, and Shane’s were there to wrap around him as they lay together, hearts slowing, breath gently shifting from ragged gasps to something more smooth and even. The sweat Shane hadn’t even noticed on both of them cooled in the air, and still they remained where they were, just holding on.

It was funny to be feeling things from that end for a change. Shane couldn’t decide why it seemed different when it was still post-coital companionship. It shouldn’t make a difference which of them had topped, but somehow it did. He felt different, holding Chance after having Chance inside him. Not better or worse, just different.

“You okay?” Chance barely pulled his mouth from the crook of his neck, but even if he’d spoken directly against Shane’s skin, Shane suspected he would have heard him. “Tell me I didn’t hurt you.”

Shane smiled, tightening his arms around Chance just a bit more. “I’m fine. You?”

“Good,” Chance answered, though whether he meant good that he hadn’t hurt Shane or that *he* was good, Shane didn’t know. Maybe both. Chance didn’t

generally talk much after sex. That seemed to hold true regardless of which side he was on. “You like it?”

It was a good question, but it took Shane a few seconds to figure out a good answer. “It was really, really good. I’m glad we did it. Um, I’m not sure I want to do that all the time, though.”

“Hmmpf.” Chance sighed and moved on him enough that Shane reluctantly let go. “Sorry,” Chance said, pulling away, “but I need to take care of the condom. Doesn’t make much sense to use it if I don’t get rid of it before it can come off inside you.”

“True.” It wasn’t something Shane had thought about with their switched positions. He was used to finishing, then getting up to handle business. He hadn’t really thought about Chance needing to do the same. “You know, we should think about getting tested together,” he said when Chance returned from the bathroom. “We’re both negative, but it couldn’t hurt to double check, right?”

“You sure? That’s pretty serious. I mean, we’re a serious thing, but that’s, you know, a big deal.”

Shane looked at Chance, trying to gauge his feelings on the subject, but Chance wasn’t giving any signs, either way. “Yeah,” Shane said, deciding it would be best to just go with it. “I’m sure. Aren’t you?”

The smile that grew on Chance’s face then answered better than any words ever could, and when Chance pulled him closer and kissed him slow and deep, Shane was truly happy for the first time in a long time. “I do, too,” Chance said simply. “Love you. You know that, right?”

“I do now.” Shane suspected that he was beaming, but that was fine. Then he wrinkled his nose. “I also know why you like to clean up after, now. Ugh, the leftover lube feels nasty. I think I’m gonna take a shower.”

Chance laughed. “I’ll change the sheets and be in in a minute. I guess it’s a good thing I really like it when you do me, considering you said you liked it but don’t want to do it all the time. I mean, I loved being inside you, don’t get me wrong. But it doesn’t feel like a regular thing. Just... I don’t know. When we need it.”

“Yeah,” Shane agreed, feeling relieved. “I was afraid you’d be upset. And it really was good! I swear! I would totally do it again, sometime.”

“Just not anytime soon.” Chance laughed again. “Okay, go shower. Don’t rush. I want to wash your back.”

Funny how something that could have been a big thing really wasn’t. Shane had been almost sure Chance would have an issue with him preferring to pitch. That Chance was fine with it only proved that Shane still had a lot to learn about his man. Good thing, too. If they ever knew everything about each other, they might get bored, and that was something to avoid at all costs. A little mystery could be intriguing, and Shane had every intention of being intrigued for a long time to come.

They still had their issues, of course, but they were figuring things out, and so far, so good. There were days when he was so on edge, he could barely think straight, and Chance had days like that, too. They dealt with it, though, and somehow managed to come out of those strangely unbalanced times stronger. Better.

If anyone had told him, back at the start of his freshman year at UCSN, that he would end up loving Chance Breckinridge, of all people, Shane would have been sure they were clinically insane, but the joke would have been on him. And on Chance, too.

Shane couldn’t swear that they’d be together forever, but it *felt* like they would, and for the moment? That was good enough.

The End

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Author Bio

Contrary to popular opinion, T.C. Blue was not raised by wolves. Nor did she spring, fully formed, from the forehead of a god, instead entering the world in the usual manner.

A true jack of all trades and master of none (otherwise known as flighty and unable to make a decision and stick with it), she currently resides near the East Coast where she does her best to avoid politics and religions as a general rule.

T.C. can usually be found sitting in front of her computer, trying to wrangle rabid and numerous plot bunnies, though her muses insist that she not be too hard on the poor little fluffy things. (Poor little fluffy things with sharp teeth and claws, but whatever. Muses don't seem to care much about the possible bloodshed if the bunnies think T.C.'s not writing quickly enough.)

Contact & Media Info

One thing sure to calm the bunnies is hearing from readers, so please feel free to contact T.C. by email, or stalk her on Twitter and/or on Facebook.

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ERIC ALAN WESTFALL



The Rake,
the Rogue
and the Roué

THE RAKE, THE ROGUE AND THE ROUÉ

By Eric Alan Westfall

Photo Description

He's blond, with his hair à la Brutus. He's broad-shouldered. He's beautiful. He's a Regency rake in a cutaway coat, cravat with stickpin, waistcoat and undoubtedly very tight inexpressibles (certainly golden-furred beneath all that), standing in a ballroom with golden pillars, lit by hundreds of candles in glittering gold-and-crystal candelabra and chandeliers. He doesn't yet know who's heading toward him, or his eager expression might not be so... eager.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He is spending this entire night dodging his mother, marriage-minded nitwits and the mothers of the "nitwits". Why he agreed to come to this ball he doesn't know, it's not like he's ever going to marry. Then they showed up, both of them. Together. He doesn't understand it, they hate each other. He is best friends with both but he pulled back from each relationship because he couldn't stand the bickering and snide comments when one found out he had plans with the other. He's lusted after both but never been able to choose between them. How have they managed to arrive together and why are they both staring at him?

Author,

I would love all three to become lovers. Enemies to lovers and friends to lovers please. M/M/M HEA is a must. I would love a regency setting but I don't mind if it's historical or fantasy or sci-fi. No BDSM please but everything else goes.

Thank you and good luck,

Anna

Story Info

Genre: historical, alternate history

Tags: Regency, ménage, a wee tad kinky, humorous, a whole lot of loving going on, Dock sex, poetry, ned-bangers and neddy boys, a glorious happily-ever-after.

Content Warnings: A brief description of wartime sex between a woman and several men, which may or may not have been rape; the off-stage beating of a man and use of a banger-stick on him; remembered abuse of a minor. Certain other aspects of this story may trigger strong emotions

Word Count: 149,553

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But please remember, if I did not adopt their suggestions, as with other authors, “The fault, dear readers, is not in our betas, but in ourselves...”

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The marvelously, *marvelously* talented Enny Kraft.

You can contact her at: <http://ennykraft.weebly.com/>

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Kenike

Leslie

Lisa ~ Books Are My Drug ~

Mandy*readsobsessively*

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Penumbra

Teresa

Tina

Verity

Vicktor

Vivian

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Mercy buckets! mesdames and monsooers.

THE RAKE, THE ROGUE AND THE ROUÉ

By Eric Alan Westfall

ANOTHER ENGLAND

For want of a nail...

But... what if the nail had not been lost?

What if...

On a fog-fading beach on the English side of the Channel, three men stood apart from the baker's dozen who waited impatiently for the three to be done. Four kept the oars of the not-quite-beached jolly boat ready for a rapid departure, a fifth stood knee-deep in the surf, a thick, muscular arm keeping the bow steady. The sixth, the fugitive's loyal companion, was already in the boat. Numbers seven through thirteen formed a ragged arc around the landing site, two watching the boat and the trio, the rest with their backs to the water, weapons raised, watching and listening for any who might have followed.

Two of the trio spoke quietly a few feet away from the third. The third was a fox harrowed by the hounds after the disaster at Worcester, hunted across England, but now escape was imminent. At least once he took the requisite steps into the water, then clambered into the stern as elegantly as an exhausted, wounded man might climb, so that he could be rowed quickly to the ship that would spirit him away to France and safety. The other two would stay behind, waiting to serve again at need. Of all there, only these three were certain there *would* be a need, though not soon.

But before that wait could begin with a departure, there was a question that had been asked, but not answered. The fugitive became impatient, demanding a response with an insistence borne of entitlement. The taller of the pair turned to face the third, bent slightly forward, spread his hands in a smaller, tighter version of a formal bow to higher rank. Straightened.

Major Charles Alexander Beaumont, eldest son of Baron Weston, looked once more to his left at Captain Edward Matthews, second son of a London innkeeper, paused, and found something in the other's expression that brought a glimmer of a smile to the edge of his lips. The captain nodded so briefly it might have been missed, but the third man, the fugitive who watched and waited, did not miss either the smile or the nod.

The major, who had faced each moment of that battle, and every moment of the escape, without hesitation, hesitated then. He inhaled slowly, and then let

the breath flow out. He looked once more to the man beside him, and answered the question. "I am a friend of Edward's... a *special* friend of Edward's, and I should prefer not to die because of whom I love."

That was *not* the answer the fugitive expected... not when the usual response to that offer was a request for honors, title, wealth, land, a boon for some future need. Unusual, indeed, but in his eyes, not unreasonable at all. He nodded.

The pair swept him another bow, formal, deep, with all the requisite flourishes protocol required, expressing appreciation of a promise made, but without the slightest hint of obsequiousness. To the watchers, however, it was merely the major and the captain bending their upper bodies forward a degree or two, perhaps a little farther than before, their heads briefly down, their eyes perhaps contemplating sand, salt water, perhaps a trio of ruined boots, before becoming upright again.

As the oars pulled deep and swift to get the jolly boat to the ship, the shore component of the baker's dozen scattered to the winds. The major and the captain mounted, rode, but stopped their horses at the top of the slope leading down to the beach, watching and waiting to be certain the sails bellied out and the wind carried him away. When the ship began to move, so did they.

And then there were none.

But what if... in the glorious days not long after 29 May 1660, Charles II kept his promise?

What if... in the heady days of the Restoration, when the King could do no wrong, he persuaded Parliament to end the death penalty for sodomy, and repeal the laws themselves?

What if... a century and a half later, there was: another England?

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PROLOGUE

I open the chest I brought here from London. Doing so was foolish, perhaps. Sentimental, certainly. All qualities the world does not customarily ascribe to me.

I carefully remove them; sort them all. Then sort them again into several stacks.

I sit back for a moment. The light linen robe falls open. Given the Mediterranean heat, even at night, I am naked beneath it. Should anyone be watching me, however unlikely that might be, both in view of who our hosts are, and the discretion for which their servants are undoubtedly well-compensated, they might notice a slight, satisfied smile cross my lips. My cock twitches, just a little. Remembered happiness? Anticipation? Although the latter should be impossible, considering...

Very well. The smile is more definite now, and with more than a little hint of pride. Anticipation it is.

I pick up the glass of white wine, take a sip. Extraordinary. Our hosts own a small German vineyard, which has been producing wine, without interruption, since 1453. Always in very limited quantities, which sell now, on the rare occasions when a bottle comes on the market, for a price as extraordinary as its taste. They were incredibly generous in sharing, though frankly I am the only one of us with the palate to truly appreciate it. Excluding our hosts, of course.

First stack.

I pick up the first. Slowly unfold the decades-old creases. Move the candelabra closer. Another sip.

I begin to read.

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HERE AND NOW
(1816)

Peregrine

Friday, 6 September 1816

Nearing midnight

Alderson House, London

The bastards. One of them could have said yes. I bloody well deserve the finest mouth or the tightest, most talented arse in England, hell, in the whole bloody Empire, for what I'm going through tonight. Damn my meddling, matchmaking Mama.

Although, come to think of it, I couldn't really call either of them the best in England or the Empire when there were so many men still available (or persuadable) for *discreet* sampling. My cock twitched at the fantasy of its white, blue-veined thickness sliding between the slender, muscular (just like Michel's), red-brown cheeks of some maharajah—nothing but the best for me—in Bombay, or Calcutta. Perhaps in his very own palace while his guards... watched?

Or a brawny, wide-shouldered seaman on his knees in my cabin, as the ship raced through smooth waters ahead of a strong wind, beneath a brilliant cloudless sky. His own cock out, stroking himself, as I hold his head and fuck his mouth, looking down on the thick mat of red-brown hair on his chest (just like Rory's), inhaling the scents of wind and water, the almost squalid tropical air of the cabin, the remains of my dinner on the small table, a wisp of my fading cologne, the heavy sweat rising from him in waves, mingling with the memory of the rum and tobacco on his breath before my hands on his shoulders gave him the hint he was there to suck and not kiss. My cock starting to move faster...

Fuck!

I forced my awareness back to the here and now and away from the fantasies. I would have to save the maharajah or the sailor for later use with my inordinately skillful hand.

Bastards.

I naturally did not have to look downward to be aware of the consequences of my imaginings.

The motto of the Earls of Glenhaven is “What we have, we hold.” It should more accurately be, “What we have, we display.” My momentary lapse of concentration left me *displaying* far too much. Although these inexpressibles were designed for display, and I do make a formidable display even without my errant thoughts, I needed to focus on something other than maharajahs, sailors, or other cock standing thoughts.

Ah. Mama’s display. Indeed, that would do it.

She absolutely glittered beside me as we made our way to the next marriageable chit she’d chosen. So much glitter I wondered why the guests weren’t holding up their hands to shade their eyes from the light refracting off the famous—infamous?—Glenhaven Diamonds. Complete with a capital “D,” of course. The tiara, the necklace with multiple strands of progressively larger diamonds, and a twenty-carat teardrop hanging down where most other women would have chosen to display a remarkably deep décolletage. She had no need to have her gown descend to that level. Even a son may objectively recognize the fact that his mother had a quite remarkable figure for her age. For *any* age. Young debutantes, nearly flat-chested or not, hated her on sight for a variety of reasons. What woman would not hate another woman with everything—looks, figure, wealth, *those* Diamonds, plus a remarkably handsome and rakish son? Perhaps most of all because they instinctively knew they were each a single small candle to my mother’s chandelier, and even in the aggregate could never outshine her. But they hid it well as they attempted to gain her interest, her patronage... and an introduction to me.

Add in the earrings that dangled diamonds, and a bracelet three diamonds wide in staggered rows, each stone set in a tiny cup of gold, clasped around the pale ivory of her gloves. Plus the brooch that provided the only vivid color in her ensemble: a square ruby the color of spouting blood, though none dared make that comparison aloud, backed in gold, surrounded by yet more diamonds.

The Glenhaven Diamonds—jewels that were by inviolate tradition given to the new bride the day the heir wed. “Look, my dears,” she was silently saying. “These can be yours if you get my son to put his head into a parson’s noose and then quickly draw it tight before he wriggles away.”

Ah. The diamond distraction worked. Except for a mid-walk plump up at the realization I should have been imagining *Rory’s* arse, large, hairy, and eager

to be pounded, and *Michel's* delectable lips and his ability to swallow me to the root. But more diamond thoughts ended that.

We had arrived.

“Dearest Peregrine,” my dearest *annoying* Mama said to me, “let me present to you Countess Carmody, my dearest bosom bow, and of course her daughter, Lady Camilla. You remember her from the Halliwell rout, do you not?”

Mama and I were, of course, the only members of this little quartet who were aware of the verbal stiletto that threatened my throat to ensure a proper response. As a quite experienced rake—not, naturally, England’s *premier* rake, a title that belonged to Weston, whom I saw propping up a wall a while back—I effortlessly did what comes naturally to those who have adopted rakehood as a way of life. Or have had it thrust upon them.

I lied.

Most charmingly, of course, as I am known for my charm in settings such as this. “But of course, Mama. So very good to see you again, Lady Camilla. I am quite looking forward to this. Shall we?”

I held out my arm, and Lady Camilla delicately placed her palm on my wrist. We started toward the ballroom floor.

We had gone only a few steps through the throng when I heard two voices, only one of which I knew.

You hear, *overhear*, cannot *help* but hear, such a wide variety of things as you move about in the close quarters that are the *raison d'être* of any hostess desirous of being awarded the accolade of having her ball declared a sad crush. A laugh, a sigh, a brief moment of... political insight or infighting, a bit of gossip, business information that might be valuable if you could only have heard *all* of it, an understanding of the latest fashion or fashion failure, whose horse is sure to win at Ascot. You cannot, of course, simply stop and listen avidly and obviously to whatever tidbit intrigued you, and so you learn to let nearly all of it flow past, the words as indistinguishable as the voice of a single wave as the surf rolls in.

But sometimes the words are a single wave that threatens to knock you off your feet. Like the almost-whispered, harsh words thrust into my ears as we paused to let another couple pass, and then we were beyond the speakers. I stiffened briefly, and refrained from looking at the young miss beside me. The

words were such that if she heard them she likely would not understand; if she understood she could not acknowledge that understanding without branding herself irredeemably fast, and quite possibly a slut.

That bastard Beckwith, in deliberate, ugly delight: “The b-b-bangers did their job on that cocksucking molly boy.”

An unknown, younger voice, mocking. “I h-heard he was b-b-badly hurt.”

Quiet, vicious, *satisfied* laughter from those two voices, and at least one other, cut off by our moving on and the rise of other voices around us.

Christ. Surely they didn't mean...

No. I could not go there. Not now.

My concentration had to be on enduring the rest of Mama's plotting and planning for the marital demise of her son.

It was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain my marital *virgo intacta*. Everyone knew Father had not married until just after his thirtieth birthday. Mine was approaching. Everyone, therefore, *knew* with the utter certainty attributable only to gossip with no factual foundation whatsoever, that I intended to honor my father by following in his footsteps.

My danger was compounded by the fact that last week Father confided, in strictest confidence, to three of his closest friends, one of whom was the Archgossip of Canterbury, financial information he should never have had access to. He reminded them of the nine days' wonder—about his *dear* Aunt Agatha's overly generous bequest to me for my eighteenth birthday. About how I had initially indulged in foolish spending, as what eighteen-year-old would not? But then, so his tale went, I repented of my sinful ways, and though my rakish days were not yet done, I nevertheless managed to increase my inheritance to £125,430. A precise figure my solicitor, or someone in his office, or Butterworth, my man of business, would deeply regret disclosing. Considering that men of the ton are no more capable of maintaining their solemnly sworn-to secrecy than a woman with a story like that, the news had already run rampant in London, and the length and breadth of England was next.

Heir to Glenhaven. Five thousand a year from the Somerville title. And all that lovely gold from Aunt Agatha. I was the prime target of the Little Season, and matters could only get worse when the Season itself opened next spring.

Mama was particularly devious this evening. No matter her cajoling or outright bullying, she knew I would not voluntarily arrive early enough to personally add my name to the dance cards of the innocent and possibly virginal misses who, shark-like, hunted their husbandly prey with an eye toward marital devourment. Normally, I arrived late, and as the diamonds of the first, second, third, et cetera, waters already had their cards filled, my pre-escape duty-dances could be quickly done with a grateful wallflower or two. Tonight, however, having secured my promise to arrive no later than nine-thirty, and knowing I honored my word once it was extorted from me, Mama had outdone herself. With either advance knowledge of the Duchess's musical choices, or simply quick action after an early arrival, Mama put my name down on the appropriate line of the dance cards for the young ladies she selected for me.

As efficient as Wellington himself in planning out this evening's campaign, she also allowed for sufficient time for deadly dull conversations, and wending one's way through the crush so she could deliver prey to the next predator. Her personal delivery of my person was due to the same certainty felt by a gambler throwing his own loaded dice, that I had not previously been introduced to any of them. It would be a social solecism of the highest order for me to introduce myself to the delicate young spiders eager to begin spinning webs around their prey. Thus Mama's necessity. Despite my name, I felt more like a tiny bird being introduced to a falcon, or being offered to a series of them in sequence.

I had danced with the simpering Miss Simpson, the boring Belinda, and Lady Flora, who chose to honor her name with a flower scent that eliminated any other odor within a radius of several yards. Although the latter was a consummation devoutly to be wished, given the apparent belief of some members of the ton that inviting soap and water for a visit is at best an annual event. There was the dreary Drusilla. The excitable Evangeline who giggled or tittered at the end of nearly every sentence, whether hers or mine.

And then...

The young lady tripped over her own feet just as we took our position. Ah. I was to dance with the *clumsy* Lady Camilla. Fortunately, it was a country dance which I could do in my sleep.

I naturally maintained my mask of polite interest as we trod the boards and she trod my feet, with occasional appropriate murmurings on inconsequential

matters. I was, however, mentally exploring alternatives to my hand for evening's end, and carefully avoiding thinking about the overheard words.

I had heard of a recently opened, extremely select molly house. Guests wore half masks to signal they intended to have their mouths used, or full masks to signal their cocks or arses would be in play. Unlike other brothels, the wares were displayed naked, but with strict limitations on pre-purchase sampling. I could live with such a restriction, certain in the knowledge that I would find a mouth or an arse, or both, that I could enjoy for an hour or so.

Not that I was entirely sure I wanted to make the effort. For a reason I did not comprehend, it all seemed not as much *fun* as it used to be. Before it became visible, I carefully quelled the inner shudder at the sudden thought that at *twenty-nine*, I was bored with the effort required to discover a discreet man I could briefly use and quickly discard. Though the reality was it had been months since I made the effort. Indeed, I was even experiencing ennui over the endless round of routs and balls and Venetian breakfasts at mid-afternoon, and racing and fencing and gambling.

Dear God, was I bored with being a rake?

No, I assured myself. It was merely that I hadn't had Rory's arse or Michel's mouth in far too long, so in their absence over the summer, I had necessarily taken matters into my own hand. Discreetly, even if, regrettably, literally.

Discretion, of course, being not only the better part of valour, but the better part of one's reputation in these trying times. Particularly given the general low opinion of the ton about men who indulge in *these* depravities. And the increasingly vocal, increasingly ugly opinions about neddy boys (though we are of all ages), and the acts taken and contemplated against them. Against *us*, since I am a piece of that continent, a part of that main, though my Edwardian vices are of necessity safely hidden, except from the few who indulge with me.

Safely hidden from Father, as well. Thankfully, he has believed for a dozen years now that what he saw and stopped when he caught me with the head groom's son, who, at seventeen, was only slightly less experienced than I, was just first-time, *only-time*, experimentation.

I found myself drowning in those memories while my body went on with the polite performance.

Father had sounded... reasonable. He was calm, stern but not enraged, as he told young Tom, once he had gotten himself tidy and tucked away (since he had been stroking his own cock while on his knees sucking mine), to go find his father and older brother and wait with them in the main hall. He had taken me, my own cock back in hiding as well, to his library. The only sign that there was a storm in the making, a monumental storm, was the grip on my upper arm. A grip that left bruises in the shape of his thick fingers, but the pain from those was ultimately inconsequential, compared to later pain.

When he let me go, he looked at me for a while, before finally speaking. It was the voice he used when he wanted to make utterly certain that he would be obeyed and not challenged, the voice of one of his irrevocable decisions.

“A man will, after all, put his cock in just about any warm and willing hole if he has no other options available. From now on, however, you *will* find other options or confine yourself to the attentions of your fist. You will under no circumstances again experiment in this depraved fashion. Your first time—and it was your first time, was it not?”

He waited for my nod, then waited again until I realized a “Yes, sir” was also required, and offered up the lie.

“Very well. That was then your *last* venture, as well, into *that* type of perversion.”

Everything about him in that moment said that there were other categories of perversions in which it would be acceptable for me to indulge. *Manly* perversions. It was some years before I learned that the word “perversion” included an extraordinary range of activities that he and the men of the ton considered within the bounds of what was “acceptable.” Only this... what I had done... was beyond the pale. At least to him and his circle of friends, and it necessarily followed, his own “bosom bow,” the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The rest of my lesson on the subject of acceptable and unacceptable perversions was, unlike Gaul, divided into only two parts.

The first consisted of being made to watch while young Tom was forced to lay face down on the gleaming marble of the entrance hall, where the blood could more easily be washed up. To watch while his father and brother were compelled to hold a boy, a young man, whose only fault lay in allowing himself to be... persuaded... in place so that he could be flogged by my father into howling, raw-voiced terror, before collapsing into unconsciousness with a

bloody back that would certainly leave deep and ugly scars, if the wounds did not become infected and cause his death. To watch as Father allowed “old Tom,” who had served the Woodhalls since well before young Tom and I were born within a month of each other, and young Tom’s older brother Richard, to carry him off. But not before informing the two who were conscious that they were discharged without references, as he would not allow the risk of further corruption of his family or the others who served the earldom.

And like a coward, I did nothing to stop him. No matter how well I later came to understand that there was nothing I could have done that would have stopped or even lessened the whipping, I have never lost that shame.

The second part was my own beating. Not quite fully clothed. The fine linen shirt I had been wearing was drawn up to my waist; my buttocks and upper thighs were covered by thin cotton drawers, and the rest of my legs were covered with a linen sheet. The fabric provided the slightest cushion for the blows, and he wielded the canes—two broke over the course of the lesson—with a skill I had had no idea he possessed. The fabric was intended to reduce the risk of breaking the skin, as it would not do for the Glenhaven heir to be scarred. Of course, had he chosen to give me scars, no man of the ton would have challenged him on it, any more than they would have had he chosen to beat or scar Mama for some imagined infraction. Though I think if he had done the latter, I would have killed him.

Equally of course, I could not keep my internal vow not to break, not to scream or cry or plead. Although I believe I held out for a remarkable length of time before my first cry. A few minutes... moments? ...aeons? ...later I gave way completely.

I finished as he intended I would, as he lashed blow after blow after blow until there was no question he had achieved his goal. I was a voice-gone, red-faced, red-eyed, sobbing, groveling mess, my back, buttocks, thighs and calves crisscrossed with a deliberate pattern of welts and bruises that kept me sleeping on my stomach for several weeks. He allowed me one day in bed, and then I was required to resume my normal activities, fully dressed, no matter the pain inflicted by even so little pressure as clothes upon my skin.

I wondered then, but never aloud, what my “lesson” would have been like had he known that young Tom and I had been “experimenting” for more than a year before we got careless and caught. That young Tom really liked a good rogering, which I was very good at supplying. That had he walked in two

minutes earlier he would have found his oldest son, that sodomite abomination, on his knees cheerfully swallowing young Tom's prodigious gift of hot seed.

I even wondered as I lay on my belly all those silent, painful hours, how long I would have survived had he known the full tale. Mama had done her duty well, providing him with two spares in my younger brothers. Accidents, I had thought, could so easily happen during a hunt, though there was always the risk I might only break something other than my neck. In my mind, I had plotted my own demise. Decided, after considering and discarding various stratagems, that there was far more certainty with a mysterious poacher who happened to venture into the Home Wood, shot recklessly, and then, quite naturally in fear of his life, disappeared from the face of the earth upon realizing all that blood on the ground and the still, still body belonged to the Glenhaven heir.

Father rarely gave second chances. Never a third. I already had my second chance. And if he learned today how he had been lied to all these years, his fury would know no bounds. Would he do it himself in a fit of rage, confident that the House of Lords would understand the justifiable homicide of a sodomite heir and acquit him? Or would he resort to a pair, a trio, a quartet of bandits to cry "Stand and deliver!" as I rode or drove through Hounslow Heath, followed by a pair, a trio, a quartet of bullets to ensure I never again stood or delivered anything?

I blinked, realizing the music was drawing to a close. That slog through the Slough of Despond at least worked better than a contemplation of Mama's diamonds. Indeed, those memories were more the cause of an inglorious retreat, much like Napoleon's from Russia. There was no further display during the dancing, nor as I escorted Clumsy Camilla back to the sidelines.

How odd to have those memories surface now, and with such clarity and... vigor. I pushed it all away and vowed no more fantasies this night, no more depressing memories of why my life was the way it was.

I would instead rejoice and remind myself that with the end of this set I was free at last. Thank God. If, of course, He should by some remote chance actually exist. If not, then I neither gained nor lost as a result of that tiny prayer.

The next dance was the one preceding supper, and even Mama had not had the nerve to make that choice for me, as it would send a signal of great

particularity if I were seen dancing with a young woman and then escorting her to supper.

First, I would tender my regrets to Carmody *mère et fille* for the loss of their enchanting company, but a prior engagement prevented me from further enjoyment. *Je suis désolé*, I would assure them, and whether they actually understood or not, they would simper, and with a perhaps none-too-subtle nudge, the girl would awkwardly flutter her eyelashes at me. Second, the same lie to Mama, who of course knew the truth, accompanied by a careful kiss to her cheek. Then on to freedom. I knew the route I would take to the footman who could call for my carriage, manfully walking without a limp, so as not to call attention to my latest wound in the marital wars.

Except...

Stone walls may not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage, but the stentorian voice of the Duchess of Alderson's butler certainly succeeded. I had just finished bowing over Miss Carmody's hand, had not even managed a complete *désolé*, when Dodsworth, hours after the proper time for guests to be announced, announced Ruaidhri Fearghas MacLean, Master of Strathairn.

I did not allow my inner glee to escape into visibility, lest I give the wrong impression to the Carmody mother and daughter. Clearly, after fobbing me off with an excuse I had more than a little difficulty believing, Rory had changed his mind. Now I could feast on his hairy arse, and give him a little rougher fuck than usual for making me believe I would have to use my hands tonight. I could...

I could turn slightly, and as others had, look to the top of the staircase.

Bloody hell. Bloody, bloody hell.

He stood there, looking out but not down at the crowd. And he was in full regalia. The black jacket. The dark red waistcoat. The flawless cravat with a ruby stud. And the Strathairn kilt, all black and dark red, with accents of vivid, burnt gold. The sporran. The plaid across his left shoulder and down his back to just above his knees. The well-displayed, very hairy, lower thighs and knees. The thick socks, with the edges rolled, and the *sgian-dubh* in its sheath, tucked inside the right sock. Rory keeps *his* dagger extremely sharp on both edges. Shiny black shoes.

He only wore the regalia when he wanted to shock, or when he was angry, as if wearing the kilt and everything else made it easier to unleash his infamous Scots temper. He was expressionless, as he reached up and ran his right hand through his thick, wavy, far-more-bright-red than brown, shoulder-length hair, unbound in a *fuck you* to fashion. I would have wagered a pony he was furious, but there was no one about with whom I could make a bet like that, despite the propensity of the haut ton to wager on such intriguing subjects as which raindrop would first reach the bottom of the window. Angry about what, I had no idea. But I had seen these moods before, and managed to bring him out of them. The kilt would also make it so much easier to get what I wanted, what he clearly wanted as well, or he would not have shown up. Just a quick flip, and...

Double bloody hell. The display that had rapidly begun moving in the direction of extremely visible at the sound of Rory's name, once again went into full retreat.

Dodsworth's voice had rung out again. This time with a flawless French accent.

“Je vous présente le très honorable, Michel Louis Arsenault, le vicomte de Vidal-Sansouci.”

Michel joined Rory, standing next to him, not touching, naturally, nor were they looking at each other.

But here at the same damned time?

Bloody, fucking, *buggering hell!*

My gaping was carefully internal. For many of the rest of the ton, this shattering of an established pattern was also more than sufficient to shatter their carefully cultivated façades of cultured boredom, which only made their gapes all the more noticeable.

Christ, but they were beautiful together.

Together. I firmly quenched that occasional fantasy that chose now to rise up again. The one about being released from my oaths, and the togetherness at the top of the stairs not being two but three. Although in the fantasy the togetherness was in a much more secluded *elsewhere*. Except that any possibility for togetherness died last December.

Wait. *Together.*

There was nothing about either stance or stare that suggested surprise. This arrival was not happenstance, but prepared. Which meant they had to have talked. Surely...

No.

They might have talked, they *had* to have talked for this to have happened. But they would never have talked about that night. Very well. Perhaps a little, but not a lot. Not in detail. Those *details* were too bloody personal for either or both to go blathering on about them.

The thought that they might have, no matter how panic-inducing, was nothing more than an unpleasant, gut-churning phantasm, as realistic as any vision born of an opium pipe. *That* conversation was simply outside of the realm of possibility. For safety's sake, I offered up to the possibly there, possibly not, deity who presumably governed possibilities, a quick prayer that that was so, and would remain so forever. Amen.

Rory was, if not angry, upset. Michel was more difficult to read, but he was a book I had read and re-read numerous times, and if he was not thoroughly memorized, he was close to it.

Michel was... languid, there at the top of the stairs. And when he is most languid, he is most lethal.

Unlike Rory, he did not dress a particular way when he was angry. He was always at the topmost point of elegant, seemingly effortlessly at the peak to which everyone else merely aspired. Impeccable black tailcoat, black inexpressibles, white satin waistcoat embroidered with silver thread, blindingly white shirt and cravat tied in his very own Sansouci design, with expensive (of course) lace on his cravat and at his cuffs. An ebony cane with a jewel-encrusted globe at the top. A style reminiscent of the excesses of our fathers and grandfathers before the turn of the century, which should have been, and for anyone else would have been, unfashionable here and now.

Except... Michel set his own style and be damned to the ton, the Crown, the world. When you are an exceedingly handsome French *vicomte*, with an outrageous English fortune at your ready disposal, unlike the usual impoverished noble French émigré, far greater eccentricities than lace would be not merely overlooked, but occasionally actively emulated.

He had his favorite stickpin, a shimmering blue sapphire circled with diamonds in his cravat. A sapphire stud in his left ear. The blue of the stones matched the blue of his eyes, which even at this distance I could see were as cold and hard as the gems. That mane of straight, light brown hair was tied carefully back. Thin Roman nose in a pale face. Full, definitely not sucking tonight, lips clamped tight to my discerning eye... how could I not be discerning when I had experienced those lips so very often this last year and more, though not nearly often enough. To others, less-experienced others, and so had they all better be less-experienced with that mouth, his lips were merely firmly set, and he was not smiling.

But angry? Oh, yes. Very.

And Rory's anger should have been increasing by not one, but *several* orders of magnitude because of Michel's cavalier breach of their presumably unspoken agreement. It had to have been unspoken, an understanding arrived at without words, since to the best of the ton's knowledge, and certainly to the best of mine, which was a degree of knowledge the ton could never possess, they had not said one word to each other for... two days less than nine months now. A span remarkably easy to calculate, at least for me. By the terms of that agreement, Michel should have left. His staying should have resulted in *something*. Something other than that *posing* to make the point to all of us of what they were *not* doing.

I was definitely not the only one wondering.

I definitely *was* the only one who worried.

They *never* went to the same events. If they did, they did not both stay. Whoever arrived first claimed the field. The second arrival, if not advised at the door so he never entered at all, would, as soon as he learned, turn and leave without a bow to the host or hostess, without explanation or apology. Offensive, and highly so, in most instances, but with these two, so customary these past nine months that the rudeness was overlooked.

But there they were. Side by side. Arriving as nearly simultaneously as made no matter. Neither ceding to the other; neither leaving. They stood there, *posed* there, damn them, a short while longer, before looking down the stairs at all who unabashedly stared up at them.

The silence could not last, of course, not with this topic to discuss. But only voices broke it, a crack here, a crack there. Someone clearly instructed the orchestra *not* to begin the supper dance, debutante dance cards filled with their supper prey's names, notwithstanding. Nothing would be allowed to distract from whatever was about to unfold.

So the murmurings began as, still side by side, they strolled down the staircase. A carefully restrained stroll that was blatantly a deliberate alternative to a stomping march down the steps, followed by a long-strided march through the crowd that gave way in a Red Sea parting that perhaps only Priny normally experienced. Heads began to turn, of course, at the realization that Rory and Michel had a specific goal.

The murmurs rose to a not quite feeding frenzy as everyone, every bloody one, realized they were walking toward me. Who else? The likelihood of their destination being Mama, or the Carmody pair, or any of the mirror-duplicates of tonnish blandness and interchangeability that were nearby, was infinitesimal.

Their facial façades had acquired tiny cracks as well, whether intentional or not. And the avid watchers now realized that they were not happy.

Before they were a third of the way to their goal, Mama neatly drew me away, much to the Carmody's carefully concealed, but not quite carefully enough, chagrin. Not, of course, out of some o'erweening maternal concern for my wellbeing, a tigress moving to protect her cub or something. Rather, Mama wanted to be sure that only she could dine out, if Mama would ever do something quite so vulgar as dining out, on the story of what was about to happen.

When a prime tale is near, Mama quickly grabs it before it can escape, drops it in her reticule, removes it later for whatever polishing it might require, and then she makes very good use of it.

We watched the forces of doom, or so I was suddenly certain they were, approaching. At the approximate halfway mark, Mama muttered, "My dear Agatha, you were so very astute, but I do not believe you quite expected... *this*."

Mama's mutterings are of a varied nature. Some are incomprehensible to lesser minds, and when queried, she will merely wave it off with an, "Oh, never mind. It was nothing, nothing at all," and refuse to say anything more. As this

mutter was indeed entirely incomprehensible to my lesser mind, I asked no questions.

She put her hand on my arm, which naturally drew my attention to her and momentarily away from the imminent end of my life as I knew it. She did not mutter at all, but said in a rather arch tone, “Mucking about with chickens again, my dear? Shoving them here, there, elsewhere?”

I responded with an astute, “Huh?”

She patted my arm, and this time did gesture in the direction of impending doom. “They’re coming home to roost right now, dear boy. Quite rapidly. And most unhappily.”

She needn’t have sounded so pleased. And then, of course, my unnatural Mama naturally did not move away as they stopped in front of us.

True, I had broken part of our unspoken agreement. The fucked understanding that arose when they decided—just before? during? just after? that fucking duel—that they were no longer friends, and I refused to take sides and choose one over the other. I told them I had been friends with both of them, one for nearly forever, one for only a few months, but they were each too good a friend for me to suddenly end my association with one. I very pointedly, albeit separately, told them how unfair it was of them to put me in that position.

I naturally refrained from explaining that since I was fucking Rory’s arse with some degree of regularity, and exploring Michel’s mouth and throat with nearly the same frequency, without either knowing about the other—each having *demande*d that I conceal from the other what we were doing—I was not about to pick one hole and abandon the other.

I had watched them so often this past year, sometimes when they were aware; sometimes when I saw one of them by chance, and they did not see me. Such a wide variety of thoughts and emotions. I had seen their faces when we hunted, gambled, got very, *very* drunk. I had seen their faces distorted with passion, almost slack in sated aftermath. Tonight, though... tonight, the careful lack of expression they had reacquired, the one that allowed a display of only the merest modicum necessary for the illusion of polite enjoyment, said there was so much more going on than that breach.

I was so fucked.

Rory bowed over mother's hand, said, "Good evening, my lady." He was so thoroughly angry that a brogue slipped in on the "guid evenin'," but was snatched away and replaced with tonnish English again for the last two words.

"Dear boy," she said, patting his cheek and causing him to flush, "so very nice to see you again. And both of you. *Together*. It seems like old times."

Rory's flush was sliding toward anger, and away from the genuine warmth of her words. She truly liked these two reprobates, though I doubt she would if she knew the truth about them and what they, or rather we, were truly like.

It was Michel's turn next. A most elegant bow, an actual brief kiss on the soft satin of her elbow-length gloves. "Lady Glenhaven, I truly don't know why you bother wearing the Diamonds." And we could all hear that damned capital "D." "No one can possibly see them against your radiance."

And no one but Michel could have made that sentence sound sincere, even believable. But he did, and it was Mama's turn to blush rosily.

"My lady, do you think we might... *borrow*... your son?"

Neither of them had yet actually looked at me. Nor did Mama when she replied, "But of course, my dears." She tilted her head to look at Rory, then back to Michel. "Will he miss the supper?"

The midnight supper at any ball given by the Dowager Duchess of Alderson, much less this particular one each year, was renowned throughout the ton.

"Alas, my lady, I fear he will. But Strathairn and I will make sure he has something to eat. It may not be to his liking... quite... but I am sure he will swallow it all down."

Mama ignored the brief sound emanating from the direction of Rory. Had there been wolves in England it might have been one of them snarling.

"Well, then, bring him back safe and sound."

Michel, the spokesman, assured her that I would indeed be returned safely, but with a Gallic shrug expressed uncertainty over my soundness.

It was Mama's turn for a little shrug. "Well, do the best you can, my dears. I have every confidence you will treat him precisely as you ought."

Precisely what I was afraid of. I watched her turn and walk away, desperately wishing I was a little boy once again, able to call out to her retreating back to come back, come back and not leave me in this wild ton forest where there were lions and tigers and bears...

Oh, my.

They looked at me.

Oh, my. Doubled. Tripled.

Michel said, "I think the Duke's library will suit us quite well. At least for now. Is that acceptable?"

Cold, cold, cold. So very cold I doubted I would ever get warm again.

Rory stepped in a little closer, and though he was shorter than me he had a mountain's mass at that moment. I definitely did not want him to avalanche on me. And there was that wolf noise again, before he leaned in closer still, and softly said, "Or ah kin juist grab yer baws, squeeze, 'n' pull ye alang. Dae ye ken?"

I kenned my options well, indeed. Walking along, smiling, pretending all was well—though that pretense was an entirely normal one at any ton event—knowing I was on a tumbril, heading for a visit with Madame la Guillotine. Or letting out a high-pitched squeal of agony as my balls were crushed, and I was forced to walk to the guillotine with everyone watching even more avidly, the men wincing away in manly commiseration, thanking the good Lord it was my balls and not theirs being damaged. The women would, of course, be utterly shocked at such a crude masculine display, but would watch even more avidly, though careful not to do anything so vulgar as directly stare.

Discretion is also the better part of pain in the bollocks. We walked, smiled, and nodded, and the focus of the other guests on the three of us faded as it became clear nothing more was going to occur in public.

We found the Duke's library easily. We had been there often for a snifter of His Grace's excellent brandy, often accompanied by an equally excellent cigar. Alderson treated the younger generation well. Or at least those of us regularly in his favor.

I sat where I was told. Rory sat opposite me, spread his legs wide, his feet flat on the floor, the kilt unfortunately drooping to hide what I knew so well.

Michel stood with his back against the door. I had not heard the sound of it being locked.

We sat in silence. I refused to break it.

I looked at each of them.

Wondered if they wondered, as I did: *How in the bloody hell had we got from back there to here?*

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GETTING FROM THERE
(1815 - 1816)

Michel

Thursday, 29 June 1815

6:30 p.m.

Maison de Vidal-Sansouci

London

and

Friday, 30 June 1815

3:40 a.m.

The Ivory Turner

London

Enough is enough. I can't go on, I won't go on any more this way.

Enough is bloody enough.

I was, I admitted to myself but never anyone else, addicted to cock. And as I stared at myself in the center of the three angled cheval mirrors, looking right, looking left, I was admiring the trio of images of a dedicated, extraordinarily talented, deep-throating-*par-excellence* cocksucker.

Henri had done an excellent job, as he always did. It was why he was paid so very much. Though I believe that his keeping of my secrets is more from long friendship, than the salary no other noble would be likely to match, not even for a valet of his talents.

His smirk as I waved away the smalls was, though subtle, not at all hidden. After all these years, he recognized that signal for what it was.

He shook his head when I waved him forward with the fawn pantaloons he had selected. "*Non, Monsieur.*"

I had long ago given up remonstrating with him for referring to me with a title reserved for long-gone French royalty.

He tilted his head, his eyes examining me. I had on the shirt he had selected, no cravat, of course, and my stockings. I was otherwise naked, naturally. He had, after all, seen me in all conceivable combinations of dress and undress in the range between fully clothed and fully naked. There was nothing lustful in

his gaze, nor had there ever been. He was not interested in my cock, nor I in his, nor had either of us ever had so much as a twitch of an inclination in that direction. It would have destroyed a fine relationship.

He shook his head again, sighed, and said, with that degree of asperity that long-employed servant-friends are authorized by some unwritten law of nature to use on exasperating employers, “Now, if *Monsieur* had but deigned to share his plans for the evening, and the night, and the morning, with me, a more appropriate selection of dress could have been made. I think... yes, the shirt will not do. Off with it. And the stockings.”

Much put upon, he finished with, “We will begin again.”

One does not argue with the valet to whom one has entrusted one's social standing insofar as that standing is based on what one wears at any given moment. I was suitably meek and mild, a veritable innocent child accepting earned chastisement, as I pulled the shirt off over my head, sat down on the bed, untied and pulled off my stockings, and stood up again, thoroughly naked.

“It was,” I said in my own defense, “a spur of the moment decision.”

“Say rather, a sperm of the moment decision, *Monsieur*. If one is mounting a campaign for cock, planning is far better than improvisation, *mais hélas*, *Monsieur* has not always chosen to make use of the grey matter within his skull to do so. Fortunately for *Monsieur*, when he has these starts, I have learned my own lesson and have *un excellent plan B à la main*.”

He left the room carrying the rejected fawn pantaloons. I ridiculously wondered, perhaps as a result of the Armagnac I had been sipping without having eaten since an unusually early breakfast, whether they felt dejected over being rejected, and having to miss an outing.

I was indeed fortunate that Henri not only had a plan B at hand, but had exercised his own grey matter so that I was quite certain that if necessary he could produce alternative plans all the way through *zed* if I needed them.

He returned with an entirely acceptable Plan B. A crisply starched pale-ivory shirt, two carefully starched lengths of linen in matching ivory, as he knew I never required more than two to tie my cravat correctly, black stockings, a black waistcoat with subtly intricate designs in thin ivory thread, black pantaloons, and a black tailcoat. And no smalls.

I took the stockings from him, sat to put them on as he laid everything out, and stood again. He came close, leaned in, sniffed, and, retreating, shook his

head. Asperity returned. "Wash, *Monsieur*. That scent simply will not do, what with the *unexpected change in plans*."

As instructed, I went over to the basin and although the water was not the temperature I would have preferred, grabbed up the unscented soap Henri had procured, washed my face, neck, shoulders, and armpits, and patted myself dry. Henri firmly believed that soap should not scent a man, but rather his scent should be his own, just *enhanced* at times by the proper application of the proper cologne.

Thanks to Henri's marvelous nose, I had acquired an immense collection of colognes for all occasions. Had I had to make my own selection, I would undoubtedly have sniffed a few at random, found one I liked and splashed some on. Henri opened the glass doors to the tall cabinet with the vast array of bottles collected on the glass shelves, tilted his head *just so*, in his signature way of concentrating, pointed a forefinger, paused, pointed again and picked up a bottle.

He brought it back and handed it to me. "Just a little dab will do for you, *Monsieur*. Too much, and they will follow you home, like homeless dogs eager for a bone. Unless... you have a particular cock in mind and would *prefer* that it followed you home?"

"Cock in general."

I was not about to reveal that I had a *most* particular cock in mind, as I did not want to endure the embarrassment if all did not go well. I tipped the bottle on my fingertip several times, dabbed a little here, a little there, and just to provoke him, put the final dab right at the base of my cock.

Having organized Plan B, it ran smoothly, and I was quickly dressed. Henri had once explained that black was best for a cock campaign. Lighter colors not only tended to *display* one's interest rather vividly if one lost control, especially if that loss of control was accompanied by leakage that so very visibly stained. Black, however, could hide a multitude of sins, including both stains of the cock-leaking variety and stains of the splashed seed variety, if the latter were thinned with an application of spit and smeared enough to be absorbed. Knee-stains as well.

And the tailcoat Henri had selected was perfect for cock campaigning. Although it appeared to be of the variety other men of wealth wore, a coat that was so molded to one's body it had to be put on with the vigorous assistance of

a valet and then it kept one's posture erect and almost immobile, *this* marvelously designed coat had a secret. Flexibility. If, for example, one simply wanted to bend over and suck, instead of dropping to one or both knees, this was the ideal coat.

I planned on needing that flexibility. I glanced at the longcase clock. Six thirty. The carriage would not be around until seven. I glanced at what remained of the Armagnac. Dinner would be soon enough, and really, how wasteful to let it just sit there and... go bad.

I carried it down to the library, picked up the last book I had been reading, sat down. Closed the book. Tilted my head back against the chair.

I refused to allow myself any uncertainty about tonight.

My addiction is kept well under control, as I do not intend to be forced out into the open before the ton and ruined, for all that there is nothing illegal in what I choose to do with my mouth and other men's cocks, or vice versa.

I cannot say I have *always* been addicted, as there were years at a time when I didn't think of cock at all. Nor can I say I recall a specific day when I noticed, and noted, "*Quelle surprise! Je t'adore la bite!*"

It was more of a gradual recognition. There was, for example, Marie, the chambermaid slut who was never terminated because she was servicing both the butler and the housekeeper, his wife, presumably without either knowing what the other was up to. When you see her getting fucked in a stairwell by one of the footmen, and you are paying more attention to the prick than where it was going, you might be addicted to cock. When you see the butler, a man who clearly believed in equal opportunity fucking, fucking the mouth of the steward's oldest son the day before he left for university, and you get hard, you might be addicted to cock. When you are constantly alert for ways to put yourself in a position to observe cocks that are out in the air for any reason at all, you might be addicted to cock. When you see nothing more than the bulge between a man's legs and you wish someone, anyone at all, perhaps even you, would rip the fabric off and expose the flesh that made the bulge to the light, you might be addicted to cock. And when, by careful connivance you watch the butler, an old, flabby man endowed with a powerful prick because of both its size and the position he held in the Vidal-Sansouci household, fuck the mouth of another man who had no choice but to do the best he could, and you not only get hard, but wished that mouth was yours, disgusting though the man was, you not merely might be, but most assuredly were, addicted to cock.

I might not have had this brand of education had my parents lived, or had I had a guardian other than the man my parents so foolishly entrusted me to. They had escaped the Terror, Father having seen and correctly interpreted the writing on the wall, well ahead of the actual visitation of horrors and the ascension of *Madame la Guillotine* to the preeminent entertainment of Paris. Over months, he slowly, secretly moved most of his liquid wealth to London, accelerating the transfers once the decision to leave France was actually made. When they crossed the Channel they had only the dirty, worn peasant clothing they wore, a folder of documents carried next to Father's skin, and a fortune in jewels broken from their settings, concealed in the pillow that made Maman look more pregnant than she actually was.

In my first eight years, my definitely cock-addiction-free years, I had neither the opportunity nor the desire for any of the education I later received. Father built La Belle Maison, invested wisely, bought businesses, sent out his wealth to be fruitful and multiply, and it did, several times over. And then there was a ridiculous carriage accident in a storm. My mother was carrying the child who would have been my younger brother or sister. None of the three survived.

Enter my guardian. Or rather, he entered the scene long enough to assert his rights under my father's will, and then left to enjoy London on my money. I was not some impoverished *émigré*, beaten and starved or allowed to run wholly wild. He could siphon off some of the funds, as he very cleverly did, but he had no access to the bulk of my wealth, just a large measure of the significant income.

He visited once a year, but otherwise absented himself from the estate. I had all the requisite tutors, and a library my guardian never, most fortunately for me, realized was as extensive as it was. I educated myself on many matters I think he would have preferred I did not, had I been so stupid as to let him know what I was doing.

I was a precocious little *vicomte*. Voracious, as well, when it came to reading. Business. Law. Languages. History. I found, too, my father's private notes about wealth, and its growth and management. I also acquired the observational education about all things, or at least very many things, cockical, as I coined the word.

At fourteen, when I knew with absolutely certainty that I was, and forever would be, addicted to cock, though I had yet to do anything with any prick

other than my own, my guardian decided to visit. And stay. And stay. Taking control of the household. Of my life.

Until he died.

Unexpectedly.

Messily.

And was replaced, by some miracle granted by a God I had ceased believing in, with Hubert Fallon.

On first hearing that so very English name, I expected a stolid, John Bull type of man, stocky, plain, English to the core, provincial, no-nonsense, ready to take me in hand and make me the model of an English viscount. I was, however, French at heart, at soul, no matter my birth, and would not surrender that willingly. Nothing more would be taken from me I had sworn, unless *I*, and I alone, chose to surrender it.

He had done me the courtesy of writing ahead, announcing his expected arrival date and time. Given the vagaries of travel, something I understood only through books as I had not traveled outside the estate myself since my parents died, he surprisingly arrived slightly ahead of time. When he was announced, I was sitting behind my father's desk, in my father's chair, dressed in the best clothes I could muster, as my prior guardian had not felt it necessary to provide an extensive wardrobe for me—what use would I have had for it, when I went nowhere?—though my money served *him* excellently well for that purpose.

Hubert Fallon was nothing like my imaginings.

He was tall, exceedingly slender, almost excruciatingly thin, dressed quietly in clothes that were superbly tailored, of the finest fabric. A bony, narrow face, sharp cheekbones, a prominent nose. Greying hair, starting to recede in a widow's peak he made no effort to hide. Long-fingered hands. A subtle stickpin in his cravat, which I later learned was an exquisitely cut diamond, expensive but without ostentation. His only other jewelry was a rectangular emerald, set in gold, on his right hand.

He stopped inside the door, looked around, looked at me, and then... *posed*... for just a moment. It was unquestionably a pose, and not merely a man who was simply pausing and observing the occupant and contents of a room. He turned his head to the butler, who was hovering and looking everywhere but

at me. Hubert, for so he became to me, looked at Wilson, and told him he could leave, as he had things well in hand and would take it from there.

He watched Wilson leave, shutting the door behind himself. He turned and looked again at me.

“He took orders from me,” Hubert said in his quiet tenor. “You are his employer; you are *M. le vicomte de Vidal-Sansouci*. An employee takes orders from no one but his employer, or one authorized to speak for his employer. That will have to be corrected, or he will have to go. Now stand up. Oh, do stop looking at me like an angry pup. You are presently somewhat bark, and little enough of that, and no bite at all. That, too, will be changed.

“I am your guardian for the next few years, or for the next few moments if we cannot find a way to get along. I want to see what I have to work with. So, *M. le vicomte de Vidal-Sansouci*, will you do me the great honor of standing up and coming from behind that rather impressive desk? Your father’s, I take it. His chair, undoubtedly. Excellent positioning for a potentially unpleasant interview.”

He paused as I stayed seated, but only because I was somewhat stunned by the nearly inexorable force of nature that was Hubert.

I finally did as he asked. We stood a few feet apart, in another silence. “You will, I believe, be fairly tall when you have your full growth. Was your father tall?”

“As tall as the tree-tops to a child looking up at him. I doubt any surge of growth will achieve that height. He died when I was eight. *Maman*, as well. Surely you knew this?”

He waved away his knowledge, or lack thereof. He raised his right arm, extended his hand, pointed his forefinger down, with the other three curled under, and twirled his finger, giving me to understand I was to turn.

“Will a simple turn suffice, or do you prefer a pirouette? I am not sure I have the skill or grace to perform the latter successfully, but in the interests of amity, I am willing to try, *mon cher gardien*.”

He smiled at my mockery, and twirled his finger again. “If it were done when ’tis done, then ’twere well it were done quickly.”

Still not moving, I said, “Murder? *Moi*?” I clasped my hand to my chest, more than a little dramatically, finding myself... *enjoying* myself, as I had not in a long, long time.

“I suspect, *mon cher enfant*, that if we engage ourselves together on this journey, that murder will inevitably be contemplated. On both our parts. I simply referred to the speed with which this decision ought to be made, as there is no reason for prolonging the process. But part of that process is the simple turn you offered, as I have no desire to see you fall on your arse attempting a pirouette. Especially not in *those* shoes.

“You implicitly offered the word of *M. le vicomte de Vidal-Sansouci* when you offered the turn. Does *M. le vicomte* honor his word?”

I stiffened at the words that might have been an insult, but which I discerned were not. So I turned. In a clearly “creeps in this petty pace” manner, so that there was a real potential that I might not finish until the morrow. Eventually I did, to be faced with thin lips, sternly compressed. And a twinkle in his grey eyes.

“Whoever had the dressing of you, should be shot. No, no, better yet... he should be drawn and quartered, and then forced to wear this... this... I have no words for it... *in public*. He would die of humiliation, and thus save your lordship the cost of bullet and powder.”

“I believe I should prefer the bullet, as I had the ‘dressing’ of me. Shall I ring for Wilson to bring a brace of pistols, in case the first should misfire? And would you prefer to put me out of my misery, or shall I do it myself?”

“I think, your lordship, I would prefer to *prolong* your misery. Let us say, until you are eighteen?”

For the first time since he entered the room, indeed, for the first time in more time than I could actually recall, I smiled. And it was a genuine smile. There was no darkness in this man. And as I realized that, I realized another thing as well. He was a friend of Edward's!

My father had acquired a good part of his library from a bookseller, who in turn acquired libraries from heirs of owners who had died, or who had suffered financial reverses and had had to sell off. There were some exquisite and exceedingly valuable first editions lurking about on the shelves, which had thankfully survived years of inattention. I had not, of course, drawn the attention of anyone to their existence once I found them and realized what they were. A first edition, worth a thousand pounds or more, sitting in a library that had never been catalogued, could vanish so very easily. A multitude of them, even more readily.

And amongst the first editions, and the fine books, and the ordinary books, and the books of no worth at all other than to sit on a shelf and look handsome, was the handwritten journal, unsigned, undated though I suspected it was nearly a century old, of a friend of Edward's. He undoubtedly thought only he would ever see the words he penned, and so he was honest to a fault in his descriptions of all he had seen, said, heard, done, with, to and about other men, though I found no fault with his honesty, given the length and breadth—an intentional word choice—of the education he supplied of yet more things cockical than I had imagined. When I finished it the first time, the first of many readings, I wondered if he had had some marvelous plan to ensure that when he died, his journal in essence died with him, a ceremonial burial, a reverent or irreverent fireplace toss. Or perhaps it was to be conveyed in strictest confidence to the man he loved, the third of three in a long life, and that plan, as the Scottish poet had once so eloquently put it, just went fucking *agley*. Or had he simply believed he would still have time to create that plan and arrange for it to be set in motion on his death?

There were two parts of the journal that leapt to my mind as my so very odd interview with Hubert was in progress. The first was the part where he related what little was known of the man named Edward, and the *special* friend of Edward's, and the king who kept his word, and of how that phrase was at first known only to those men who loved men. Eventually it fell into public use, and gave birth to the most-often-contemptuous term, though that depended primarily on who was voicing it, of “neddy boy.”

The second was his description of a certain “ned-sense,” which he was certain all friends of Edward's innately possessed. It was the ability to recognize another friend of Edward's without a word being said, though words could change reasonable certainty to absolute assurance. And it was the ability to recognize the difference between a true friend of Edward's and a man who was merely making use of one for his own convenience.

I had contemplated the men who had provided me with my observational education, and reached certain conclusions about them. But those were all well after the fact. The journal was talking more of the application of ned-sense on a first meeting.

Hubert was my first. Everything my ancestor-in-spirit had written made sudden, complete sense, and when my virgin-no-longer ned-sense said “Yes!” I nearly destroyed it all by blurting out, “Are you a friend of Edward's?”

Losing one's virginity, of any type, is not always a thing of beauty, a joy to be remembered forever and relived with fondness and smiles. It was sometimes a thing better forgotten, interred deep within, and never looked at again. I could attest to that, though I never would.

Hubert became very still. Statue still. His face was wiped clean of the amusement and animation. "That is not a question one asks in polite society, *M. le vicomte*. Especially not in public."

He wasn't angry, nor was he exuding the type of glacial cold I later became adept at using to depress pretensions. But the warmth *was* gone.

That moment was, in fact, my first accurate use of a ned-sense of unparalleled accuracy. Not that I had any formal affirmation of my accuracy that day. What I had was an overwhelming joy on finding someone else like myself, which was promptly crushed by his words, plus a thorough bewilderment. Public? There were only two of us, alone in *my* library. How was that public?

I knew I had not masked my dismay at his response; it would be years before I achieved that level of control. But I asked him those four words anyway.

"Two matters, my lord. The issue of 'public.' Is the door locked?"

"I... I don't know."

"If you are where anyone may intrude on you at any time, with or without a modicum of warning, you are in public, not private. And so you should *always* consider yourself to be."

I could only sputter at him. "But this is my home, *my* library, the door is closed, the..."

He held up a hand to silence me. "May we sit?"

My father, had he been alive, would have blistered me somehow, whether on my bottom with his hand, or by words, for my rudeness. Once I stood, Hubert, as someone of lower rank, since he was announced without a title, could not sit until I offered him a chair and sat myself. An almost-twinkle became almost visible as he watched me realize my *faux pas*. And then my dilemma as to where to sit.

"If I may, my lord, I suggest those." He gestured to two very deep and comfortable wing-backed chairs by the fireplace. I had a sudden flash of winter

memory. Papa in one chair, reading, his glasses having slid down to the tip of his nose. *Maman* in the other, doing some intricately exquisite embroidery. I was on the floor, playing with toys in front of, but never *too* near, the brilliant red-gold-yellow-orange of the fire.

I nodded, and as we sat, he gestured toward the chair in front of the desk, subtly not designed for the same degree of comfort as others in the room. "I assume I was to sit there?"

"Yes."

"Good thinking. Always think of position, and placement, and power, in everything you do. Though most will not speak of it aloud, that is a 'supplicant's chair.' It is far less comfortable than the visibly *powerful* chair behind the desk. I have even known some who have shortened the legs on that chair. Not enough that the person sitting down on it feels as though he is dropping to a child's seat. But just enough so that the average person will have to look *up* at whoever is across from him, and will feel suitably, subtly *diminished* by having to do so."

He crossed his right leg over his left, elbows on the arms of the chair, and steepled his hands. His expression became, not stern as though he was angry, but solemn, to emphasize the seriousness of what he was about to say. I was to become very familiar with that expression.

"Someone told you about friends of Edward's?"

I shrugged. *Someone* had, but he was long dead.

"And about what is called 'ned-sense'?"

I hesitated, nodded.

"I won't ask you who supplied that knowledge. But I will ask you this, and I expect a truthful answer. Were you *forced* to acquire that knowledge?"

That knowledge was not acquired through force at all, and so I was most truthful when I said, "No."

Some part of him relaxed.

"Very well, then. Let me explain a little further. Most friends of Edward's, if not all, have an innate ned-sense, a nearly instinctive recognition that *this* man is a friend of Edward's while *that* man most assuredly is not. With some, it is extraordinarily accurate, with others erratic, and with others so small it might

as well not be there at all. For obvious reasons, no scientific studies have been done, but I firmly believe there is nothing whatsoever mystical about ned-sense. It is simply the ability to read and recognize very subtle signs that friends of Edward's, ah, *exude*, perhaps, without conscious thought.

“But even if you have the most superb ned-sense in the history of mankind, and I assure you, there have always been friends of Edward's *throughout* the history of mankind, you do not ask that question in public. *Ever*. There may some day, some far off day not in your lifetime or mine, where asking that question will not be offensive, or potentially so. And if you should, inadvertently, *blurt* the question out in what might have been public but was not, still, you should not expect anyone to answer you. Not without some overt confirmation on his part of the correctness of your perception.”

I could so easily have been humiliated for what I had done; yet he was gentle with me. For six years, no one had been gentle with me, and some had been far, far less than that. I burst into tears, and Hubert was immediately up and out of the chair and over to me, understanding my need. He knelt partially beside, partially in front of my chair, held out his arms, enfolded me in them, and held me until I regained control of myself, with much sniffing and snuffling and apologies for dampening his coat and cravat.

When I was done, and pushed back, he let me go. Took both of my hands in his and squeezed them lightly and released. Went back to his chair. Ignored the wrinkles and damp spots on his clothes.

“Well, *M. le vicomte*, shall we?”

“*En avant*, Mr. Fallon, *en avant*.”

Thus began my education with Hubert about life, and manners, and society, and love and all things Edwardian and cockical. Though it took me a while to *completely* understand that no matter the explicitness with which he was willing to discuss matters of sex, and how to get it, and how to get over the eventual loss of it at the end of a bad relationship, he did so with the grace and love of a father raising a son.

I doubted that my real father, had he lived, could have provided, or indeed would even have been willing or able to provide, so excellent an education on that which made me, me.

Besides that great service, he did me the equally great service of introducing me to Henri, then twenty-nine to my nearly fifteen, as a “possible candidate for

the position of valet.” He smiled when he said it, because he knew I had recognized Henri as a friend of Edward’s, and thus my ongoing hesitance about agreeing to hire a valet was eliminated.

I am sure that Henri has had a sex life during the years he has worked for me, but I have never known any of the men with whom he might have been involved. As for me, my cock, wondrous though it was, and is, and evermore shall be, was to him nothing more than a more-troublesome-than-the-others appendage on a body about which he had to acquire intimate knowledge in order to perform his job. It was also an appendage that I was required to take firmly in hand and deal with as necessary.

Hubert left shortly before my nineteenth birthday, to help someone else I was always sure, explaining that as at that point I merely wanted him around, but did not in fact need him to be there, he could do more good elsewhere.

I raised my glass in a silent toast to Hubert, who, I had heard, had most regrettably died last year, and to that most astute of planners, Henri. I downed the last of the liquor, and headed to the door as the clock chimed seven.

Hours later, *many* hours later, I was ready to howl with frustration. Nothing had gone as I had planned. Yes, I had picked Peregrine up in a carriage I had purchased for the occasion, an *intimate* carriage which required its passengers to sit more closely together than was customary. Yes, our thighs pressed together with not quite absolute necessity, but there was no Edwardian pressure or slight movement by him to overtly signal interest. And I could not rub up against him like a dog humping his leg, no matter how much my cock felt that would be a most marvelous feeling.

Dinner. An appearance at a musicale. A ball. Another ball. A brief stop at a brothel at which I managed to convince him with remarkable ease that there really wasn’t a tit or cunt on display that he was interested in. A hell where he slammed down several glasses of brandy, lost a thousand at hazard and regained double at faro. Another hell where we only stayed long enough to look and sneer, though not visibly so, and then, finally, the Ivory Turner.

Old, but not ancient. Faded semi-elegance, but without the stench of desperation of the worst hells. A varied clientele, from drunkards who yet retained enough money for one last chance to destroy themselves, to those who gambled neither more nor less than they could afford to lose, to the occasional vastly wealthy guests who would make other choices of venue if they were bent on putting their fortunes at risk.

As rakes of the first order, vastly wealthy (me) and reasonably wealthy (Peregrine, who had not yet inherited the earldom and the even greater wealth that went with it), we were welcomed with open arms. By the proprietor who was so well aware that in the long run the house always wins. By the croupiers and dealers who knew our reputation for generosity, win or lose. By the harlots who hoped to acquire some of that generosity as well, as we were known for not always requiring cocks in cunts before the coins were shared. Though both of us had done the cock-and-cunt route often enough that no one eyed us askance if we did not on a particular occasion.

I knew I was doing it so that I could remain hidden, distasteful though it was and requiring an extraordinary degree of acting and concentration on my part. Fortunately, harlots neither expect nor require protestations of love, or fervent desire, just enough interest for a creditable performance by the customer, so that they may consider their coins were earned.

I just was not certain, not absolutely certain, that on those occasions Peregrine was doing the same thing. My ned-sense, with its unfailing accuracy, assured me that he was. But there had been nothing, at least between Peregrine and me, of those overt signals to confirm what my ned-sense told me. And Hubert had repeatedly pointed out the necessity of some degree of overtness.

A man your ned-sense says is a friend, who looks at your cock and up at you and licks his lips, is overt. A man who, in passing you in an only reasonably crowded room *accidentally* brushes the back of his hand against your groin, and lets his knuckles linger for just that extra second, instead of snatching his hand away as if he had finger-tipped a poker just removed from a fireplace, is overt. A man who in a publicly “private” spot popular with friends, displays his erect cock for your visual delight, is being overt.

The clock in the main room had discordantly chimed three a while ago. “Now or never” was of course not accurate, as if I failed to make the effort now, I would still make the effort sometime.

I stood carefully erect, wobbling only slightly, and slurring only a little more than that. “My lord viscount!”

Peregrine straightened as well, a somewhat lop-sided grin on his face. I peered at him. Yes. Disguised, how could he not be after all we both had consumed, but alert. There would be no taking advantage, no claim of being so drunk as to have no memory, no knowledge of what was done. If, in fact, it *was* done.

“Yes, my lord vicomte?”

“I need to piss.”

He waved his arm, splattering the last little bit of wine in his glass, which luckily missed everything except the already-filthy floor, and declaimed, “And so do we all, all need to piss!”

Damn him. But fortunately for my intentions, there were only smiles or complete disregard.

“And where shall we piss, my lord vicomte?”

The proprietor started toward us, perhaps envisioning a pissing contest then and there, but my palm stopped him.

“In the, ah, the pisserie!”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “Is that Frog for privy?”

I nodded. “Most excellently Froggish. With a delicate sauce for the legs.”

He wagged an unsteady finger at me. “Ah, ah, ah. No pissing on my leg. Down your own, of course, if you can’t aim.”

Haversham looked up from his cards and snarled, “Just bloody well go piss elsewhere, and let the rest of us do what we’re here for.” He slapped a card on the table.

Thus admonished, I took my cue to leave, waving Peregrine to follow. He staggered only a little on his first step, and proclaimed, “Lead on, MacDuff, and damned be him that first cries, ‘Hold, I’ve pissed enough!’”

When I glanced back after that bit of outrageousness, I saw a twinkle in Peregrine’s eyes. My cock lurched.

Six bloody hours. More. And never a moment of privacy. Never a moment of overt confirmation in response to the looks and touches... the always readily explained away touches. Fuck this shite.

My ned-sense was *right*. Had been right for years. I had wanted to suck his cock the first time I saw it as he undressed for bed when we shared a room at university. But I could not, would not, take the kind of risk with a beginning friendship by making my interest in the mighty Peregrine prick known. Nor with a moving-right-along friendship. Nor with a close friendship. And one with so damnably frequent opportunities to see his cock over all these years.

Enough was more than bloody enough.

I had ostensibly *wandered* away a while ago as Peregrine made a start at hazard. Looking for a place that might provide a bit of privacy is wandering with intent. I found it. I gambled then that the small storage room was unoccupied. We were almost there when Peregrine stopped and said, "This ain't the way to the pisserie."

His tone wasn't belligerent, but more of an "I'm not as dumb as blonds look, you know" variety.

"But you're going to follow me anyway."

"But of course. I would follow my best friend to the ends of the earth. I would even follow him to a pisserie, if he knew where it was, and if he did not, I would willingly wander with him as we searched and searched and searched to find a place to piss our weary, full pricks." He snickered at me, the twit.

"Very well, then, walk... No, I think not. You will do something obscene with 'this way.' Just follow."

The proprietor clearly did little to protect his corridors and rooms from wandering patrons, probably based on the well-founded belief that there would be little to nothing at all worth stealing.

Except for a few minutes of privacy.

A minute or so later we arrived at the door. I turned, looked at him, and said, "Stay."

He gave me a tiny "woof!" in reply. I was not quite sure if it was accompanied by a wink.

I twisted the handle, opened the door inward. Peered inside. Still empty. In the dim light from the hall, I could see the almost-to-a-stub candle in its holder, which I had noticed on my reconnaissance. The hell with it. True friends of Edward's don't need light to find a cock and suck it, not as long as they know the cock is there. Or to be realistic, that there is even the slightest possibility a cock will be in range.

I turned to look at him, but didn't have far to go. He had moved closer. I stepped back and out of the way, grabbed his right shoulder with my left hand, turned him, shifted my hand to between his shoulder blades and shoved. The stumble forward, finishing beyond the arc of the door, was somewhat suspicious, as if he might have been cooperating. Absurd. Yes, absurd.

My turn to enter the room, step to my left, use my right to grab the edge of the door and shut it, while my left hand reached out and grabbed Peregrine's right shoulder. Anchored by that grasp, I pulled him toward me, put my right hand on his other shoulder, and leading with my left, spun him round and slammed him... but a very quiet, delicate slam... against the door.

I moved in on him until there was, perhaps, the thickness of a gentleman's card between his lips and mine, between our chests, between our cocks.

I could have stopped. Could have pulled back. Could have laughed off each moment up to that moment as a drunken game, a joke gone awry.

I chose to be that stupid, stupid, arrogant, egotistical wastrel who wagered his home, his family, his fortune, his future, on the turn of a single card at baccarat. Or any of the other games where wagers like that might happen.

I ignored every precept Hubert had instilled in me. Every Edwardian precept I had lived by all these years so that I could feed my addiction from time to time without risking all.

Our breaths mingled, but we still did not touch.

"You are a friend of Edward's, best and only friend." There was not the slightest hint of a question in my words. "*I am a friend of Edward's.*"

Though I could not see it in the darkness, I could *hear* his lips lift at the edges in that tiny, private smile of his. He made me wait, the bastard shite-head, unmoving, before he said, "And your point is?"

My point *was*... his mouth against mine, every inch of me against him, there in the demanding, *urgent* darkness. He opened his mouth to mine, with no hesitation at all. The *bastard*. Had he but given me a hint of confirmation... Wasted years of cock stands being brought to glorious softening. I would mourn my... his... our... losses later.

I raped his mouth with my tongue, and he raped me right back, proving the adage that it is not possible to rape the willing. I dropped my hands to his placket, paused to swat his hands away from mine. Lifted my head away from his.

"No time, you lying shite. *My* decision, *my* choice."

He smiled that darkness-hidden smile, murmured into my mouth as he returned the ardor and claimed my lips, tongue, teeth, and every bit of flesh

inside my mouth, as his. All that was a loan, of course. Very short term. Extremely short when the term was bare minutes.

His cock freed, he whimpered in my mouth as I stroked him. I could make him spew his seed with all the force of a lightning strike setting an ancient oak to torch and raging flame, just with my hands. My mouth was better, even in the short time available.

I pulled back, dropped spit and thick drool from our mouth-ravaging on my palm, applied it to the length and breadth of his jutting cock. It was as impressive as I had always dreamed it was.

“Eight and a half inches,” I whispered as I reluctantly surrendered his mouth and dropped to my knees, confident in the effectiveness of Henri’s Plan B taking care of anything on the floor. I was equally confident in the accuracy of my assessment of length. I was rarely wrong, and then only by the merest part of an inch.

“Eight guineas, eleven shillings, I’ll have you know,” he whispered back.

Bloody hell. Trust Peregrine to arrive at a system of measurement by money: one-inch diameter gold coins.

And then neither of us were thinking, much less talking about inches or coins or anything else as I lapped at his slit, inhaled the liquid streaming from it, and then swallowed him to the root. And sniffed.

Christ. It was, my mind insisted, nothing more than the scent of a man who had bathed many hours earlier, then gone through an evening attending ton events where people were pressed together in near immobility, generating enormous heat and seas of sweat they tried to hide with advance applications of excessive colognes and perfumes. Sweat, *ordinary sweat*, my logical mind insisted.

More! the cock-addicted friend inside me insisted. And it was. A scent that was uniquely Peregrine.

I swallowed my moan as I swallowed, massaging his cock with my throat, then pulling back to lick and slurp and lap at his slit, wanking the base of his cock with my fist, my lips pressing against forefinger and thumb as I moved my head and mouth in circles, before setting my fingers free and taking him all the way in again. I allowed him to begin thrusting his hips, fucking my mouth quickly since there was clearly no time for my customary finesse.

My fingers cupped his hips, my thumbs resting on the joiner of thigh and groin and all was fucking well, when he decided to grab my hair. That came to an immediate stop, as did my sucking, when I dug my thumbs into him. The pain made him gasp... far too loudly under the circumstances... and he held quite still.

He quickly understood my message: He could fuck with my hair or he could fuck my mouth, not both. I was *not* going to return to gaming after having just “taken a piss,” and to all the friends, acquaintances and strangers throughout the hell who would see me, looking as though someone had run his hands through my still-perfectly-ordered hair, and thoroughly disheveled it as I sucked that “someone’s” cock.

Peregrine’s hands lifted away with alacrity and I could tell from the briefly hesitant movements as he resumed mouth fucking that he was not quite sure where to place them. He eventually chose flat against the door.

As I began cooperating, very vigorously, with that long, wide cock pushing in and out of my throat, his breathing became ragged, and he moaned, bit it off, and then, in a harsh whisper, said, “Christ, Michel. So fucking good. *Un cocksucker par ex... par ex... Oh, fuck!*”

And then he was spewing all that warm and wonderful seed down my throat. I pulled away but not off so that I could savor the taste. But not for long. I cleaned him up, and rocked back on my heels in preparation for standing up.

“Hand,” he whispered. I reached out, somehow unerringly found it in the dark, gripped and allowed his strength to help me up. Most politely—Peregrine was clearly a courteous friend of Edward’s who believed in reciprocity—his hand lowered to my crotch and found my hardened cock. I could feel him start to bend...

“Another time. Too long.”

He gave a soft little chuckle, indicating his understanding that I was not referring to the length of my cock and his possible inability to accommodate it were he to start sucking, but rather that we could not afford to be gone too long at the “pissierie.” He squeezed and released, and then put himself back together.

A friend of Edward’s with both a cock addiction and the talent to earn a good living at it had he chosen that route, does not always get to release his own seed. And frequently, as at that moment, he is sucking in a place where

reappearing with a cock stand might well be noticed and not in a pleasant way. The accomplished cock addict therefore has developed a way to quickly go from standing to at ease.

My method was extraordinarily effective.

Great-great Aunt Angelique.

I never knew why Father chose to bring her portrait to England, particularly since looking at it terrified me. He always said, when I asked about her, "One day, when you are older." But then, of course, he died.

There is nothing angelic about her. She might have modeled for Caravaggio's *Medusa*, except that Medusa was beautiful compared to my ancestress. She was all three of Macbeth's witches combined into a single horror. If her face was not sufficient for softening, just a hint of a mental image of her naked accomplished the task between the tick and the tock of any decent clock.

Peregrine turned toward the door, his shoulder brushing me. I put my right hand on his right forearm. He stopped. "Your word."

He stiffened, as if he had been insulted. But then relaxed. He knew what I meant; he had as much at risk as I. "And yours."

Two words of honor given that what we had done would not be spoken of to anyone.

"Another time?" he asked.

"My very dear, could you possibly imagine that there would *not* be another time?"

"No. I don't think I could imagine that."

He turned the handle, stepped quickly into the hall. Coughed. I followed him.

He grinned, somewhat ruefully. "Ah, do you, by some chance, actually know where the, ah, pisserie is?"

I pretended shock. "My dear Peregrine, a good friend of Edward's *always* knows where the pisserie is, if for no other reason than that where the pisserie is there are pricks, and where there are pricks, there are always possibilities. I fear your education is sadly lacking."

“Indeed, I think it must be.”

“Well, if you will put yourself entirely in my hand, I believe I can make your education quite stimulating.”

He choked back a little laugh, and then waved me on. We left to piss, and there turned out to be no possibilities there other than ours, and we had taken enough risks for one evening.

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Rory

Saturday, 8 July 1815

Late morning

Earl of Glenhaven's Estate

Hampshire

A path near the boundary

It was the best of pisses; it was the worst of pisses.

I could have just walked to the edge of the grassy embankment when I finished the fuck, and pissed into the water idling by, but despite where my cock had just been, accompanied as its presence had been by a reasonable amount of almost fully believable verbal encouragement, it appeared that having to watch me piss was embarrassing. So instead of seeing whether I could actually get my piss to go over the stream and into the woods, I walked, still naked, through the bushes, until I was out of sight and on the path.

Where I was, of course, fully in sight of anyone who might be walking down it. After all, the mere fact that there *was* a path indicated someone, or several someones, used it with some regularity. Bugger them all if seeing a naked Scot offended.

It was the kind of needing to piss where you know it is going to be long and satisfying, a pleasurable occurrence ranking somewhere between an average wank, or a really good one where you are shouting out your fantasy fuck's name as you spurt, or perhaps as enjoyable as a fairly good, but not really something to brag about, fuck or suck. I decided to try for a personal distance record, took hold of my still half-hard cock, which actually makes for better aiming, aimed and fired.

The stream admirably arced up and away, and started a preliminary puddle in the dirt. I was planning on perhaps a miniature swamp by the time I was empty. It was entirely *not* my fault that his cough, that politely pointed attention-getter I later became exceptionally familiar with, startled me, caused me to spin around, and piss on the pants of the tall, blond-furred demigod.

Which was how I met Peregrine James Woodhall, Viscount Somerville. The *fully-clothed* Viscount Somerville, though what he wore was far less than and far from his London standards.

I fully admit I had imagined that, often—the far less clothes, at least—after I came upon him by chance, legs spread, placket down, and a glorious cock out and pissing against a hedge in a fortunately not-too-dark part of Vauxhall Gardens. I might have stayed in the shadows, in hopes of a piss evolving into a wank, but we both heard voices approaching and quickly went our separate ways. My spying was, with equal fortune, not discerned.

And there he stood, still with far too many clothes on, but I could settle for what I was given, since I well knew it could never be anything more.

He had on a well-worn shirt, sleeves rolled up past his elbows to show me strong, tanned forearms and a light brushing of gold hair. The shirt was open at his throat—deliberately? uncaringly?—showing off the thick fur of slightly darker gold that rose in the vee to just below his collarbone. Braces. Loose breeches that would have looked more at home on one of his gardeners. Stockings, one starting to sag. Low-heeled, scuffed leather shoes.

Golden hair I recalled seeing usually brushed à la Brutus when I had seen him in passing at a hell, but tousled now. Sea-blue eyes. A nose that was merely a nose, not one of the aristocratic or aquiline or Roman varieties, a functional nose that fit his face and neither attracted nor detracted. A wide mouth... all the better to suck you with, my dear? ...with the lower lip just a bit more plump. A definite distraction and attraction.

I knew what he saw, of course. I have seen myself in the most-excellently-clear tall mirror on which I spent money I could really not afford at the time. Sometimes I have positioned it to watch myself driving my thick, oiled cock into the arse of a man I could trust to be in my home, trust to keep his secret and my own. Most assuredly not a neddy boy who fucked or sucked for coin. Sometimes—far less often than I would like—I watched myself receiving the hammering in the hole. Sometimes, I just watched myself, naked, candles providing warm, flickering illumination as I wanked myself furiously until I seeded the mirror in great blobs. And licked it all off.

What he saw was a naked, wet Scot. I could hardly be anything other than Scottish, given the green of my eyes and the brilliant red of my hair. My thick, everywhere hair. Wet, not merely damp, as I tend to sweat a lot during sex, outdoors on a warm day in early summer; hell, actually I tend to sweat a lot anyway.

A naked, wet Scot, almost hard, cock in hand, pissing.

Begin as you mean to go on. While I did re-aim, so that I was merely pissing *by* him and not *on* him, it was close enough that a few drops splashed on those well-worn shoes. He didn't murmur, mutter, or jerk away. Just stood there, waiting.

I finished, squeezed the last couple of drops out, shook properly, and let my cock fall. Not that it fell very far.

I looked up at him, smiled, held out my hand... the aiming and squeezing and shaking hand... and opened my mouth.

"Rooooooooooooooooory!" The voice came from where I had left the body it went with. Every man knows that tone of name. It means "I want to get fucked again."

"I'm Rory. As you heard." I grinned at my... oh so briefly and only in a here-and-gone fantasy... demigod.

He looked down at my hand. I was almost certain that there was a quick look, a quick survey of all that hair on my chest, circling my large nipples, and the broad band that marched down my belly and wound up in the brighter flame of curls over, under and around my cock and balls. An *approving*, perhaps even *interested* glance, but it was cut off so quickly I decided it was my imagination.

It could only be my imagination. Only that and nothing more. Never more.

He looked up at my face. "Somerville."

His voice was neither cold nor warm. I stared back at him, hand still out, suddenly determined to wait him out. Although men know that the bare hand that they are about to shake might quite recently have been... aiming, squeezing, shaking, perhaps even wiping... or have been somewhere else entirely, as long as they have not seen the activity there is no hesitation. But here, he not merely knew, he had *seen*.

He accepted the challenge, and with a sudden grin, shifted the pail he was carrying from his right hand to his left, to join the fishing rod, shook my hand without rushing, and when he released it, did not wipe his palm and fingers on his pants. Not even the wet part.

Before the pause could become actually awkward, as we seemed to have been handling the whole naked Scotsman, fully dressed Englishman, meeting in the woods, situation rather well, my name was repeated. This time the tone

said, "If I'm not going to get fucked *right now*, I'm bloody well leaving and going to find someone who will."

"*Dinnae fash yersel', lassie,*" I called out, without looking away from him. "*Ah will be richt thare.*"

I winked at Somerville. Spoke a little more softly, and in the flawless aristocratic English I had so arduously and eagerly learned. "I *am* Scots, and speaking as if I might never have left the Highlands does seem to make them all the more eager for me to have my wee, wicked way with them." I deliberately did not look down at myself and up again as I finished. "Well, perhaps not so 'wee,' but most assuredly wicked."

"And you couldn't find any place better for your... wee, or not so wee... wicked ways than trespassing on Glenhaven land?"

His voice had a kind of smoky note, like the single malt whisky my father so excellently and illegally distills, thereby avoiding the damned Sassenach excise taxes and bringing much-needed money into the falling-down castle's coffers. Not that much of it stays there for very long. And if that voice was a pair of hands, I'd want them rubbing and stroking and grasping me, whether gently or roughly or anywhere in between.

Och, weel, th'heel wi' it.

I let myself get fully hard, and with feigned indifference, peeled my skin back to let the broad, weeping knob show. Then dropped my hand, as if what I'd done was an unconscious act, perhaps related to what one might call the harlot behind the hedge. A man eager to get back to fucking and not caring who might know it.

But not so eager as to prevent me from taunting him. Or trying to. On the off chance that what I thought I had seen before was not my imagination after all.

I spread my arms wide, looked around. "I don't see it."

From the tiniest bit of grimness in his face, I was fairly sure he was making sure he did not look at my cock. At least, not directly. "Don't see what?"

I smirked. Turned to my left slowly. Not so slowly as to be *unduly* blatant about what I was doing, but slowly enough for him to get a good look at how thick my cock is when viewed from the side, and then my back, and the muscular, broad, tight, white arse. With my legs spread a little wider, my red-

furred, long toes digging into the ground, purely for balance of course, I put my hands on my knees and leaned forward as far as I could without falling. Looked right and left as if I was peering under bushes. Ignored the way my large balls hung so visibly down between my thighs, as if I were unaware they were even there. And then there was the itch in my arse that just had to be scratched, and momentarily one cheek was pulled so if he was watching carefully he might have had a glimpse of my talented pucker, circled with thick red hair.

Straightening up, left again to complete the turn. Still slow enough to give him ample time to get his eyes up and away from where I wanted them, and if they had indeed been there, I would never know.

He surprised me. When I was facing him again he was looking down at my rampant cock, which meant, if his head had been in that position moments earlier, he had also been looking at my un-rampant, but very willing hole. He looked slowly up, his eyes taking their time, caressing my belly hair, and rubbing the swirls between my nipples. Did he see my nipples harden beneath the fur?

And then he was finally looking again into my eyes. And there was... nothing there. It had all been my overly active imagination. He simply stood there, looking at me. Waiting. Clearly waiting.

Waiting for what?

Oh. Bloody hell. An answer. I licked my suddenly parched lips, and found the words. "No sign."

"Ah." He tilted his head back and down again, and I wanted nothing more than to cross to him and lick the long line of his throat to see if he was as delicious as I expected he would be.

Somerville gifted me only with a small smile, though a larger one was in his eyes. "The sign identifying Glenhaven land. The sign advising would-be trespassers that if they want to find out whether there is life after death they should enter. That sign?"

I limited myself to a nod.

"It must have fallen down. I shall go find it, and you can get on with your..." He waved his right hand in a way that encompassed my only slightly softening cock and the woman impatiently out of sight. If she was even there.

"But what about your fishing?"

He looked at me with the English version of *The bludy heel wi' it* in his expression. "You're fucking where I was going fishing."

"Uh, we can..."

He shook his head. "Don't bother. Another time."

"Another time?"

A slight pause. "Another time." He turned abruptly and went back along the path.

Another time.

Another time... to go fishing?

Another time... for something else?

My no-longer-interested cock heaved a sigh of relief when I arrived at the spot where I had left whatever-her-name-was, along with the blanket and the scattered bits and heaps of our clothes. The relief at the absence of whatever-her-name-was instantly vanished with the realization the blanket and my clothes were gone.

Mostly gone. My boots were standing upright, toes toward the stream. They were completely full of water. The current was not swift enough to carry *everything* away. Just my smalls, pants, stockings, shirt, cravat and jacket. I doubted, though, that the money in my jacket was actually *with* my jacket. Indeed, it was undoubtedly safe and dry. The blanket was caught on a root about twenty feet downstream, and with only a moderate amount of cursing—at the tart, life, the stone that hid itself in the grass for the sole purpose of hurling itself against my toe and sending me stumbling into the cold water, but most particularly golden gods who teased and taunted and weren't truly interested in sex with a hairy Scot—I managed to retrieve it.

I gathered the dripping wool about me, grateful for the heat of the day, but more grateful, in view of the moderately long walk back to Eckley's house, that my feet were not the delicate ones of the mostly effete English.

I used the walk to polish the tale of my meeting Somerville, the loss of the tart, the loss of my clothes, and the nearly naked walk. Edited out the aching, leaking erection and the lusting after an unattainable man who was most assuredly not interested in a sodomite of the Scottish persuasion. It was a story on which I could dine out for quite some time, particularly as I was inviting

laughter at my own expense in this less-than-Shakespearean comedy of errors. And when it eventually appeared the tale was on the verge of becoming stale, I would acquire something new to maintain my reputation as a rogue with a fair bit of wit. Maintain, too, my entrée into the homes and clubs where wagers could be found. Even though none of those homes or clubs were in the truly rarified strata where dukes and duchesses and the likes of Somerville and his father roamed.

And if the tale should reach Somerville, as it undoubtedly would work its way up to the heights inhabited by him and his ilk, given how much men gossip, or to use more masculine terms, share a tale over a pint of ale, it will not serve him ill, as the stigma would all be on the lewd, naked Scot who pissed on Somerville's perfectly pressed pantaloons. As men are not noticeable for the accuracy of their tales, particularly when confided over multiple ales, undoubtedly Somerville would have been strolling along in clothes appropriate for a royal ball, when the lewd Scot leaped from hiding, and pissed, pissed, pissed.

So. A way to profit from the afternoon's events.

But still...

But still...

Another time?

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Peregrine

Saturday, 8 July 1815

The same path, a little later

Fucker.

Scottish scum shite. Standing there, flaunting himself.

How the bloody hell had I managed not to rip my breeches open and shove my cock, with or without a drop of spit to ease the way, into his taunting hole?

I paused once I was around the curve and out of his sight, presuming he'd stayed there, hard and leaking, or left as soon as my back was turned. He would not have watched me go; he had no reason to. He was clearly not a friend of Edward's, for all of that displayed hardness and leakage.

He was more like that damned officer from the British Heavy Brigades, last week at Antoine's. The major, a hero of Waterloo to hear him tell it, was safely returned by the grace of God and his own prowess. Perhaps a truth, perhaps only in his own mind, since the men who could say him nay had apparently all died in the counter-slaughter that followed their illusory victory over d'Erlon's Corps. Major something. Ah. Major Lord Whitney.

I had just completed a bout with Antoine himself, holding my own, and even managing two touches that he did not allow for teaching purposes. As a member in good standing, I had access to the bathing room he maintained for those who could afford the deliberately exorbitant, weeding out the chaff, monthly fees. I stripped off my fencing clothes, left them to be cleaned and stored away until I came back, picked up a towel and cloth from the stack beside the door, tucked it around my waist, grabbed a sliver of soap from the bowl, and walked in.

To find myself face to cock, so to speak, with the major. The sweaty and quite naked and quite aroused major. Nakedness in a changing room or a bathing room used by a group of men after exercise, such as fencing here or boxing at Gentleman Jackson's, was, of course, nothing out of the ordinary. Even the occasional erection, or near-erection, was ignored so long as you did not draw attention to it, so long as you treated it as the momentary result of a random thought, and it quickly softened away.

The major was telling the tale, however, not of Waterloo, but of the Battle of Vitoria, and of a see-nor-ee-tuh he had had after the defeat of the French. He was already into the story, so I had no way to tell if the encounter was consensual with a lady, purchased from a whore, or merely an after-the-victory rape. Men talk of their conquests often, and repeatedly, especially in their cups. Men get hard from the telling or the hearing. Nothing unusual there.

The unusualness was in the combination of the storyteller, location, the listeners, and the sex-soaked atmosphere of the room.

The major was standing next to a tub, his towel draped around his neck. He was short, stocky, hairy, well-muscled, his cock jutting straight out from his body. An impressive cock, perhaps the largest I had ever seen. Certainly the largest one hard.

There were four listeners nearby, all hard themselves, two fully on display, two obvious behind the towels wrapped around the cock-owners' waists. No one was wanking, at least none of the standing men. The listener in the tub was trying to be subtle, but it is hard, as it were, to wank submersed in a tub, no matter how gentle the stroking, without making waves. There were waves.

One of the servants, who would normally have left the room after adding water to a tub, was being carefully unobtrusive in a corner, two large, empty buckets at his feet, his hands covering his crotch.

I stood frozen, knowing that walking to an available tub would break the spell this crude tale had woven in the room. The major told his obscenity-laced story with the most intimate details of his repeated use of the woman's mouth, and cunt and arse. Had I been interested in women that way, I am sure I would have been as hard as the rest, and like all but the one in the tub, barely restraining myself from simply grabbing my cock and wanking as he talked, be damned to where we were.

I was starting to turn away, to simply return to the changing room, dress and leave, when my name was called.

“Somerville! Have we offended you?”

I recognized the bastard who spoke. I berated myself for not noticing sooner that the man with the huge belly, his nether regions fortunately towel-clad, was Beckwith. Had I done so, I could have left immediately and avoided the now-imminent confrontation. Unfortunately, his voice, as offensive as both his

personality and politics, was loud enough that I could not pretend not to have heard.

I turned back to find, not surprisingly, that the major had stopped speaking and everyone was looking at me. I looked directly at Beckwith and lifted my right eyebrow in inquiry. It is a talent I have. I use it to irritate Beckwith, who cannot duplicate it, when I am forced to endure his company for any undue length of time, with my definition of “undue” being any amount of time in excess of that necessary to nod my head to acknowledge his presence and then pass him by.

I waited him out.

“Such an... *arousing*... tale, would you not agree?” His voice oozed slime.

I wondered where he was going with this. Nowhere good, of course.

“Obviously.” I gave him the single word, without mockery. Though what had been “obvious” before was rapidly becoming much less so for the listeners. The major was unaffected. He found *Beckwith*, or what Beckwith had to say, sexually stimulating? Or perhaps his now internal monologue was at work.

“But perhaps...” Beckwith paused as if trying to find the words to say something delicately. But as he had no skill with delicacy, barely an acquaintanceship with it, he went with vulgarity. “Perhaps a friendly cock stand over a tale of a cunning cunt does not... interest you?”

Damn. Politics again, aided by an innate personal dislike.

Beckwith was a baronet who yearned for public position and influence, for which his late wife's substantial wealth was not quite enough to achieve his goal. He had aligned himself with a group of peers and members of Commons at work to reinstate not only the laws against sodomy, but the death penalty for conviction as well. He and his bosom beau, the Bishop of Harwell, had become, for all practical purposes, the public face of the crusade for a new reformation.

The seven reinstatement attempts since 1660 had obviously not succeeded. Undoubtedly because beloved Charles (to those neddy boys acquainted with history) or “*that king*” (to the reformers who refused to say his name), had ensured that the only way to enact another sodomy ban was by secret ballot. And changing the secret ballot provision could only be done by secret ballot as well.

Secret ballots were virtually unheard of in Parliament, and never used in elections to the Commons. Beloved, *brilliant* Charles. The hypocrites in the Houses—the secret sodomites and men who wanted to continue enjoying the occasional dip of their wick in a man's holes without fear of hanging—could take a vigorous public stand on the side of righteousness and God's holy word, as handed down by the Bishop and his like, decrying the perversions which were causing a deterioration in the moral fiber of the nation. Then vote... secretly... against the bill.

These “reformationists,” as they called themselves, were working more slowly than their predecessors, building a public perception that London was in danger of becoming the new Sodom or Gomorrah, and the contempt and hatred directed toward friends of Edward's was on the rise. Even an accusation could be nearly as destructive as being caught with a cock in your mouth. Or worse, up your arse.

Ignoring the bastard, or professing a profound love for cunt, and just walking away was not an option. *Whatever* happened after those words would be casually dropped into every single conversation over after-dinner port that night, and several nights thereafter. Men are the most prolific gossips in the world, preferring blatant vulgarity and cock-warming lasciviousness over anything mild or merely crude.

The port-driven tale, twisted beyond any bounds of truth, would then have reached the women of the ton. They would not blanch or swoon over the lewd words whispered into their “delicate” ears. They would refine the tale, smooth its rough edges, shape it, sharpen it, and set it free to circulate in the cesspits of general ton gossip. And as women far exceed the cock-adorned sex in tongue-viciousness, by several orders of magnitude, it would not be long before a man muttered over dice, a woman whispered behind a fan, how terrible it was that the son and heir of the Earl of Glenhaven, that pillar of the Established Church, should turn out to be a neddy boy.

I did not see that I had much choice but to do other than what I did, though as I began I was uncertain whether I could do it at all.

I ignored Beckwith. I ignored them all. All but the major. Dropped the cloth and soap on the floor, pulled the towel from around my waist and wrapped it around my neck as a mirror to the major. Paid no attention to who did, did not, look at my cock and bollocks.

“I do not know what your young *señorita*—” pronounced correctly, of course “—looked like, as I seem to have arrived at the tail of the tale. But I am sure she was beautiful enough to get you hard and eager... get your men hard and eager as well? Did you share her with them?”

It did not matter in that time and place whether he had or not. That he *might* was more than enough for the cocks that had begun to go soft, to become painfully erect again.

There are dark desires in every man, no matter how buried, that with the right spur will be launched into the front of his mind. The desire to see a group of men use a woman's willing holes one after the other, or darker yet, to imagine her raped by all of them. To imagine joining in or just watching and wanking. And perhaps shamefully imagine it was a man, not a woman, being brutally fucked, brutally raped.

That was the darkness that got them hard again. The darkness I had to use. I took that darkness, that cock-drooling lust, and wove a tapestry of words.

I did not let him answer.

“I rather think you did, but only after you had her first.” I hardened my voice, hardened my cock as well with imaginings I would never dare disclose. “How many, major? Two? Three? Five? A dozen? But only her cunt or her mouth, because her arse was reserved for you.

“If I had been there that day, when my men were done, I would have pulled her up, positioned her like a bitch, got behind her. Worked her bruised nipples, twisting and pulling to make her moan. I would have thrust my cock in her cunt, got it wet and slick with all that seed that had only just begun to leak. Slicked my fingers there as well, then used one or two, no more, on her arse. I'd have slowly pushed my knob inside while helpful men held her, then shoved in balls deep, fucked her arse hard and fast, spewing seed until it spurting out around the flesh of my cock, and then drained like an unstopped bota bag turned upside down, once I pulled out.”

I stopped talking. There was no sound in the room except the sounds that men make when they are so aroused their balls are frantic with demands to seed and *seed now!*... but knowing they could not, dare not.

I have had my fair share of women's tits and asses and cunts. Well, to be honest, I had probably had rather less than whatever my fair share was, or

might or should or could or would have been, had anyone been counting so that an adequate division of shares could be made. But the imagining that had made me hard had been of a man. No particular shape, features or even cock size; it was just enough to imagine that he was *mine*.

I stood there and let them see my cock stand... a thing of beauty if I say so myself, but unfortunately, it will never be a joy forever to anyone. Certainly not to the wife I would eventually have, though I would put that day off until I was old. Weston was old. Thirty-eight? Forty? And still unwed. I would emulate him. But I knew the day Father beat me so thoroughly and so well, that I would never have a man to have and hold for forever. Nor ever that one day more.

And when the silence might have been broken by one of them, might have fallen apart had someone moved, I broke it myself.

“All of you, so *enthused* by my story.” My voice was vicious and low and pitched so that those in the room had to strain to hear it, and whoever might have been listening at the door would have to just wonder what I said. “You’re a bunch of boys at Eton or Harrow, just bigger, older, fatter, hairier. Boys in a circle, wagering precious desserts on who can shoot farthest, and which poor sod will shoot first, when the prize is earned by being last. A wager, gentlemen? Twenty pounds says Beckwith will be *first* among you.”

I stared them down. “No takers? Sadly, I have no time to waste watching men trying to relive their schoolboy days.”

I looked at Beckwith. “You want all the friends of Edward’s to hang on a gibbet and burn in hell afterwards, yet here you are, displaying your cock stand to these men.” I deliberately looked at his prick and curled my lip. “Such a *mighty* display, too.”

My cock had softened enough that I could wrap the towel around my waist again. “Good day, gentlemen.”

As I headed back into the changing room, I did not acknowledge the servant whose pants were gloriously stained with seed; I assumed he would spill water on himself in just a moment to solve that potential embarrassment.

Some of them would be wanking later, I knew, just as I did in the privy, quickly and efficiently, once more imagining that phantom man who gave up his arse and his mouth so willingly—I refused to let myself say lovingly, even in the silence of my mind—before I dressed and left. Carefully avoiding the thought that I had turned innate dislike into active enmity.

Christ.

As that memory faded away, I realized how hard my cock was, how much it hurt. Hardness and hurt had nothing to do with my tall tale, but with the fact that as I relived it, the man whose fuck I had described in feminine terms, the man I'd wanked to in that privy, was not some vague image, merely male and nothing more, with readily available holes. He now had a face. Rory's. And he was not being shared because he was mine. *Mine!*

Christ!

I stepped off the path, pushing through bushes, circled around a tree with a wide enough trunk to hide me. Ripped my cock out. Leaned forward, my bare forearm resting on the rough bark, my forehead on my arm, looking down at my angled body, at the eagerness of my cock, and wanked myself. A fast and furious six to the images of Rory's lush, powerful arse being pounded ruthlessly, furiously, by my cock, and then I spent myself all too quickly in spurts against the wood.

I stood there for a moment, gasping. Berating myself for my thoughts, for the wanking, for the stupidity of wanting a man who had just left a whore's hole shortly before he pissed on me and who was heading back to her holes when I walked away from him.

Stupid, stupid man. And I did not mean Rory for his love of women.

Later that afternoon, I compounded my stupidity by deciding to accept after all the invitation Sir John Eckley had extended, to feel free to join a small house party of friends he had invited to get away from the capital's still overwhelming celebrations of Waterloo. I had never before accepted his invitation, given that we did not move at all in the same circles in the city. He still kept extending them, since he probably suspected that not to do so might in some way cause offense to my father. And causing offense to my father, however slight, was not something anyone with any sense ever knowingly did.

I insisted to myself, though my self was paying little attention, that I had had enough solitude, now that the latest unpleasantness with Father was ended. At least for now. Mama would want me to stay for a while, and so I would. But I needed the company of men, though not men whose arses or mouths were available for a good rogering. Men with whom I could relax, drink, play cards, gamble, tell outlandish tales that were most assuredly untrue—do some of the rakish things I do so very well at a males-only house party.

I was not going to Eckley's because that was the most logical place for the Scot to have come from. Absolutely not.

So I rode over to his estate, where I was tormented by Rory's presence for the remainder of the day, and over dinner, and well into an evening of drinking and gambling over cards.

I lost several hundred to him.

That night, after one final wank to an imagining of my cock driving into that wide Scots mouth repeatedly until his lips were swollen, and his face as red with lust as his hair, I put him out of my mind. I would not see him in town.

As pleasant as Sir John was, a bluff, hearty baronet of what is described as sound English stock, sensible, plain-spoken, who enjoyed occasional trips to the capital for some never-to-excess gambling, and perhaps a bit of discreet wenching on the side, Lady Eckley having brought coins rather than beauty to the marriage, our circles did not overlap. He and his friends or acquaintances, and I did not know which Rory was, were at the edge, slightly beyond the edge, of the group that comprised the Upper Ten Thousand. We would therefore not meet in my usual haunts, and I certainly would not seek him out.

Nor he me.

And as I put him out of my mind, I refused to wonder why I had said "another time" to him. Or what it meant.

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Rory

Sunday, 20 August 1815

Well past midnight

The Dock

London

I smelled. Not the good, clean smell of having worked in a field on a spring day. Not the smell of leather and weather, or sweat after a hunt. Not the smell of a bout at Antoine's or a round in the ring at Gentleman Jackson's. Not even the smell of *private* sex. I smelled of sex on the Dock.

The riverbanks of the Thames are crammed with countless wharves for the ships that carry the trade that is the life-blood of the Empire. There are so many ships that it is said you could go the London length of the river without ever touching water, just by walking from ship to ship to ship.

So many ships, so much overcrowding, so much delay in offloading and loading, that we, or rather the government, just spent nearly six million pounds to complete the London Docks this year, to provide added shipping capacity. But of all the docks, with all their names, only one was referred to as just "the Dock."

With a capital D.

If you are a man who lusts for the heart-thumping thrill of an unknown man sucking your cock, fucking your arse, or the reverse, nothing leisurely or gentle, always hurried, almost frantic; if you are a man who *needs* that extra tension sizzling throughout your body as you get close, closer, *closer*, that always-present fear that you will be caught, your secret revealed, yourself made known for the disgusting pervert you have so recently been assured by Beckwith and the Church that you are, you choose the Dock.

True, there are other public places where you might hold the head of the man you chose, the man who chose you, the man you paid for the use of his mouth, the man who paid you and made you feel he was desperate for your cock when you know bloody well any cock at all would have done. One particularly dark walkway in Vauxhall. Certain public privies. Certain out of the way areas, behind bushes, along trails, in the parks.

But there is no place for public sex that is as gut-churning as the Dock. And while in most other places, the risk of being observed is mostly minimal if you seed quickly, observation on the Dock is a near certainty.

There are almost always watchers and wankers, sometimes watching just far enough away to be sure they can see everything you are doing, or enough to satisfy their lust, but still not so close that you might see them clearly. Sometimes they are bolder, moving within touching distance, perhaps for a better view, perhaps hoping to be asked to join. They are the watchers and wankers who explosively seed just as you and the one, two, three, however many others are sexing with you, seed as well. If they're lucky, or perhaps just very skilled, in the timing of their strokes.

If you want privacy for your fucking or sucking or arse-eating or whatever your particular perversion might be, you do not choose the Dock.

I chose the Dock tonight. Dressed in the rough, tattered clothes I keep for such special occasions as Dock fucking. Though not the kind of fucking I wanted but so rarely got.

My clothes were dirtier than before, and they had already been very dirty indeed, the knees in particular, when I finished sucking the toff who was still dressed in the clothes he had worn to some ton affair or other. We were on the outermost edges of the Dock area, where such attire was reasonably safe. Far enough in for enough shadows to hide the quick suck or fuck; not so far in as to invite a beating and robbery. The Dock is, after all, not only a place for friends of Edward's to play, and prey upon each other, but to be preyed upon as well.

After he frantically tucked himself away, and turned and almost ran, while still buttoning the placket, I moved farther into the darkness of the Dock. I found another man. Another man of the ton, though he wouldn't think the brutish Scot would know, and indeed, I didn't know him by name and probably wouldn't recognize him later, if by chance I ran across him at some tonnish affair—to which I was unlikely to be invited in any event, as my life is spent on the fringe of the ton. The fringe where all rogues—the men who survive by their wits, their charm, and their gambling skills—live and play.

What he wanted was a rough fuck. Not what I wanted, but what I was definitely capable of giving. A neddy boy must do what a neddy boy must do, if he wants to seed well, or even reasonably well. My cock is not long, a respectable almost six inches, but as gasps and grunts and whines and moans have often told me, remarkably thick.

I made him bend over a barrel, his pants and smalls at his ankles; made him use his own spit to wet his hole and stretch it; smeared my copious precome around the knob and shaft of my cock to join my spit in slicking myself up. Pressed myself against his arsehole, feeling the flesh give way a little, only a little, asked if he was sure, and when he nodded, shoved hard, and punched through.

He gave a most satisfactory cut-off howl, perhaps wondering if he had splintered the edge of the barrel he was gripping so tightly, and then I pushed all the way in. He was too tight, hot, eager to want gentleness; hell, he would not be on the Dock if he wanted gentleness. He hesitated only a moment before fully cooperating with the assault on his channel. I had worked up a good, steady rhythm, almost every stroke going over that special little bump inside that made him, like every man not actually being raped, moan in accelerating pleasure, when I felt the hand on my rump.

I had been aware of the watchers and wankers, of course. I always was. I even paused between plunges to give them an opportunity to see how widely my cock was spreading him. I am *proud* of my damned cock. After all, if you can be proud because you are handsome, well-born, talented, whatever facet of you that you had no part in creating, you can be cock-proud as well.

I turned my head to look up at him but only saw a shadowy outline. Another ton bastard, though. He smelled... *clean*... somehow beneath the scents of the Dock and its filth and the men who added to that filth. Not someone who made my cock wither and retreat, so I let him find pleasure in touching me, while I pleased myself with the well-fucked hole providing a temporary home for my cock.

He moved behind me, long fingers caressing my arse, two of them pressing into my hole. He reached around as if to undo my pants and bring them down but a growled "No!" from me stopped that. He sighed and moved around to my right side. I didn't stop him from reaching between the man I was fucking and me, to fondle his balls, my balls, to caress my well-slicked cock. He inhaled sharply when he felt it, curled his fingers around it so that for a moment I was fucking his hand as I fucked the arse.

His voice was low, and as rough as my fuck; the kind of whisper a man uses when he doesn't want his own voice to be too easily recognized.

"I'll imagine you've got a hairy arse. Imagine what it would feel like if I ate it out, buried my tongue inside, making you squirm and whine like a slut.

Imagine slicking your hole up with the oil I have in a little vial in my pocket. Imagine slicking myself up with it as well.”

He was bent over, his left arm stretched out so his left hand could work my arse, his fingers pressing and caressing my hole. His knob briefly brushed my cheek.

“Imagine, with me, the feel of my cock pressing into your hole, spreading you wider than you’ve ever felt before. Then pushing inside you swiftly, balls-deep on a single thrust, the way you just used him. Would you howl for me, let it all out instead of holding it in?”

I was so aroused I actually turned my head, twisted my torso as if I might bend awkwardly over, so he could fuck my mouth while my cock was in the barrel-man’s hole. But the prick taunted me. He scraped his finger over the weeping slit, put it up to my mouth, let me suck it in, tasting the slickness and his at least clean-for-now flesh, not that cleanliness lasts long on the Dock. He pulled the finger slowly out. “Oh, no, my friend. I won’t use your mouth. Not now, mayhap later. But imagine my cock far up inside you, fucking you until you’re begging for me to let you seed. Imagine that!”

My flesh tingled where we touched, the watcher-wanker and me. I wondered whether he felt that odd... *connection*. And then it was too late to wonder anything more except for the most momentary of wonderings of whether this seeding would be what I wanted, needed, to satisfy the urges that had brought me to the Dock.

As it turned out, it was not.

The barrel-holding man began to moan louder, to fist his own cock faster, until he shouted to let the Dock know he was coming as he spattered seed against the wood and his arse clamped down on me. I forced him open again with a last few brutal strokes of my own, refusing to signal my own coming other than with the grunt I can never refrain from making. It was enough for my watcher-wanker as well, because I felt the side of my face being splattered with drop after drop after drop of thick, hot seed.

We paused, panting. Then the man who had so badly needed a fuck began struggling. Yet another who comes and runs. I pulled my cock out of his arse, letting it slowly begin its droop back to normalcy, stepped back to allow the barrel-fucked man to make his escape. If there had been any other watchers, they were gone. It was just the two of us. I turned toward my watcher-wanker,

feeling his cooling seed sliding down my cheeks, one drop dangling from my nose in imminent danger of making a mess of the ground, until his finger reached out, scooped it up, and then inserted it into his mouth. I gulped when his lips tightened on it, and as he so obviously cleaned it and slowly pulled it out, his left hand moved to my cock.

We turned, then, and it was just enough to see each other's face in the dim light.

Fuck me! (Please, Lord!)

Somerville.

He stilled as well, obviously recognizing me. Realizing, perhaps, that he had an actual memory, if he had not chosen to somehow wipe it away, of my arse, how hairy it is, what my hole is like. He had had no need to imagine that at all.

Then a slow smile spread across his lips. He had not yet moved his left hand from my cock. I could not help beginning to plump up just from his hand holding me, not even stroking. I was certainly helped along by that cock-stand-making finger, joined by a second, touching my cheek, scooping up more of his seed, and then holding them in front of my lips. I opened my mouth and took them in, demonstrating my not inconsiderable sucking skills on his fingers.

He pushed both fingers in, testing my gag reflex. I passed the test. His smile broadened. My cock stiffened. It was his own voice, that plummy *Somerville* tonnish voice that softly said, elongating my name in a mockery of what he'd heard that earlier summer's day, "Rory, you are such a pervert."

He took his fingers out of my mouth, so very slowly, and I knew he was hardening again as well, though I did not look down to verify my certainty.

I smiled back at him. "I but hold the mirror up to thy nature, m'lord."

He blinked at that. Then stilled his face. Ah. He had not expected the rude, crude, lewd Scot, who flaunted his cock and balls and arse on pastoral pathways, who fucked a man over a barrel, skillfully sucked fingers, and came deliciously well from imagining all that he had asked me to imagine, to be able to mangle the Bard.

I handed him back my best Scottish smirk.

A scream is a definite killer of cock stands.

Particularly a scream of terror like that one was. It was followed by a loud cry of "*Ned-bangers! Ne—*" But the voice was cut off in mid-word.

Because he was running? Because it was cut off for him? But at least the man, whoever he was, had not run away in silence, but had attempted to warn everyone else. The shouts continued for a while as unknown voices spread the warning, even to those whose location might be safe from the predators. Or perhaps not, because voices calling out in the darkness could not tell us where the bangers were, where they had been.

Cocks having retreated to the safety of trousers, buttons buttoned, Somerville and I sensibly decided to move elsewhere, wherever that elsewhere might be, for the second round of sex we both knew was inevitable. But what should have been a reasonably rapid stroll, designed to achieve that elsewhere goal without drawing undue attention to ourselves, unraveled with the loud “Oi!” after we turned the first corner.

There were three of them halfway down the block. The largest, in the center, was the one who had hailed us. They began sauntering toward us, neither moving too quickly, nor too slowly, but just right to create the illusion of casualness and just-looking-for-a-cocksucker friendliness.

“Whatcher lookin’ for, mates? Mebbe we got it right here.” He groped his crotch and leered.

There are times when honor... Stand your ground! Never surrender! Charge uphill into the cannon fire! ...is sheer stupidity. Neither Somerville nor I were stupid. Though running would be a swirling cape enticing the bull to charge in hopes of gouging our guts, we had no choice.

We turned and ran and the three followed. We raced through the dark, the near-dark, twisting, turning, sliding through shadows, hurling ourselves past light, never quite gaining enough ground to elude them. I suddenly realized I knew where we were. Up ahead was a building under construction.

A quick decision. “Fuck this shite. Can you get rid of one?”

The blessed man didn’t waste breath on anything other than a well-panted, mocking, “Aye!”

I sped up, and he kept pace. We needed to gain a little, just a little, on our pursuers.

No time to pause and plan, and so my plan consisted of a chin-tilt forward and leftward as we ran side by side, six words and the oddly confident hope that he would understand and go along.

“Building. Left. Go right. Any weapon.”

We made it to the ancient office building leaning over the street, turned left around it, out of sight of the hounds for a moment. I ran straight ahead, Somerville twisted right into the deeper shadows of the site, and then I stopped. Turned. Faced the three pursuers who raced around the corner, stumbled to a halt, puffing like Trevithick's Catch-Me-Who-Can, and stared at me. Greedily.

Not a greed for sex, though. I knew that particular greedy look all too well.

I made my voice softer, gentler, more consistent with a nancy-boy who was easily afraid despite his obviously not slender and tiny build. Hunched a bit, a spurious cringe to help disguise my height and weight and reach. “Wh-what do you want?”

“Where's your mate?” The biggest was apparently not entirely stupid, but hopefully just stupid enough.

“He... he's, uh, over there.” I tilted my head directly to my left, to shadows where a box, where *something*, created an appearance that *might* be a man hiding, or just a place for a man to hide. “P-p-please don't hurt us. We-we'll...” I let my voice trail away.

“Just a coupla neddy boys, lookin' for cock to suck, aincha? We got three good ones for ya 'ere. Suck us good 'n' ain't no one'll get 'urt.”

“O... okay.”

I had to gamble on my speed and sheer desperation. I dropped as if eager, now, to be of use to the approaching predators. My left knee went into the filth, though, and my right leg went back as if it had slipped in the muck. Which tilted me so that I was leaning with one palm flat against a cobblestone, bracing myself for a launch against the nearest. There was only a second, two, three, before they realized I was not actually getting on my knees, but I could not move until the time was right, or when I had no time at all to do anything but move. Would they be...

Yes! They *were* that stupid. And I had an odd confidence in Somerville.

They moved toward me, big man in the lead, reaching inside his pants to haul his cock out. Assuming, probably, that the frightened molly boy on his knees wouldn't notice that his other hand was out of sight. The one to his left had a hidden hand, as well. I thought the one on the right might have both hands visible but could not be certain, as he trailed just a little.

Just little enough.

Somerville stepped out from the shadows.

Two voices overlapped. The left-hand banger, groping his crotch, saying, "Me next, Bill." The right-hand banger's "Fuck 'im, Bill."

I felt no regret for what we were, I hoped and nearly prayed, about to do to them. If Somerville's aim were true.

It was.

Somerville's hands gripped a long, thick piece of wood, which he drew up and toward his left shoulder as he twisted his body left as well, and then like some reverse bat on a frighteningly odd cricket pitch, swung right in a backhand stroke propelled by the full weight of his body.

The *thud!*—as the wood met the right-hand man's upper back and knocked him flat—was so loud in the silence that for such a brief slice of time seemed to be a prelude to sex. To be followed, of course, by the banging these men had always intended to give us, with fists and boots and the varied clubs, held in the hidden hands, that had come to be known as banger-sticks.

They had not expected resistance. Startled, the standing two stupidly turned right to look. I launched myself out of the muck, and slanted to my right. Left foot. Right. A partial third as the left-hand man began to twist back toward me. Too late, too late. Weight on my left leg, arms out for brief balance, with all the skills honed by playing football with a bigger, meaner older brother and his equally big and vicious friends, I kicked the fucking-with-no-one-tonight bastard in his balls.

Two down. The shrill scream and groin-grabbing hands as left-hand man dropped brought the big man's attention back to me. A moment of hesitation. A flicker of worry over the unarmed man in front of him, and the board-armed man behind him. He made his choice.

Yanked a knife from somewhere, moved toward me, circling to his right, my left, where he could keep an eye on Somerville, and where his friend might be able to grab me if I stupidly forgot he was there and allowed him to get behind me, temporarily fallen or not.

I was not that stupid. I stopped the circling by standing still when we were both in a position to keep an eye on the other three in our little tableau. The two fallen bangers and Somerville.

Somerville... the fucking idiot! ...was paying far too much attention to me and the man with the knife. The man he had hit was beginning to struggle up.

“Arse-wipe!” I shouted, without taking my eyes off the eyes of the knife-man.

Fortunately, Somerville understood that he was the arse-wipe in question, turned, and slammed the board down, this time on the back of the man’s head. Dead or merely disabled was unimportant, so long as he stayed down.

He did.

And then to prove he wasn’t a total arse-wipe, Somerville strolled over to the ball-bashed banger, and whacked his head as well.

Two against one. Except it wasn’t. The big one was mine. It didn’t matter what he had intended for me. What mattered was what he had intended to do to something, *someone*, who was inexplicably mine. So I said the word aloud, to both of them, but I doubted the Englishman understood the double meaning. Somerville understood enough, though, that he stopped the stalking that would have brought him in close. Possibly close enough to help me, or close enough to get in my way and hurt the pair of us.

We danced, knife-man and I. Twists and turns, stomps and taps; the long muscled arm with the long fat knife at the end jabbing out, and my body dancing back and away. An arcing forehand slice at my neck, me tilting back, knees bending, barely keeping from over-balancing and falling on my arse. A backhand try to rip open my belly, an almost tonnish bow forward that moved my belly away so only my shirt was ripped.

And then I fell.

An awkward fall, to end it all. Or so he thought.

I might... I think... fight fairly if ever I were stupid enough to agree to a duel or force one on someone else, but otherwise? The only reason to fight is to win. Which is why I used a sweep of my left arm to throw a fistful of slimy muck up and into his face, as I rose and brought my right arm down in an arc that placed my hand around his knife-hand wrist, and pulled so his own momentum swung him around, off-balance, so I could give him his fair turn on the ground.

I snapped his wrist as I brought him down.

He howled the other kind of howl I enjoy. The howl of a man I've hurt because he intended to hurt me or mine. *Somerville is mine!* I safely howled inside my head. I stepped back.

An injured animal is still both an animal and injured, and if it can move at all is still capable of wreaking havoc.

I put my right arm out, palm up, not looking away from the man who glared up at me while he cradled his flopping wrist in his other hand.

“Arse-wipe.”

That could be my new favorite word. Part of a special language known only to me and Somerville—a man who unquestionably readily understood arse-wipish. Spoke it fluently, indeed, as he moved closer and put the board into my hand. And immediately backed out of range so if I had to use it he was not only out of the way, but could keep an eye on the other two.

What a fucking team!

Yes. Definitely. A *fucking* team, though just not quite yet.

There was one more thing to do before that. A possibly stupid, possibly reckless idea to implement, but no one has ever known me to hold back when I am truly angry. I used that same disguising half-whisper Somerville had used to make me seed so hard and so well, a little deeper, since I am a baritone to his tenor, bits and pieces of brogue and Cockney tossed in. But not a tonnish tone in the lot.

“Ye dinna know who ye fooked wi’, did ye, mon? Me mate ’n’ me, yeah, we’re neddy boys. Or maybe, jest maybe, we’re just friends o’ some friends of Edward’s. Either way, we took ye down, ’n’ ’urt ye bad.

“’N’ that’s what’s gonna happen again, t’ all ye bangers. See, we’re part o’ the Friends of Edward Society. Foes of men like you buggerin’ barstards. ’N’ we’re gonna fight ye when ye come after us. When ye ’urt one of us, ye ’urt all of us, and we’re fookin’ gonna ’urt ye back.”

I tilted my head toward Somerville and back. “Me mate, ’ere? ’E’s a founder of the Society, ’e is. Meanest man-fooker in the whole fookin’ valley, too. Bugger me, but if ye’d been fightin’ ’im, ye’d be bleedin’ out right now, besides havin’ some serious broken bones t’ go along w’ yer gutted belly, ’stead a that limp wrist there.

“But we’re gonna let ye off kind of easy-like. So ye kin let yer pals know that when they try this shite again, they’re never gonna know if it’s just some random neddy boy they kin actually ’urt, or one of yer foes that’s gonna fook you up ’n’ fook you down, ’n’ leave you cryin’ and beggin’ for mercy y’ain’t never gonna get.

“And if you *do* ’urt one of us, ’urt any friend of Edward’s at all, at all, we’ll ’unt ye down, ’n’ after we’ve fooked ye up, we’ll find yer friends, find yer family, ’n’ fuck w’ ’em one way or another or lots o’ ways.

“Are ye gettin’ the message from yer foes, shite-head? We’re mad as ’ell, ’n’ we ain’t fookin’ takin’ it anymore.” I raised my voice and roared at him. “Now get the fook outa here!”

The shite-head did as he was told, with no qualms about leaving his still unconscious friends behind.

I tossed the wood away and turned to look at Somerville, who looked at the downed men and then at me.

“You idiot. You bloody idiot. Look at their sizes. We could have outrun them.” He paused as remembered reality set in. “Uh, somehow.”

“Wee lads. Better to punish them.”

“But what if that wood had not been there? What if I hadn’t been able to stop the third one? What if...”

I could not help the laughter that erupted from me. “Bugger what-if, m’lord. It didn’t happen.”

His frown became more stern. “And what the fuck was all that shite about a Friends of Edward Society?”

“And why not have one? An army of neddy boys in frilly dresses or dripping chains, or just plain clothes, wielding fans or whips, or wooden pricks, or fists or knives or boots or pistols. We could march down St. James’s Street, make our bow in front of the bow window at White’s. And shout as we march, ‘We’re mad as ’ell, ’n’ we ain’t fuckin’ takin’ it anymore.’”

I stopped. Realized that the idea wasn’t quite as funny, quite as outrageous as I had thought when I conceived it in a moment of rage. Reality, as ever, had a way of settling in, sitting heavily down, on my odd starts. A Friends of Edward Society had as much reality as a dream born of an opium pipe.

I was starting to come down from the almost drunken exuberance of all that had happened: the sex, recognizing Somerville, the chase, the fight, the win, the braggadocio after. I needed... something. Something more to keep that feeling for just a while longer.

What I needed was a good fuck. The kind of fuck *I* needed, not the fuck someone else needed or wanted.

“Fuck me, Somerville. Here and now, fuck me fuckin’ arse. I need yer cock inside me.”

Somerville looked at me in shock. I knew men like him well. The stuffy Englishmen who fucked other men in mostly discreet places, hidden away with little to no chance of being discovered. And even in their excursions to the Dock—and this was most certainly not *Somerville’s* first foray into Dock fucking, with his carefully ordinary, carefully just a little threadbare attire, his hair dirtied to dull down the gleaming gold, his face a bit scruffy—these stuffy, timid little men, little, at least, in mind and soul if not in body, would still be as discreet as possible. They would venture only as far into the maw of the Dock as needed to find the right cock or hand or hole, drawing as little attention as possible to themselves while they got the sex they craved.

Right then, it was *him* I craved. Him I would have. I wanted what he’d promised me back there, before the fun began, when he played with my arse, played with my mind. I wanted it here, wanted it now, not in a few minutes, not later, in some *safer* spot.

“Afraid, *Englishman?*” I made the word an insult. “Fer all yer braggin’ back there—” and I tipped my head in a vaguely “back there” sort of direction—“it’s a wee Sassenach willy y’ have, ain’t it? So ye just make up stories t’ get yer cock goin’, ’n’ yer balls hummin’, all that imaginin’ the shite y’ ain’t never gonna do, ain’t never gonna have. Just to make yerself seed.”

His fists clenched, and he glared, but the bastard didn’t move. Fine, if I couldn’t get a fuck, another fight would do just as well to drain me.

“Aw, poor, poor toff. Yer real problem is y’ can’t get a cock stand to fuck someone else, just when yer own arse is bein’ used?” I groped my hardening prick through the cloth, reminded him of its size. “C’mon, then, give up yer arse, ’n’ I’ll give y’ a poundin’ like y’ never ’ad before.”

He couldn’t literally tower over me, of course. He was only a few inches taller, but just then something *shifted*, and he was all ninety feet of the Tower of

London. His voice dropped, became as rough as a blacksmith's callused hand. "Turn around. Against the wall."

Impressive. But he wouldn't have me that easily. "Oh..."

He cut off the mocking words I had intended. "Two guineas wide?"

It was my turn to be shocked. What the bloody...

"Your cock, Rory, your cock. That thing down between your legs, above your bollocks? Two guineas wide, perhaps a little more? Perhaps a little less?"

Fucking English aristocrats, measuring everything in golden guineas, they couldn't just use inches like the rest of us. I wondered just how many two-guinea cocks he had had in hand, in width *or* value, to be able to estimate that well, just from grasping mine while I fucked.

"Aye. So?"

He stepped closer, only a bit of his anger gone. "Mine's only a guinea and ten shillings wide, perhaps a few pence more. But more than eight guineas long, *Scotsman*."

I had not realized until just then that our mutual fluency in arse-wipish included both my ability to snort a snort that indicated a strong disbelief, even a disparagement, of an arrogant lord's bragging, and his ability to translate it into daily English.

"Care to measure it? Hell, we could write the wager in the betting book at White's: 'Lord S—wagers 8 guineas to one that his cock, when properly measured, is not less than eight and one-half inches in length.'"

His voice was softer, heading toward the tone he'd used on me back there. I shivered, hoped he didn't see it, was sure he had.

"Ever had eight guineas and ten or eleven shillings up inside your arse, *Scotsman*?"

Actually, no. But I wasn't about to let him know. Nonchalant. That was the tone to take. "Nine a couple of times. A handsome ten guineas and a shilling or three, once."

He had moved in until he was up close and very personal. A fine Tower of London, indeed. Making me feel, not small, or frail, but smaller, and definitely no longer in control. If ever I had been, in fact.

“Liar.” There was a smile in his voice now; he paused. “You know this is consummate idiocy, do you not?” When I opened my mouth to acknowledge that truth, the hand that wasn’t on my weeping cock pressed my lips shut. “There are other places for a fuck as quick as this will have to be. Bloody hell, if we kept quiet, I could fuck you in an enormous soft bed in my home, but... that’s not what you need.”

How did he know that this fuck was more of a necessity than the wanting of plain lust?

His breath was gentle on my face as he leaned in further still. “The wall. Now!”

I was going to obey. I just needed a short delay. My hand reached out to his crotch, to test the eight guineas, ten or eleven shillings boast. He batted my hand away. Shrugged. “Changed your mind about getting fucked? Your loss. I’m not interested in your hand.”

He started to turn away.

Liar. However reluctant, however unlike himself this was, this here, this now, he was *interested*. But I couldn’t take the chance of being wrong and having him walk away.

Though his walking away, not seeing him again, would be the inevitable result of tonight in any event. I was as like to win the 2000 Guineas on a plough horse, as meeting him by chance in the second and third tiers of the ton where I survived. As for the other... He did not know anything of me other than my looks and first name. And that I was, at a minimum, an acquaintance, or an acquaintance of an acquaintance, of Sir John. That he would actively hunt for me, sans hounds, sans scent save for the scents of sex and seed, was equally improbable.

I caught his left wrist; he stopped his turn, looked back over his shoulder.

“Nor your mouth.”

Arrogant fucking Englishman.

I was too proud to grovel; I never begged.

I did both in a single word. “Please.”

The banger whose bollocks I had banged, and I smiled at the rhythm of that thought, moaned. There was no way I would allow him to deprive me of what I so desperately desired, so oddly needed.

I loosed my grip on Somerville's wrist, stalked over to where the banger lay, still half curled. Leaned over, grabbed his thick, filthy hair with my left hand, raised his head and his upper body and before he could cry out too much, smashed his jaw with my fist. I let him go, and he dropped. I think his head might have bounced. No one asked me if I cared; I did not volunteer an answer. I stood up, shaking my hand.

Somerville looked at me. Licked his lips—good if it was because of lust; bad if it was because he was getting nervous and stuffy again. I tried tipping the balance toward lust.

“Your cock as big as you said?”

He nodded. Smirked. “But right now you don't really care if that's braggadocio or not, do you? Just so it's up inside you. And soon.”

I ignored those home truths.

“Then what are you waiting for?” I wanted him to see a nonchalant, don't-really-care-if-you-do, don't-really-care-if-you-don't, but-if-you-do-let's-do-it walk to the wall. What he saw was a quick few steps of the bloody-hell-fuck-me-now variety. And then I was fumbling... *fumbling?* ...with buttons and snaps before shoving pants, no smalls, down to my ankles. I leaned forward and braced myself, palms flat, the dirt and grit pressing in. Christ, I was in for some serious humiliation if he laughed and walked away, or just walked.

He did walk.

In the right direction.

I inhaled, a sharp little gasp when his hands cupped my cheeks, squeezed, rubbed; his thumbs spread me apart a little.

“I never knew how much I liked a hairy arse before,” he whispered.

“We don't have time for admiration, arse-wipe, though it *is* an arse worthy of extensive admiration. It's also worthy of a nice hard fuck, here and now.”

He chuckled. Silence, then, his fingers still spreading me as I felt him change position, drop to his knees?

“Oh, fuck.” The words were a soft moan as his tongue touched the edges of my hole. Then I wasn't communicating with words, just moans and other noises as his tongue licked and lapped, and a wet thumb pushed inside while he did it. Withdrew. Repeated. Repeated. Repeated. Cool air for a moment as his thumbs

let go, and his palms kept me spread, then hot, hot, *hot* air as his lips circled my entrance, and his tongue went inside. I relaxed my muscles, let him get deep, remarkably deep.

I could seed from wanking while being tongue-fucked, though it had been years since I had had the chance. If this was what he wanted...

I dropped my right hand to my cock, which was followed by an odd sound arising from the vicinity of my arse. It is difficult to speak intelligibly when your tongue is buried inside another man's arsehole, doing incredible things to the sensitive flesh inside. Unless, of course, you are fluent in arse-wipish. And to anyone fluent in arse-wipish, that odd sound said, "You fucking wank and seed and I will break your fucking wrist, and then not fuck you."

I briefly thanked my imaginary God for our mutual fluency and pressed flesh again to the wall, in a not quite holy palmer's kiss.

It had been a long time since I had been fucked, and with the best will in the world, and the deity knew I had the best fucking will in the fucking universe at that moment, I was still tight, and getting his cock inside with just his spit and whatever precome he might have, was going to be bloody difficult. And bloody painful.

But a friend of Edward's must do what a friend of Edward's must do, when the issue is a cock knocking at the hole of that friend of Edward's, demanding entrance. *Immediate* entrance.

A motto I lived by. When I had the chance. As now.

The humid, summer, Thames-infused Dock air still felt cool on my hole when he moved away, stood up.

"Against the wall."

I almost spoke, almost asked, "What?"

But then I played out the sequence in my head that would result from my asking the question: What. Against the wall. But why. Another threat not to fuck me, whether or not the threat was made in words. My giving in.

I eliminated the dialogue and let him have his way. Straightened slightly. Shuffled the three steps forward needed to have the leaking tip of my cock touching the wall. Tiny pieces of grit acted like miniature pins, pressing against the tender flesh. Especially the thousand and one pieces that were trying to

work their way inside my slit. I vowed to thereafter be extremely careful what I wished for. Although if this fuck was as good as I hoped it might be, that vow would naturally go by the wayside, as virtually all vows that men make do.

There was no hand, or mouth, or tongue, or cock on my arse just then. There was only an arse-wipish silence that told me “all the way.” I kept my sigh equally silent, and hobbled the last little bit, reaching down to use my fingertip to guide my cock beneath my flopping shirt, so that when I was pressed against the wall, my right cheek flat, my cock was between my belly and the wall, but at least covered by cloth. Thin, worn cloth that easily tore. Better than nothing at all, though not by very much.

Somerville stepped in again. I felt a wide, blunt knob rubbing my hole. Suppressed the sigh for the pain to come. But that touch was replaced by another touch. A fingertip. Slick with oil. Wiping around the edge, then pushing slowly in. I sighed.

I hadn't realized I was speaking arse-wipish.

“Thought me a liar, *Scotsman*?”

Liar? About... Oh.

“Sassenachs so often are, *m'lord*.”

The sigh was replaced by a moan when the second slick finger joined the first, and went in and deep, and touched that bump inside.

“Three, I think.”

I whimpered as the two fingers stroked and stroked. Managed to gasp, “Three is my favorite number.”

The third went in with a grunt and a groan and a whimper and a hint of whine. He twisted and turned the three, oiling me up, stretching me, thrusting more roughly, turning the hint into full-on whine that conveyed in arse-wipish, “More, please, *more*.”

“I thought you had a different favorite number. A *new* favorite number.”

My slit was oozing steadily, his fingers were wreaking havoc with my innards and my outards, if there was such a word and he wanted to talk mathematics?

The fucking bastard.

Oh.

“Next... oh, shit... next to eight guineas, ten...” A sharp thrust and a *gasp!*
“Eleven... bastard... *eleven fucking shillings.*”

And then he ended his torture.

And began a new one.

With his cock.

He bent his legs to get in place, his knees and inner thighs searing my skin, and then he pressed... and pushed... and I opened up as if I'd just slid one of my polished wooden pricks out of my arse and was stuffing a newer, larger, well-oiled one, all the way in.

Buried to his balls, we stopped breathing. I was more alive than I had ever been before, in this dangerous, dirty place, and prayed he felt the same, or even a sliver of the same. His chest pressed against me, mine against the wall, we returned to the land of the breathing, and he began fucking me. I could not possibly have worked a hand between my body and the wall to grab my cock, but I knew there was no need. He picked up speed, dancing with the danger, and I ground my arse to help him get there, help me get there. With that kind of wealth of cock up inside me, using me, punching over that brilliant little bump on every damned stroke, me squeezing my arse muscles every time he pulled out, relaxing to let him in, it took no time at all for us both to lose our customary English in favor of arse-wipish grunts and moans that an expert linguist could have translated as... “Fuck, oh shit, oh fuck, yes, do that, that’s right, oh fuck-fuck-fuck, I’m *coming!*”

I felt scorching hot seed coating my channel, felt my own scorching hot seed smearing my belly, soaking into my shirt.

And then, all too damned soon, it was over. We stood in place, gasping for the breath we’d lost again.

He slowly slid his cock out of me, backed away. My confident, unfazed move away from the wall was more stagger and stumble than step. Still hobbled by my pants, I nevertheless turned, looked at the cock that had fucked me so very briefly. So *very* fucking well.

I reached out. He let me caress his low-hanging bollocks, roll them in my fingers. Lift his not quite soft cock, but then, I had no way of knowing how far that wealth of flesh would normally retreat. Not, I thought, with no basis at all

for my certainty, to as little as a guinea or two of display. In inexpressibles, on display in his own milieu, he'd flaunt at least four guineas. Perhaps even an ostentatious five.

It was his turn to inhale in surprise, not quite enough for a gasp, when I bent forward and opened my mouth, and sucked his oiled, seed-slimed cock all the way down. Cleaning him well with a talented tongue he would never get to know again, for all the obvious reasons, was the least I could do for the pleasures just given. And the future wanking pleasure with each remembrance.

When I was done, I stretched my hands down, pulled my pants up above my knees, enough to make walking a little easier, and then hobbled, waddled over to left-hand man on the ground.

“Knife,” I said to Somerville, and held my hand out.

“No!” Not a denial that he had one; I expected him to and had berated myself during my dance with possible death for not having brought my dirk with me. Instead, a refusal.

I was unreasonably hurt by his instant belief that what I intended for the knife was murder, but then, what did Somerville actually know of me other than a cock-and-arse-flaunting meeting on a path, getting him involved in battling bangers instead of sensibly eluding them, somehow, and then insisting on a royal fuck? Though the image of Prinny and my arse being that intimate made me want to cast up my accounts.

There was apparently enough light for him to see, or at least sense, my offended glare. Technically, he had offended my honor, and I could have called him out for it, though explaining the circumstances that led to the challenge would have been outrageously embarrassing. He realized his mistake and had the grace to apologize before he walked over and handed me the blade.

I pushed aside the rough jacket the banger wore, grabbed a fistful of shirt, and sawed that chunk off. I handed the knife back to Somerville and said, “Gie us a shoolder, mukker.”

His fluency in arse-wipe was clearly helping him to translate a deliberately thick brogue. He took a step closer, let me put my left hand on his shoulder for balance as I leaned forward, and then with the banger's shirt shard, thoroughly wiped my arse.

Somerville choked back a laugh.

I mock-glared again. "I am not about to make a mess of the inside of my britches," I told him in my most mocking tonnish tone. "Of course, a really *fine* buggerer, after a bloody brilliant buggering like that, would have completed his task and removed the residue himself, tongue in cheek."

I was rewarded with a quiet laugh, and, "Another time."

That phrase again. But there was no reason to believe it now, as I had not believed it then. Tonight was mere happenstance. And men, after all, say numerous things after a good fuck—or indeed any fuck at all that has resulted in them seeding—things that they neither mean nor have any intention of doing: *That was brilliant. Never been fucked, sucked, like that before. We must do this again. I don't want this to end here.*

But here it was ending.

Almost. There was one more thing I needed to do. "I need to piss."

A sigh. "Of course you do. Do you always piss in public?"

"Do *you* always piss in private privies?"

He waved a hand at the wall. "Piss away, and then, let's... well, piss off."

I had a better idea. A much better idea. A step back, a turn, another step. I held my cock steady. Made ready. Aimed. Fired.

"Jesus!"

Ah, I had shocked Somerville back to stuffiness, and prayer. At least he hadn't blurted out my name. Shocked the banger into awakening yet again, too, as the hot piss flowed steadily out and down, onto his face, into his hair, over his neck and then, to share the liquid golden wealth, generously down his body.

My voice was rough and growly again. "Wouldn't move, if I was you. Ye fooked w' t' wrong pair o' neddy boys, see? We're members o' the Friends o' Edward Society, we are. Talk t' yer friend about us. T' one wi' the knife 'n' the broke wrist 'n' all. 'Oo ran off 'n' left yer both be'ind. 'E knows."

I finished pissing, pressed his head flat again with the sole of my boot, using him for balance as I did myself back up. "Now, ye'll stay jest like ye are until we're gone. But first, me friend, 'ere, 'e 'as t' piss, too."

The body under my boot shuddered.

“Naw. Me friend, ’e’s all ’oity-toity, loik. Loiks t’ boldly piss where no man ’as pissed before. ’N’ you, well, you been pissed. Well-pissed, if I do say so m’self, as shouldn’t.”

I’d dared him, but knew he wouldn’t do it. And if ever I saw him again, though I knew I wouldn’t, I’d tease him quietly about his cowardly ways.

Somerville surprised me. Glared at me with enough heat that I should have been instantly charred. He’d done himself up while I pissed, but he got his cock out again, stalked briskly over to the right-hand man whose back and head he had thoroughly whacked, and proceeded to piss him with equal thoroughness. He turned back to me as he buttoned himself up again.

Ah. Arse-wipish can also be a language of signs. As in the thumb jerk that clearly said, “Now that you’ve been well-fucked and had your fun, shall we get the bloody hell out of here?”

I grinned at him and gave the right-hand banger a friendly kick in the side as we walked away. We strolled casually, as triumphant members of the Friends of Edward Society would do, not scuttling away in cockroach fear of light. It was only when we were around the corner, out of sight, and well away, that we began to run, as silently as we could, and then when we were certain we were beyond their hearing, laughing and gasping in exhilaration as we ran and ran and ran further still.

All too soon, we approached the edges of civilization, along with the approaching dawn. Time to part. Time for that inevitable, frequently awkward, after-fuck moment of decision that all men must face: To lie, or not to lie, that was always the question.

Lying generally won.

We stood in a fading shadow beside a building. I opened my mouth to get my lies in first, as it would hurt less, since I wanted so much more, with no reason that I could see for why that wanting should be.

Somerville held up his hand. Shook his head. “No, don’t.”

I wrinkled my brow at him, which was as close as I could get to that fucking one-eyebrow-lift thing so many of the ton seemed able to do.

He hesitated, gnawed at his lip with perfect teeth, released it. “Will you give me a truthful answer?”

False bravado underlay my words. "Depends on the question, doesn't it?"

"Damn it, Rory! Your word of honor you will answer me truthfully."

If it was that important... I gave it.

"Do you want to meet again?"

I could swear I heard "The Hallelujah Chorus" rising in the background over London along with the sun, accompanied by the faint sounds of Handel whirling in his grave so rapidly he was a veritable underground cyclone. I managed a quiet, dignified, "Of course." At least that was the way it sounded inside my head. I was afraid that aloud it told him how desperately grateful I was for the question; since it was one I never would have had the courage to ask him.

He smiled at me. Fuck the sun. Golden Somerville, dirty, disheveled and all, was ample light.

He held out his hand. "Peregrine James Woodhall, Viscount Somerville. My friends call me... Somerville."

I gave him a firm handshake, albeit with a probably piss-, cum-, dirt- and grit-stained palm, which did not put him off in the slightest. "Ruaidhri Fearghas MacLean. My father is Viscount Strathairn, and alas, I am merely a second son. My friends call me... *Mr. MacLean.*"

"And are we friends now, *Mr. MacLean?*"

"Indeed we are, Somerville. Friends with, I believe, certain, ah, *benefits*, which need exploring."

"An in-depth exploration is warranted, don't you agree?"

"The more depth the better, quite frankly."

And still we clasped hands, far longer than anyone could possibly deem socially acceptable, grinning somewhat stupidly at each other, until at last, with mutual reluctance, we finally let go.

"Friday next, the twenty-fifth, I believe. White's. Ten o'clock?"

This was to be a *public* friendship as well? Men who fucked men, where the fucker and the fucked were not admitted neddy boys, and who would dare in these days to make that admission, avoided each other in public, lest their secret be inadvertently let out. I would most certainly never betray this trust, and

disclose Somerville. Of course, that meant for any future public excursions with this man, I would have to figure out some way to bind my cock down and hold it there, since the mere thought of Somerville's touch, much less the anticipation of the feel of his mouth or his cock, would now always be enough to launch a display that would be disastrous if anyone should notice that it inevitably and only occurred in his presence.

I was eager to agree, but had to confirm what he already undoubtedly knew. "I'm not a member."

"I am." *And they'll fucking well let in anyone I tell them to let in, second son of a Scottish viscount or not*, was what I heard in a faint remnant of silent arse-wipe.

"Then, of course."

We smiled again, and with no awkwardness at all, went our separate ways.

The fucking "Hallelujah Chorus" *was* being sung that morning. I heard it. Sang with it. Ignored the stares from passers-by as I returned to my lodgings.

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Peregrine

Wednesday, 6 September 1815

Late Evening

Alderson House

London

I did this to myself.

Why did I do this to myself?

I could have invited Rory to another ball, another rout, a quiet dinner where an extra man was needed. So many options now that the Little Season was officially launched by the Duchess of Alderson's Birthday Ball. Instead, I had to show off the fact that not only did I have one of the coveted invitations, but I was able to get one for an unknown Scotsman, second son of an unknown (at least to the ton, and after all, what the ton did not know was not worth the knowing) Scottish viscount, merely for the asking.

We were more than mere friends, Rory had said, he and I were friends with *benefits*, though he had been thinking of the mutual benefits of available cock and arse and mouth. One benefit of my friendship, though, was entrée for him into the upper echelons of the *haute monde*.

Originally, I had been thinking of extending carefully selected invitations to events where these two would be unlikely to meet. Which was, now that I actually *thought*, a rather stupid line of thought. Michel has his own entrée everywhere. No one would dare bar their doors to him. I suspect not even Priny, indulging himself in one of his infamous pets, would do so.

Perhaps he would be ill. Yes. A sudden attack of the plague, of the not quite 1348 variety, just enough to lay him low for tonight. Or a broken carriage wheel, preventing him from... No. He had already returned to the city; he sent a note round earlier. I could perhaps...

I could perhaps...

My dithering was interrupted by Mama's touch on my sleeve. "A bit blue devilled, my dear?"

Mama having, for quite obvious reasons, known me all my life, discerned my dithering, as others did not, but mistook the meaning. She patted my arm. I

looked down at her. Thank God she was not wearing the Diamonds. The dearth of Diamonds did not mean a dearth of debutantes, however, merely that her focus was not *entirely* on my deplorable marital status. "I have just the thing to lift your spirits, my dear."

She could lift my spirits with a measure or three of blue ruin. Or a small fire in Michel's bedroom, with so much smoke before it was put out he had nothing he could wear. I would have accepted even a modest lightning strike that frightened his horses and sent the carriage careening out of the city again.

But Mama's definition of spirit-lifting and mine were patently leagues upon leagues apart. "I have someone I want you to meet."

Of course she did. And I could not escape by pleading the necessity of introducing my friend around, since Rory had abandoned me to find a chamber pot to piss away the ale we had been imbibing earlier and the champagne punch since our arrival. I should have gone with him, but for the fact I might have actually seen his cock as he pissed, and he mine, and looking at each other's cocks, out in the open, so to speak, would have had an inevitable effect. It was not an effect to be displayed in a room where other men were likely to walk in at any moment, pull out their pricks, and begin pissing in a nearby chamber pot.

Ah, well, he would find me.

We were approaching a man and a woman from behind. Such carefully matched glossy black hair, presumably naturally curly if his was any indication, although hers was piled up, in a style appropriate for a young miss, with long, carefully selected curls down her cheeks to set off whatever beauty she might have. Of modest height, slender, they dressed in not *quite* the first stare but close enough that most would not notice, or noticing, care. I certainly did not care.

A few moments of diplomatic chatter, some truth about finding my friend who had clearly gone lost in the fray, or some serviceable lie, and then back to Rory, back to dithering, back to deciding what to do if... *when*... Michel made his appearance.

"Anthea, my dear, I have brought my dear boy to meet you."

"Dear" I am, to her and no other. A boy, most assuredly not. But if I were to remind her that I was a grown man of twenty-eight, on the downward slide to thirty, *she* would remind me that she remembered me in nappies, and wrinkle her nose at the obviously odious memory.

The pair turned around at her voice and I found myself gob-smacked by *two* of the most beautiful young ladies it had ever been my pleasure to admire. Even when the only use I ever have for such young ladies is admiration. From afar. From far, far, far afar.

The one on my left was wearing an elegant white gown appropriate for young virgins going up on the auction block known as the Marriage Mart. The slut on my right was wearing black pantaloons that went with the black tailcoat, off-white waistcoat, perfectly folded cravat. And a waistcoat. How had the two of them managed to get in, much less have their masquerade escape notice this long? *And* convince my astute mother...

My *astute* mother. Who was never *convinced* of anything.

Bloody hell, I was an idiot. I blamed Michel for distracting me by not being dead and staying away until well after the resurrection.

I took a discreet glance down to confirm my idiocy—a glance which turned out to be not discreet at all. When I raised my eyes from black superfine that most assuredly covered a cock and balls... friends of Edward's know these things... I found the young *man* glaring at me.

His face and manner were all that were proper for the Alderson Ball and a young woman and her *brother* being introduced to the Glenhaven heir. The glare was in his eyes just long enough for him to be sure I saw. If looks could kill? That look was a long, painful, *slow* death, which would make the death of a thousand cuts seem instantaneous.

Then there was a moment of something other than rage before he blinked and was *all* graciousness.

It took a vast deal of control to look away from his face voluntarily and attend to his sister. He was so very slender, delicate pale skin that would burn with just a hint of sun, thick, curling eyelashes that were longer than his sister's, large, brilliantly blue eyes, an almost heart-shaped face. Take him to the right molly house; sit him down and apply subtle cosmetics, stand him up and fit him with haute couture, with or without padding for bosoms, and he would be... already was... more beautiful than his sister.

Except... he would be exceedingly out of place in that fantastical molly house. My ned-sense seemed to have gone on holiday since this... *thing* began with Rory, and this... *thing* went on with Michel. It returned briefly to confirm that the young man was indeed no friend of Edward's.

And *that* was that “other thing” I had so briefly seen. He believed I had assumed him to be not just a friend of Edward’s, but one of Edward’s rather more flamboyant friends, and now fully expected the disdain, or possibly worse, from me that he had so clearly experienced so many times before.

That would not happen.

But first, his sister. Actually, these introductions to Lady Anthea Bennington and Lord Andrew Bennington were something of a tease on the part of Mama.

Of me, not them. She knew quite well I would never consider a barely-out-of-the-schoolroom miss for a wife. Knew as well that I would also be courteous, and briefly attentive to a shy young lady, after which I would extend my regrets for my inability to talk longer, and take my leave without having given offense. Being seen as the recipient of even modest attentions from the Glenhaven heir was often enough a prelude to the interest of other men. Men who might actually be in the market for a wife.

Lady Anthea could be scarce eighteen, and Bennington, who could be readily mocked as younger, and undoubtedly had been, was, if one was alert, clearly older. Twenty-one, I was fairly sure. His introduction and mine were finished off with a somewhat abrupt mutual head-nod and a near-simultaneous “Bennington!” “S-Somerville!”

I turned to his sister, and said, “Dear Lady Anthea, I must beg a boon. Do you think you might grant me one?”

She blinked those startling black lashes over the same brilliantly blue eyes. Nothing like an older man putting her on the spot by asking her to agree to something in advance of knowing what it was. I smiled at her, which for some reason she found reassuring. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that Bennington’s opinion was rather less so. Very much less so.

“I... of course, my lord.”

The violins were beginning to scrape and whine in anticipation of being put into harness and trotted out for a somewhat more melodic use. “I should very much like you to be, well, quite mean to someone. A gentleman. Except that I don’t know who he might be.”

This time her eyes widened, and she became clearly flustered, though no words popped out.

“You see, I really think we should dance, you and I. But with your dance card already full, I am certain, the only way we could do that is if you were to be very, very mean to whatever gentleman has his name down next. But if we scratch his name out, and put mine in, then all’s well.”

I smiled at her again, and she hesitantly smiled back. Opened her mouth to speak, and young as she was, she was undoubtedly going to be unfortunately truthful and tell me that she had few or no entries at all on her card. They were new in town; they were not attached to powerful ton allies, and even having achieved an introduction to Mama, though I was quite sure they had never plotted that occasion, the men would not have flocked to her side to place their names on her card.

I prevented that awful disclosure quite simply. I gently took the card from her hand, along with the tiny attached pencil, though without looking at it. “I tell you what, Lady Anthea. Let your brother do the scribbling out and the scribbling in. He’s a most excellent scribbler, is he not? Taught you everything you know about scribbling?”

The girl *gurgled* at me. A genuine, happy little *gurgle*. She was delightful. Never for me for numerous reasons, but still... delightful.

“He did, my lord, he did.”

“Well, then, we must leave him to it. And let him bear the brunt of the explanation to your disappointed gentleman.”

I handed the dance card and pencil to him, to find that the glare was gone and he was looking up at me with a genuine smile. He knew that there was no name inscribed on her card for the upcoming minuet. He knew that I knew. And he was grateful for my remarkably neat—if I did say so myself, as shouldn’t, but if I didn’t who would?—avoidance of the necessity of her having to tell me so.

As she placed her hand on my arm, I glanced over at Mama and grinned smugly at her stunned expression. Though only she and I could see the grin or the stun.

As we moved toward our place I noticed Rory, on his way back from pissing, where his cock had been on plumping-up dis... Damn it.

He saw me as well, and nodded when I tilted my head toward the groaning table. I suspected he thought I was wanting him to feed well, to keep his

strength up for the *rigors* ahead. Except I had this odd certainty that events would unfold so that, because of my stupidity, I would end the evening with no *rigors* at all. Merely rigid with unrequited lust.

I ripped my thoughts away from Rory and firmly focused on ensuring that Lady Anthea enjoyed this dance. That she was seen to enjoy the dance. And for her benefit, that a rake such as I was seen to be enjoying her company.

Beauty. Grace. A *gurgle* of all things. Wit. With a little help from Mama, which I would impulsively ensure, and the occasional assistance from me, she would do well in the Little Season. And with that behind her, far better in the Season next spring. If marriage was her goal, and what young thing did not have her heart and talons set on achieving it, she could well be wed by the time the ton scattered to the country for the best (or worst) part of the summer. It was even conceivable, though extraordinarily unlikely, that she might even marry for love.

As the music slid to a close, she curtsied most elegantly, I bowed most elegantly, and rising, tucked her hand in the crook of my arm to escort her back to her brother.

I had managed to forget for those moments of banter, and the length of the dance, my dilemma.

I was slapped in the face with it halfway back.

Dodsworth announced him in his usual flawless French. I have repeatedly explained to Dodsworth that Michel... why the *hell* couldn't his parents have named him plain Michael Lewis with *English* pronunciations? ...is as English as I am. He was bloody *born* here.

So it does not fucking matter if his parents were French; if his title was French; if he was raised by servants who were mostly French and stubbornly spoke only that language. When you are born on English soil you are a bloody Englishman. But even though he speaks English like the fucking English aristocrat he is, he long ago decided to add just a breath, just the merest hint of a French accent. Suddenly he became oh so *très tragique*, oh so *très intéressant*, the young French viscount who barely escaped the Terror with his life, veritably plucked from the tumbril itself.

I despaired for the future of England and Empire. Would the inability of these young debutantes, and even their mothers, to perform the most simple of

mathematical calculations, be passed down to future generations? Depriving the Crown of men of science, men of the navy who could navigate by something other than dead reckoning, future chancellors of the exchequer who could actually correctly count?

Had that fantastic tale been true, Michel would be in his late thirties or early forties at the moment. He and I are the same age. The story is simply a remarkable pile of bullshite he has never bothered to shovel away with the truth.

Dodsworth's announcement drove home the point with the sureness of a sharp blade that God did indeed have it in for me more than was customary for Him. Michel did not get a tiny stain on his cuff while dining with friends, a stain invisible to all but him, necessitating that he go home and spend hours changing into a different flawless outfit. Thereby giving Rory and me time to enjoy ourselves and leave before Michel arrived.

Dodsworth had done his duty, and dumped me into my deep dilemma.

What words does one use, other than the most banal of banalities, to introduce the man you fuck insufficiently often to the man who sucks you with equally insufficient oftenness? When neither is aware of what the other does to, or with, one? With me.

I had considered hiding, and on some other occasion learning with "surprise" of his presence, and expressing deep regret we had missed each other. Useless. Since this "thing" began with each of them, I could find either in any crowd; they had each become the north to which my compass cock pointed. And I wondered if they had that same certainty.

But perhaps if Rory could eat just a while longer, I might...

No. Of course not. How had I forgotten God's displeasure?

Rory was on his way back to our little grouping of two Glenhavens and two Benningtons, following a servant bearing a tray with five champagne flutes and a dish with a selection of small pastries. He was, unknowingly, on a converging, but fortunately not a collision course with Michel. Who arrived first.

As Michel and I were the tallest of our quintet, we could carefully glance at each other over their heads, and I could respond to the eyebrow that asked three questions in rapid succession: What are you up to? How soon can we

reasonably leave so that I can suck your cock all the way down to your hairs? My, my, my, isn't the little one *pretty*?

This was the aristocratic version of the arse-wipish Rory I had had such fun with. My replies were short: Nothing. Not bloody soon. Pay attention, you French *cul essayez*, he's not a friend of Edward's.

I rather thought I preferred the Dock version of the language. The results were so much more exhilarating.

I had enough time before Rory's arrival to make the introductions of Anthea and Bennington.

Michel blinked. Blinked again. Caught my eye over Bennington's head, gave me a nod so tiny it might well never have happened. His vaunted ned-sense... the one he had been vaunting ever since he used that ability as the basis for assaulting my mouth in that hallway and then my cock in the room we fell into... was again functioning properly.

Then Rory was upon us. He absorbed the fact we were no longer four but five, and looked at me. I quickly decided to fuck protocol, as by rights he should have been presented first to Michel, as the highest ranking unknown-to-Rory nobleman present. But I was not going to leave him and the poor servant hanging there while introductions plodded precisely along.

"You have already met my mother."

Rory smiled at her, said, "Lady Glenhaven," and handed her a glass. She took a small sip and her eyes sparkled with amusement at the complications that had ensued from her teasing.

Fine. Anthea next, Michel could just bloody wait and berate me later... oh, wait, there wasn't going to be a later for us. At least not tonight. The dear girl rosily blushed as Rory air-kissed the back of her hand, and blushed again when he offered her a "wee sip" of truly fine champagne. She shook her head, which solved the paltry dilemma of too few drinks, and he handed a glass to Bennington following their introduction. Then it was time for the introduction I least desired.

Formality was the way to get safely through the ordeal of introducing my two fuck-friends to one another. The lesser title, or no title at all, is presented to the higher rank.

“*M’sieur le vicomte*, may I present Mr. MacLean. His father is Viscount Strathairn. Mr. MacLean, may...”

Michel fucked my mind. Shocked Mama. Insulted Bennington. Went right over the head of Anthea.

Formalité, toujours formalité. I mocked him once that he had the motto embroidered on his smalls.

He interrupted the formalities, held out his hand to Rory, and said, “Michel, to my friends.”

The bastard *never* used his first name in public. I was Somerville. He was Vidal, having graciously agreed that Vidal-Sansouci could be shortened. Rory should have been “MacLean” at best. And it should have been only after an appropriate term of increasing friendship, as the ton viewed friendship among men—drinking, driving, gambling, boxing, shooting, hunting, all the manly pursuits in exclusively masculine company (the frequently present whores and courtesans and mistresses naturally not counting)—a period of at least a year, more likely several, before Michel unthawed enough to bestow the privilege of using his first name. But only in private.

Had *I* not been stupid enough to extend this invitation to Rory, I could have, with a modicum of luck and a maximum of careful planning, maintained my two *fucking* friendships... well, one fucking, one sucking... entirely separate from each other.

Had Michel not suddenly gone all touched in the head and instead maintained the austere distance he customarily maintained with anyone not in our stratum of the ton, I might still have had a chance of distinct friendships and never the twain would meet. Or at least, only rarely.

I recognized the extended hand, in that instant before Rory replied and took it, for precisely what it was.

The hand of doom.

There was an almost imperceptible pause before Rory destroyed what little remained of a correct introduction by saying, “Ruaidhri Fearghas MacLean, *monsieur le vicomte*. Ah... Rory to my friends.”

The handshake was brisk, formal, and entirely appropriate for the setting. But though Michel let Rory’s hand drop, he did not drop the subject he had introduced. “And are we to be friends, then?”

Rory looked up at him, gave Michel a very slight smile, and tested the waters. With Scots. “Ah cannae sae, m’laird, nae wi’ certainty. Efter a’, isnae it th’ crustiest o’ th’ upper crust wha mak’s tha’ decision?”

I did not gasp or inhale, just held my breath at that bit of audacity. Mama was, I thought, more amused than confused, for she knew Michel well. The poor Benningtons were just plain... an unfortunate word to apply to that pair... confused.

I did not think Rory knew, and although he may have heard could not fully have appreciated, how very lethal Michel can be. But the lethal blade was amazingly sheathed and not in Rory, as Michel responded with a jest, and Scots teasing of his own. And then I was being asked if I concurred with Michel’s comment that we three should become good friends.

My stance was stiff, but for every wrong reason. And hopefully, my moment of lemonish sourness was not visible. The three of us. Fucking friends! Except, well, we would not be *fucking* friends. We would be friends who did the things together that male friends did in our society. Which would leave me even less private time to spend with each of them, doing the kind of things that *fucking* friends do in private. Or semi-private. As in the jointly stupid exhilaration of Michel sucking my cock behind some bushes in Hyde Park one afternoon.

And then Michel awakened to the insult he had dealt young Bennington. Offering the friendship of a first name on a first meeting with a bloody *Scot* who was in fact outranked by everyone in this small group. Including me in that charmed circle of friends, while implicitly excluding Bennington from those *masculine* ranks. He might as well have skewered the boy with the thin blade in his cane and been done with it. From the look on Bennington’s face, which his lack of town bronze made him entirely unable to hide, Michel had done just that.

And Rory had, even though unwittingly, helped.

I saw Bennington struggling to regain control, to come up with words that would enable him to get his sister away from the humiliation, away where he could presumably pray that we four would not tell and retell the tale until the ton knew.

“We are, indeed, all of us, friends,” I said. And silently to Michel, *You fucking idiot.*

Everyone turned toward me, but I kept my eyes on Bennington, so that he saw, so that *hopefully* he saw, there had been no mockery in that word. “And I believe I know what these friends need right now.”

I looked at Mama. “May I beg a boon of *you* this time, Mama?”

The light laughter that accompanied her again-teasing, “But of course, my boy, my *dearest* boy,” eased the strain. Four muscle-tensed males relaxed just a little bit. “There is, though, just one thing...”

“There is *always* just one thing, my *dearest* Mama.”

“Well, of course there is.” She winked at Lady Anthea and gave her a smile that brought the girl back from the turbulent seas of an almost-disastrous evening and into calm waters again. “You must always remember, Lady Anthea, that when a man asks you a favor, you must be sure he repays you. At the very least, threefold.”

My own laughter was luckily genuine. How I loved my mother. “And when the favor is provided by one’s, ah, *dearest* Mama, the exchange rate is quite considerably higher, and not at all in favor of the son.”

Bennington’s shoulders relaxed a little more, but the pain was still there.

“Would you be so kind, Mama, as to return Lady Anthea to her parents?”

I looked over to Lady Anthea. “Please take no offense, Lady Anthea. But I propose that these three reprobate newfound friends... and yes, yes, I am sure you are utterly shocked to learn that your much-adored older brother is himself not only a reprobate, but one who has friends such as we... step away to blow a cloud.”

Crinkled brow again. Ah. She did not know the phrase. “We’re going to step away from the delightful presence of two such beautiful women, to indulge in the attractions of fine cigars. Something we may not properly do here.”

Her brow contracted, and then: “But...”

Someone must educate this child in the fine art of never, ever, under any circumstances, saying the first thing that comes to your mind, most particularly if that first thing should, unfortunately, be the truth. I was certain she was about to say, “But Andrew does not smoke,” thereby costing me all the ground I had gained, and humiliating her brother with the devastating effect that only a sibling can sometimes achieve, however unintentionally.

God briefly decided to be nice and nudged Mama to interrupt her. “Yes, my dear. *But*, indeed. I am sure your own Mama has said what a vile habit it is, but after all, they are merely men, and what can mere women do with them? A brother, a son, their friends—” and oh what a subtle, subtle emphasis my marvelous Mama placed on that last word “—it is a conspiracy against the finer sensibilities of women, and we must just bear up under it.”

Wisely, we *mere men* said nothing at all to such pronouncements of wisdom.

Mama gathered her charge up to polite bows from Rory and Michel, and a rather bewildered bow from Bennington. As they turned to leave, my words were just loud enough for the ladies to hear. Mama would appreciate them, though once again, they would pass Lady Anthea by.

“Do you know, my friends, I rather think we might find the best cigars, and perhaps even better brandy, in the Duke’s library.”

Mama, being so very awake on all suits as she was, would undoubtedly work into the conversation with Bennington *père et la mère*, that their son was enjoying some (unspokenly) masculine refreshments with his newfound friends, three of the most (unspokenly) masculine men of the ton. And in the Duke’s library, no less. Perhaps even with the Duke himself. And if she was the merest hint of a touch too loud, so that a few guests nearby heard all... and would of course proceed to tell all... why that was no more than merest happenstance.

I led them to the Duke’s library, where the brandy was exquisitely fine and the cigars as much so. I wondered, too, how long his cache of undoubtedly smuggled brandy would last, now that the war was over and cross-Channel trade was, if not precisely free given excise taxes, at least legal again.

I decided that before the night was over, I would, in the company of my old best friend (Michel) and my new best friend (Rory), consume an astonishingly sense-dulling amount of liquor. I rather hoped it would not be in the company of our new young friend, particularly if the drinking became more private than public, such as Michel’s library or my own. It would do him great harm if it ever became known that we three were friends of Edward’s. Bloody hell, if even one of us were, by *force majeure*, or otherwise, forced out of hiding, the boy could be destroyed in the ton.

That outing was unlikely to happen, unlikely in the extreme, as we three had been so very careful for so very long to do what we had to do to keep our

secret. I need not discuss the point with either or both to know we all intended to keep it that way. But intentions do *gang* fucking *agley*, as Rory might say. Napoleon, after all, had no intention of losing at Waterloo. So we would repay our debt to Bennington with whatever benefits our *public* friendship might provide.

It had become necessary to consume an astonishing amount of alcohol tonight in the company of my two best friends. Plus Bennington. I would, therefore, *publicly* pass well beyond the merely mellow into the realm of the disgustingly disguised, though hopefully not so much so that I would shoot the cat. At least, not until I got home. Alone. The one time I did so was entirely humiliating. Particularly as Michel was there. And he has, since then, taken every reasonable or unreasonable opportunity to remind me of it.

Once home, my undoubtedly disordered clothes stripped away, my nightshirt donned, I would wait until my valet was safely away before bashing my head severely against the wall of the bedroom. Naturally, I would not want him to become alarmed at the sounds of my stupidity.

It seemed a most reasonable plan for the remainder of this God-most-definitely-forsaken night.

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Michel

Thursday, 7 September 1815

Near dawn

Maison de Vidal-Sansouci

London

I am, of course, a fool, but at least I did not make my foolishness *completely* known tonight.

Peregrine looked thoroughly shocked when I offered my first name to his friend, and he would be appalled to know that I knew, as he has such faith in his ability to be virtually impassive in all but the most extraordinary circumstances when among the ton. Although my offer could, perhaps, be considered extraordinary.

How does the English Bible put it? A haughty spirit goes before a fall? And there are few spirits in the ton more haughty than mine. Particularly when it comes to the efficacy of my ned-sense.

Efficacy? Bloody hell, until this Scotsman came along I was convinced of my infallibility in recognizing a friend of Edward's. Even though I did not always act on that awareness.

As I made my way down the stairs, my cock quietly, with utmost certainty, pointing me in Peregrine's direction, I noticed a brawny, red-haired man who could not possibly be anything other than Scots, stepping out of the room where Her Grace served the vast array of refreshments set out on groaning tables. There was *something* about him which did not scream, but subtly said, "I, too, am one of Edward's friends." My reason for attending was Peregrine, so I shifted my attention back in that direction, though I kept in mind the possibility that if I were to see the Scotsman on another occasion, I might explore the depth of that friendship. It was not as if Peregrine and I had pledged our troth, nor agreed to exclusivity. Yet... even the thought felt somehow wrong.

Occasionally, when my ned-sense has advised me that someone is a friend of Edward's, I try to figure out what subtle sign triggered the recognition. Most often it is the eyes, a certain *softness*, a hint almost of femininity, that seems customary with all of Edward's friends, no matter how overtly or blatantly masculine they look, act, walk and sound. So when I realized the Scotsman was

walking toward us, I tried to find the particular *something* about the broad man with the thick, wavy, unfashionably long hair, and the shadowy hint of a beard on his clean-shaven face that said *Edward* to me.

There was certainly nothing overt in the way he responded to Peregrine and Lady Glenhaven, as he arrived with champagne and pastries clearly intended for a smaller-by-one group. No blatant Edwardian tones or glances when he was introduced to the exceedingly young, exceedingly pretty brother and sister. Surely a friend of Edward's could not have prevented a moment's *appreciative* reaction to the extraordinary beauty of young Bennington, before applying his ned-sense and realizing that this young lord only got cock stands for women.

Granted, *I* had not bothered to apply my ned-sense at all before placing Bennington firmly in the Edwardian camp, and simply assumed. For which I was soundly, albeit silently, berated by Peregrine, and only then realized my error.

I saw nothing Edwardian at all about the Scot. But my arrogance kept me absolutely certain even in the absence of evidence.

To everyone else present, he was undoubtedly nothing more than a powerful, ruggedly handsome, potentially—or most likely, probably—rude and crude Scotsman.

While he was approaching and I could see more clearly the breadth of that chest, the thickness of his thighs, the comfortable bulge in his crotch, though no one would have caught the flicker of my eyes down and up again, I felt my own cock wanting to lengthen and put on a rutting display. *That* I retained control of. What I did not rein sufficiently in, indeed, did not rein in at all, was my suddenly rampant imagination as he joined us.

I was a friend of Edward's. *Peregrine* was a friend of Edward's. My papal ned-sense assured me that so was the Scot. The pretty lad was not a part of the painting in my head, a most graphic painting indeed. In oils. Not the quick slashing lines of the caricaturist, nor the softer hues of watercolors. These were life-like colors in all their brilliant reality.

For the first time in my life, I found myself painting a picture in my head of what sex might be like among three friends of Edward's. A series of paintings, actually, to be studied later, at leisure, cock in hand. Which prick would go where and when. Which mouth. Which arse. Two pleasuring one in rotating turns of being the center. Three in complex tandem. One... one of *us*, not some

random inchoate man whose features in a wank fantasy are never clear... being the focus until all were done and sated. And then another would be center, when we had recovered in such a rapid span. And then the third, with the other two making very sure he had no less pleasure because he was last.

I could not, of course, simply ask him if he would like to fuck my mouth. That approach had worked with Peregrine, but then I had known him far longer. No matter the certainty my ned-sense allowed, I nevertheless had to be more *certain* than that before I put it to the touch with the Scot.

The introduction irritated me, which is in all likelihood why I did what I did. Everything Peregrine did had to be done so very bloody *comme il faut*. Including, on occasion, fucking my mouth. So it was something of a shock that he disregarded propriety by making me wait for the introduction to the red-haired Scot.

I was, of course, perfectly polite and exquisitely proper to the Bennington pair. And perhaps my temporary belief in the young lord's intimate friendship with Edward, solely based on how beautiful he was, should have alerted me that my ned-sense was in serious disarray. But it did not.

And so I fucked with Peregrine's mind, and perhaps Mr. MacLean's perception of me, by offering him my first name and my hand, instead of staying with my title and the usual arrogant acknowledging nod at which I excel.

Friends accept each other as they are, not as we or others wish or would prefer them to be. So he tested me. In a way, his "upper crust" mockery, which brought instant silence to our small group, was correct. To shift the metaphors, he did not swim in the waters in which Peregrine and I swam, the deepest, shark-filled waters of the ton. His manner, but for that mockery, was impeccable. His clothes, however, while acceptable, did not bear the subtle signs, the *je ne sais quoi* that bespoke the excellence of the bespoke, and most expensive, tailors. He must swim somewhere in these seas for Peregrine to have met him, but only, I thought, in the shallows. Yet here he was, poised to join us in the deeps.

I was not the social arbiter of a Brummell, nor someone who could destroy with a disparaging remark, but with the right words right then I could have sent him back to the shallows and left Peregrine's friendship to be mine alone. Bennington could be easily excluded from that closer friendship, since he had

no interest in Peregrine's cock or arse, or mine. But I was so certain that we three shared that other friendship that I laughed, instead, at his Scottish mockery.

"Rory, I think it is such a *braw, bricht, moonlicht nicht t'nicht* that we have no choice except to be friends, we three."

Rory laughed at my mangled Scots. I looked at my best friend, standing there with that pole of offended propriety up his arse, and asked, "You concur, do you not?"

There was the tiniest flicker of lemonness to his expression which I attributed to the pole, before he smiled, and agreed.

It was only then I realized what I had just done. What my unthinking lust had just done. It was so apparent to Peregrine and me, who had both been in the ton for years, to Rory who was clearly new to the ton but an experienced man of the world, and even, I was sure, to Lady Glenhaven, that I had mortally insulted Bennington. And not in any way by which he could save face by calling me out.

Fuck me.

I most unusually froze and could think of nothing to say that could even approach making things right.

And then Peregrine did find the way. Cleverly, quietly, with ease and light banter, Lady Glenhaven adding her own right notes to achieve a remarkable harmony. Within minutes, Lady Glenhaven and Lady Anthea were off to spread the word of Bennington's warm welcome into the masculine camaraderie of three men of the ton, two prominent, one not, but Bennington's newness would not let him know that.

We followed Peregrine's lead toward the Duke's library, and my wayward mind filled with contemplation about how I might yet salvage my earlier plans for the outcome of this evening, or at least, as those original plans had been modified by the introduction of Rory into the blend. I could not prevent my mind from conjuring up a remarkably *clear* image of me servicing their cocks, one after the other.

Whether I should, even if we three became private, say anything then. Whether it was best to first broach with Peregrine the subject of Rory's friendship with Edward. And whether Peregrine might decide to put paid to his

somewhat priggish tendencies in order for the three of us to become fast fuck-friends. I could get a great deal of enjoyment out of sucking both their cocks, alternating between them as they stood side by side. Perhaps persuading them, though they were patently men who fucked and only fucked when it came to arse play, that a finger in each of their holes, gliding over their glands as I deep throated them in turn, would make fucking my mouth all the more enjoyable.

Damn and bloody hell. I wrenched my mind away from those thoughts and the inevitable display that would go with them. Bennington and I found ourselves side by side, following Peregrine and Rory. When we reached the privacy of the hallways, I knew that while I could say nothing, and let Peregrine essentially smooth matters over, I owed it to Bennington and my own sense of *amour-propre*, to make the effort.

I waved the other two on, receiving a don't-fuck-this-up glare from Peregrine.

Bennington clearly was reluctant to stop and equally clearly wanted nothing at all to do with me, since I had precipitated his embarrassment, but the rules of the ton gave him no choice.

"My lord," I said quietly, though no one was in sight, "I owe you an apology, and I do, indeed, apologize. I have no excuse to offer for insulting you, and doing so was not my intent."

A more experienced man would not have blurted out a nearly anguished, "But *why*?"

"I have no good reason at all. It was a jest at the expense of Lord Somerville, gone disastrously awry." I paused. He was due at least some portion of the truth. "I have, you see, a reputation for strict formality; I am *never* on a first name basis with anyone in public, much less someone to whom I have just been introduced. So, I far too rapidly, and with no rational thought at all, conceived a mockery of my good friend Somerville's own steadfast propriety. And ended mocking you."

Hurting him, actually. A most painful strike at his mind and soul, made worse by what I should have understood the moment I realized he was not a friend of Edward's. Understood before then. A man that beautiful, who had undoubtedly been that beautiful as he grew up, had been teased and tormented a good part of his life, and from the reaction when I applied a verbal whip to a

still-open wound, had never been protected from the torment, nor ever fully recovered from it.

“I sincerely regret what happened. And if you are willing to accept this offer: my friends call me Michel.” I held out my hand to him.

He paused, unaware that even in these circumstances, that pause was in effect an insult, albeit a very mild one in comparison to my own to him. And then he held out his hand. “My friends call me An... drew.” His handshake was strong, though not of the proving-a-point sort.

He was probably about to say “Andy,” but undoubtedly felt that would make him appear less than a man.

“Well, Andrew, we must still abide by the rules. So although we have cried friends, ‘Michel’ and ‘Andrew’ must be saved for privacy.”

His smile was really quite wonderful. “Of course... Michel.”

“Very well, then, Andrew, let us dare the ducal lair and see if the brandy and cigars are indeed as fine as we have been promised.”

I led the way to the library. For whatever reason, although I was certain the reason had nothing whatsoever to do with any Edwardian friendship, the Duke had taken a liking to Peregrine some years prior and had given him leave to sample his brandy and cigars, even in his absence. Apparently, that leave extended to the invitation to us.

The Duke, however, was there when we arrived. He had obviously made a successful escape from the glitter of Her Grace’s ball-giving brilliance, and was comfortably ensconced in a deep chair, a snifter on the table at his side, his feet up on an ottoman of dark red leather, his head tilted back, blowing a cloud himself just as Bennington and I walked in. The duke’s cloud, however, was not merely an exhalation of blue-grey smoke that went hither and yon, but rather three precise circles, the third inside the second inside the first. They hovered there, as he and we four admired his artistry, and then with a wave of his hand, he dispelled them into near invisibility.

He smiled broadly. “Somerville, you young scamp. Making your escape from Matilda’s marauding horde out there, are you? And these three... the chits are laying siege at *their* gates as well?”

It was an explanation that would do well enough, as we would indeed be besieged were we to remain at the ball much longer. Or at least, truth be told,

Peregrine and I would, given our respective ranks and the certain wealth of Somerville now, Glenhaven wealth to follow, and my own wealth. Bennington might be besieged as well, given the at least reasonable Bennington wealth shown by the combination of clothing that was clearly bespoke, and that indefinable aura of being *accustomed* to it, as compared to the men, and women, who clothed themselves elegantly, but were unlikely to have even a chipped chamber pot to piss in. Rory, however... well, once he was known as a second son, and once women's eyes on his clothes and their ears on investigatory gossip confirmed he did not possess the funds needed to be an eligible parti, he would be relegated to invitations based on his entertainment value or on the sudden need for another man to balance the numbers at a dinner.

"May we find refuge here, Your Grace, from the hounds of hell?" Peregrine paused. "Her Grace, of course, not being anything so mundane as a member of the pack, but perhaps, Field Mistress?"

The Duke chortled. Took a sip and set the glass down. "Has my dear gel sounded the 'View, Halloo!' yet?"

The Duke and Duchess had to be in their eighties, had been married for centuries it seemed, and he still viewed her as the "dear girl" of their long, *long*-forgotten youth? Or perhaps, not so very forgotten after all. I deeply regretted I would never have that. Certainly not with a woman, as I had no intention of marrying. Should any distant relatives have survived the Terror, and the torching of the Chateau de Vidal-Sansouci, on my death they would inherit a bankrupt title, as my wealth was not entailed and a fair number of organizations would be quite surprised by my will. Nor, with equal certainty, would there ever be a man in my life, who at the Duke's age would smile fondly and refer to my equally aged self as his "dear boy."

I mentally gave myself a shake and returned my attention to what was happening.

"Not yet, Your Grace, not yet," Peregrine replied.

"It's well you are here, then. This is the start of the meet, you know, and she'll set the bitch pack loose on you soon enough. And Matilda knows every single covert in London, and throughout England, I don't doubt."

His Grace's smile was decidedly wicked. "But you are safe here. For a time. Bide a while, recoup your strength and your will to live, with refreshments. And then you must open that door, and once more unto..." He genially waved

to indicate the vast, ravaging hordes we would be “unto” at the end of our respite, since as usual, Her Grace’s birthday ball was the saddest of sad crushes.

Peregrine gave a false sigh that we all knew was teasingly false. “Truth, Your Grace, truth, indeed. But in the ducking and dodging and weaving to get to this... so very *elegant*... den, I have mislaid my manners. Allow me to present my fellow foxes.”

Following the introductions, another hand wave from the duke gave Peregrine the office to act as substitute host in locating sniffers, pouring generously at His Grace’s urging (“You must be generous, dear boy, far more generous than *that*, if you are to stiffen your sinews, and summon up the, ah, *blood*...”), passing the glasses round, and then offering each of us a selection from the intricately carved humidor.

Bennington hesitated when it was his turn. He was experiencing heights of the masculine ton he was perhaps not really equipped to handle so soon, but he did not want to appear unmanly by refusing. Yet we all saw that he either had no experience smoking a cigar and thus could easily be humiliated once again by losing his tobacco virginity in such a venue and possibly entertaining us with loud, racking coughs, or he had had an experience and disliked it intensely. Even if the latter were so, it would be impolite to explain that the experience of smoking *these* cigars would be utterly unlike whatever far less expensive brand he had previously smoked. Nor that he might even enjoy it.

The Duke noticed. “Not a smoker, lad? No matter, no matter. To quote dear Oliver, ‘Pray be under no constraint in this house. This is Liberty-hall, my lords. You may do just as you please here.’ Indeed, we’ll have no airs and graces at all, at all.”

I wondered how much brandy he had imbibed before we arrived.

The Duke smiled broadly at us, clearly pleased with his pun. “Except, of course, for at least one Grace. Two if darling Matilda comes waltzing in. Ah. Bennington, my lad, whilst these three are gathering their spills and lighting their cigars, perhaps you’d lock the door? That won’t stop my good lady, of course, but at least it will give us slight warning.”

Bennington did as he was asked with alacrity; we other three took our turns at the fireplace, and returned to the seats the duke had designated.

Some time passed in comfortable quiet, and before the air became too blue and heavy, Peregrine rose, went to the door to the balcony and opened it slightly, pausing a moment to look out.

“Alas,” said the duke, “no escaping your fate that way, young sirs. The earth below is too far for gallant leaping. The ivy adorning the wall is too weak for even Bennington’s weight, and MacLean here would put one foot on it and come crashing down, undoubtedly denting the ground on his arrival.”

We laughed at the thought of so perilous an escape.

“And that tree is not at all close enough for a good leap and a climb down.”

He smiled at us again, his thoughts briefly inward. “Matilda planned it that way, you know.”

Our faces showed our lack of comprehension, and dawning amusement, or bemusement, at least.

“Well before your time, lads. It was at a Christmas ball, I believe. Young... well, the name doesn’t really matter, and I only tease him about it in private these days... Lord X, let us say, was being hunted very carefully, even cleverly, by a bosom bow of Matilda’s. The bosom bow had a daughter of unparalleled perfection, of course.

“So as so many had done before, he sought temporary refuge here from the, if I may say, mischievous machinations of my Matilda. Unlike the others, who had had the fortitude to drink up and go back to face their fates, or who, perhaps, lacked his desperation, Lord X conceived an audacious plan to escape from the den where all believed him trapped.”

Another healthy sip, another puff that drifted toward the open door, as the earlier accumulation was doing. Peregrine leaned against the door frame, and Bennington relaxed in his chair, comfortable now in this *friendly* place. The Scot was seated either far too close for my comfort or not close enough. We all leaned forward, an indication of interest not really because our raconteur was, after all, the *Duke of Alderson*, but because he told the tale well.

“It was glorious, lads. Gloriously conceived, gloriously executed. He threw open the doors, took a few steps back, raced forward, leaped onto the railing, pushed off, and flew through the air toward the welcoming arms of the tree.

“I had, of course, bestirred myself from this chair’s predecessor, and proceeded apace to the balcony, where I was just in time to witness the dénouement... the joining of hands and the so-convenient limb. Unfortunately, the dear lad had not taken into account the ice from the previous night’s storm. He slipped from limb to limb, flailing about, before dropping to the ground and breaking his leg.”

We broke into more quiet laughter at the image, and His Grace joined us.

“Now, did I not have an obligation to a Higher Power—” and here the duke rolled his eyes toward the door and tilted his head there and back to indicate precisely to *which* Higher Power he was referring “—I’d have sent the servants down, had them summon a physician to his home and spirited him there. As it was, the servants went down, the lad went up, to a bedroom here, a physician was summoned, and would you believe it? By the merest of mere chances, and nothing more, of course, the young gel, who was the cause of these acrobatic wonders, just *happened* to be in the back hallway when he was brought in.

“And for the next several weeks, while he was laid up in bed, and for a week when he was on crutches, unable to leave for the privacy and, ah, *security* of his own home and servants, because the physician, too, answered only to a Higher Power, the young gel, suitably chaperoned, visited him regularly. They were, of course eventually married. Just a few months later at St. George’s.”

He blew another set of rings within rings, and took a next-to-the last swallow of the brandy. Set the snifter down. “The moral of this tale, young lads, is to simply surrender once dear Matilda has you in her marital sights. God knows, I did. But then, the surrender has led to such a wonderful journey since.”

He fell silent.

It was Peregrine who broke the silence. “Your Grace? The tree?”

He looked up from his reverie. “Oh, yes. The tree. The next day Matilda had the tree cut down. Punishment, she said, for having dared to hurt our young friend. And then she very graciously allowed the tree you now see to be planted. Far enough away that no one would be foolish enough to try to repeat that leap, close enough to *eventually* offer some shade again.”

Peregrine came back from the balcony, with a wicked grin on his face. One I knew well. He braced himself, lifted his glass, and looked around. We understood our part and all stood up, braced as well, glasses lifted.

Then, with all the solemnity of a toast to the King, he said, “Gentlemen! I give you Her Grace, the Duchess of Alderson. God save our gracious... duchess!”

The duke lifted his glass as well, and we swallowed the last of our brandy. Peregrine saved the moment afterward, as glasses were lowered, from any awkwardness.

“Your Grace, I believe it would be perhaps wise to forego the throwing of the glasses in the fireplace?”

The duke's eyes twinkled. “I believe you are quite right, Somerville. A certain, ah, Higher Power would be distressed, ah, most *vigorously* distressed should anything voluntarily happen to glasses from that set. You might say she would be quite, ah, *snippish* about the situation.”

“And none here would intentionally distress a Higher Power,” Peregrine replied.

The duke nodded his agreement.

“Alas, Your Grace, I fear we have tarried nearly too long. I think we must boldly go onto the field of battle, rather than act the foxes and scurry through the underbrush in a frantic attempt to escape.”

“But since you are not the chief prey this evening, you will in a little while beat a strategic retreat?”

“Indeed, Your Grace.”

“Where does one retreat to these days?”

My wayward mind came up with the ideal response. The three of us, after we had done as little of our social duties as we could get away with, and with young Bennington having been politely persuaded to rejoin his family, would retire to my house for a convivial remainder of the evening, with cards and fine wine and conversation. Where I might explore my ned-sense certainty of the Scot, and perhaps discern whether my sudden visions of three cocks, three arses, three mouths, three pairs of hands, were as fine in fact as my envisionings. Sucking both of them. Having one suck me, while the other worked my balls. Yes. I could imagine that.

But all good imaginings must come to an end. Sometimes shatteringly so.

It was the damned, damnable Scot who spoke first. Fortuitously preventing what would have been a most imprudent suggestion on my part.

“My lords, I suggest we retreat to Annabella's, to sample the delights there. The newest one, especially.”

Peregrine's eyes widened slightly and then retreated to normality—the only sign of surprise he chose to display. Annabella's was currently the most popular brothel in the city, catering only to the most distinguished of tastes and men.

And those tastes did not include the perversions engaged in by friends of Edward's.

“An *especially* fine delight?” the duke asked.

“Oh, indeed, Your Grace. While I have no personal knowledge, ah, *yet*, I have heard she is quite the comely thing. Sufficiently unspoiled that you can imagine her *quite* unspoiled, even if not quite virginal, it is said.”

His Grace smiled. “Firm smooth tits, has she?”

“Aye, Your Grace. A nice double-handful.”

“And...?”

“Slender waist, plump arse. *Real* blonde hair, both above and below, it is said by those who are presumed to know.”

“And a tight little quim, I daresay?”

I must have signaled my surprise in some way. Poor Bennington was bright red with his mouth open. The Duke chose to glare at me, and spoke sharply. “I am old, *M'sieur le vicomte*, not *dead*.” He sighed. “And I am entirely faithful to my dearest Matilda.”

He sighed again, more deeply. “As I must, young gentlemen, as I must ever be. For you see, I can never be quite sure that I have found all the exceedingly sharp, ah, *pruning* shears she has hidden about this vast pile. In case she has a sudden desire to *snip* something, she has informed me.”

He allowed us to enjoy the jest with him. I joined in the smiles and was, of course, quite believable. I am quite the extraordinary actor when I want to... or must... be.

As we left the library to rejoin the fray, I briefly imagined myself the Pope, in far-off Roman splendor, experiencing a *crise de nerfs* on learning that he was not, in fact, as infallible as he had so oft proclaimed himself to be.

The rest of the night was as shattering to my foolish, no, my *stupid* hopes and fantasies, as any night could ever be.

I had to listen to him fuck the slut, and endure her shouted screams of ecstasy, which oddly sounded not entirely feigned and paid-for.

The night ended not quite an hour ago as I came up the steps to the door of *ma maison*, the door opened by Deville, the second footman, whose turn it was

to wait up for me. I told him to lock up and go to bed, and after Henri helped divest me of my clothes, and into the nightshirt I divested myself of as soon as he was gone, I gave him strict instructions not to disturb me until I rang for him.

Leaving me alone in bed, naked, stroking my stupidly fantasizing cock. The cock whose imaginings alternated between Peregrine fucking my face, holding my head in place with his usual careful regard to ensure my hair had not been disturbed when we were done, lest we be disclosed, and images of a cock I had never seen, was unlikely ever to see, my head immobilized by ten thick, callused fingers and thumbs with no regard at all for appearances afterward.

I was sure there had been no padding, so that Scottish bulge was surely an indication of a *thick* prick. And it was, my mind decided, a wide, *wide* cock that even my talented mouth might have trouble surrounding. Rory could—would, I decided—be more forceful more often, had there been any possibility of an “often” at all, than Peregrine. He would *fuck* my skull, not merely acquiesce in having his cock sucked, forcing me to accept every inch of girth and length, pushing down into my gullet, ruthlessly using me as I occasionally wanted, needed, to be used. Until at last he cannon-blasted hot shots of semen so deep I could not taste him at all.

Yes!

I could imagine that.

And I did.

Each and every thrust of Rory's prick matching each and every stroke of my hand, until, with my feet braced, my hips arched up, I came when he did, my own seed splattering my face, my throat, my chest, and final dribbles onto my belly.

I collapsed onto my bed. Collapsed into sleep.

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Rory

Thursday, 7 September 1815

Near dawn

Rory's Lodgings

London

I panicked.

I was *right* to panic, though. That flare of lust when Michel... no, no more Michel, only Vidal... gave me leave to use his name was stupid. Extraordinarily stupid, especially given that I was one of the few friends of Edward's with no functioning ned-sense whatsoever. Although I had never really needed it, as the men I had sex with generally made their interest known to me.

The Dock, of course, presented no problems at all, in knowing. The men who went there, to fuck or be fucked, suck or be sucked, to do all the other things that men do with cocks and mouths, arses and hands, with fingers and fists, and objects of wood and metal and leather, were *de facto* friends of Edward's. No ned-sense was required.

Outside of the Dock, the men who offered themselves undoubtedly possessed an accurate ned-sense, knowing despite nothing overt from me, that if they dropped, or offered to drop to their knees, I'd fill their mouths with cock, and equally so if the offer was for a bared arse. Still other times, at random, pissing in a privy, perhaps, my cock getting hard for no reason at all, doing nothing more than displaying it, to the frequent gulp of the man beside me, and an offer to "help with that." At times, the gulping man will get hard as well, hesitantly showing himself to me, and when I look and silently admire, but make no move, he becomes nervous, babbles in that "just us men here" idiot tone that that "just happens sometimes." And even if I agree that "it does, indeed," he covers himself back up and scurries away. I always hoped he would wank later, thinking of me, and berate himself for what he had missed.

I repressed the wanting that sought to surge up and shout "fuck now!" when Michel... *Vidal!* ...and I shook hands.

I repressed the thoughts of the three of us... together.

I had been with two men before. Three other men, as well. I knew what the possibilities were.

Four men together is not as intimate as three. Oh, there is definitely something which gets your shaft up and makes it stay that way when there are four, but it seems more... automaton-like... more taking turns in a careful sequence. You usually wind up in pairs, side by side, fucking, and even the scents and smells of sex, the feel of the sweaty flesh of the pair beside you rubbing up against you as you fuck or are fucked, doesn't really change what is happening from two men having sex, while watching and being aroused by and arousing in turn, two other men having sex in the same place.

Although there was that one time... John was on his back, my cock inside his arse. Someone whose name I don't think I ever knew was over John on all fours, devouring John's cock while John devoured his. And behind the nameless man was a slender, almost delicate molly boy who often went by the name of Pauline, brutally fucking the nameless one's arse with an amazingly splendid prick. Whenever I saw him erect I wondered how he could possibly remain standing, without all that weight tilting him forward and down. So there was a certain... intimacy that one time with four. But not the intimacy of just three.

Three men seemed to be, *were* more intimate. It could, of course, be two pleasuring each other, the third watching, wanking, perhaps caressing but never quite joining in. That had happened in a way similar to the Dock and my meeting with Peregrine. The three fingers in my arse kept perfect time with my thrusts into the man who kept begging me to fuck him harder. But there was that one time, and only that one time, with two men I had never seen before, and never saw again.

A park where, I had heard, and other men had obviously heard as well, that friends of Edward's might be found, hard and waiting and wanting. A park with trails, and thick bushes, and clearings. A park where three men might, with a glance, a stare, my rampant erection, a hand fondling the owner's cock, reaching out to fondle the obvious slenderness of the man beside him, suddenly find themselves abandoning what little good sense they had remaining after being there in the first place, and stripping themselves naked in a clearing.

We kissed, caressed, stroked, tugged, fondled, twisted, turned, nipped, bit, suckled, moved and turned in a twisted tangle that made our sweat soak up bits of dirt and leaves, tiny twigs and rocks, ignoring them all for the greater

sensations we shared, until we ended where it seemed we somehow knew we would inevitably be. My cock was inside one man's arse, not easily arriving there, but with the dint of sweat and swearing and spit and precome, we managed to get it where it needed to be. The third man, whose prick was indeed slender and some six or so guineas long, as Peregrine would say today, was in the mouth of the man on all fours. And slender cock and I were awkwardly bent over the body we shared, kissing, twisting, hurting the other's nipples, all in the good cause of getting a release as best we possibly could.

Whoever says that three men in that position can seed simultaneously lies. The man between triggered the avalanche, furiously wanking until he spewed, grunting around the cock in his mouth, his arse muscles clamping down on me. I moaned into the mouth attached to mine as I unloaded and a moment later, thin dick moaned as well, coming into a warm and welcoming mouth. Gasping, we pulled away from each other, fell to our backs, and with none of the customary post-fuck haste, subsided into a brief, thoroughly sated haze.

The man who had been in the middle, still in the middle as we lay there, reached out and his palms rubbed our sweaty thighs. And then with a fond pat, he used our thighs to brace himself, leverage his legs under, and stand. We followed suit, slender prick and I, gathering clothes that had commingled wildly in the rapid disrobing, figuring out which item belonged to whom, carefully reassembling ourselves into some semblance of order.

Dressed, we stood there. By unspoken mutual agreement, we moved together, shared one more trio kiss, and then three gentle, individual kisses. With fond smiles, we nodded and went our separate ways, thin prick and I sharing a trail for a short time.

Through it all, no word was said. None were needed.

It had been glorious.

It would have been even more glorious, perhaps heart-stopping, world-stopping glorious if it were to have happened with Peregrine and me and Michel... Vidal, damn it!

But the lightning of mutual attraction between men of the ton, an attraction that could last for more than one furtive moment of sex followed by public pretense of never having met, was unlikely to happen twice. At least not to me. And most definitely not with Michel Arsenault, *le vicomte de Vidal-Sansouci*,

whose name and rank I could in fact perfectly pronounce but would probably never admit the ability to do so.

Despite my fevered imaginings, Vidal was most definitely not a friend of Edward's. The succession of affairs with opera dancers and actresses, only the best of the best, since he came on the town. The string of mistresses who left when he tired of them, pleased and proud of his attention, ever-satisfied with his gifts during and at the ending of the relationship. His current mistress in the snug little house on Howard Street.

This was *not* a friend of Edward's, not a man hiding cock-lust behind a *façade* of cunt-devotion, no matter the instant lust that had assaulted me on being introduced. I would have preferred making my excuses, feigning sudden illness, recalling with equal suddenness a prior engagement I could not in good conscience be late for. But I could not offend Peregrine that way, nor Lady Glenhaven, who had greeted me with genuine warmth.

Nor could I risk the loss of Peregrine's friendship, his patronage, by offending an obviously close friend with hints that my mouth and arse were available if he wanted to indulge, nor would my cock say no to the idea of using any hole he might offer. Then, too, such an offer might pose a risk of a duel at dawn that I would have no way to get out of other than by fleeing the country.

I never intended this outcome when Peregrine and I fucked on the Dock, but now that he has provided it... needs must when the purse-strings drive. The play up here in the upper air of the ton is deeper. Some, perhaps even most of it, beyond the limits of my purse. The extremely modest, one might almost say penurious, quarterly allowance from the Laird, who allowed only his heir to address him familiarly, and most certainly not his wastrel son, could be stretched only so far. And that "so far" to which it could be prudently stretched was not a pleasant life.

Gambling met, or did not meet, the rest of my needs, as the turn of a card, a flip of the dice, might decide. So while the risks were proportionately greater up here, the urge, the *pressure* from inside yourself, from the men with whom you gambled, from the watchers who were as equally gleeful to be present at great gains as they were at devastating loss, to continue gambling, no matter the odds, would also be greater, and thus more dangerous.

So far, I had not succumbed, and vowed I never would, to the lure of believing, while I was winning, that God or some ancient deity was on my side,

directing the play so that I was, in that place and in that time, invincible and could not lose. Until, of course, I wagered all on one more round of piquet, one more roll of the hazard dice. At which point, the deity or demon would walk away, around the table to select another poor fool to kiss and caress and whisper urgings in his ear... as I lost it all.

I would never allow that to happen. Never place myself in the position of having to shoot myself because I had incurred debts of honor I could not honor.

So it was that I *needed* Peregrine. Needed, wanted him for the sex we had. For the burgeoning genuine friendship. For the purely, or impurely, financial gains that might be had if I gambled wisely and well, and knew when to hold my cards, when to fold, and when the risk of going on was reasonable for the possible result.

That meant I could not, under any circumstances, risk damaging my friendship with Peregrine by assaulting Vidal right there in the ballroom, throwing him down on the floor, ripping his pantaloons and smalls, although I doubt the man was wearing any of the latter, down to his ankles, turning him over, pulling him back up to all fours, spitting on my cock and then fucking balls-deep into him.

Vidal was *not* a friend of Edward's, and unless and until he proved otherwise, perhaps by his falling to his knees, pulling my cock out and swallowing it to the root... yet another of those consummations devoutly to be wished but which will never happen... Vidal is safe from my attentions. And so that Peregrine would also be safe from any hint that I could possibly be anything other than a most-assuredly *non*-friend of Edward's, I decided as we finished the banter about the three of us being friends... in that moment between the banter and the realization of what Vidal and I had done to Bennington, and how we had pulled Peregrine in on the harm as well... that I would devise some clever way to ensure Vidal's belief in my non-friend status.

The friendship extended by the Duke, the beyond excellent cigars and brandy, the Duke's story, the genuine laughter of five who were friends for at least the length of time they were in that place, lulled me into letting down my guard. Instead of social pretense while I thought of something else, such as the perfect way to convince Vidal without being obvious, I simply *enjoyed* myself.

No good enjoyment goes unpunished.

Which led to the panic when I realized our refuge time, as the Duke had put it, was about to end.

A blurt is to rational thought as shooting yourself in the foot is to hitting the wafer at which you were aiming. And so I blurted out the suggestion that we all go to Annabella's.

And had no choice but to follow through on it, given the Duke's delight and his bawdy commentary.

After we left the library, we four scattered to do what we had to do at the ball, though as Peregrine's guest I would have to stick to his side, and inwardly bemoan the lack of cock-sticking-inside in the night ahead. Inside of me, that is. But before we did, I perforce had to set a time for our meeting at Annabella's. I made sure to include Bennington in the planning, but in passing, offered him a way out by telling him that we would, of course, understand if his commitments that evening to his sister and his family prevented him from joining us.

The "us" encompassing Peregrine as well, unfortunately, but I could not do other than drag him into the mess I had made. Fortunately, I believe, Bennington did not come to Annabella's. Unfortunately, all three of us did. Not one of us had an accident resulting at least in a torn thumbnail, which would have sufficed as an excuse for all of us to aid our injured friend and forego whatever phantom delights Annabella's might have to offer.

I have fucked women before. Would undoubtedly be compelled to do so in the future. They were easy to find and use when my cock informed me in no uncertain terms that it needed a hole, having grown tired of my fist, or of being fucked between a pair of pillows and thereby rubbed a little raw, when no man was available. And when I was not in the mood for the effort necessary to disguise myself for a trip to the Dock.

And so we wound up with "Angel," as she called herself. Or perhaps Annabella, if there was indeed actually an Annabella, gave her the name.

And she was all that I had heard and described in the library. Except for the "blonde below," as there was nothing there to compare with the hair above. She was also far more expensive than I had anticipated. True, I would in most circumstances have gone with a still-exquisite, but less-expensive whore, but having made such a point of "admiring" this Angel back in the library, on finding her "at leisure," I had little choice but to offer her my poor self. With "poor," of course, being the operative word following the offer.

Peregrine had been to my lodgings briefly, and he was astute enough to recognize the general state of my finances. He generously offered me a

“Welcome to London” gift and paid her. Angel’s eyes widened at the thickness of the folded bills, and more so at their denominations. Thankfully, the Crown had begun issuing banknotes in 1799, as Peregrine would have walked tilted grotesquely to the left had he had to carry the equivalent value in a purse-full of gold guineas.

She must have given some sort of a signal too subtle for me to catch, which brought over two of her sisters before the currency could be put away. Peregrine offered to pay for one for Vidal, and overrode his demurrer with an airy, “But after all, my dear Vidal, what are friends for but to give other friends gifts?”

His eyes also made clear to the trio that while he was ready to pay the asking price for Angel, the other two, who were clean, well-groomed, scantily clad, and quite attractive, were lesser lights in the constellation, and as such commanded lesser compensation as well. Once that was resolved to his satisfaction, Angel and the other, whose name I never learned, led us away. Peregrine, the bloody, fucking bastard managed to elude the trap laid by the third whore, and do so in so very charming a manner that no one there could have conceived of the possibility of how ruthlessly he pounded my arse that night at the Dock. And since.

The bitches took us to adjoining rooms.

That perforce put me on my mettle, and required that I give Angel one of my more rigorous and vigorous cunt-fucking performances. For as the Bard has said, so were they all, all *performances*.

And if my cock got hard a little more rapidly after she disrobed, because of an image of Peregrine’s thickness, oiled and leaking, nudging at my hole, so be it. And if I was able to stay hard because of the imagining that the cock I saw beneath Vidal’s inexpressibles was only slightly thicker when hard, but *much* longer than Peregrine’s or mine, working its way deep into my throat as I sucked him, so be it. And if I was able to fuck her far more ruthlessly than I had ever fucked a woman before, sending her into a series of orgasms which were, curiously enough, most believable, accompanied by loud, wall-piercing, gasps and screams and moans, and cries of “My lord”—although I preferred to believe she was calling on me, rather than the Deity—so be it.

I suppose it was the traditional spirit of competitiveness between sisters, sisters in harlotry or not, that led to similar sounds starting to emerge from

Vidal's room. But he and his ride were late to the race, and never quite caught up.

As for tightness?

That quim was to tightness as a child's toy yacht being sailed on the Serpentine would be to HMS *Caledonia*, under full sail and heading into battle with the French, all one hundred twenty of her guns run out and ready.

I would not, however, be so crass, though I can be incredibly crass at times, as to go back to the Duke and destroy his imaginings with a dose of reality.

On the other side of the so very thin wall, which at least shut out the more modest noises that occur in the aftermath of sex, the Frenchman was undoubtedly doing as I was doing. Pulling out, cleaning ourselves, with or without a little help from our harlots, putting on clothes so that we were both presentable and dressed as reasonably close to the way we had been on arrival, as the circumstances allowed. We then emerged from our rooms. At the same bloody time.

That fucking non-friend Vidal naturally made a great show of kissing his whore good-bye, which necessitated my instant emulation. At this stage of the contest, I ceded the laurel to Vidal. Fucking a woman is possible. Having her suck my cock is also possible, though I have yet to meet a woman who can do so with any degree of skill remotely comparable to the mouth of a good man, and so are they all, all good men who suck my cock for free. Putting my mouth on a woman, except, perhaps, quite, *quite* briefly on a tit, is as enjoyable as eating broccoli.

I *loathe* broccoli.

Luckily, whores of either sex do not expect their temporary employers to be one whit concerned for their well-being or enjoyment during the term of the contract, whether that term is for a minute or less before the man too-eagerly spends in her mouth or some other hole, or the longer term of a mistress. The "responsive" moans from Angel were, this time, discernibly false, though she was quite skillful at them.

Peregrine watched us as we came down the steps, jostling one another with bumps that, had the stairway been long enough, would have escalated into some sort of violence. When we reached the bottom, Peregrine made some mocking remarks which were not well received on either of our parts.

Thereafter, having been required to endure additional pointed jocularly from him with an *appearance* of good order, we adjourned to a nearby tavern where we consumed multiple flagons of surprisingly well-brewed ale apiece, as men do not go home to their beds immediately after fucking at a brothel. Rather, they demonstrate their continued manliness by that consumption. I much prefer the clarity of friends of Edward's. We suck, we fuck, we seed, we go. Neither asks or even cares to know the destination.

But I was still achingly hard when I only somewhat staggered up the stairs and into my rooms. It was not, most definitely was not, a full-blown stagger.

I stripped, dropping boots, stockings, pantaloons and everything else wherever they might fall.

Fell naked onto my bed, on my back. Commanded my recalcitrant cock to obey and go to sleep. He of course ignored the command and would not let me sleep, insinuating brilliantly clear images in my head of what the three of us might have done in a bed, on the Dock, *in a fucking field!* had Vidal been even a non-friend who was merely curious and willing to experiment.

And then my cock fucked with my other head. Giving me images of what Michel... and I gave in to my *cock's* command to use the name I in reality wanted to use... might look like naked. What he might look like to my eyes if I were on my knees or in some other position that enabled me to take that long, slender prick all the way into my throat, trying to reach my belly, as I looked up at him. Or his face as he thrust his cock rapidly into my hole, each inward thrust rubbing that bump.

We decided, my cock and I, that that was the image to work with. Michel over me; the consummate, always-collected hedonist, losing all control because of my arse, his pale skin flushing, his entire body becoming wet with sweat, and the more he fucked, the more drops of that sweat, thick with his scent, fell to sizzle on my skin as he fucked and fucked.

Yes!

I could imagine that.

And I did.

Each and every thrust of Michel's imagined cock in my hole matching each and every stroke of my hand, until, with my feet braced, my hips arched up, I

came when he spilled rope after rope after rope of seed deep inside me, my own seed splattering my face, my throat, my chest, and final dribbles onto my belly.

I collapsed onto my bed. Collapsed into sleep.

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Peregrine

Friday, 6 October 1815

Before the curtain

Glenhaven Box

Covent Garden Theatre

London

It is no wonder that there is a paucity of good deeds in this country. They are so regularly punished.

One has only to examine the list of my recent good deeds and the punishments meted out for them to ascertain that truth. And there is no rational explanation for why I should be punished for doing something *good*.

Perhaps there is something, after all, to those foreign chaps who believe that when you die you are reincarnated as a flea or a mouse or a horse or something if you have not been sufficiently good in your lifetime. Or you can come back as a man, and then atone for the sins of all your past lives. I think I should have been better off as a flea. At least my life would have been a short and merry one had I found the right dog.

I can only conclude that whatever crimes I committed in some past life, none of which I can recall, must have been truly heinous, as nothing I have done in *this* life could possibly warrant... all this.

I let Michel suck my cock on 30th June, although if I were to be honest, and if I am to whine about good deeds and punishment, honesty seems unfortunately appropriate, it was rather more mouth fucking than allowed cock sucking. I would have given him a remarkably fine wank immediately afterward, but under the circumstances he understandably declined. He has sucked my cock since then, an act he obviously enjoys with all the (occasional) lip-smacking appreciation of a gourmand for fine food, and which he does so very well. Like the excellent good fellow I am, I have reciprocated every time. *Every time*. While I admit I do not have his skills, I am no slipshod sucker of cocks myself.

So why have I been punished with this utterly irrational jealousy about the other men who have perhaps had more of him than I have had? Who have,

perhaps, been able to run their fingers through his hair, without having to worry that its sudden disarray will disclose what we have been doing; who have been able to gather it into their fists to hold his head tight and look down to watch their cocks gliding in and out of his mouth, watching those slender lips and the long tongue perform a certain twist and swirl on your knob that leaves you gasping. The other men among the ton he might be sucking in secret as he does me. I have found myself watching the men he talks to, the men he interacts with on a basis other than the merest nod of recognition. And even the latter are suspect. I have discarded the obvious impossibilities like Beckwith and his ilk, the too old, the too infirm, and all the other men of the “too” categories whose cocks would never enjoy the glory of Michel’s mouth. And after all the discards, I have found myself consumed by curiosity about which of the remaining group it is. Merely some of them? Or is he more of a whore, and sucks them all?

I fucked Rory on 20th August. Fucked him hard, fucked him well through the fucking wall. Made him seed so hard he nearly collapsed when I pulled out. That has to count as a good deed. As do each of the too-few fucks since, which, although none have quite reached the heights of the first one... a defeat I can turn to victory if we could ever find the quietude and a private bedroom where we could be both vigorous and loud... have certainly been *good* fucks.

I have on two prior occasions had fuck-friends. Briefly. We fucked or sucked, we cleaned up, we parted. That is all Rory and Michel are, I have told myself repeatedly, but have discovered I have not been listening at all. If I had been listening to myself there would not have been that Michel-style jealousy about Rory. That same wondering and nearly hating the men, however many, however few, who have been there before me. The men who are fucking him now when I am not.

And surely a good deed which was done quite unintentionally should not be repaid with the worst punishment of all. Yet so hath God decreed.

I stupidly invited Rory to the Alderson Ball, resulting in the necessity of introducing one fuck-friend to another. The punishments were later, much later, when I had forgotten the possibility of the other boot not merely dropping, but stomping on me.

First my back was punished when, in the flurry of leaving Annabella’s, Rory grabbed me at a moment when we were out of sight of everyone else,

yanked me into a corner, slammed me against a wall and growled at me, his English rapidly sliding away, “Not a word to your fucking French friend about me, about fucking *us*, Peregrine. D’ye ken? Ah will hae yer wuid oan it.”

It took me a moment to translate that last sentence, as I had consumed rather more wine than perhaps I ought, while waiting for the pair to finish their competitive fucking upstairs. I nodded to show I agreed. A careful nod, as a vigorous one would have sent my head spinning even more than it already was after the grab and slam. The way he used his grasp on my lapels to shake me indicated he needed something more than a head movement. I gave up a brief, silent prayer that I would not cast up my accounts, and when that prayer... and *only* that prayer was answered... I gave him my word aloud.

Then he grabbed my head, pulled it down, kissed me briefly but fiercely, lifted his head away before giving me the slightest chance to kiss him back, took a careful step away so we were no longer cock-pressed against one another, and with the flat of his hand patted my chest, crushing what little lift was left in my cravat. “Guid laddie,” he whispered and sauntered away and out the door.

The guardian of the gate, a mountainous former boxer resplendent in the surprisingly tame livery of the house, came back after having had to escort out some clients who had overstayed their welcome. He was immaculate, though I doubted the guests could say the same as I heard the start of some rather loud bumps and thumps, as of someone falling or possibly being hurled down the steps, before Rory took advantage of his absence to assault me.

My head was hurt next. Michel walked into the foyer, shaking out the ruffles of lace around his wrists. He saw me and said, “We really must talk, *mon ami*.”

I opened my mouth merely to agree, but his glare was of the “not here, you fucking idiot” variety so I clamped it shut. We walked to the bottom of the steps to await Michel’s carriage. Rory was nowhere in sight, which puzzled me until I heard him. Pissing. Just around the corner of the house. I have, of course, pissed beside or near other men in other places from time to time. It is inevitable, and men tend not to consider whipping out their cocks and letting loose as an impropriety in virtually any location. Rory pisses louder and longer than any of those men. If there were an Ascot-equivalent for pissing, Rory would win.

“Where’s your friend?”

“Pissing.”

Michel cocked his head, noted the sound, and gave a little nod. And then grabbed my arm, yanked me into the darkness next to the stairs and pushed me in the direction of the wall, where the back of my head promptly collided with a protruding brick. He leaned in close, his lips so near mine we might have wrongly been mistaken for being engaged in a kiss. Thankfully, the deep shadow prevented anyone from making that mistake. “You will say nothing, whatsoever, about me, about *us*, to your rude Scots friend.”

I briefly wondered what it was about the men in my life that had generated this sudden propensity among them for grabbing my lapels and shaking me. France imitated Scotland and did so. I had learned my minutes-earlier lesson well, as I was a quick study, and told him aloud in the same careful whisper that I would not.

I did *not* sound at all like an offended school boy when I reminded him that I had already given him my word, the night he first sucked my prick.

He patted my cheek, and softly said, “Reinforcement, dear boy, reinforcement. Sometimes reinforcement is required to be sure a lesson has been properly learned.”

I had a vague feeling that I was in some way being compared to a puppy who needed reminding with a rump-swat not to piddle in the house. But before I could quite formulate that thought into a coherent sentence, he, too, stepped slightly away.

He pressed his palm against my chest to finish the demolition of whatever remained of my cravat, and said, “You do understand, I hope, that you have just given me your word. If you break your word, I will find it necessary to rather less than gently remove that pole of propriety you keep up your arse, and replace it with the sword from my cane. Or better yet, I will borrow the claymore the Scot undoubtedly lugs from place to place and use that. *Est-ce clair, mon ami?*”

We just had time for me to assure him that I was most “*clair*,” indeed, when the sound of Rory’s piss at long last ended.

“I would kiss you, dear boy, quite quickly of course, here in the shadows and out of sight of anyone. But as you will not take even the most modest of

risks of being caught in 'public' impropriety, this will have to suffice." He put his hand again to my cheek, his palm cool against my flushed warmth, stroked his thumb lightly across my lips... and was several steps away from me as Rory came back around the corner.

I do not have a propriety pole up my arse, you shite-head! I wanted to shout at him. *I can be most... most... impropriety indeed. I let you suck my cock in Hyde Park! And I just kissed Rory, up there, in the entranceway where it was even more dangerous! So how proprietary... propitious... a paragon of impropriety was...* I realized that even inside my head I had lost control of the English language, and so kept the foolish words locked behind my lips. Most especially the Rory-related words.

I kept quiet during the carriage ride to Rory's lodgings. Kept quiet in non-response to the parting, don't-fuck-this-up glare Rory gave me after alighting, while Michel's head was turned away. Kept quiet during the ride to Somerville House.

Kept quiet when, as I reached for the latch on the door, Michel put his hand on my sleeve. His "I am sorry, my friend," was a shock. I had expected a Michel-style variation on Rory's theme of glare and warning.

I looked back at him. Waited, knowing there was more.

He spoke softly, so that his driver could not overhear. "You have as much to lose as I if word of our being friends of Edward's were set loose among the ton. It would be, how you Ahn-glaze say eet, *un teegrey* among ze chickens?"

His fractured Anglo-French at least made me smile.

"I like your friend, Peregrine. Reluctantly, I admit, but I do like him. And while he has not voiced approval of the bangers, or disapproval of *us*—" a light squeeze to my arm let me know he meant friends of Edward's and not a literal "us" as in Michel and me—"a man so aggressively *male* is likely to hold those opinions, even if not expressing them yet."

I took a step out onto thin ice. *Exceedingly* thin ice. So thin it began cracking immediately, the icy water starting to rise past the soles of my boots. "You don't think he might be... acting?"

He blinked at that. Then laughed. "*Posing?* Pretending not to be Edwardian at all? No one acts that well."

Michel did. His mistress, the opera dancers, the others. I acted, though not to his extent. But I could not make that argument.

He paused, shook his head. “No, *mon ami*, you did not hear him fuck. That was no act.”

Yes! It was a bloody act!

I retreated off the ice to the safety of the shore. I offered him my most nonchalant shrug, as if this part of the conversation had just been a bit of whimsy. “You were there; I was not. I concede your point.”

“Good. We have no need of problems like that.”

Well, of course we had a need, and I was the only one who knew it. We could have major problems like who got fucked first, or sucked second. Who was going to seed in what position. Where we could go, we three, so we could fuck as loudly as we wished.

I had no choice except to agree with each of them, because I was prevented from telling either of them the truth about the other's relationship with me: that we were all, are all, devout fellows who worshipped at the altar of cock, in the multitude of positions the endlessly inventive friends of Edward's could devise. And wasn't that exceedingly odd, that a member of the ton would feel odd about being unable to tell the truth?

But God and Michel had not been quite through with me that morning as I yearned to escape his carriage. There was still more shite to shovel on my head, as Michel let me know that he understood Rory was my friend; that he would make every effort to become a friend of Rory's as well, and that he even thought the three of us could become quite good friends.

And God said, “So let it be written.” And so it was fucking done.

Damn Him.

We became friends. Good friends. Best friends. We were the very model of a modern major enema: The friend-shite just poured out of us and splattered everywhere.

The splattering about part of the punishment truly began a week later, when I mentioned to Michel that I was leaving for Doncaster the next morning for the St Leger Stakes. I suggested he might care to join me. Two days there in a well-sprung carriage, sharing a room at the inn en route as friends inevitably do, the

same at a superb inn near the race course. Drinking and gambling our way through the race on Saturday, 16th September. No travel, of course, on Sunday. Then two days back. Six days of private fuck-friendship. He smiled broadly as he accepted. I was confident that great minds thought alike and our cocks were in perfect harmony.

Except...

That night, as the three of us sat down to a quiet game of whist-for-the-imppecunious, at only a shilling a point, and waited for our fourth to arrive, Michel casually mentioned that he had asked Rory to accompany us. Fortunately, I was not drinking anything at just that moment or whatever it was would have been spewed across them. I naturally nodded and expressed my joy.

Later, during a brief break between rubbers, the purpose of which was to piss away the alcohol we had consumed in order to make room for more to begin the cycle again, I whispered to him, "Six days of sucking, *mon* fucking arsehole *ami*. You just gave up six days of sucking fun."

The bastard actually looked hurt, which was, of course, quite deliberate, as Michel never displays emotions he does not want seen. "I thought it was a good way to become better friends. You did say you wanted that to happen."

Like fuck I did. He had entirely rewritten the script of the events at Alderson House. Good, better, best friends? It was the thing I least wanted to happen. What I *wanted*, what I bloody well *needed*, was that my fuck-friends remain *my* fuck-friends, given their bans on truth, and that the two of them become the best of nodding acquaintances and nothing more.

I could hear God laughing as I lied and most believably thanked Michel for a most excellent idea, and inwardly swore again at the realization that with all the coming and going of the journey, there would certainly be no seeding at all. At least not in Michel's mouth or in my own, since we would be in the same carriage and of necessity sharing the same room that I had ensured would be comfortable for two sharing a bed, but now would be crowded with three.

Chuffy arrived, and we began playing. For all his apparent vagueness and air of eternal distraction—all too frequently his name must be called several times to wrest his attention away from whatever he was contemplating—he is a very talented whist player. I was most grateful when the luck of the draw made him my partner.

We won the first rubbers, trouncing Rory and Michel soundly, with two successive wins to claim each rubber. The trouncing was rather odd, as Michel was generally a fine player, and Rory, a man who lived by his wits and wagering, of necessity needed to be rather better than merely “fine.” They seemed... distracted for some reason.

I have always been in favor of an opponent’s distraction allowing me to win whatever the competition happened to be.

The deal had returned to me. Michel had cut, Chuffy was shuffling the second deck in preparation for the next game, and I had just dealt the first card to Rory, when a very nervous footman in Chuffy’s livery was escorted to the table. And then just stood there.

“Yes, Frank?” Chuffy asked, setting the shuffled deck to Rory’s left, as required. I paused in the deal, and we all gave our attention to the footman.

The footman squirmed a little before saying, “Uh, I, uh, have a message, well, from her ladyship.”

Chuffy smiled and held out his hand.

“Uh, well—” he looked at the three of us and then couldn’t quite manage to look his master in the eye. “Uh, she, well, her ladyship, that is, said I was to tell you direct, and, and, well, she made me repeat it back to her to be sure I could, uh, I could say it to you right.”

He stopped and then nearly wailed, “But I *can’t*, your lordship. It ain’t right!”

Chuffy let out a sharp bark of laughter and a knowing, *smug* smile. He waved a hand at us. “It’s quite all right, Frank. These are my friends. And besides, you can’t go wrong doing what my good lady tells you to do.”

Flushed, perspiring, Frank inhaled sharply and then let it all out in a rush worthy of the end of a close-run Derby. “M-m-m’lady says to say, to say, ‘This is all your damned fault, Chuffy Penworth, you lumpish lout, so you better get your worthless bloody arse home right now.’”

The poor footman looked as though he might well wet himself, and both Chuffy and I erupted into loud roars of laughter. Michel looked puzzled for a moment and then smiled. Rory had the look of a man who has not been let in on a joke about which everyone else is laughing, and who is not pleased with that state of affairs.

Chuffy got himself under control and took pity on Rory. “Marianne, my good lady, is a most delicate creature, you see. How did you describe her, Somerville, when we first saw her?”

As if the arse, good friend arse that he was, did not precisely recall every instant of that event, so that he could on numerous occasions since, regale us all with the most fine of details. He just enjoyed hearing others say the words, apt as they so clearly were then, and remain so today.

“A dainty fairy princess,” I drawled.

“Indeed, indeed!” He did a fair imitation, for those who did not know him well, of a man whose faulty recollection had just been admirably refreshed.

“And so she is, MacLean, so she is. But when she is *enceinte*, she is, how shall I put this, she is—”

“Oh, do let me, Chuffy. If you once get started we shall be here the entire remainder of the night listening to your encomiums, and you shall never get your bloody arse home.”

I looked at Rory. “When Lady Penworth is in a delicate way, she is more of a tigress who can take down an entire herd of fleeing antelope with a single swipe of her claws. And when that tigress roars, it behooves a good husband to do precisely as he is bid. Of course, if he does that, then when he fails to do a particular something more, which, by all that is sacred and holy, he *should* have known he was supposed to do, it is ‘Off with his head!’”

I paused, realizing... Laughed again as I turned my head toward Chuffy. “Oh, my friend, you are truly in for it, are not you not? How deep is the shite in which you stand?”

“Chest-high, and rising rapidly, I do believe.” He waved Frank off toward the door and rose. “Well, my friends, I must away. Our third, you see. Early again. And so I will be faulted for not having paid the Oracle at Delphi enough to ensure an *accurate* prophecy, so that I might be at home when she first needed me.”

I laughed again. “Needed? Say rather, needed as a target. Gentlemen, Lady Penworth, whether with a pillow, a vase or words is as accurate an archer as that Robin of the Hood fellow, able to hit dead center every time! And this dainty princess, when she begs her dearest Chuffy to hold her hand and help her

through the pain, then proceeds to squeeze him in such a fashion that were he less manly he would yelp and moan from the agony of it. Better yet are the times when she needs first his one hand and then the other, so that when at last she sets him free, he finds himself unable to do anything at all with either hand! For days.

“Pity his poor valet who then must not only dress him, but hold his cock while pissing, to keep his aim accurate, and must wipe his arse after shitting!”

The three of us were, by then, drawing the attention of the room from laughing so hard at poor Chuffy, who just flushed even more, but took it all in good part. It was my turn to wave him away, and with a brief nod, he left us.

When at last we calmed, and I, for one, wiped my eyes, we paused to decide whether to seek another fourth, or decide on other entertainments.

I had not realized young Bennington was nearby until he somewhat diffidently said, “M-may I s-sit in?”

As we were still in the same positions, the unshuffled remains of the previous game unmoved, the deck at Rory’s left so that he could hand it to me for the cut and then begin to deal, we could hardly make some excuse to either leave, or to exclude him. Especially since it was only a week since the various meetings of 6th September. And more especially since the card tables filled virtually every available space in the Earl of Brookshire’s card room, which meant our words might easily be overheard by any of a dozen men who cared to listen. Shunning Bennington, or being perceived to do so, would undo whatever good we might have accomplished for him at Alderson House.

And since we each, without saying it aloud, undoubtedly felt our debt for his initial humiliation that night was not yet marked “paid in full,” murmurs of agreement and sheer delight immediately rose from the three of us.

I suggested he partner me, since that was where the open chair was; no one objected.

God, that cunning deity, then proceeded to lull me into complacency, into feeling that I was perhaps being rewarded after all for my good deeds in turning around a disaster. It turned out Bennington was an extraordinary whist player. While Rory and Michel won the first game of the initial rubber, which was based more on the distribution of the cards than skill, since sometimes there is nothing you can do with the hand you have received, we won the next two.

Michel and Rory finally realized that their lack of concentration was making them look foolish, and they began playing with their customary skill.

It was not enough. Bennington was flawless. Focused, precise, remembering what had been played, calculating the odds of who had what in his hand, he clearly led the two of us to victories in three rubbers. We decided to take a short break, letting the others know the table was still taken, then stepped outside to inhale some early fall night air.

We had just closed the terrace doors, walked over to the railing, with Rory and Michel pulling out cigars, when God started pissing on me.

Just a slight trickle at first, like rather smelly raindrops that kept falling on my head.

Rory said, "Well, lad, do you have any plans for the next six days or so?"

Then a slightly stronger flow.

"None, sir."

"Lad, lad, none of this 'sir' shite. We're friends here, are we not? It's Rory, lad, Rory." That word from anyone else would have caused hedgehog bristling, but the boy... and compared to the jaded three of us, he was still a boy... understood there was no condescension. Just affection. *Manly* affection.

Rory nodded, clapped a large hand on Bennington's shoulder with perhaps a little more force than was precisely required, making the "lad" stagger, and said, "Well then, how about giving his *vicomte*-ship here and me a chance to win back some of the losses you've inflicted on us? We're leaving for Doncaster and the St Leger Stakes in the morning. Just think how many rubbers we can get in!"

Après Rory, le déluge. Un déluge de pisse.

"That's all right with you, isn't it, Peregrine, my lad?" Rory was an equal opportunity ladder.

No, it's not all right, you fucking shite. I had six days of sucking sex planned, with the occasional wank thrown in, all right and tight. And then Michel fucks it up with the invitation to you. Three of us crowded into a room reserved for two. And two of you don't know that all of three of us are friends of Edward's. But at least with you two, I could maneuver some bloody separate private time for a desperately quick wank or suck, which would still be

infinitely better than my hand on myself. And the worst that could happen would be that your bloody secrets will be out, and then we could all get on with sex together. Only with Bennington along there's going to be no fucking privacy at all for anything, much less cock stands! And likely at this venture, no fucking room at the fucking inns except four of us together. In a single fucking room, you fucking shite!

Screaming inside your head races by far more rapidly than it ever could aloud, because attempting it aloud would result in words tripping over the tongue, rather than running trippingly upon it. There was, therefore, no discernible lapse of time between Rory's question and my feigned but nevertheless believable enthusiasm for the idea.

We decided on Michel's barouche, as the original plan of using my curricule and no driver, groom or footman, was patently impossible with four instead of two. The required driver and footman would be Michel's, of course. As this debacle was all his fault, it was only fair that he should bear a good part of the increased costs involved in the trip.

Several hours prior to Michel's arrival at Somerville House with the other two, I had sent John on ahead, with a well-filled, well-hidden purse, to arrange for a second good room at each of the inns on the way, followed by as short a rest as possible, and then on to Doncaster to the Golden Hart to make the same arrangements.

Michel's cook and mine had made ample food for the first stage of the journey. There was a sufficiency of liquids to imbibe. It was, in fact, an enjoyable time that day, with conversation, travel whist, other games for penny stakes, books to read, quiet enjoyment of the passing scenery, and the laughter of friends.

And balls that I felt certain had turned quite blue in the agony of no release, as I had deliberately not wanked for three days, so as to make the start of six days of sex with Michel even more pleasurable. Or at least so my balls appeared on the briefest of examinations when I stepped out of sight behind a tree at one of our stops. Stops that were far too short for even the most rapid of wanks.

The respite ended, the deluge returned when we arrived at the first inn. There was no room. Or rather, no separate room available. John had, I am sure, done his most persuasive best and would have suggested the unusually large

additional largesse that would have been bestowed on the innkeeper had he accommodated us. With much bowing, and scraping, and protestations of vast sorrow, we were informed that our choices were for two of us to sleep in the carriage; in the stable itself, or the four of us could crowd into the original room intended for two.

The innkeeper could provide a trundle bed and blankets for the fourth to sleep on the floor, if that was our choice. That *was* our inevitable choice. No wanking. Close quarters. Drawing straws for who would sleep where, which left Rory and me on the bed, Michel on the trundle and Bennington on the pallet. Morning cock stands that, under the circumstances, could hardly be hidden, but which were vigorously ignored.

A lack of decent sleep made the next day's journey slightly more difficult, but still enjoyable. At the next inn, God held back the flow enough to allow us the originally reserved room, and the adjacent much, much smaller second room, with the connecting door. The second room also had a much, much narrower bed, which Rory's width would have filled entirely. There was no trundle available. Michel and Bennington, as the thinnest and smallest of the quartet somehow managed the second bed. Rory and I took the original bed. Naturally nothing happened, despite my inner fist-shaking at the heavens and raging threats of creative vengeance on the Most High, like not believing in Him anymore, or not going to church, though He undoubtedly dismissed that threat for the puerile attempt it was, as I had stopped church-going many years earlier. There was, after all, that connecting door which might open at any moment, and in any event, we were too tired to think of anything we might do in the dark, much less act on any thought.

John welcomed us on our arrival at the Golden Hart the next morning. We were in ample time to refresh ourselves in our rooms, and make our way to the course for the race.

Our room. Singular. Though this time the innkeeper had been generous with the provision of *two* lumpy trundle beds.

I contemplated another round of fist-shouting and fist-raising at God, though this time out loud. I contemplated venting my fury by pissing right back at him.

But then, pissing at God is like pissing up a rope. The one pissing is the only one who gets wet and smelly.

Friends that go to the races together stay together. And stay together. And stay together. We met others of the ton, vast numbers of them, since the St Leger is one of the premier races in the country. We ate and drank and gambled; we cheered enthusiastically for the winner, Filho da Puta, and promptly spent our winnings. When we finally stumbled in well past one in the morning on Sunday, 17th September, the straws decreed that Bennington and I would share the bed, while Michel and Rory were relegated to the trundles.

We could, of course, not travel on Sunday, so that was a day of leisure. Renting hacks for a ride in the countryside, informal races with chance-met acquaintances, or games of chance. Even quietude by a stream for a while.

The two day return trip was quieter, of course, and the piss-punishment from on high let up. We were able to get as decent a pair of beds as the inns boasted, allowing for better sleep. But no wanking. By that time, I was in such constant pain with two such very fuckable and suckable men being constantly nearby and untouchable, that I half prayed for a new production of *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, so I could play Mephistopheles and walk around declaiming, "Why this is hell, nor am I out of it."

We arrived in London late on 19th September. I devoutly hoped that Rory and Michel were in as much agony as I was from that many days without anything at all.

We each had a variety of things to do after nearly a week's absence. By an exchange of notes, we agreed to use the Somerville box tonight for a production of *Love's Labours Lost*. The footman had just brought the champagne and poured a glass for each of us. Mine was at my lips, the marvelous liquid trickling down when Michel looked up from the sheet we had each been handed on arrival, but to which I had paid no attention.

"Gentlemen!" he said with some degree of excitement. "You should read this. Mr. Kean is going to do a revival of *Dr. Faustus*. It opens next week. We must definitely see it."

I choked on the champagne and it took much pounding of my back to stop the coughing. Michel threatened to take his carriage and go home to change because of the amount of champagne I had spewed on him, leaving us stranded. But it was an empty threat. He wanted to see the production as much as we did.

All those good deeds. And they *were* good deeds. Yet still I have been, am being punished. And the greatest punishment of all is that Rory and Michel are indeed becoming as good friends to each other as they are to me.

I do not have a good feeling about what will happen if Michel learns I know just how fuckable Rory's arse is, and Rory learns I know how fuckable Michel's mouth is.

I *want* to tell the truth, and devil take the hind-most, except that I have no choice but silence.

This is indeed hell, nor am I out of it.

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Rory

Thursday, 26 October 1815

Beside a stream

Sussex, England

I had never had friends before. Not true friends. Second sons who mostly live by wits and wagers rarely do, I imagine.

And now I had two. Two and a half, actually.

Peregrine and Michel formed the two; Bennington the half.

And it was killing me. Though most would, I think, conclude that that was a reasonable end for someone who was not only a sodomite but quite out of his mind. Well beyond merely touched in the head or off my chump. A prime candidate for Bedlam instead.

Why the bloody hell do men always have their cocks out?

And if they're not out, they're flaunting them, putting their dangly bits on bloody display!

We're out hunting, and the hounds lose the scent, so we're milling around, waiting for the start, and someone has to take a shite. He has the common decency to step behind a tree or at large bush, or even a moderate one, so long as at least his lower parts are out of view. But if you're on horseback, talking with Lord this or that while you wait, and one of you decides a piss is necessary, and dismounts to do just that, the other one inevitably realizes draining is an excellent idea. But instead of choosing *another* tree, the second pisser joins the first, hauls his prick out and starts watering as well. And keeps right on talking.

Or you're on foot, in a group, grouse hunting in the Highlands, and one of the beaters decides he needs to piss, and once he's paused and pulled his prick out, the need spreads like the bloody plague, and pretty soon you have every man there in a long bloody line of pricks out and spraying.

Or you're at a tavern, and instead of a nice private *one bloody hole* privy, there are two or even three, and if the latter, you aim very, very carefully when you're pissing the middle hole while the other two are occupied. And the men are glancing at your cock.

Or you're at a ball, and the host... or far more likely, the hostess... has decided that too much time spent pissing out all the champagne and highly fortified punch they have so kindly provided, is too little time spent being a target for the marriage-minded misses. Standing too long in line for a piss, slows the process down. So a room is provided, far enough away that the smells will not affect the overwhelming odors of the ball itself, and lined with chamber pots. The most I have ever seen personally was eight.

I would swear, if anyone were around at this moment to hear me swear, that the man who placed those eight pots was a devout friend of Edward's, who enjoyed watching men piss, though he could not personally be there during the ball to watch, enjoyed imagining it all with cock in hand. The usual arrangement would be pots decorously arranged around the walls of the room, so you could piss staring at the wall in pretended privacy, only flickering your eyes right and down, left and down, because you, of necessity, had to twist your neck back and forth to relieve some built-up muscle strain from all that strenuous dancing and standing and walking and talking, and of course, purely by chance, *happened* to glance at the cocks of the men beside you.

Instead, they were in the bloody *center* of the room. Two rows of four neatly marching away from the door. Eight men pissing, while the waiting ones lounged against the walls. Or stood in the hall with the door open to be sure when a piss pot became available.

The man who invented party piss pots had to have made a bloody fortune. There were earthenware ones for those who could not afford the top of the line. Or fine porcelain, carefully fired and exquisitely painted, frequently with images of *faux* Greek men, naked, of course, and most likely fucking or sucking in pairs and trios and more, which was acceptable because that was, after all, not *Edwardian* in the least, but was *art* and *historical*, and only men would see it so the supposed delicate sensibilities of women would not be affected. Or the pots that night. Metal, intricately carved, perhaps three feet tall, with a wide lip designed to minimize splashing and encourage the liquid to go where it was intended to go, a narrow neck flaring out to a wider body, and a sturdy base. Equally sturdy handles. It would, of course, take two fairly sturdy men to lift, carry and empty a full one, but the size meant they could be emptied far less frequently than the ordinary chamber pot in one's home. Men piss a *lot* at parties.

So we stood facing each other as we pissed. The pots were far enough apart that if you were a bit off in your aim you would not automatically splatter the man opposite you.

And there were no stiff-neck-need-to-stretch motions. We simply checked each other out. Seven other cocks at a time to compare, for better or for worse, to your own. Or if you were a friend of Edward's, to your ideal prick.

It is a thing men do, something innate, and not the least bit Edwardian, unless one is Edwardian one's self, and then one does the checking with vastly more avidity.

Fox hunting, grouse hunting, getting drunk at a tavern, pissing at a party.

Pricks to the right of me, pricks to the left of me, and not a one to suck. Or shove in my bloody arse.

Except one. Peregrine's. No need to check his prick when we are pissing side by side, or just near. I know that prick so well. The problem... the *great* problem... is that Michel and his marvelously long, slender cock were likely to be there as well. He usually was. Next to me, so of course I look, and he looked back. Or not by my side but just close enough that I would not be noticed as doing anything even vaguely Edwardian, nothing that screamed "neddy boy looking at our pricks!" when I looked at him. As I inevitably did.

And damn it all, the man *looked back*.

His prick, and the man attached to it, might as well be opium to a man who is desperately in need of a smoke.

For a reason I think I know, but which I refuse to acknowledge, much less admit aloud, Peregrine is the only cock in my life just now. He should be enough, but he is not. I am like a child who wants what he wants when he wants it, even when he knows he cannot have it, will never have it.

And what I want... is Peregrine.

And Michel.

I have tried to tell myself that these pissing moments have significance, that Michel is signaling interest, and then that illusion is shattered as he talks crudely, as men so often do, of his mistress's mouth or cunt, or excuses himself from our gathering to be with her. And her tits. And her cunt.

Bitch.

I have never enjoyed a man's company more than theirs, save for Peregrine's. Save for Michel. I look forward to the things we three do together. And if I am not getting fucked by Peregrine that night, or sucking him, or him sucking me, then I drop onto my bed, all too often after far too much whisky, and wank to alternating imaginings of Peregrine's long fat inches up my arse, or Michel's even longer slender inches punching my hole.

I proved my theory today. Yet again. The four of us were on the way back from a marvelous mill, at which we all backed the wrong man, and lost twenty quid each. I blame that on Peregrine. He picked the one on whom we bet. The man was large, and beefy, with hands like hams, and nicknamed "Bruiser." Only Bruiser's hands were indeed like hams, all soft and easily squashed. His opponent had smaller hands, but from their effect on Bruiser's body, and ultimately his jaw, were modeled after the steel or whatever magic metal made up Thor's Hammer.

We'd stopped at an inn, filled our saddlebags with food, attached baskets with carefully wrapped jugs of ale, and after an impromptu race in the crisp sunshine... which Bennington won by a length, as the young lord rides with all the skill of an Ascot-winning jockey... stopped by a stream to refresh ourselves. We ate, we drank, we sat with our backs against a tree trunk or removed a coat, and stretched out on the ground, hands behind a head. Cigars for the three of us; Bennington still declining. Peregrine checked his watch, and in a regretful tone announced we would have to leave if we were to reach London in time for all the entertainments to which we each were committed tonight.

Bennington, Vidal and I respectively groaned, moaned and muttered, but Peregrine was adamant. It was an appropriate time for a test.

I announced a need to piss, rose from my tree, walked to the stream, and the House, by unanimous consent, passed a motion to piss. Peregrine to my right. Vidal to my left, taking, I was sure, an inordinately long time to get his prick out, stretching it just a bit too long to emphasize its length. Beyond him, Bennington, at whom I most carefully did not glance.

Prick to the right of me. A flaunting, taunting prick's prick to the left of me. Another unsuckable prick to *his* left.

As Mephistopheles so wisely said, "This is hell. Nor am I out of it."

Michel

Tuesday, 14 November 1815

Mid-afternoon

Changing room

Valeron Fencing Salon

London

We acquired a name.

Unfortunately, the “we” that had acquired the name was not the royal and imperial “we” to indicate a name bestowed solely on me. That I could have endured with more equanimity.

The caricaturists have christened us “The Rake, the Rogue and the Roué.”

I am, of course, the roué. The other two could certainly not aspire to that level of hedonism, or more accurately, apparent hedonism, accompanied as it is by real grace, style and wit. But seven words can be more readily written as three, and thus, when a scandalmonger wishes to describe our activities, we have become “the Three R’s.” As in, “the Three R’s graced the home of Lord and Lady S—for a Venetian breakfast.” Or, “the Three R’s dined al fresco with a hundred or so of the closest friends of the Dowager Countess of N—.” Or more recently yet, “the Three R’s were seen at Gentleman Jackson’s on Bond Street, Monday last, challenging each other to bouts of fisticuffs, in which, unfortunately, the third R received a bloodied nose. One has heard that it was the second R whose fist accomplished the feat. After which the infamous sporting trio repaired to the Daffy Club to consume quantities of blue ruin in order to ease the pain of fingers and nose.”

Fortunately for the Scottish “middle R,” he did not break my nose. A friend of Edward’s is inherently vain about *something* about himself, more often about his person than about some skill he possesses. A Roman nose, fine eyes, an excellent physique, an enormous cock, a tight arse. I have more to be vain about than most, save, perhaps, Peregrine. So had the Scot ruined my features that way, I would have found some way to equally ruin him. Though with features as rugged and rough-hewn as his, that would be like trying to “ruin” granite. Who could possibly notice?

And still, I wonder if the red stubble on his face would give me a delicious burn if he woke in my bed some morning, nibbling my nipples, licking and

nipping as he worked his way down to my cock, making my toes curl as he learned to swallow all of me, then, still with my cock in his mouth, kicking off the covers, turning, lifting himself, coming down so his knees straddled my shoulders, his hand briefly down between his legs to guide his cock into my mouth.

One of the more salacious artists depicted a fantasy visit of the Three R's to Annabella's. In it, we were surrounded by a bevy of blowsy tarts, with enormous tits and bigger hips, wearing flimsy gowns that barely covered their cunts, while their nipples threatened to pierce the fabric. Each of us was fully clothed, but visibly hard. The Scotsman's cock was covered by his kilt but appeared long and fat, pointed at the mouth of a kneeling harlot. Peregrine's depiction was reasonably accurate, as his left hand cupped his balls and circled his cock to emphasize the length and breadth straining against the fabric, while his right forefinger was poised between his whore's breasts, ready to rip the gown away. The artist could not possibly have been a friend of Edward's, or he would have done justice to the depiction of the length of my cock down the leg of my pantaloons. With my left hand I was peering through a quizzing glass... an affectation I have affected on only one occasion... at the enormously deep valley between the breasts of a slut who, had she been real, would have outweighed me by at least three stone, while with my right, my walking stick was starting to lift the hem of her skirt, as if it might test the waters, as it were.

This is bloody ridiculous. Outrageous. Stupendously stupid. Inordinately idiotic.

I go everywhere it seems, all the time, with the man I have, and the more I have him the more I want him, and with the man I cannot and never will have, yet still I want.

I have become a Ruth with no Naomi, but rather a Peregrine and a Rory. I might as well be trailing them in the streets, or following them about at entertainments, preemptively weeping in case I do something to offend them. *Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee. For whither thou goest, to hounds or hells, to routs or races, to shooting or sailing, to fishing or fencing, or all the places wheresoever thou might go, there will I go as well.*

I even have this odd dream from time to time—mostly at night, but occasionally it will simply strike me, as it did just now—of the three of us,

living together. Pathetic. Absolutely pathetic. But still, a part of me secretly whispers to them, *Where thou lodgest, there will I lodge as well.*

The door slammed open, and I lifted my head and shoulders from their slump as a loud and boisterous herd of men came through. It was, of course, only the Scotsman. He was followed by Peregrine and several more of our friends and acquaintances, who were, in the aggregate, nowhere near as large, as Brobdingnagian *large* in body, voice and *presence* as the Scot.

Not surprisingly, as the Three R's did everything together—one was suggested a fortnight past that the White Cockerel should install a three-hole privy just for our use—Peregrine dropped his arse on the bench to my right, and the Scot to my left. They peeled the sweat-stained shirts they were wearing over their heads. I held my breath as they did, and then carefully and slowly breathed through my mouth. I would not, I *would not* inhale their scents. Bad enough when it was one or the other, but together! Bloody hell, they were as intoxicating as a bottle of my favorite Armagnac.

My resolution lasted for just a *single* mouth breath. On my second breath, I breathed in through my nose and struggled not to shudder. Then the fucking bastard shite-head Scot raised his arm and casually scratched his pit. His right arm. All I had to do was turn a little to my left, dip my head a little, and I could have buried my nose in the thick, surprisingly straight red hair. And then mouthed my way over to that far-too-close large nipple.

The bastard did it to taunt me, I was sure. But that did not make me sure enough to take either the bull by the horn or the nipple by the teeth. Even were we private.

I reined in my rampant cock, or rather the cock that begged me to let him *be* rampant, got up and walked to the long table which contained ewers of water, wide, shallow bowls, a bit of plain soap (no expensive scents here despite the fees we paid), and a towel for a quick wash-up. I bent over, scooped up a double handful of the water I had just poured, and was about to apply it to my face when I recognized who was now beside me.

I had no need to look. I could have had my eyes shut and known that Peregrine was to my right, and Rory to his. Oddly enough, more often than not, we were in this arrangement. Peregrine was, not precisely, our center, though he was the first of the R's, and he was also the original common link between

us. But for our mutual friendship with Peregrine, Rory, no, *the damned Scot!*, and I would not have met. Or become a member of the Three R's.

We were joined by the rest of the group, momentarily quiet as we splashed about, washed and dried ourselves, and then quickly went to the tall, slender, built-in closets where we stored our street clothes. I looked carefully neither right nor left as I dressed, avoiding temptation, though I well knew that the reality was that since last June Peregrine's... *and the bloody Scot's*... were the only cocks I craved.

I sighed and didn't care who heard. How had these bastards known which closet was mine? I had been out in the salon, warming up, when they arrived. Yet there they were, Peregrine with his clothes in the closet to my right, and the Scot beyond him. We had made no plans for after the lessons, so I planned on making my escape.

I should have known better.

I was shrugging into my jacket when the Scot leaped up on the bench, almost over-balancing, and shouted, "Friends, English, countrymen, lend me your ears."

With a friendly bit of mocking laughter the room quieted down.

"I will now declaim a verse I wrote my very self."

A general moan was heard throughout the land, or at least the changing room.

Rory stage-coughed.

*"There once was a young man from Wales,
Whose money was tied up in bales.
More wine! he did cry as he dined.
More wine! with each vowel he signed.
And his money now fits in two pails."*

A combination groan and laugh was the general response.

"So you won well?" a voice called out.

"Aye, aye. Ye cannae *ken* how weel ah won." More smiles at the deliberately overdone brogue.

"We shall repair to the White Cockerel, and with ale I'll regale you with my tale. And of course invite mine host to prepare the Earl of Sandwich's sandwich

for which the Cockerel is so justly famous. And not a farthing's cost to any of you. A treat, I say! A palpable treat!"

Beneath the general shouts of approval, as men of any rank do not generally reject free food and ale, I muttered, "A twit, I say, a palpable twit!"

"Did you say something?" Peregrine asked, turning to look at me.

"No." I was uncharacteristically sullen. He just twinkled back at me. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

"Enjoying what?"

And of course I had nothing to say. What could I have said? "Are you enjoying my pain because, besides yours, there's *another* cock I desperately want to suck, and he's your damned friend, and he's not bloody Edwardian at all?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

Peregrine clapped my shoulder with his right hand and pulled me along. I joined the rest of the rats following the red-headed Scots piper.

As I walked in the door of the tavern I became absolutely certain. I was in hell, and I had no idea when, if ever, I was getting out.

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Rory

Thursday, 7 December 1815

10:35 p.m.

Rory's Lodgings

London

He looked at me as if I was out of my fucking mind. That went well with his barely not shouting "Are you out of your fucking mind?" as he barged through the door I had forgotten to lock. I suspected he would not have bothered to slow down had he found it locked.

"You're engaged to duel *Michel* tomorrow bloody morning?"

He held his hand up, palm out, apparently thinking I intended to say something. I had no such intention.

"Did you really think your seconds would keep so marvelous a tale secret? I don't know whether Billingsworth reached White's first, or Chatham at Watier's, but the story spread from the clubs faster than the Great Fire. When I got to White's to stop the lies, I was ready to call the clunch out myself, but he convinced me you had, indeed, asked him to be your second. *In a duel with fucking Michel!*"

The last words were shouted, and I couldn't prevent a wince. I had been drinking steadily since I got back. Drinking steadily before as well, though not at the after rate. That's why it happened. I was drunk. There couldn't have been any other reason.

"What the fuck happened, you asshole?"

Peregrine was in my face, his fists bunching my shirt, as he did sometimes when he was about to kiss me fiercely. Kissing, however, clearly wasn't on.

What could I say to him?

That we had been drinking and dicing since late afternoon, Michel and I? That it was, in fact, *Peregrine's* fault, since it would have been the three of us had Peregrine not chosen to give in to his father's demand for an appearance at the family home, and had there been three of us, what happened could never have happened.

I looked at the anger in his eyes, and the hurt and the fear for me, and the caring we had never expressed aloud. We began as more than merely fuck-friends, that night at the Dock, when he held out his hand and introduced himself. How or why that could have been, I still do not know. But happen it did. And if I wanted still more, I had destroyed all chance of that, whether I lived or died in a bit less than eight hours.

Friends of Edward's fucked, but did not love. Or at least none had that I had ever heard of. And even if it were possible, a man did not grow to love another man who fought a duel with his best friend, and at worst, killed him, or at best, was wounded and survived himself.

So what could I say to explain?

That I was drunk? Though not so drunk I did not know what I was doing. That there we were, face to face, unexpectedly intimate? That I did what I had sworn I would never do? That I *kissed* Michel? That he kissed me back, for just the tiniest part of a second? That he pulled away, his cool, always-controlled face well beyond control, letting me know the utter horror and disgust he felt at what I had done?

That I quickly accused *him* of forcing himself on me, as he accused me, our words of blame leaping out simultaneously, then more words piled upon more words as we scrambled to reject what had happened. And more words still, until we reached an insurmountably high mountain's peak and paused, and had nowhere else to go but down. Down and down to an agreement to meet. At six a.m. tomorrow. That I needed a second and Billingsworth was the first man I saw that I knew after I left the tavern hall where the... incident... occurred?

No. There was nothing I could... or would... say to Peregrine.

Except: "Let it go, Somerville."

He shook me, looked as though he might shove me against the wall, and rather than fuck me through it, beat me through it. Then he paused, and let me go. Stepped back. Took a huge breath. "Since when are you so formal with your best friend, Rory? Your *other* best friend?"

Soft, soft. I could not speak loudly for some reason. "Since he became an interfering arsehole."

I hated the look of concern on his face as he asked the inevitable. "Why?"

"He impugned my honor. I could not tolerate that. Will not."

“I asked, you idiot. Asked why this was happening. No one knew. Hell, there wasn't even any speculation, and you know how men will speculate given even a hint of a basis for doing so. So... what? You were alone? Just the two of you?”

I was surprised he did not ask the obvious question as to why we were alone, but he passed that over.

I nodded, lifted the glass and tilted my head back for another long swallow. “There was no one there... when it happened.”

“When *what*...” He paused to take a breath again, exhaled the air slowly. “Then if no one saw, you can let it go. No one knows, will ever know.”

“I will know.”

I had offended my... other... best friend in the most abominable manner possible. He had the right to satisfaction. I would not insult him by deloping, but I could not apologize. I also would not seek to kill him. I had no way of knowing whether he would feel the same way.

“You could be dead tomorrow. Both of you.”

As if I did not know that.

Peregrine moved in again. This time he hesitantly opened his arms, and I stepped into them. He was enough taller that for all the fact I outweighed him by at least two stone, and was far stronger, if crude, brute strength was the issue, I felt warm and safe. I wondered whether, feared, actually, that perhaps this was the last time I would know his warmth and safety.

“What can I do, Rory?” His breath was soft against my ear.

I could have asked him to fuck me. He loved that; *I* loved that. But I needed something more than what we had had so often, no matter how marvelous it was.

“Let me fuck you.”

The sharp inhalation that sucked the air away from my ear wasn't really a gasp. But he still went still, did not even breathe for a moment.

He let the breath out, slowly, carefully. “But you've never...”

True. I had *never*. Never fucked him. Never mentioned how much it would arouse me to have done so at least once. More than once. Until that night at the

Dock, I had rarely been fucked. Mostly because while I am not taller than most men, I am generally broader, heavier, stronger than others. I suspect that even had I been less hairy, had I been lightly furred in red like the golden hair on Peregrine's chest and belly, or hairless like the sleek, smooth pale muscles on Michel... no, on *Vidal's* slender, wiry frame, the result would still have been the same. Once I was naked most of Edward's friends would do as all of them had always done: get on their backs, get on all fours, and offer up their arses for my use.

Mouth offers were comparatively few, but there had been those who had swallowed quite well.

But none of them had ever asked me what *I* wanted. They simply assumed, and in their assumptions there was a sense that if I contradicted that belief I would somehow be lessened in their eyes. A *man* who looked as I looked might suck, and suck well. It was, after all, almost a requirement for being a full-fledged friend of Edward's. But he would never get fucked.

And so I went along, and when the need could not be appeased by my own fingers or what was locked in a small chest, there was always the Dock. Where you could generally find what you needed, though even there it was difficult.

I had gone along, too, with Peregrine's assumption that all I wanted, needed, was the kind of rogering he could give me, whether rough or gentle or somewhere between the two. I would not let him assume now.

The silence drew out after his almost-sentence died away. Drew out and out and I could not quite believe how much that hurt. That all the while I was starting to believe, eventually believed, that what we shared was something more than just the perfect mating of cock and arse, I was in reality nothing more than a convenient hole. A hole he could safely use and avoid the risks of Dock-hunting. A *whore's* hole he paid for not with cash or jewelry, but with entrée into his world so far above the rest of us, and casual gifts of "Let me get that" when it was time to pay for what we ate or drank when on the town.

My body stiffened as my cock didn't, and I stepped back, forcing his arms away. Completed my movement by putting my hands on his chest and shoving him. He stumbled, nearly fell, then righted himself.

"Get out, you bastard. Get the fuck out."

His mouth dropped open, farther than that I had ever seen it, even when he was sucking my cock. And my cock requires a *wide* open mouth. "Rory..."

He looked as if he intended to step forward, to hold me again, or something else, but stopped when I snatched up the decanter and carefully threw it over his left shoulder so that it smashed against the wall. It shattered and spewed glass and whisky back in our direction before gravity took over and liquid and shards and slivers glittering in the candlelight fell to the thin carpet. Fortunately the decanter was nearly empty, because I hate to waste whisky, even whisky as bad as that. Also fortunately, I had more where that came from, since I could not afford anything finer.

My poor falcon... no, he was not merely no longer, he had never actually been, *my* falcon... froze. In mid-flight, as it were.

I kept my voice low, though the lack of response to the breaking decanter reasonably well indicated the men whose rooms were on either side of mine were out getting themselves drunk elsewhere. Or gambling or whoring or whatever they were of a mind to do. "Get. The. Fuck. Out."

He held up his hands as if he was surrendering and about to retreat. And then he surrendered something I never expected.

"I've never been fucked."

It was my turn for my mouth to drop open in shock. Widely. Wide enough that my jaw made a popping sound, and I wondered if all neddy boys compared the width to which a mouth dropped open in surprise to the size of cock needed to fill that opening.

Based on that standard of measurement, I could have been swallowing someone's fist just then. Although preferably only with someone with hands like Michel. Long, slender fingers about which I had often wondered. Wondered what they would feel like around my cock, brushing my lips with a single fingertip, rolling my bollocks, then one, two, three of them entering my hole, stretching me. Four, even?

"Never?"

He flushed, a deeper red, somehow, than when he was above me, my legs on his shoulders, or spread wide with knees hooked over his elbows, or curling around his waist, as he pounded me into a screaming explosion. The rake who won races, shooting matches, boxing rounds, a night of high-stakes piquet or whist, with quiet aplomb, or perhaps a modicum of a satisfied smile. Bloody hell, the rake was *embarrassed*.

I collapsed into my chair, looked up and grinned.

“You’re a virgin,” I said, just to be very sure we were both clear on what had suddenly become far more important than my possible death. Or Michel’s, by some God damned mistake of mine.

“And you take it up the arse, so what?” he snarled.

I smiled back at him, spread my legs so he could see the way my cock was eagerly staining the dressing robe I wore over nothing at all. Leaking more rapidly than usual. But then, I had never had a virgin before.

“So do I get to fuck your virgin arse, since, you know, I might die tomorrow and never have the chance again?” I gave him the most pathetic, pity poor, poor me tone and expression I could find in my repertoire of mockery. But I had gone too far.

“You might die and you think this is some sort of fucking joke? You fucking bastard!” The always-controlled rake erupted in fury and launched himself at me.

I managed to get my hands up in time to prevent myself from being throttled, but we still went over backwards as the chair collapsed from our not inconsiderable dual weight.

It was not a real battle. Not in the sense of actually trying to significantly hurt or at a minimum, moderately maim each other. It was the kind of battle men use to express feelings we’re too fucking cowardly to say aloud. Such as the fact that Peregrine and I felt something for each other after all, beyond the sex, and we had difficulty accepting that tomorrow all possibilities might end. Forever.

We realized at the same moment what we were really doing, though not soon enough to have prevented a bruise on my shoulder and another where he gripped my wrist... the left one, for even in the midst of the struggle, I realized he was making sure he did nothing to harm my right arm, my right hand. The arm and hand that would have to wield the pistol in only a few hours. It had not all gone his way, of course. As my gift to him, he would have what would, I felt, be one of my finer black eyes. Large and eventually brilliantly colorful against his fair skin.

He was on top of me when we stopped the struggle. I could feel that thick rod pressing through the cloth against my own naked cock, since the robe had become twisted and tangled about me, leaving me bare down there.

He half-glared, half-gently smiled down at me. "I could fuck you now. Set my cock free, toss your legs up, spit on my cock, spit on your hole and just shove in until my balls slapped against your arse. And you'd let me."

Bastard. Fucking bastard. He was right. I sagged, the tension of the fight draining out of me. I'd take whatever he was willing to give me.

And then he released his grip on my wrist and used four fingers to stroke my face from cheek to chin. "I will be very upset if you use *me* that way."

He smiled, and in a soft falsetto gave me back a far more powerfully pathetic, pitiful me than I had been able to provide him... complete with those thick eyelashes batting like a maiden luring in her prey. "You will be gentle with me, won't you? My lord?"

I grabbed his head with both hands, pulled him down into a bruising kiss. Released his swollen-lipped mouth eventually. "You have far too many clothes on. And while I could, an' I would, had we but world enough and time, I'd take you over there, bent over that straight-backed chair, just bared enough to get my cock in."

He did not quite leap away from me, but did get up quickly and carefully, avoiding the knee to my bollocks he might so easily have dealt me in hopes of incapacitating me for just long enough. Except, for all his distress he would never so dishonor me by doing anything intentional, even *accidentally* intentional that would cause me to miss my appointment.

I followed him upright, though I took the farther route to the opposite side of the bed from where he stood. He had on boots; he could deal with the shattered glass. It was, after all, entirely his fault there was glass on the floor; it had nothing to do with me. He stopped when his footstep *crunched*.

"You have a broom?"

I was naked, erect, one knee on the edge of the bed. I let my expression show what I thought of that insanity. He was obsessing about neatness at a time like this?

"I'm not going to allow you to risk slicing your feet and perhaps missing your meeting."

A friend, indeed. I nodded toward the armoire that held my clothes. An old broom leaned behind it, frail with age. He grabbed it up, and briskly,

efficiently, swept all the bits and pieces of glass that offered up tiny flashes in the candlelight past the edge of the carpet and against the baseboard. He didn't look at me, just stood there with his head down, as if entranced by dust and liquor-dampened carpet and glittering glass, as he said, "Tomorrow... tomorrow when you're... done, and both of you... *both of you, God damn it! do you understand?* ...go home, you can finish cleaning the mess up. Be damned if I'll be your servant more than this."

"I understand." My own voice was soft, and I could not keep it from shaking, just a little. "And I'll understand, too, if you've changed..."

He shook himself, shook off what had gripped him a moment ago, turned, looked at me. Began to undress.

"Do you know why I've never been fucked?"

He was as efficient in undressing as he generally was in all things. Jacket struggled out of, as I was in no mood to play the valet, and instead enjoyed the sight, and dropped on a chair. Waistcoat and cravat next, then his shirt. I so rarely had a chance to see Peregrine naked. He was only halfway there, but it was more than enough to increase the flow of clear, thick liquid from my cock. I idly smeared it around my knob as I watched. I loved those tight golden curls, so much softer than the wiry red on my own chest, rising up to the hollow of his throat in a flat-topped pyramid shape, spreading out below the base, to right and left, the top stroke of a "T" that emphasized surprisingly large, and highly sensitive, nipples. Then the vertical stroke went down and down in a wide swath, a veritable trail to the treasure still hidden by his damnable pantaloons.

"I..." I shut my mouth very quickly. *I don't have all night, you know*, as a means of encouraging far more rapid nakedness, would have been such an incredibly stupid remark that he undoubtedly would have just dressed again and walked away.

"This is why," he said, grabbing his cock through the cloth, adjusting it so that its long, wide length was clearly visible. Oh, yes, a definite treasure. Eight guineas, indeed, though in that one moment of drunken measurement, I placed the value on his cock-length as eight guineas, *thirteen* shillings, nine pence. Peregrine tended to undervalue himself.

He flopped on the chair and awkwardly tugged off his boots. Fortunately they were of the variety that did not require assistance. Stockings next, after a

quick check to make sure there were no bits of glass nearby. They made a small crumpled heap beside him as he stood again, unbuttoned, pushed pants and smalls to the floor and stepped out of them.

Had I been a remotely prayerful man, at that moment I would have thanked God for His decision to gift Peregrine not only with the substantial guineas of length and width, but hair down there the color of a freshly minted guinea, brighter even than the hair on his head, and matching the thick gold in his pits.

He stood still, letting me admire his golden beauty with its occasional hints of reddish flame. The palest of white for his cock, never sun-kissed, fine blue veins tracing his girth. He grabbed his cock, stroked it almost angrily, which brought my attention back up to his face. He was not looking at me, but rather at his cock, as if were something he somewhat disliked.

He looked up and our eyes met. "The very first boy I had, and I was only a boy myself, took one look at my cock, which was not even fully grown at that point, and offered his mouth or his arse, preferably both in short sequence, for my use. The men I have met have continued to drop to their knees, or present their arsens. So I have graciously accepted the given gift, and no one has ever questioned whether I wanted, or even contemplated, anything else."

He paused. Then began again. "I... *contemplated*... not often, I admit, if it would be as pleasurable for me to have a cock in my arse, as it clearly was for the men I was fucking. And despite my obvious knowledge that an arse can open up to allow this prick inside and enjoy every fucking guinea of it, I wondered if, perhaps, my own arse was different, too tight, too inflexible after all the years of no use at all except for shitting, to get a cock inside without pain I was unwilling to endure. It seemed safer to just contemplate and do nothing."

I smiled at him. Kept stroking as I did. "I, ah, *contemplated* your arse, too, from time to time. Usually on those nights when we had either not been together for anything at all, or had been together but only in public. Sometimes I even... *contemplated*... fiercely enough in the middle of the day that I had to find some quick privacy for an even quicker wank."

I chuckled. "You have cost me more than one handkerchief, you know, with your fucking and my wanking. I could wipe myself clean, both cock and arse, squeeze out the last drops so I would not stain my clothes with residue, but then, I could hardly return a damp, seed-smelling square of even cheap linen to my pocket, could I?"

He laughed.

“Are you enjoying the image of me littering London with the aftermath of my Peregrine-laden imaginings?” I asked.

He nodded.

I understood now, of course. How could I not? When I had often bemoaned the fact that so many men, nearly *every* man, did the same to me. Though if my cock was part of the reason for the on-the-knees position, it was because, I was smugly aware, that in the valuation stakes—and I so enjoyed this game of measuring in inch-diameter coins—though my length was far shorter than Peregrine’s, my prick was a *full* two guineas wide. Most assuredly not the penny short of Peregrine’s insistence that I was merely... *merely!* ...one guinea, twenty shillings, eleven pence.

He came closer, stood over me on the bed, looked down at my reddish-purple cock with its bulging veins and gulped. Although he had stroked me to completion before, even sucked me to that goal as well, opening your mouth is merely a matter of will. For your mouth is under authority, and you may say to your mouth “open,” and as Luke might have said had he been of this bent, it openeth. But your arse is a stubborn beast. It requires far more training than we had time for to make that tightly clenched muscle open, or even relax just a little, on command.

And Peregrine, my bold, brave falcon, was about to squawk, and flap away in terror. But training a falcon requires that you start with the proper lure. I had the perfect one.

“Coward.”

His entire body became as rigid as his cock, and if he had snapped his head up to look at me just a little bit harder, it would have snapped right off. His words were spoken with the precision that is a prelude to violence. “What did you just say?”

I didn’t reply immediately. I lifted my right hand, spat twice in it, brought it back to my cock knob, where I had it join the flow of precome and then slid my palm and curled fingers down my cock to slime it up. He *almost* kept eye contact. *Almost.*

I gave him my very best smug smile, the one reserved for the man who is lusting after your cock but doesn’t want to admit it. Gave him, too, a wee bit of

Robbie. "An' will ye run noo, laddie, an' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain for promis'd joy?"

He blinked, and stared, and blinked again. And then he laughed and the tension drained away. "I did promise your cock joy, did I not?"

"In a manner of speaking." I stroked myself several times, pinched one nipple. He had stopped looking in my eyes, focusing on what was far more important. "It depends on whether you are a good virgin or a bad virgin."

That got him looking at me again. "What?"

"Are ye a good virgin, so good 'n' tight ye don't relax a'tall, a'tall and snip me cock off when ye clamp down on me? Or are ye t' kind o' virgin who's so vurra, vurra good when he's good, but when 'tis time t' be bad, he's vurra, vurra bad indeed?"

"Bad, I think. So bad that perhaps our next time, I can entice you with, 'Once more unto my breach, dear Rory, once more, an' close my English hole up with Scottish cock.'"

I gave him the groan that deserved. And then we slid away from jests and into the serious business of initiating a new and hopefully glorious relationship between my cock and his arse.

My lodgings were not meant for fucking, much less the truly vigorous fucking I was most interested in at just that moment, as the bed was narrow and the mattress thin, entirely in keeping with the amount I paid for the two rooms. And while the lodgers on either side of me and across the hall appeared to be gone, given the lack of response to our earlier... *enthusiasm*... they could still return at any time. None of us kept precise hours. So this, unfortunately, would have to be as rapid a fuck as his arse would allow.

I got off the bed, and pulled him into a kiss, my right hand on the back of his head, bringing it down to my level, while my left hand rubbed his cock. Time was short, but there was always time enough for a kiss, especially with this man.

I broke it off. Gave him one last chance as I asked, "Are you sure?"

He thrust his cock at me, backed away, cockily... how else for Peregrine? ...stepped over to the bed, bent, braced both his hands, and looked over his shoulder with a wicked grin, followed by a slight waggling of his arse.

Cock tease.

But cock teasers eventually get their *comeuppance*, as Peregrine was about to.

I turned away from him, went to the armoire, retrieved the intricately carved chest, set it on the stand beside the bed, removed the key from the drawer, put it in the lock, twisted. We both heard the tiny *click!* in the still room. But there truly was no time for what was inside, not for proper use. I sighed and turned the key back. Quickly put the chest away.

Peregrine's eyebrow asked "what the fuck?" and I shrugged.

"Another time," I said unthinkingly.

We winced at that, a wince we could not conceal. There might be no time for another time, after time passed beyond six in the morning. But then again, there might.

"A promise," I said. He nodded agreement, and we carefully avoided letting the other see our knowledge of the truth that I might have no choice about keeping that promise.

"Spread your arse for me, Peregrine."

"Uh... what? How?"

I sighed a loud and long-suffering sigh that clearly said, "Virgins!" Followed by a grunt in arse-wipish which clearly conveyed, "With your fingers, arse-wipe, with your fingers."

Peregrine then reached behind himself with both hands, clasped those well-muscled cheeks and pulled them apart. Were I Buddhist, I would say I had achieved nirvana at the sight of that oh-so-tightly clenched, bright pink hole, surrounded by a fine dusting of light golden hair, almost invisible against the whiteness of his skin.

Nirvana vanished in an instant, however, when he lost his balance and fell forward, his left knee slipping on the edge of the bed, his right knee landing firmly, so he twisted and found himself with one banged knee on the floor, accompanied by his left hand for balance.

I refused to laugh. At least, not a lot.

I had never seen every inch of Peregrine flush a rich, rosy pink. It was quite beautiful. If I had not already been hard to the near-breaking point, that would have finished the job of making me so.

He got up, more than a little awkwardly, glared at me over his shoulder and got into position again. This time on all fours on the bed, his knees and part of his shins well-placed, the rest of his legs hanging over. He balanced himself with his forehead on the far side of the bed, as it was not at all wide, and spread himself once more.

But there was no time for admiration, for delicacy, for spending minutes, eons, on my own knees licking his arse and fingering it until my tongue was fucking it readily. I took out the stopper on the small bottle of oil I had intended to use for one last wank, regardless of the meaning of “last,” and coated my fingers with it. Holding the bottle in my dry left hand, I leaned close enough to be sure of my aim, and drizzled oil on his hole. It could not have been cold, but still he shuddered.

I used the tip of my forefinger to caress the edges of his entrance, spiral down to its center, caress and press. “Shall I warn you when I am about to enter?”

His “yes” was muffled, but I understood it. Naturally, I ignored it, and in the interests of time, pushed my finger all the way in.

“You fucker!” he yelled.

I was more than a little smug as I pulled it almost all the way out and pushed back in, and replied, “Not yet, Peregrine. Not just yet. A one finger fuck does not a full fuck make, you know.”

I knew where his gland was, of course. A man who has fingered and fucked as often as I over a lifetime, knows these things, and knows them well. But I wanted to tease him for just a little while.

“Arse-wipe!” he grunted back. It was fast becoming my second-favorite endearment.

I pulled entirely out, but left the tip resting on his center. He could not feel my second finger, curved, and with its tip pressed on the nail of my forefinger. I asked him whether he wanted two, with or without a warning. When he was silent, I nudged him slightly. “Well?”

His sigh was practiced long-suffering. “You bloody well know that whatever I say, you’ll bloody well do what you want. So can we get on with this, or shall I just leave and practice on myself later?”

“Well, since you asked so nicely...” I slid my second finger quickly forward as I pushed, letting it briefly lead the way and open up the passage for the pair of them. Peregrine’s grunt was loud this time, and he abruptly released his hands, dropped them to the bed and recklessly clenched my well-worn sheets. I thought I heard one tear, the bastard.

But I was nice. As I spread my fingers to a side-by-side push, I guided them to and over his bump, and curled over it, and pulled them back. I hoped that after tomorrow morning I would have the chance to hear that kind of moan from him again. I repeated the in-and-out strokes, moving my fingers together, apart, up, down, twisting, and his breathing became just a bit more ragged.

“Three now, Peregrine,” I whispered as I braced my weight on my left hand beside his knee. “I’m going to fuck you with three fingers. That won’t be enough to get you really ready, not for the full two fucking guineas and not a bloody pence less.”

He remembered as well as I, and this time his groan carried a bit of mockery, but then I made a triangle shape of the ends of my first three fingers, second finger of course pointing the way, and I pushed inside. Straight in, shoving the walls out to their, just for that moment but definitely not forever, capacity. Then another spread so three fingers in a neat row marched in and out to the tune I was playing on his body. A tune whose tempo was increasing as the fingers bobbed and weaved, ducked and dodged and played with his hot flesh. I yanked them out and greedily listened to his loud whine and his whimpered, “No.”

Four fingers then, an almost square, two and three on top, one and four below. Before his hole could slam shut, I shoved them deep. Another march began, the four marchers spreading out so that they were not *quite* touching each other. A more elaborate march, with an even more rapid rhythm, near-acrobatic turns and twists, his breath more ragged with each in and out thrust, his fists clenching and unclenching and tearing more holes in my poor sheets.

I pulled my fingers out, poured oil on my cock, used my right hand to slick myself up. Pushed four fingers halfway in again. I rotated my hand back and forth as a queen might rotate her wrist to wave to her subjects from a royal carriage. Peregrine *liked* being treated like royalty.

“Slow and easy, or fast and hard? Your choice.”

“Liar.”

“Would I lie to you? No, don’t answer. We both know I would. But not now, because if you choose the second, it *will* hurt. I remember my first time, and though I was willing, I wasn’t given the choice, and he chose the second one for me. I thought for a moment there was a knife slicing up inside me, the pain was so sharp. So I have no personal knowledge which is ultimately better.”

“Truth?”

“Truth.”

“Well, fuck.” He then grunted and moaned again, as I had not stopped playing with his hole. He grabbed my almost-not-there pillow, folded it up, and shoved his face into it. I had to interpret the arse-wipish sounds to understand he wanted it fast and hard.

“As you wish.”

And I did as he asked. Took out my fingers, pressed my knob against the fluttering opening, and shoved with as much strength as my hips could give, and broke past the ring, spread him even further with the thickest part of my shaft, and felt his channel collapse around the base of my cock, sobbing with gratitude for the slight bit of relief, since I was not quite as wide there.

I had, of course, lied to him. As arrogant as I am about my size, four fingers wide is about three guineas’ worth of width, and that is not me. If it were, I think I’d rarely get a mouth or arse to fuck; they’d be too frightened of the damage I might do.

Peregrine howled into the pillow. A manly howl, I’m sure, though muffled by the fabric and feathers. Not at all a girlish shriek. I was nice enough to give him a moment’s respite, a moment to get used to having something that thick where no prick had boldly or otherwise gone before. And then I fucked him.

His arse fought me, at first, an inevitable response to so unfamiliar an invader. But then he relaxed, and as he relaxed I sped up. As I pounded harder and harder, I reached around, slicked up his cock with my oily hand, commanded him to wank himself. As he did, as I did, Peregrine began a conversation with my pillow.

Entirely one-sided, of course, because though we assumed the men in the rooms around were gone, we could not be sure. And so silence was needed. *Near* silence.

I was fortunately so very fluent in arse-wipish I could readily translate every word of the conversation. I clearly heard him say, “Oh, Christ, Rory, oh God, that feels so good. Didn’t know... expect... can’t, oh fuck oh fuck, yes right there... no you bloody arsehole shite-head bastard you don’t fucking slow down. Yes. Yes yes yes yes, faster, oh God, faster, harder, harder, *harder!*”

I gave him precisely what he asked for because that is the kind of fuck-friend I am, and far too soon I could feel his muscles clenching around me and releasing, over and over as he spewed seed far and wide across my bed. I joyfully joined in the spewing.

I collapsed on top of him, but braced my hands on the mattress so it was not a literal collapse. We panted and gasped and began the process of gathering enough air so that we could actually breathe again. And though I had no desire whatsoever to do so, I knew, as he knew, that this had to end. I slowly and carefully pulled out of him. Knee-walked a bit backwards, put one foot on the floor and then the other, stood.

Peregrine turned over, sprawled ungracefully on the bed, his head almost falling off the other side. He slowly lifted it, looked at me and grinned a grin of utter delight.

I quickly and carefully painted a wonderfully executed oil of him inside my head. This was what I would carry with me in the morning.

He looked around and I realized it was for a cloth. “Bloody hell, Peregrine, just use the sheet. You’ve ripped it to rags as it is.”

The grin got wider, and then he stood, pulled the sheet off the bed, and thoroughly wiped his hand, his cock, his balls, between his legs and his arse. He let it drop in a heap on the bed.

“I... I’m sorry, but I have to go.”

He walked over to his clothes, and as he grabbed them up, beginning to almost rush into donning them again, it occurred to me there might be a reason for such speed. I felt a fool for not having realized it sooner. “Are you going to see him?”

Peregrine at least did me the courtesy of not pretending he had no idea what I was talking about. “I have to.”

As much as I wished to shout a denial of those three words, to argue with them, I could not. I would not, *could* not, be persuaded to apologize for the

wrong I had done. It was too great an offense. But if I were in Peregrine's shoes, though given the size of his feet I would flop about in them, I would try the other duelist as well. I did not think it likely that he would succeed.

Before he made the attempt, however, there was something important he had to do first. And so I told him. "Fine. I understand. But you will go home and bathe and change before you do."

"Don't be ridiculous! It's—" He looked about for a clock, realized there was none, scrambled in the pile of clothes until he found his watch, and flipped it open. "It's 11:27, Rory. I have no time for a side trip, since if I have no more success with him than I have had with you... *success in calling this bloody stupid duel off, you arsehole!* ...he will need time to rest. As you do now." He set his watch down, resumed dressing.

"You gave me your word."

"I... *what?*" He stopped with his pantaloons almost up his thighs. "What are you talking about?"

"You promised me you would not tell Michel about us. You gave your word."

"And I'm fucking not going to fucking tell him anything," he snarled back, and yanked the fabric over his hips.

"Go there as you are, and you will."

"Explain this simply, Rory. I seem to be not yet out of leading strings and have no knowledge of the world at all." His words were moderate; his tone was anything but.

"You might as well *be* in leading strings, if you can't see this. Michel has a *mistress*, arse-wipe. He has had a string of them, and other women besides. He is no stranger to the smells of sex, and of seed leaking from a hole, even though that hole is more probably a woman's cunt than her arse. He is going to ask if you have been to see me and probably rag at you for coming here first. You bloody well *know* he will.

"And he is astute enough... and you also bloody well *know* he is... that, knowing where you have just been, and smelling the smells he would smell if you go there as you are, he will put two and twelve together and inevitably arrive at fourteen. Fourteen being the knowledge that you have gone directly

from my lodgings to his bloody mansion, bloody reeking of sex, which would bloody well mean you'd had bloody fucking sex with me!"

I might have been shouting on that last bit. Fairly loudly, in fact. I finished more quietly. "You will agree, will you not, that your word not to disclose that you and I are friends of Edward's, who are fuck-friends as well, includes not only not disclosing those facts by actual words, but also not disclosing them with a wink and a nod, and perhaps a little nudge, too?"

He slumped, straightened. "I see. Yes." He held his palm out to me in his customary stop-right-there gesture. "And before you ask, yes, my word on that, as well. And now I need to piss."

I nodded toward the door to the much smaller second room where I kept the chamber pot. He politely closed the door behind himself, as if I had not seen and heard him pissing numerous times before. I used the sheet to wipe myself off too, and dropped it on the floor, as it would have no more use on the bed, not tonight, and perhaps never. I padded over to the chair, picked up his watch. It was a beautiful thing. From his grandfather on his mother's side. He often mentioned, when we had "watch matches" in a dispute over what time it was, the superb accuracy of his own, when compared to the "lesser" timepieces that Michel and I sported.

Despite his pride, the time looked wrong to me. I stepped to the nightstand, picked up my own watch, compared the two, and corrected his. Flipped it shut again, and put it where it had been.

When he came back, I was sitting on the bed, one arse cheek partly in one of the numerous wet spots he had created. I could feel the hairs on my arse absorbing his seed. I watched him dress, and reassemble himself at least reasonably well; enough so, at least, that if his departure from the building were observed, it would only lead to the conclusion that the condition of his dress was due to drinking and not having had sex in lodgings where only men resided.

Our last kiss... forever? for the night? just until "another time?" ...was short, and gentle.

And then he was gone.

Michel

Friday, 8 December 1815

12:57 a.m.

Maison de Vidal-Sansouci

London

Mercier opened the library door to let him in, then closed it quietly as he left. I could tell by Peregrine's stance in the slight shadows across the room, motionless, tense, that he already knew. I wondered which of our so-called friends had rushed to find him, to be the first to let him know that shortly after six tomorrow morning, *this* morning now, he might be minus one or even both—and that has been known to happen—of his best friends.

And now he had come to try to dissuade me. Although not with any apparent urgency since he simply stood there and stared at me. The Meissen clock on the mantel chimed and my eyes flicked to it.

One a.m.?

Unless Peregrine had been somewhere unexpected, so that the search for him was long, if he was concerned he should have been here some time ago. At least three hours. So why...

Le bâtard, le dieu maudit bâtard!

I forced myself to take just a sip of the Armagnac, a vast contrast to the gulps that had gone before. A ploy for time to help me keep my temper. *Hélas, pour les bonnes intentions qui pavent le chemin de l'enfer.*

My good intentions went up in a puff of infernal smoke, and he clearly heard the puff and understood its source. "You went to see him first."

"What?"

"You know about the duel." He understood I was not asking a question and confirmed it with a nod. "Why?"

"Why, what?"

As he might have said, he damn fucking well knew what I meant, and so I told the fucking bastard. "*Vous savez sacrément bien ce que je veux dire, vous maudit chien.*"

It took him a moment to work that out. I watched the slow dawn of translated enlightenment and cut off the imminent words. "You have known for hours. You have known *me* for years, have been my friend since university, and yet you go to *ce chien d'un bâtard* Scotsman first?"

"This is ridiculous. You may perhaps be dead tomorrow morning, shot by my *other* best friend, and you are concerned about why I saw Rory first? I'll tell you why. I... I... tossed a fucking sovereign in the air, a street rat grabbed it before it hit my palm, plucked it right out of the fucking air. And ran. So by the time I lost the little bastard in London streets that are, I swear to God, designed to permit, hell, *encourage*, thieves to escape, I was closer to Rory's lodging than fucking Mayfair."

He ran his hands through his hair, tousling it even more than it had been when he walked in. "What the fuck does it matter anyway?"

He stamped over to the desk, grabbed up the glass and the bottle, poured a generous portion, slammed the bottle back down, and tossed the liqueur back.

As a good friend of many years' standing, as I had just reminded him, I had a duty not to refrain from smirking when he gasped, choked, and made a face of utter disgust. Like the face of...

No. I would not go there.

"Why did you just give me that shite?"

"You didn't ask. You took. Accept the consequences of your decision."

As I had accepted the consequences of mine.

He put his palms flat on the desk, leaned toward me, his face coming fully into the candlelight. I kept my eyebrows down. Someone had hit him. Hard. Good. He deserved it.

"Michel, my friend, *mon très bon, mon meilleur ami*, you cannot do this. You *must not* do this."

I looked up at him, refusing to ask, though at any other time I would have mocked him for it, demanded the full tale of the blow with a minimum of roundaboutation. I made my eyes cold. "Has the Scotsman..."

"Your *friend* has a name, Michel. It's Rory."

"As I started to say, has *the Scotsman* agreed to apologize?"

Peregrine slumped, pulled back from the desk, dropped into the nearest chair. "No."

“Then there is nothing to be done.” I gave him my most Gallic shrug, perfect after a lifetime of practice.

“*You* could apologize. Even if you didn’t do anything wrong, you could apologize and this could be over.”

“I have nothing to apologize for. I will not lie.”

I had *everything* to apologize for. And I just lied.

I could not, would not, give Peregrine an even greater cause for disgust with me than the duel itself. I could not tell him how I had betrayed our friendship, both his and Rory’s. But...

We had been drinking, Rory and I. Not enough to use that as a valid excuse for what I did, but we were only a little disguised, not even half seas over, but enough that our balance was not quite what it ought to have been. So when I stumbled in that empty hallway that led to the privy, and would have fallen, Rory grabbed me just as I grabbed for him, which upset our balance, twisted us about, caused a little dance of stumbling steps, and we bumped heads.

Stood there. He only held onto me, and I to him, *for balance*. Only that and nothing more. But we were close, not nose-tip-touching close, but still, close, and I saw... *thought* I saw... *wanted* to see... *something* in his eyes. So I kissed him. And for the merest fragment of a shard of time so small I could not comprehend how to measure it, I thought he kissed me back. Only he pulled away and I pulled away, my control gone as my own face became the mirror for the horror I saw in his.

His horror at my assault on my friend, my horror at the realization of what I had done and how unwelcome it was. But I could not face admitting my error, so I attacked instead. A technique I have honed since childhood.

“Why did you do that?” *Je m’accuse, je m’accuse, oh mon cher ami, je accusé à tort d’échapper à la vérité.*

I could not admit the truth, so I accused my best friend to escape that truth, when I should have just taken the more cowardly part and turned away. But he said the same words to me.

I denied.

He denied.

Words began to pile upon words, in harsh whispers, piling up until one final word... his? mine? ...began the avalanche that left us agreeing to meet.

“There is no way I can...” He stopped as he saw from my face that there was, indeed, no way that he “could” whatever his next words might have been. Persuade me to relent? After he had failed with R... with the Scotsman? He sighed. “I should go, then.”

He rose from the chair and looked at me as though he wanted to say something else, but could not, or chose not to, find the words. He turned, but I stopped his departure. Perhaps he “could,” after all. “No.”

He turned back, watched me rise, come around the desk. Stand before him. Close to him. The kind of closeness we had often shared; the kind of closeness that was a prelude to... something else.

Something I needed just then. Only... not what I had always wanted or needed before.

“Please. Stay with me. Just... a little while. Not... not the rest of the night, not until it is time to... time to go.”

“Michel, I...”

I put a finger to his lips. “No, my dear, I understand. It would not be fair to”—I was tempted to say “that Scotsman” again, but could not find it in my heart to do so—“Rory, or even to me, to have you go from here to there. Because you *are* going to be there, are you not? Even if I do not wish you to?”

His face acquired that peculiar *Peregrine* look. If ever a follower of Dr. Johnson publishes an illustrated dictionary, an image of Peregrine, with that particular mulish expression, will be beside the word “stubborn.”

“Your seconds are honor-bound to make one last attempt to reconcile the two of you before you fire your fucking pistols and each do your damndest to destroy yourselves and destroy my heart. I am even more honor-bound than they to make one more effort to change your minds. *At least* one more time. And to be there no matter the outcome.”

He put his hands on my arms, just below my shoulders, squeezed slightly. And began speaking rapidly. “You know, if I told Rory, about—well, us—he would understand, I am sure, and then he wouldn’t want, well...”

“To kill me?”

“He doesn’t want to now!” His voice was sharp and angry, and he squeezed a little harder and shook me, as if the shaking would jumble my thoughts and rearrange them into the order that he would prefer.

A tiny part of me unwound at that truth. Peregrine is fully capable of social lies, possesses a positive skill at them, as they are a necessity to survive the ton. But he would never lie to me about something like this. So, at six I would only be at risk of unintended death. I vowed the same for Rory... that bloody Scotsman.

“Please, Michel, let me tell him.”

I shook my head and moved in the rest of the way, knowing he would put his arms around me, as indeed he did. So I only said, to the side of his head, “You gave your word.”

“But...”

“Your word of honor, Peregrine. You *gave* your *word* of *honor*. I don’t release you from it.”

“Fuck!” The word was heartfelt, and angry, and resigned.

“Well, since you brought the subject up, and something else is, ah, up...” It heartened me that even at a moment like this, cocks could get stiff. Even if only out of desperation or a shiver of this-might-be-the-last.

“Yes.”

“But you don’t even know what I have in mind.”

“My cock, your mouth, so we’ll each have something to remember of the other, even if it turns out the memory will only last a few more hours?”

Words are ever ready at my fingertips or lips, whether writing or speaking, so I had no idea why I struggled just then for words. Perhaps because I knew that what I had to say was purely selfish, and a manipulation of a long friendship to serve no purpose other than my own.

“Ah, well, it’s just... Peregrine, we’ve never fucked.”

He grinned at me and ground his risen cock against mine. “Because you’ve always acted like a skittish horse, dancing away at the lightest touch. Bloody hell, my friend, after the first few times when you clamped your fingers around my wrist and squeezed hard enough I thought I might never have the use of it again, just because I brushed your hole, I finally understood your message.”

You would be skittish, too, if your first time was rape. And multiple times thereafter, until at last you screwed your courage to the sticking-place, and with

a loaded pistol—because you were smart and could find a book in your father's library that taught you how to do just that—threatened the bastard. And when he mocked you, and came at you, you screwed your courage to the *shooting-place*.

When they found you, you were shaking, terrified, crying like the child you had once been but would never be again, babbling carefully, carefully about the horrible accident and “I never meant” over and over again. You were believed. Just as you knew you would not have been believed had you ever accused such a fine and lordly man of so foul a deed.

But none of this was anything I could say to Peregrine. Nor anyone else. So I danced skittishly away once again, by using my left hand to stroke that marvelously long and thick cock, and my right to reach behind him and caress and then squeeze his arse.

His eyes widened. Message received.

And not happily so.

A good man, a *fine* man, a *noble* man would suck as he had always sucked, be sucked or stroked in return, and enjoy both thoroughly, as he always had.

But I might die tomorrow, whether the Scotsman intended my death or not. I discovered I was neither good, nor fine, nor noble after all. Not that I had ever truly believed myself to be any of the three.

“I’ve...” He hesitated, flushed.

I’ve... what? Never been fucked? He was a virgin? And there was no way I could ask him that, lest he ask me in return if, because of all my refusals, I was a virgin as well. If he asked, I would lie, and I do not want a part of our possible last talk to be lies.

“You’ve what, my dear?”

“I’ve... only been fucked once before.”

Not *quite* a virgin, but *mon Dieu*, his so very, very *beau cul* must be tight. My slit oozed.

I would, of course, not *deliberately* manipulate him by hinting at the duel. Which was, of course, a lie, but at least it was only to myself. I could live, as it were, with that.

“Would you allow me the honor of being second, then? Considering...” I looked away, as if too embarrassed to mention the obvious.

Peregrine snorted. “Considering that you might be dead in the morning even if both of you lackwits just try to maim instead of murder, did you really believe you could *manipulate* me into giving up my arse, instead of just asking?”

Well, fuck. I was indeed so very non-good, non-fine, non-noble.

The bastard laughed at me. “You succeeded.”

“Then for obvious, non-manipulative reasons, let us not waste any time.”

We undressed quickly, as we so rarely had had the opportunity to do these past months. Naked in each other’s presence on numerous occasions, of course, how could we not be? But never as now, never just the two of us, with time enough for l... lust, even though there were constraints on that time.

We admired each other’s faces, bodies, cocks, balls, chests, thighs, arms, until we both realized that we were doing was *memorizing*. It was a moment for mutual flushes.

He asked, his voice somewhat gruff, “Back or belly?”

“I, ah, I want to see you.”

“I’d like that.” He got into my bed, laid on his back, his legs spread, knees bent, his strong feet planted on the mattress. He rose up on his left elbow, reached between his legs with his right hand and began to caress his hole. Shoved his first finger just a little way in.

Ma putain de Dieu.

I turned away from the bed, went to the cabinet where I kept the oil that went so well with cock-stroking. It should be even better for this.

I came back to the bed, holding the capped bottle, and stupidly said the obvious. “I have some oil. Let me...”

“No!” He looked surprised at the sharpness of his tone. “I mean, I, ah, let me. Do it for you. Get myself ready for your prick.”

He pulled his finger out, then squirmed around to gather several pillows so he could brace his head and raise his shoulders a bit off the bed. But first he took the oil from me, moved to his knees before me, carefully drizzled some of

it the length of my prick, and then while he ravaged my mouth, his right hand ravaged my cock. When I was moaning in his mouth, he pulled away. Drizzled oil on his right hand, handed the bottle back to me.

Smug bastard. I quickly put the bottle down on the nightstand.

He carefully got back onto his back, reached down to start fingering himself, and then raised his legs slowly, moving his knees toward his shoulders. I watched him rub his golden-furred hole, push his finger in just to the first knuckle, and then quickly all the way. He winced.

Tight. Yes. Dear God, yes. I oozed more, and used it to add to the slickness of the oil coating me, stroking only lightly so as to avoid disaster.

A few strokes in and out and then he added a second finger. Which brought a grimace, quickly suppressed. He began working his opening, stretching, twisting his fingers, his hand, flesh gleaming in the candlelight.

“You like watching me finger-fuck myself, don’t you, Michel?”

I jerked my eyes up from where they had been mesmerized into immobility. At the blaze in his eyes, I could only nod.

He worked his hole as he taunted me. “You’re good at *imagining*, aren’t you, *mon cher* Michel? Have you lain in this bed, *imagining*? Imagining that long, long, *long* cock of yours going where my fingers are right now? But further, of course, *much* further. So much deeper inside me than any man has ever been before?”

Peregrine moaned and used *three* fingers on himself. I moaned with him.

But there was no way my cock was as wide as three of his large fingers, whether side by side as they plunged in and out, or triangled as he twisted. We both knew it. So why...

“Almost there, Michel, almost there. Just about stretched enough so my hole will open up when you push that fat mushroom knob in, and then I’ll clamp down on your shaft so tight you’ll never get out again. You’ll never *want* to get out of my hole.”

We were both breathing heavily when he yanked his fingers out, and I stupidly stared at that glorious hole as if *I* were a virgin who had no fucking idea what to do with it.

Peregrine patently agreed with my assessment of myself. “Are you going to fuck me, or am I going to fuck myself with my right hand and stroke off with my left?”

I shook myself out of my bemused adoration, and got up on the bed. With the same ease as if we had practiced this a thousand times, his right leg went into the crook of my left arm as I rested my palm on the bed, he held his left leg up, and we both watched as I nudged his nearly closed hole with my knob. Then we inhaled and held our breath as I pushed. It slipped in. The knob and a bit of shaft.

And... *holy Mary Mother of fucking God!* as one of my Catholic fucks once blurted out... he wasn't jesting about the tightness of his hole and the way his muscles clamped down on me. He groaned, winced as I thrust my hips forward, and then grinned wickedly at me as he made himself relax, and I slid in. All the bloody way in.

I have so rarely fucked, and the last time was so very long ago, I hadn't truly been certain what to expect if Peregrine said “yes.” I had not expected *this*, though. The heat, the tightness, the look on Peregrine's face, the rising joy as I slid back out and then in again. I could get used to this. Well, if I survived the meeting.

So in case I did not survive, this was going to be one bloody brilliant fuck.

And it was.

By the time I seeded his bowels with a quantity I was sure I would be unable to replace for several weeks, if not months, his chin, and chest and belly were streaked with his own spend, and we were an exhausted, sweating, stinking pair of ecstatically satisfied men.

Who unfortunately had another reality to face than the joy we had just shared. In just a few hours.

The joy faded from our faces almost simultaneously. I slowly withdrew, and his legs collapsed to the bed on either side of my kneeling form. Our smiles were far different than they had been such a short while earlier.

I rose up, leaned forward, braced my hands beside his shoulders and brought my head down for a gentle kiss. When I lifted my head, I said, “*Mon cher ami...*”

He blinked, nodded.

We did that awkward dance that well-sexed men do, until he was up and off the bed, and I was seated on the edge.

I watched as he stepped into the bathing room in my suite, to quickly wash up, or at least enough to get the worst of the oil and sweat and seed off his body and out of his arse. I would have preferred to just stay where I was, barely not-collapsing backwards into immediate sleep, but there was one more thing I had to do. And I only had a short time in which to do it.

I got out of bed, padded quickly to my dresser, yanked out a handkerchief, well, *merde!* it would have to be one my finest I would choose to permanently stain, and quickly moved to where he had dropped his vest on the floor. With cloth-covered fingers, I pulled his watch out, and flicked it open.

My eyes widened. So the Scotsman cared at least as much as I did. I made my own adjustments, sent a brief prayer winging upward to a deity who might, if He truly was as loving as some said, forgive my lapses and grant me the tiny prayer that our deceptions would not be discovered.

I put the watch back, and was again sitting on the edge of the bed, still naked, when Peregrine returned. I watched him get dressed, though he made no effort to clothe himself as if he were doing anything other than returning from... *someone's*... bed to his own home.

We looked at each other from across the room, memorizing again. Then he crossed to me, leaned forward, kissed me lightly on the lips. "Until morning."

I blinked and hoped I was not lying. "Until morning."

He left and the room, my house, my life, felt empty.

I eased myself backwards, ignoring the wet spots, the damp spots, the oily spots. Put my arm across my eyes to shut out what remained of the candlelight. The rest would gutter soon enough and give me darkness.

*Now I lay me down but not to sleep.
Is there a Lord, my soul to keep?
I doubt there is, and so won't pray,
Although I hope I'll live this day.*

My mocking smile mocked only me. I closed my eyes.

Peregrine

Friday, 8 December 1815

6:06 a.m.

A clearing in the woods

By the river Thames

I sat atop Horatio, peered through the swirling snow that would have been so heavy that by the time the time for the duel arrived, the duel would have to be called off. Except what I peered at was the aftermath of carnage...

At the brilliant red sprays and pools of blood at the separate ends of the straight line that had linked the duelists, staining the already snow-covered ground. At two kneeling men, who had to the exorbitantly paid physicians, bent over the bodies on the ground, their torsos twisting and turning as if they were performing some life-saving function instead of verifying the presence of a corpse. At two men, the fucking bastard seconds who had failed to stop this, staring down at the pair on the ground next to each of them. At the man whose goddamned count had started their back-to-back and away march.

I think, had I had a brace of pistols, I would have made use of them just then. The seconds, first, for their failure to stop the duel. A quick reload, and the physicians second, for their failure to bring them back. Another reload. A single shot for the fool who counted out the cadence that killed them both.

And the last for me. Without these two, what was the point?

I was too late!

As *my* particular pair of bastard shite-heads had intended.

Damn them both.

Rory had handed me my watch, having pretended a moment's renewed admiration of it. Michel had pointed out where it had fucking "fallen" from my waistcoat when I undressed. They each had set my watch back, knowing my tendency to be fifteen to thirty minutes early for any appointment. An earliness they knew would be strictly adhered to for an engagement of this nature.

If by some odd chance they survived, I was going to kill them. Not immediately, of course. A truly effective killing based on these grounds...

grounds *any* nobleman would both understand and vigorously applaud... could only, in honor, be done when the victims were once more hale and hearty.

If either or both were dead, I would somehow manage a resurrection without a three-day waiting period, so that I could have the pleasure of killing them here and now.

With all these plans unfolding in my head, I nudged Horatio and guided him forward. I brought him to a stop halfway between the bodies lying on the ground. If they were both alive, I declined to give one the opportunity to gloat because I had chosen to check his well-being first, and the other the opportunity to inflict unholy hell upon me because of that choice.

I was at that moment as neutral as the Congress of Vienna had made the restored Switzerland only a few days before Waterloo. *Neutralité, toujours la neutralité*. The Swiss motto and mine own.

I was cold, and wet, because I'd chosen to ride and forgotten a hat. Even if they survived I'd probably catch pleurisy and die from that. It would serve them right. I sat and waited.

And waited.

And waited yet more.

I was becoming a snow statue. They would ignore me, remove the bodies, remove themselves, and leave frozen me behind.

I had, from time to time in my life, wondered how a man with no honor would feel, *knowing* he had no honor. Particularly if he had knowingly betrayed that honor.

On the ride to this small, oval clearing that had no name, but was conveniently screened from the Thames by a row of tall trees, close-set, and thick bushes, and accessible from the road out of London only by a twisty path through a forest, I decided to become that man and learn how it felt. I had decided that I would, rather than let this duel go forward, break my word of honor and tell each man the truth about what the other meant to me, and me to him. And how we had been expressing that caring.

Remarkable how the imminence of death and two desperate, for all we know, we may never meet again, fucks focuses the mind and the heart and the soul on what is truly important. I was no Lovelace to risk my love for the honor

of risking war and death; I had, instead, intended to lose my honor and risk the loss of love, rather than run the risk of love's loss through death.

I wondered if any part of my upset, my anger, was because I had been upstaged and my great and glorious gesture negated. But I could not be that petty.

Could I?

No. I could not.

And damn them for taking so bloody long to let me know what had happened to *my* men.

Farrell, one of the physicians, finally made his way to me after first walking to the other end of the dueling ground and consulting with his colleague about the other... body... other man.

"It is most odd, my lord..." His voice trailed off.

Odd how? That they both died? Both survived? Only one did?

"The, ah, gentlemen each shot the other's shoulder. The arm that was not holding the pistol. With, ah, intent, I believe."

"And did they both survive this mutual feat of marksmanship?"

"Oh!" He started. Realized that the man, who had paid the exorbitant sum to him to be there in case of need, might want to know if his money had been well-spent.

"Yes, my lord," he then hastened to reassure me. "They will not, of course, be able to use their injured arms for some weeks, but if they follow our instructions, and if the wounds do not become infected, an unfortunate possibility naturally, they will regain full use."

I allowed myself the smallest slump. They could not in honor delope, and so they had each come up with the same solution to do the other the minimum amount of damage. Accompanied by significant pain, of course, to be sure their respective points had been adequately made.

I straightened, raised my voice so I could be heard by everyone. "I've tossed a bloody guinea, you pair of watch-fucking bastards, so I'm going to see the Scot first. You give me or each other any shite about this, and you'll answer to me. And it won't be pleasant."

I looked down at the obviously shocked Farrell, waited while he gathered his wits enough to point me in the right direction, wheeled Horatio and went to the duo of Dr. Carruth and Rory, who struggled to his feet.

I greeted him with all the love I was capable of giving him. “You look like shite, you bastard.”

I had succeeded in shocking a “my lord!” out of Dr. Carruth as well.

“I have no sympathy for this idiot, doctor. Or the idiot at the other end of the field. This idiot, however, is coming to Somerville House.”

Rory was nearly as white as the snow, his shoulder heavily bandaged and his arm already in a sling, but still he argued. “I will be...”

I overrode him. “You won’t be. You have no valet. You have no servants. You’re bloody lucky he chose that arm because at least you’ll be able to hold your prick and aim your piss, and wipe. But that’s about it. Shut your gob.”

His eyes widened, but he shut his gob. I put two fingers to my lips and whistled a loud, piercing two-tone signal that told Michael, the driver of one of the two carriages I had sent for the doctors to use, that he was needed. I waited until he brought it down from where they had been waiting, out of range and nearer the tree line. Gave him his instructions, followed by a glare at Rory that demanded compliance. He nodded.

He glared again, at only me, of course, when Michael helped him into the carriage. Stubborn Scot, not wanting to admit that after all that had happened in the last twenty-four hours or so, he might be somewhat shaky on his pins and actually, bloody *need* help.

I left them, started Horatio toward Michel, and gave a large wave to Thomas, the other driver, directing him to my destination. I pulled Horatio up, swung down and dropped the reins, knowing he would stay. Michel was on his feet as well, as shakily so as Rory.

He looked at me and said aloud, with a somewhat wobbly eyebrow raise, “Second...”

I interrupted. “If the next word was intended to be ‘choice,’ with or without a question mark, I suggest you rethink and select another word. Or better yet, perhaps just say nothing at all.”

He said nothing at all.

“Good.” I looked over my shoulder. Michael was pulling away, Rory’s horse tied to the rear of the carriage. I looked again at Michel.

“Mr. MacLean will be staying with me until he is sufficiently recovered to function on his own. While there are many things a man may do with only one hand, there are even more he cannot. You have servants and the estimable Henri. Although you may, if you wish, accept my hospitality as well. And Henri, of course.”

“No.” He swayed, and while I wanted to reach out, to support him, pull him close and tell him what a damned fool he was and how damned glad I was for his survival, I let Farrell take hold of his good arm. As Michel generally disdained any show of personal weakness, I was surprised he allowed it.

He took a deep breath, stood as straight as pain and strain would allow. Looked at me with hollow eyes. “You need to make a choice.”

Damn him. *Damn him.*

“We can discuss matters later.” *When you have calmed down enough to be rational.*

“There is nothing to *discuss*, my lord. I will not voluntarily be in that man’s presence again...”

“Honor has been satisfied, *M. le vicomte*. You can both put it past you.”

“No. And no, again. If I see him I will cut him. So you must make a choice of friendships.”

“No.” My voice was as cold as the snow about us. I had no choice but to make it so.

It was the wound and the shock that made his mouth drop open, as otherwise he would have controlled himself so that no reaction was visible.

I gathered myself. I could do this. I had to do this. I refused to lose one of my best friends by *my* choice. And if a part of me niggled, and wondered whether my refusal to choose was because I wanted to continue having Rory’s arse and Michel’s mouth when I and they wanted and we could find the time and a place, that niggling part of me was undoubtedly right. In part. But these men were more to me than convenient holes. Not that I was willing to examine too closely precisely what that “more” might be.

“*You* will have to choose.” I paused, thinking. “And Rory as well, as I will preempt any attempt on his part to do what you have just done and give him the same choice. You are *both* my friends. Better friends than I ever envisioned, especially these last months. I won’t give that up.”

He looked at me, and his eyes said what his mouth could not, since there were others around us. “You won’t give up my mouth.”

I stared at him, made sure he saw all that I, too, could not say aloud. That I wanted his mouth, of course. That I wanted to continue what we had. *All* that we had had. That I would not voluntarily surrender any of that. That I would not surrender my friendship with Rory any more than I would surrender my friendship with him.

His eyes told me his decision, but I had to make him say it.

“Your choice, *M. le vicomte*. Do we stay friends as we have been these many months, or friends just as we were all the years before, or do we part ways here and now... of *your* choice?”

His “Damn you, Peregrine,” was more muttered than aloud, but aloud he said, “*Amitié, toujours l’amitié... salaud.*”

Bastard I was, not by birth, but occasional inclination. This being one of them.

I confirmed my bastardy by asking, “And will you accept the hospitality of my home, as you recover?”

His lifted eyebrow unmistakably said, in our perhaps *special* eyebrow-speak, “*Baiser votre hospitalité!*” while his voice said, “I must regretfully decline.”

I regretted that as well. I did not really think he would accept, and had he accepted, I did not really think we could have found the privacy, given my other guest, for him to *baiser* my arse. Though on additional thought, that particular *baiser* should probably wait until he returned the favor with his own arse, slender, muscular, as I had on occasion seen, and undoubtedly tight, as I so often imagined.

Thomas opened the carriage door, and as I put my hand on Michel’s un-shot elbow to steady him, he did a marvelously precise Rory imitation.

“Are you less of a man than *our* friend, Rory? *He* was not too proud to accept a moment of help from a friend.” Or rather, a friend’s coachman, but I wasn’t about to explain that distinction.

Michel subsided and let me help him get settled. He didn’t mutter at all when I pulled the heavy blanket over his lap, and manfully, so very *manfully* tucked it in. With not the slightest bit of Edwardian flare or care.

I watched Michel being driven away, then turned to thank the seconds and the physicians and the man who had counted out the paces, for their service in this most regrettable incident. I let them know that a paid-for repast had been laid on for them at a nearby inn. I did not bother asking for their silence about all this.

The physicians would undoubtedly forget their hefty bribes once word had spread, thus freeing them, in their minds, to add their mites to the gossip. That the tale would be told was inevitable. The men my foolish friends had chosen as seconds had not kept the fact of the duel quiet except for as long as it took them to reach the first man or group of men they wished to tell. All of this would be circulating among the ton within the hour.

I remounted Horatio, and started away.

I had thought, occasionally, over the last few months that I was in hell.

That had been a picnic before the Pearly Gates compared to now.

This was hell, and I had no idea when, if ever, I would be out of it.

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Peregrine

Wednesday, 7 February 1816

Early evening

White's

London

“Good afternoon, George.” I handed my hat, coat and gloves to the porter. “Or is it evening? I am never quite sure at what time to change greetings.”

The porter favored me with a slight smile. “Good to see you, m’lord. And I am sure that whatever you decide is the correct greeting will inevitably be so.”

In other mouths, that last sentence might have been far-from-subtle arse kissing, perhaps even arsehole lapping. Between George and me, it was simply a gentle joke.

“Anyone about?”

He knew, of course, that I meant anyone I might particularly know, or my particular friends. Which these days seemed to be primarily Michel and Rory. Albeit *separate* friends.

Michel was unlikely this early. As for Rory, well, Rory had just left me. Or rather, left Somerville House to return to his lodgings, having pronounced himself fit to live on his own.

“A bit thin on the ground, m’lord. What with the weather and all.”

The weather being the remnants of a snowstorm that had, perhaps for all of five minutes, turned London beautifully white, after which it degraded into what was now left. Filthy piles of not-yet-melted snow that had been shoveled up. Patches of nearly invisible ice. Temperatures neither cold enough for a solid freeze, nor warm enough for a good rain. Dark grey clouds that cut off what little sunlight there might have been and seemed to be hovering just over the buildings, looking as though they might crash down on us if they acquired just a bit more weight.

Thoroughly depressing. Made more so by Rory’s departure. The house felt empty without him.

I decided to see what the menu was like. I could naturally have had a sumptuous meal at home, with every delicacy I might wish for. But I was in no

mood to dine alone. And even though I might technically dine alone if no acquaintances were here, I was still not *quite* alone. There were always members here, eating and drinking.

“Thank you, George.” I handed him a florin. “I think I’ll settle in for now with a copy of the *Times*. Perhaps you might send Daniel along with a brandy?”

“Of course, m’lord.” There was a sudden, somewhat muffled shout of laughter. “Ah. Pardon, m’lord. My wits were indeed wandering. The Four Dukes are in the morning room.”

The ton so loved naming things. Any four dukes might gather at any time for some reason or other, but whenever these gathered, no matter how many others of their rank might be around, they were the “Four Dukes”: Alderson, Stoneleigh, Rutherford and Bellmore.

“They sound... merry.”

George permitted himself another smile. “A celebration of some sort, I believe.”

I naturally wondered what the Four Dukes might jointly have cause to celebrate, or perhaps it was only one of them, and the others were “assisting.” None of my business, of course.

I nodded to George and headed toward the stairs. I naturally looked at the open morning room door as I started by, and was immediately seen by Alderson. He let loose an apparently delighted smile. He beckoned with the hand holding a half-full (half-empty?) flute of presumably fine champagne... as if the club would serve anything else... being careful, of course, not to waste any of it by over-zealous beckoning.

“My dear boy! Come join us! Your ship has come in!”

Three such emphatic sentences, only the first two of which were comprehensible. It would be rude to decline, so I accepted the invitation. As I turned toward the entrance and began walking, I caught the last word of a sentence, which resulted in a “Huzzah!” and Alderson raising his glass as if a toast had been made, and tossing back the remainder.

I could have sworn that that word was “Agatha.”

As it turned out, I heard correctly.

When I entered the room, Stoneleigh was standing, with his back against the mantel; Rutherford was seated in a comfortable chair—no chair in White's would have the temerity to be anything other than comfortable—and Bellmore was picking up a still-sealed bottle of champagne, and struggling just a bit with the cork.

He saw me and smiled as well. "Young hands, my boy, young hands. If you don't mind?" He waggled the champagne bottle a bit, and I understood two things. First, that he wished my assistance in opening it, thus saving the time required for a bell-pull and waiting on a servant to arrive, and second, he... and the rest... had already imbibed quite a bit. That latter understanding was undoubtedly assisted by the two dead bottles on the table.

I nodded, went over and took the bottle, and then with an expertise born of a good decade of experience, though not an expertise to match the accumulated *many* decades of champagne-opening skill in that room, popped the cork. As expected, given that little struggle and the waggle which followed, the pressure was higher than it might otherwise have been and so the cork had a gun-shot sound and spewed an extra bit.

I was immediately joined by four tipsy dukes, or rather, three visibly tipsy dukes. Stoneleigh's expression and stance permitted no certain conclusions one way or the other, but given the circumstantial evidence standing... or slightly wobbling... about me, I would have said, if asked, that he was at least a bit on the go. They held out flutes for filling. Rutherford had two, one of which he handed to me.

Alderson lifted his glass again. To me. I blinked. "To *The Angry Agatha's* safe arrival home."

I lifted the flute and drank the damned thing dry. What in the bloody hell?

"Your Grace?"

Alderson beamed. "You had not heard the news yet? Another bloody storm at sea kept them from coming up the Channel to London, so they docked at Plymouth a few days ago, after being reported lost some months back in a typhoon in the Indian Ocean. Lloyd's has, of course, covered our investments, and the loss of the ship itself, which will clearly be repaid, but the profits were not insured. Only minor damage to the cargo, my boy, and so only minor damage to our profits. And yours."

Profits? Ship? Agatha? I barely knew where to start, so I chose the latter. “The, uh, *angry* Agatha? *My* great-aunt Agatha?”

Alderson nodded, took a sip. “Your Uncle Matthew, great-uncle, I should say, was a fine man. He always said that when his Agatha was angry she was fearless and fast in dealing with whatever had aroused her ire. The ship was originally christened with another name that I’ve quite forgotten, but after the travails of that first voyage, he renamed her. Agatha was quite pleased, you know.”

“Your Grace, I, ah, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

A Duke cannot, of course, look gob-smacked. It would not be at all fitting or proper. But if it *were* fitting and proper, that would have been an apt description of his expression.

“The *Agatha* and the other four ships are part of the Mayhew Company. *Your* company? Part of your inheritance?”

My visible confusion had turned what might have been statements into questions.

“Your Grace,” I looked quickly at the other three who seemed equally puzzled. “Your Graces, the only inheritance I received from Great-Aunt Agatha was shortly after my eighteenth birthday.”

“But you’re thirty now,” Alderson said.

“Respectfully, Your Grace, not yet. Not until 23rd November.”

“Oh.” All the elation and celebration left him. “Oh, dear. I assumed... *we* assumed...”

Stoneleigh’s voice was decidedly stone-like. A family trait one might say, as his son, the Marquess of Ireton, was known with less than affection as “the Iron Marquess.” “Speak for yourself, and your own assumptions, Henry. Leave me out of it.”

Alderson sighed heavily. “My dear boy, I guess I am, as they say, in for penny, in for a bloody great fortune.” He sighed again, gestured for me to sit. I pulled a chair away from the table and sat. He did as well.

“*I* assumed—” and he gave a small glare at the other dukes, “that you were thirty, you had your inheritance and you were simply being quiet about it. And

that you had known you would not be getting it until you were thirty. Or so we—” another glare, “*I* understood from Agatha’s solicitors.”

“Mr. Brumley?”

“Lord, no, boy. He’s been dead these nine or ten years. A Mr., ah, Mr. Wainwright.”

“I...” I changed what I was about to say. I stood up, bowed to him, turned and swept a bow to the others.

“Your Graces, you have... given me much to think on. I hope you will pardon me, while I go and do just that.”

Alderson nodded.

Somewhat unsteady on my feet, though most assuredly not from a single glass of champagne, I returned to the entry hall, advised George I would not be staying after all, and properly attired, had him call for my carriage.

What bloody inheritance?

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Peregrine

Thursday, 8 February 1816

9:00 a.m.

*Offices of Bainbridge & Brumley, Solicitors
London*

“I should like to see a Mr. Wainwright.” The porter had, of course, for a modest gratuity, already informed me which office was his and when he had arrived that morning.

The clerk at the tall desk, who had obviously not heard me come in, shot to his feet as if he had been shot, and his stool tumbled backwards hitting the floor with that gunshot sound. He flushed and did not immediately bend to retrieve the fallen stool.

He was roughly my height, my age. Already-thinning, light brown hair, and rather ordinary features. The type of man one would see and then the moment your eyes were off him, forget what he looked like. He was shabbily dressed, though his clothes were neat, and as clean as could reasonably be expected of a man who wielded quill and ink all day, hunched over that desk.

He straightened a little. “I apologize...”

His voice trailed off, clearly asking for a name. For all his non-descript appearance, he had the courage to ask, instead of immediately using “my lord” and starting to fawn.

“Viscount Somerville. There *is* a Mr. Wainwright here, is there not?”

“Yes, my lord. Have you an appointment?”

“Do you recognize my name, Mr...” My turn to ask.

“Hamilton, my lord. And I do.”

“Then do I look like someone who *needs* an appointment?”

“Uh, no, my lord.”

“Announce me, then.” I looked at the door he was effectively blocking. I would have to go through him to get to it.

He held himself very still, and it was obvious, at least to me, that he was forcing himself *not* to look at the door.

I was certain he did not realize that when he answered affirmatively when I asked whether there was a Mr. Wainwright “here,” he had essentially admitted that Mr. Wainwright was, indeed, “here.” And since he was not plainly visible in this room, and had not left the building, he was most logically behind the door at which Hamilton would not look.

Which meant that the next words from his mouth were going to be a lie. They were.

“I regret, my lord, that Mr. Wainwright is not, ah, available. Perhaps if you would care to come back?”

“Set up an appointment... perhaps?”

He very nearly sighed in relief. “Just so, my lord.”

His relief was so very short-lived. “And do you have the authority to make an appointment for Mr. Wainwright? One where I could be assured that upon my arrival he would be here to greet me, with open arms, as it were?”

“No, my lord.”

“I rather thought not.” There were two other clerks in the room, though neither had a desk quite so “fine” as that used by Mr. Hamilton, nor quite so tall. Lesser clerks. Both avidly watching and listening, while trying to appear engrossed in their work and entirely unaware.

“You, there!” I pointed a finger at the unfortunate one who just that moment happened to look directly at me. “What’s your name?”

“Uh, Jamie, my lord?” His voice was a questioning squeak.

“Is the office of the late Mr. Brumley nearby, Jamie?”

He grimaced, and hesitantly tilted his head toward the door behind which Mr. Wainwright was *not*.

“And is there a living Mr. Bainbridge, then?”

“Yes, my lord?”

“Is he in?”

“No, my lord?”

I almost asked him if he could find someone who could answer his questions and then convey the responses to me, but I held my peace.

“Does his office have chairs that are more comfortable than *these*?” I gestured toward the two extremely *uncomfortable*-looking, straight-backed wooden chairs which were obviously intended to be used by anyone waiting to be allowed into the august presence of Mr. Wainwright. Supplicant’s chairs, albeit of the preliminary variety. Intended to reinforce the importance of Mr. Wainwright and the comparative unimportance of those who had to wait for him. Inside, he would have another supplicant’s chair. More comfortable and welcoming, but still a supplicant’s chair.

That dog would most certainly not hunt.

Jamie had an anguished look on his face but finally nodded.

“Very well, then. You and...” I pointed at another of the young gentlemen who with equal squeakiness identified himself as possibly John. “Go to Mr. Bainbridge’s office and return with his most comfortable chair, being most careful not to chip, scratch or dent it on the way.”

Jamie wailed, “But my lord!”

I gave him a quite frosty eyebrow-lift, which naturally silenced him. “Now. If Mr. Bainbridge is in, you will explain that Lord Somerville requires the use of his best chair, even if his thin or fat bottom should happen to be in it upon your arrival. If he is not there, you will simply pick it up and bring it here.

“You will then procure some tea from Mr. Bainbridge’s private cache, and begin the brewing process. If he has a decent service, and porcelain cups and saucers, bring those along as well.”

I looked around. There really wasn’t an acceptable table on which to place any of that. “Oh, and you might as well bring a table. I’m sure he can spare one for a while.”

They simply stood there. “You can, of course, decline to do as I ask, and I will then depart. Leaving the pair of you, and perhaps Mr. Hamilton as well, to explain to Mr. Bainbridge, and to Mr. Wainwright should he ever return, precisely why it was that Viscount Somerville decided to take his business elsewhere.”

Ah. Clearly not an explanation in which the two young men had any desire to participate. They did their best imitation of discreet cannonballs and departed.

I had, of course, removed my hat and gloves upon entering the building. I turned the hat upside down, deposited my gloves and held it out to Mr. Hamilton. He gingerly took it. "Deposit that somewhere dirt-free, Mr. Hamilton, if you would be so kind. And, ah, be aware that any cleaning costs that might become necessary will not quietly be charged to my account."

He gulped. "Yes, my lord."

"Now, as I am going to be here quite some time..." I let my voice trail away as we had done earlier, and he took the bait.

"*Some* time, my lord?"

"Oh, yes." I raised my voice. "I had nothing planned for the day, really. So I can simply sit here and while away the hours, communing with the flowers... if there were any to be had, of course. Rather sparse on the flower front, as it were."

I looked around at what was essentially a drab workroom despite the comparatively fine panels on the wall and the crown molding.

"I also am beginning to think it likely I might become bored despite the scintillating conversation I anticipate with the three of you. Should that happen, I can send my driver on a quick jaunt to Hatchard's to pick up a book or two.

"And I am sure, Mr. Hamilton, that you share my concern that should I have to visit the necessary, why that would be just the time Mr. Wainwright might nip right in and nip right out again. So in that inevitable event, a plight that comes to all mankind when enough tea is consumed, I shall have my coachman or groom take my place. And should Mr. Wainwright by some chance return, he will ensure that Mr. Wainwright understands that when *I* return I will want to see him. Even if the meeting will most likely be a very short one."

I took off my greatcoat and handed it to Mr. Hamilton. He carefully hung it on the coatrack just outside the... empty... office, and with equal care deposited my hat on a stack of ledgers over which he had placed his very own handkerchief. Unused, one could but hope.

I was unnerving poor Mr. Hamilton, and regretted the necessity for doing so. "Do pick up your stool and sit, Mr. Hamilton. Go on about your business. I can quite amuse myself for however long it may take."

However long it might take for the chamber pot in Wainwright's office to be filled to overflowing, as I was reasonably certain that was all he had. The offices were too old to have a private water closet.

I was prepared to be a Sphinx, waiting patiently for someone to try to pass by, but should that be Mr. Wainwright, the only riddle to be answered would be how he could convince me to stay with this firm.

Patience, however, has never been one of my prime virtues, though my virtues are, of course, manifold. That virtue was sorely tested as time crept in its petty pace, or something. I had boldly asserted my willingness to stay until Wainwright actually arrived, or, as I was certain, decided to shed his cocoon and butterfly out to me. Therefore, I could not show my actual impatience by checking my watch every time a minute passed and I was sure it was at least an hour.

So I waited. And waited. Drank the bloody tea. Bainbridge was clearly a cheap bastard as the quality was abysmal, barely flavoring the water, and deeply bitter. The porcelain tea set was exquisite, though, in keeping with the image of urbane elegance he clearly wished to portray. I doubted he ever offered any visitor a sip of that muck.

Eventually I stood and ostentatiously checked my watch. Only an hour had elapsed. "Does your employer usually arrive so very late, Mr. Hamilton?"

He could not quite keep his eyes from looking to his left, as if he might turn toward the door, but he resisted, looked at me, and licked his lips before speaking. He really was no good at lying, and once again, he was about to utter one.

"He, ah, often meets clients at... ah, their, ah homes or offices, my lord. A, uh, service of the firm."

I had never met the man, but a man who would use those particular supplicant chairs instead of providing a decent waiting area, especially when the firm had a reputation for handling the affairs of quite a few wealthy individuals or families, was *not* a man who did anything other than require clients to come to him. Though I felt certain he would make an exception for the Four Dukes.

Sometimes a really loud noise can frighten a fox out of its hole. Mere noise would not do that here, but accompanied by...

I raised my voice, and began a definitely one-sided conversation with John. I then dragged Jamie in, and in a fairly short time had them as comfortable as they could be when talking to a nobleman, and even laughing. And getting no

work done at all. Hamilton diligently kept his head down, scritch-scratching away with his quill, though from time to time I saw a lip quiver that looked like an incipient laugh, ruthlessly suppressed.

I raised my bet.

“I say, gentlemen, look at the time.” I flicked open my watch and showed the face around, as if they could actually see from where they sat. “It’s nearly noon!”

It was, of course, nearly eleven, but I was unwilling to allow myself to be confused by facts.

“Jamie, my lad, nip downstairs and have my groom come right up. I shall send my carriage over to the White Cockerel for some ale and sandwiches, and on the way back, he’ll stop by Gunter’s for some pastries for dessert. Such hard-working chaps as you deserve a break and a good lunch. A most relaxing, *long* break. I am sure Mr. Wainwright won’t mind.”

These were not men who could afford the prices of the White Cockerel. Nor could they ever expect to taste anything from Gunter’s. They were desperate with longing and agonizing over what might happen if they agreed. I was a fucking bastard for doing this to them, and I would find a way to make it right.

“But my lord...” was the faint protest from John.

“Bugger it. I’m starvin’,” from Jamie stopped the protest.

He darted out, and I briefly heard him clattering down the stairs. An uneasy quiet descended. I deliberately looked at Wainwright’s door, and then back at the clerks. Still nothing.

Had I been wrong?

“Mr. Hamilton, is it possible that Mr. Wainwright might have returned by some other entrance?” A rat hole, perhaps? “Would you be so kind as to check?”

“Ah, your lordship, there is no other entrance, so it would be pointless.”

And would risk exposing the charade.

It was indeed a charade, then, as the porter had also told me, for another coin, that Hamilton had arrived before Wainwright. So Hamilton knew, though he tried his best to protect his shite-head employer. He shrugged.

I let it go. And kept my voice loud enough to be heard through that bloody door.

“Do you know, Mr. Hamilton, I think it would be unfair just for Mr. Wainwright’s clerks to enjoy this break. John, why don’t you go to the others in the building, and see if they would care to sample a White Cockerel meal and a Gunter’s dessert. And assure them that Viscount Somerville will ensure that there are no, ah, repercussions for joining me in my early luncheon.”

John’s eyes widened, and then he grinned. What a day he was having. He quickly turned and left. That left only Mr. Hamilton and me in the outer office, and a coward hiding behind the door.

Would he really let me stop all work for the firm for several hours? Be held accountable by other employers, if there were any besides the firm in this building, for *their* work stoppage?

He would not.

The door to the office opened and Wainwright appeared, carrying a handful of papers, calling out Hamilton’s name and *appearing* not to notice me. And then he did.

Notice me. Notice the no-work-going-on office. “Mr. Hamilton,” he said in his best shocked-employer, outraged voice, “what is the meaning of this?”

Mr. Wainwright should never tread the boards. Rather than an Edmund Kean holding center stage, his acting talent at best qualified him to hold a spear, or a pike, or some weapon, in the back row of a group of soldiers. At the farthest possible distance from the pit. In utter silence.

My shock at his shock was better than his shock at the state of his office. Though I humbly admit I am no Kean, I would have at minimum qualified, I thought, for a role with some significant number of lines and time on stage.

“Are you Gerald Wainwright?”

The shite had the nerve to allow an expression to cross his face that indicated his surprise that I was so ill-informed as to not recognize him.

“I am.” He opened his mouth to continue, wisely shut it instead of letting out the incipient, “And you are?”

“Somerville.” I did not move to extend my hand to him. He had forfeited any conceivable courtesy from me. “I wish to have a word, or perhaps several with you. Now, if that is convenient.”

My tone told him I didn't give a bloody fuck whether it was convenient for him, as it was convenient for me.

"But of course, my lord." He gestured toward the open door.

As I went in I casually sniffed. *Eau de pot de la chambre*, indeed. He had attempted to hide it by splashing some cologne around but only succeeded in his own mind. He rounded his desk and did a repeat of the door gesture, this time toward the... yes, the *slightly* more comfortable... supplicant's chair.

Not bloody likely.

"I think not."

He looked truly shocked that time. "My lord?"

"A rather uncomfortable-looking chair, I think. Mr. Bainbridge's will do, just fine."

I walked back to the door and called out to Jamie and John for a repeat of their recently acquired chair-moving expertise. Looking extremely nervous, and with repeated glances toward Wainwright, they carefully carried the rather luxurious chair into the office. I bestirred myself enough to move the supplicant's chair out of the way. The two clerks hurried back to their desks.

I sat in Bainbridge's chair, and then it was my turn to wave at him, to "sit, sit, sit."

He did so. There was a moment of silence during which we each assessed the other.

I knew what he saw. An arrogant blond lord rakehell, dressed extraordinarily well, fine as five pence indeed.

What I saw: A man who, as he grew into manhood and looked into a mirror, realized he had no choice but to become a solicitor. He was a weasel of a man with narrow features, a sharp nose, thin lips, and a precise little mustache he undoubtedly thought was dashing. Slickly pomaded dark hair receding in a deep widow's peak. He was dressed well, but the kind of "well" that is just a hair beyond the boundaries of good taste. And he had not enough taste to recognize he had o'erstepped that boundary.

I ended the silence. "Tell me about my inheritance."

"Nothing has changed since the firm's last report to you, my lord, other than interest on the money in the Funds. I can have..."

“Mr. Wainwright, please. I blackmailed your clerks into doing my bidding by the simple expedient of threatening to take my business elsewhere and leaving them to explain that their refusal to do as I asked was the reason. Oh, and some judicious bribery with food and ale.

“So let me be most direct in my blackmail of you. If you don’t open your budget about what the Four Dukes are quite certain is an inheritance from Great-Aunt Agatha that I know nothing about, I shall be forced to take my business elsewhere. Immediately. And seek advice as to my legal recourse.”

“There is no inheritance.”

I let my expression show my opinion of that answer. “Let us try this again, in a more roundabout manner. There *is* a Mayhew Company, is there not?”

“Yes.”

“Which first belonged to my great-uncle Matthew, and upon his death, to Great-Aunt Agatha?”

“Yes.”

“At least some of its assets consist of trading ships, one of which has only just returned from a long journey to the Orient, having been reported sunk in a typhoon.”

“Yes.”

“That ship is called *The Angry Agatha*.”

“It is, my lord.”

“Well, then?”

“Well, then, what, my lord?”

The bastard was enjoying this far too much. But short of seeing how easy it would be to squeeze that thin little neck and perhaps snap it—self-satisfying, naturally, but ultimately self-defeating—I appeared to have virtually no leverage. I had no fulcrum with which to move a teacup, much less the world.

“The Four Dukes are under the impression that an unknown-to-me inheritance is to become mine upon my thirtieth birthday this coming November.”

“Alas, my lord, I fear I cannot be held accountable for the, ah, impressions of even such illustrious personages as the Four Dukes.”

“They are mistaken?”

“They are, my lord.”

“And there is no additional inheritance which will be turned over to me on my thirtieth birthday?”

“Quite so, my lord.”

“But then, even if there were such an inheritance, but you were for some reason forbidden to mention it before time, you would say the same, would you not?”

“My lord, if I had such instructions, that would be quite true. But I assure your lordship, that there is no inheritance scheduled to be given to you on, or even before, your thirtieth birthday. And certainly not afterward.”

“You are certain?”

“Quite, my lord. Do you wish my word of honor upon it?”

Not when I was still uncertain he knew the meaning of the phrase, though that was not something I could actually say to him.

“No, no, Mr. Wainwright. Nothing so formal will be required. But still... have you any idea how the Four Dukes might have come to this misperception of reality?”

“Alas, my lord, I am not...”

“Yes, yes. I understand you are not responsible for the thoughts of others. Very well. I thank you for your time.”

I stood up, walked to the door. Did a partial imitation of Michel by turning back and saying, “Just one thing more, Mr. Wainwright.”

“Yes, my lord?”

“I have unfortunately somewhat... disrupted, shall we say? ...your office today. I plan to make good to the men out there, and elsewhere in the building, on my promise of a meal from the White Cockerel and dessert from Gunter's. The time taken to *enjoy* that meal, and perhaps even a significant portion of the remainder of the day are likely to be lost in terms of their productivity. So, shall we say a hundred?”

He thought it over. Not with quite as blank a façade as he undoubtedly believed he possessed. He was calculating whether he might increase the

amount and, if so, by how much. Going along with me, and ensuring my swift departure so he could claim responsibility for having *persuaded* me to honor so rash a promise to men entirely undeserving of my beneficence, as he most certainly viewed them all, would be as advantageous as a likely modest increase in my offer.

“That would be most generous of you, my lord.”

It was indeed generous. Overly so. But then, I can afford such whims as these.

“Then take it from my account, and make a proper notation in your next report.”

I nodded and this time actually left his office. I walked toward Hamilton, who rose on hearing the door open, stepped over to the rack, lifted off my greatcoat, and then held it up for me to put it on. An unlooked for courtesy, and there was not the slightest servility in his stance. When it was shrugged on and adjusted to my satisfaction, I accepted my hat and gloves.

“You will all have your luncheon,” I murmured. “And if there are any, ah, difficulties, arising from this morning, I am sure you or a note can find your way to Somerville House.”

His bland “But, of course, my lord” told me that no matter the consequences he would not be telling tales out of school to me.

I left the building, and drove to the White Cockerel and Gunter’s to make the arrangements necessary to honor *my* word.

Then on to Manton’s to meet Michel and see which of us was best today in culping wafers. Tuesday, Manton’s, Michel. Thursday, Manton’s, Rory. It had become something of a habit since they recovered from their mutual wounds. I missed the days when it was the three of us. Hell, even with young Bennington around. Laughing, joking, making outrageous challenges.

Damn them.

How could they not miss what we had had together?

I brooded all the way there, but shrugged off most of my melancholic air as I walked in.

Michel was standing in the hall, patently impatient about my slight lateness. I looked at my friend, at the mouth which I could not put to the use for which it

was definitely divinely destined, at the expression which said he knew precisely what I was thinking, and my melancholy vanished.

Except for a second's wondering precisely what it was that still troubled me about Wainwright and his words. And whether I had been told the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

I doubted it.

But I could do nothing about it just then. So I started in on Michel.

“You look a wee bit fashed the noo, as a certain Scotsman I know might say.” I actually had no idea *what* Rory might say, but the words sounded almost right, and would annoy Michel in any event. “Over-indulgence last night, perhaps? You might find yourself missing the wafers entirely or getting turned about and shooting off the ear of someone adjacent to us. Perhaps this should be postponed until you are more yourself?”

“Bugger off, *M. le vicomte*.”

I smiled. He smiled. The game was on.

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Michel

Saturday, 23 March 1816

Early evening

Maison de Vidal-Sansouci

London

Peregrine stood in front of me, resting his arse on my desk, and grinning widely. He handed me a piece of paper somewhat raggedly cut out from that scandal sheet, *Ton Tales*. The edition of 21st March.

We have learned that on 14th March, a gang of deviants commonly referred to as “neddy boys,” brutally assaulted Lord C—and Mr. J—. Although they fought valiantly, the gentlemen were eventually vanquished, and then subjected by their tormentors to the most humiliating depravities. Their injuries, alas, were most painful, and must remain *private*. *Private*, indeed. But we wonder if it would be indelicate to wonder just why these pillars of the ton were at that particular dock at that time of the morning? Well after one of the clock, we have been told. However, we suspect that those reasons are *private* as well. Although we might speculate on such *private* matters, or even investigate them, we feel that such *private* matters should naturally remain *private*.

I looked at it, and handed the snippet of gossip-mongering back to him. “Why do you persist in reading this trash? And in paying for it? The price is outrageous for the quality of what one receives.”

“And how would you know the price? Or the comparative value?”

Fortunately, I am excellent at dissembling. “I hear things. People confide in me, bemoan rash financial decisions. Ask my advice on making sound financial decisions.”

Unfortunately, Peregrine has acquired, it seems, an even greater skill at peering through my dissembling to the heart of the matter, since we became... whatever it is we became to each other as of last summer... than he had before. He just *looked* at me in that “Oh? Really?” way he has, and I gave in. “Very well. I subscribe. I read.”

“Ha!”

I smiled. “Ha, indeed.”

He waved the scrap of paper. “And so with all these people who talk to you, give you advice, seek your advice, do any of them, perchance, from time to time *tell* you things?”

“Such as what?”

“Well, it’s so bloody obvious who they are. Lord Carswell and his odious friend Jackson. Jackson has been out and about since then, but not Carswell. And the only place likely to have been the site of an altercation with neddy boys would be the Dock. *Why* they were at the Dock is obvious. Neither is a friend of Edward’s, but they’re of the same ilk as Beckwith’s crowd... any hole when a cock is standing.”

I started laughing.

“Alright. What’s so bloody funny?”

“You haven’t heard.”

“Heard what?”

“What all that ‘private’ means.”

He snarled, which just made me laugh harder. “Come on, Peregrine, certainly you can figure out what ‘private’ means when the subject is the Dock and neddy boys.”

Dawn shattered the dimness that was Peregrine’s mind at that moment. He smiled broadly. “It couldn’t have happened to a nicer man. But why would getting a punch or a kick in the bollocks keep him in hiding this long?”

“No punch. No kick.” I laughed again. “A... *bite!*”

He was so surprised he went directly past his usual gob-smacked look into totally blank. And then he shuddered, and moved his hands to his groin as if to protect himself. Precisely my reaction when I first heard the tale. Indeed, that would be the undoubted response of any man on hearing it.

Finally realizing there were neither sharks nor shark-like neddy boys near his own prick and bollocks, Peregrine relaxed. “Do we know...”

“Oh, of course, my dear. The redhead...”

“*What?*”

As much as I would have liked to have led him on even further, which is why I phrased it the way I did, and as much as I disliked the Scotsman... and I did... dislike him—*didn't I?* Yes. Of course I did. “Not *that* redhead.”

Peregrine's sigh was deeply relieved.

“Does anyone know who...”

I shook my head. “A great deal of speculation, but all anyone claims to be certain of is that it was a redhead who was, ah, in a position to... bite. Considering the general accuracy of Dock-based gossip, combined with Carswell's absence from the ton, I think it's probable the bite occurred, but I'm not certain about the biter.”

He nodded, and then we were both still.

Damn.

Nine months and still we have these awkward moments. We don't... can't... live together. I can't wake Peregrine up with his cock in my mouth. He can't just get the urge to suck me in the middle of dining, dismiss the servants, yank the lower half of my clothes down or off with a fine disregard for buttons and rips, and then suck me to a cock-pleasing seeding before he fucks my mouth. So we must... arrange matters. Regiment them. Make a bloody fucking *appointment* to seed.

At times I have been tempted to suggest that we simply say “Fuck England!” and leave for... somewhere. Anywhere. Italy, perhaps. I have a villa in Tuscany, and if it didn't satisfy us, we could buy another, better one. I have more than enough money to permit us to live for several lifetimes, nearly as extravagantly as the Tsar of All the Russias. Or live just a single lifetime with vastly *more* extravagance than that.

But Peregrine would never agree. I doubt he would care about the separation from his father, but Lady Glenhaven... oh, yes. And he would care about the damned Scot, too.

Hell!

But I allowed none of this to show on my face.

Peregrine walked over to me, stroked my cheek with one finger. “Have you... ever been to the Dock?”

I decided, the night before the duel, that if I survived, I would not lie to Peregrine, or at the very least, avoid lying whenever possible. Fortunately, he has never directly asked me what I think about the Scotsman. Should he do so, I will be forced to lie. I cannot confess my ongoing attraction to a man so definitely not a friend of Edward's. A man who could never reciprocate.

This, though, I could be honest about. But first: "Have you?"

"I asked you first."

I chortled at the child-like snap-back. I so enjoyed making Peregrine blush. Whether a little or a lot.

"I have." His breath hitched. "You?"

His "yes" was almost a whisper. His right thumb caressed my lower lip. I opened my mouth and let it slide in, nipped it a little with my teeth, the way I so rarely got to do to his nipples. He always enjoyed that.

He stilled. "Have you... Since..."

Not bloody likely. But I could not say it that way to him. That would surrender too much control. But I could truthfully tell him "no." So I opened my mouth, let his thumb slide wetly out, and did.

"Neither have I."

We both shed a little apprehension about... us.

"Had we met at the Dock... before... would you..." He swallowed loudly. "Would you have been... a *slut* for me?"

How could he doubt it? I worked his trousers open, pulled out his engorged prick. So little time just now... cocksucking and no bollocks-licking would have to suffice. I licked the droplets seeping out of him. I, of course, have not spoken to Peregrine's valet, but I wonder if he is as upset with his master as Henri is with me. This... whatever it is between us... has severely restricted their ability to dress us to be a credit to them, and continue their distinguished reputations amongst the ever-competing valets of the nobility. We now only wear dark pantaloons, or breeches for an Almack's evening, since light colors make stains from seed or leakage highly visible.

I swallowed him whole, then pulled away, leaving him momentarily gleaming wet and shining in the candlelight. I breathed on his knob, teased the

tip with my tongue. Looked up at him. “How would you have taken... *used*... your slut if you had met me on the Dock?”

Peregrine has become an expert—of necessity, he *had* to become an expert—in holding my head and fucking my mouth without disarranging my hair, my cravat, or my clothing, so that when he is finished with me and I with him, I am not in disarray. And a quick application of ice, or a chilled drink to my mouth, and whatever well-fucked look my lips might have simply disappears.

I regretted making that request almost instantly.

Not because of what Peregrine said. In a quiet, rough, *raw* voice that could not be heard beyond a foot or so from us, certainly not beyond my library's locked doors, he set the scene of almost perfect darkness, dim lighting, the scents and tastes and touches of near-degradation, our own scents and looks in the dirty, disguising clothes we wore to visit a place so dangerous to our lives, to our reputations. The fear of discovery that added a spice that turned an ordinary meal of seed into the finest of gourmet dining. The extra pounding of hearts in chests as we sexed in public. The urgency of “get done, get gone, get done, get gone!” warring in our heads with the desire to make the experience last. The panicked pause when someone approached, muscles suddenly held tight like a racehorse just before the starting flag is dropped, both ready to *run!* The relaxation on realizing it is just another neddy boy who wants to watch and wank, or add his own prick, and mouth, and arse to the action. Or a Dock-worker, one of the non-Edwardian men who use the Dock to sate the lusts they won't truly admit to themselves, hesitantly hoping he'll be lucky enough to be allowed a turn at the mouth or arse being so willingly, flagrantly used in front of him.

The fantasy he created... and who knew Peregrine could be so filthily eloquent? ...was so arousing to both of us that he let loose his seed far more quickly than either of us desired, and he stood over me, panting heavily, his softening cock in my mouth as I licked it clean.

The regret was for none of that, but was for the fact I had not known how desperately I would want to set my own steadily flowing cock free and pump my seed out without a care as to where it sprayed, at the same time I was swallowing his.

As he tucked himself back in, and buttoned himself up, I told him what a bastard shite-head he was. He grinned and let me know he was ready to fall to

his knees if I wished. Though he knew bloody well that when we were taking a risk like this in my home, there was usually no possibility of *both* of us seeding. Too much time spent behind locked doors, no matter how titillating that time might be to Henri, who unquestionably bloody well knew what we were doing, though the rest of my servants did not, might generate questions. Particularly if there was a pattern to these cocksucking events.

Peregrine gave me a mocking eyebrow-lift as I stood, noticing how very visibly distended my pantaloons were. But I had my ever-effective solution at hand. I had paid a goodly sum to have the portrait of Great-Great-Aunt Angelique at La Belle Maison duplicated in precise detail, in near-miniature, set in a plain wooden frame. I walked to my desk, opened the drawer where I kept it as a form of anti-cock stand talisman, and looked at it.

I was soft in an instant.

Peregrine looked over my shoulder and shuddered artistically. “Gadzooks!” he mocked. “No wonder you are so shriveled.”

I closed the drawer, then punched his shoulder. He winced in theatrical agony. As we left, I wondered if... when... he would ever notice that the new chair I purchased some months back, the one in which I sat just moments ago, and only that chair, was *precisely* the right height for me to sit so that Peregrine could fuck my mouth.

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Peregrine

Tuesday, 9 April 1816

10:30 p.m.

Library, Somerville House

London

I am so very tired of all this.

Not tired of what I have with Rory, what I have with Michel, though I *am* tired of the breach between them, and of the two secrets I must maintain because I so foolishly gave my word.

But what I am tired of most of all is *the* secret.

And all I have done since my eighteenth birthday to protect that secret.

Michel is away for some urgent problem at one of his estates that his steward cannot deal with on his own. Rory is off hunting foxes and other things with several of our friends, including young Bennington.

So I am alone and maudlin in my library.

I have wondered before, wonder now, how my life would have gone on had Wilfrid Brumley not arrived, unannounced, at Glenhaven Hall, quite late on what Mama later described the next afternoon—after the meeting that changed all—as a “dark and stormy night.” I asked her how a December night, or indeed any other night, could possibly be anything other than dark, considering the absence of the sun from the scene.

She shrugged and said, “Well, my dear, it *was* snowing at the time, with vigorous winds blowing all about, and it *was* dark, without a bit of moon, so what I said was quite accurate.”

She paused, and then said with a little gleam, “Do you know, I rather think that phrase of mine would be an *excellent* first line for a novel.”

She lifted her head, staring into some unknown distance, and sonorously declaimed, “It was a dark... and stormy... night.”

She quite spoiled the effect with a giggle. “I think I shall pen a note to Mrs. Radcliffe, and suggest she use it. It would be quite fitting for one of her romantic novels, don’t you think?”

“Having never had the, ah, *pleasure*, of reading one, I defer to your expertise.”

“As well you should, as well you should,” she said, and patted my hand, as we sat side by side on a sofa in her sitting room. She became more serious, then. “Do you have any ideas about what you might do with Agatha’s gift?”

I did, oddly enough. But the ideas were most definitely not something a man of eighteen could ever share with his mother.

I met Wilfrid Brumley in the front parlor the morning after his arrival. At my age, he seemed older than God Himself as he informed me of the bequest. While I was gaping, my mother was fanning herself, and my father was glaring. Mr. Brumley explained that she intended to present the gift herself on my birthday, but as she died three days prior to that happy event, the members of the firm took it upon themselves to slightly delay the presentation in order to address the other circumstances created by her passing. He did not elaborate on that latter point.

While I noted the oddity of his tone on “circumstances,” I was naturally focused on the hundred thousand to which I so unexpectedly had unfettered access; money that could not be withheld on a father’s whim.

Father had been unsurprisingly furious at what he perceived to be his aunt’s deliberate humiliation of him by not giving him control over the funds, to dole out or not, most likely not, as he chose. Until, of course, I was of an age suitable to manage it on my own. Somewhere around my thirtieth birthday, undoubtedly. Perhaps later.

So when Mama asked about my plans, I did what any good and loving son would do in the same circumstances. I lied. Proclaimed my utter lack of ideas. How overwhelmed I was by such generosity (true), that I would have to carefully think on it before making any decisions (false).

I have never been sure that Mama actually believed me.

Father’s fury over the “slight” became even greater when he realized, on viewing, or being told of, some of the *ostentatious* results of my spending, just how quickly the money was going out. All to implement the plan I started to formulate when I realized Mr. Brumley’s presence was not some odd May game. The plan that was only half-formed when I kept it secret from Mama, and fully formed by the time I fell asleep on my first night as a *very* wealthy man.

The following months, more than six before I was satisfied, served to provide me with the solid foundation for reputation I needed to acquire. Thus the women. And wild parties. Then wilder ones still until the last major one ranked as a full-blown orgy. At which I was, indeed, blown in an unlit corridor by a man I never identified but who was remarkably skilled at swallowing... everything.

A few more parties which were progressively, but not noticeably so, milder. A few more extravagant expenditures. A few more fucks with women paid well enough to keep their mouths shut if my performance was not as skilled as they perhaps expected. But then, when you are desperately imagining a man's mouth or arse around your cock, as opposed to the reality of a woman's cunt, just to keep yourself hard, your performance will not be as skilled as it would if you had reality beneath you instead of your imaginings.

I thus demonstrated to my father, clearly and unequivocally, that I had repented of my sinful and perverted ways. And had gone on, in quite glorious and ostentatious fashion, to embrace the many and varied *acceptable* perversions permitted to the men of my class.

A man who likes men, who likes a man's hands on his body, a man's mouth or arse surrounding his cock, cannot repent what he did not choose, and does not refrain from repeating those perversions except by an exercise of will far greater than any I was willing, or perhaps even capable, of exercising. A man in that position simply becomes discreet. And if my hand was exercised far more than any alternative method of setting loose my seed, for I never sowed where it might be fertile; if I then relied on my imagination far more than on action, that was the way I knew it had to be. The only way it could ever be.

As it had been. Until now. Until the beginnings with Rory and Michel.

Until I began to dream, only to have those dreams die in a duel that did not kill anything else.

Despite my certainty that those dreams might come true if Rory and Michel knew the truth about each other, I have no certainty whatsoever about the outcome if learning the truth was not based on one of them releasing me from my word. All it would take is one. But just as Rory furiously forbade me to go to Michel the night before the duel, reeking of our sex and thus risking inadvertent breach of my word, harping at either or both of them to release me poses a similar risk.

And what compounds my annoyance is that if my bastard shite-heads had just left my fucking watch alone so that I arrived early at the clearing, I *would* have said “fuck it all!” that morning. I would have dragged their arses away from seconds and doctors, and politely, calmly, in a caring tone of voice, whisper-shouted at them, “I’m fed up with this shite, you arseholes. You’re both fucking friends of fucking Edward’s, and I’m bloody tired of separate, secret sex, when we could be fucking and sucking together. Now call this bloody stupid duel off, and let’s go find a bed somewhere.”

That would have worked. I know it would.

And I have imagined so many times since then, cock in hand, what we three might have done in that bedroom.

I was not so drunk that my cock could not stand, so I stroked, and imagined, and drank, and imagined more. Imagined, in particular, fucking Rory on his side, with my right leg up and over his, while long and lean Michel eased that vastly valuable cock into my arse. And as we set seed free in my imaginings, I set my own seed free into my palm. God forbid the servants should *know* from stains or damp spots what I have been doing in my own library.

I drank some more and eventually staggered upstairs to bed. As I fell into it, I vowed I would make an appearance or three in public over the next few days of their absence, lest I appear to be brooding over that fact.

I kept my vow.

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Peregrine

Wednesday, 10 April 1816

11:45 p.m.

Almack's

London

“I’m not going to marry you, you know.”

A known rake, making an appearance at Almack’s, that den of matrimonial iniquity, must be dressed in full ton armor: clothes, attitude and a set of the mind both alert to, and standing fast against, the slightest hint of a lurking parson’s noose. Once properly armored, even while twirling some young lady, delightful or otherwise, around the dance floor in a somewhat sedate waltz, a rake should be impervious to marriage-related surprises.

I was well-armored. Experienced in the use of my armor. And I discovered I was not at all impervious to the marital shock of Lady Anthea blithely announcing her intent to marry me. I bloody well nearly stopped dancing and dragged her to the side to demand, politely, what the bloody hell she was talking about. I would probably have done so, despite the inevitability of thereby initiating a series of collisions amongst the other dancers, except that I realized I had misheard her words. There was a “not” most definitely in that sentence.

The safety of the “not” that would not knot any noose around my neck enabled me to dance on. Though I looked down at her and whispered, mockingly, “I am, of course, quite, *quite* devastated that you will never be my own. I am not sure how I shall bear up under the devastation of the loss.”

Oh, she had so delightfully matured these past months. Gaining her own form of town bronze, becoming more assured; making friends even among the debutantes who were her chief competitors in the beauty and marriage sweepstakes; learning to flirt, from subtlety to a form of *almost*-outlandishness peculiarly and *innocently* her own, which never crossed the line that would bring down the wrath of the ton on her gorgeous head.

She twinkled up at me. “Perhaps... wine, women and song would help you survive the loss?”

Oh, what a daring minx she was. Yet I not merely suspected but was entirely certain that this type of teasing was something she reserved for the

three members of the former Three R's. As we were now occasionally referred to. Two *different* sets of "Two R's" did not have the same *panache*.

Lady Anthea would never make a remark like that to anyone else, as those words could so readily be perceived as proof she was fast, not demure and virgin. I naturally could not explain that it would be wine, *men*, and the occasional bawdy song while thoroughly in my cups, that would help me get over my loss.

Last night there was only wine in my library, certainly no man to make my cock stand except in my imaginings, and I didn't do any singing that I could recall.

The music drew to a close, and I escorted her to the table with the, by now, very tepid punch and dried food items, that even in their original state could never have been described as edible, much less delicacies.

As she put a cup to her lips, I said, "Do you know, Lady Anthea, I must be getting old far more rapidly than I had thought, as I seem to have acquired—or is that *lost*?—a most lamentable memory. I was not aware we had discussed matrimony. And I would certainly never offer for you without having your father's consent first. Or did I?"

"Well, you *are* fairly old, so it is entirely understandable you might be forgetful at times," said the young lady of not-that-much-over eighteen to a man on the downhill slope to thirty.

"Has some wicked fairy or other substituted *you* for the real Lady Anthea? The real Lady Anthea is shy, demure, not at all outspoken. Why, she would never say *boo!* to a goose! Although I have always wondered why one would ever *want* to say *boo!* to a goose, since doing so would simply set the goose off in a tizzy. And geese in a tizzy are dangerous."

She took another sip, and then sighed. "I guess I am being a silly goose, but... I just thought you might have heard something. So I wanted to, well, reassure you."

"Heard what?"

Another sigh, this one a little more forlorn. "Mother has decided that since the Three... uh, since you, and Lord Vidal and Mr. MacLean have all been so nice to the family, and to me, that there is some sort of... competition going on between you. For me.

“She has also decided that as a second son, Mr. MacLean is not eligible, and for reasons she has not confided in me, while Lord Vidal is acceptable, *you* are the one I should marry. And she has, well, been, ah, *hinting* to her friends that something is in the offing. Between us. You and me.”

I could not give her a hug in public, nor even in private, so I hoped that my voice would convey what my arms were not permitted. “No one has said anything to me, Lady Anthea. And if Mama has heard of this, and knowing Mama, she undoubtedly has, and *if* she believed there were anything to it, or that I could be forced, willy-nilly, into something, she would have both alerted me *and* taken care of it. So we will both have to bear up under the strain of this, ah, tragic loss.”

Tension that she had carefully managed to hide drained out of her. “Well, my lord, you are certainly not the *worst* of choices. If I had to choose just now.”

“I am so relieved to know that I am the best of a bad lot. So who in this ‘lot’ of yours are worse than me?”

“Lord Beckwith.” And her voice went completely flat.

I froze, and I could not really help that my voice held some of that frost. “Indeed. I quite agree. The worst of the lot, I suspect, no matter which members of the ton make up the rest of the lot.”

That bastard. He would get Lady Anthea over my dead and bleeding body. Or his dead and bleeding body. I could live with that. On the Continent, if I had to.

“But do you know, my dear,” I said, replacing the frost with genuine warmth, “I think you should stop worrying yourself about him. It will never happen. Although be very sure you are never alone with him, no matter what story he might tell you, no matter how believable a tale he offers, if that tale could even lead to the slightest possibility of being in private with the man. And with him, I suggest it is far safer to simply assume that *any* tale he tells you that would result in your leaving a room full of people, even if, in theory, he is escorting you to another room full of people, is meant to entice you into being alone with him. Thereby forcing a marriage.”

“Are you... are you really that sure?”

It did not matter if she was asking whether I was sure about Beckwith or sure she would never marry him. I was positive either way. “I am. And I give you my word of honor, my dear. You won’t be marrying Beckwith.”

She looked happy again. And then she looked inward, and smiled. A really extraordinary, extraordinary smile. Not at all for me. But it had to be for *someone*.

“So. You have rejected my desperate suit out of hand, leaving me to tear my hair and go off in despair and write bad, sad poetry. You have quite properly rejected Lord Beckwith. You clearly won’t give the time of day to *most* of your other suitors, but that smile... that smile was for someone *special*. Who most certainly is not me.”

Her blush was that gentle rose that went so well with her fair skin. It accented the look of a young lady who was fairly certain she was in love, and with the right man, but not *utterly* certain of him or herself. “Lord Ramsey.” And she blushed again.

The name was not that of a man who ran in the same circles that I did, which was a step in the right direction for Lady Anthea. “Is he here tonight?”

She nodded.

“Do you recall how your brother scribbled for you the night we met? Mortally wounding the man who had been on your dance card before Bennington scribbled him out and scribbled me in?”

She looked like she was considering telling me the awful “truth” about that night, but I wagged my finger at her, and she closed her mouth.

“Is he on your card?”

“No.” Her voice made it clear the omission was her mother’s... responsibility.

“Very well, then. Since I have my name down for another dance, let us scribble me out and scribble him in.”

“But my mother...”

Another finger waggle silenced her, indicating quite clearly that all would be well if she would only put her trust in me. She handed me her card, and I did the requisite scribbling. “Now. I suppose if I were to look about for the young man whose expression combined great sorrow with a fierce glare at me, I would be looking at Lord Ramsey?”

She was torn between not wanting to admit that I was right, and giggling. The little giggle won. As I returned her card and casually shifted to look about,

I discovered I was nearly right. Lord, save me from another innocent on the town. Well, I had already done my good deed for the next decade with Bennington, so Bennington could repay me by assisting his sister. A task I would set him on as soon as he and Rory and the others returned from their kill-fest in the wilds of... I couldn't quite remember.

I held out my left arm, and she placed her hand in the crook of my elbow. I led her over to the man who might possibly be "her" young man, though as whoever "they" are say, only time would tell the truth of that tale. I held out my hand to him. "Ramsey. Somerville."

I both reminded him who he was as he had an uncertain look about him and identified myself. He looked at my hand very carefully, as if considering whether it might be a cobra about to attack him, but not for long enough to be insulting. He shook it with surprising strength for one as nervous and slightly out of his depth as he appeared to be.

"Ramsey, I would appreciate it if you would do me a great favor this evening." I then paused, so that the silence and the necessities of ton manners compelled him to commit himself without knowing who, for example, he might be required to assassinate.

"Of course, my lord."

"I have just now received a most urgent message, which unfortunately requires me to leave immediately." I paused to let them get used to the inordinately large rapper I had just told—one about which they would have to act as if they believed it—when everyone in the bloody room knew I had been approached by no one at all, much less anyone carrying an "urgent" message for me.

"I have expressed my regrets to dear Lady Anthea, but I won't be able to join her in the next dance. May I deputize you to take my place?" I looked away so as to avoid being burnt by all that brilliantly rising sunlight.

"Of course, only if *you* agree, Lady Anthea," I said, naturally ignoring who had been plotting with whom, and the scribbling already done.

She most artfully expressed her regret that I was so unexpectedly called away, and her demure acceptance of my proposal. Of course, she had to get a slight dig in at her hopeful swain. "That is, if *you* are willing to dance with me."

The artful baggage thus got him to fall all over himself reassuring her of his supreme joy, the honor, couldn't ask for anything finer to happen, and so on

and so on. *Ad nauseum*. God save me from the requited or unrequited love of young men and women.

God, grant me the *requited* love of two not-so-young men. Though God had patently not been listening for a *long* time.

I put that thought aside, left them to their tender staring, and went to Lady Bennington. By the time I advised her of the change of plans, Ramsey and my erstwhile dance partner were on the floor, where a mother could do nothing about it without drawing unwanted attention to herself and her daughter. She didn't believe my rapper any more than the other two did, but then she wasn't really required to *believe*... just to *pretend* that she did.

After mutual not-quite-true, not-quite-false assurances of mutual respect and admiration, I made my escape.

I walked a little way down the street to my carriage, got in, rapped the roof to get started, and leaned back, frowning.

Beckwith and Lady Anthea?

Not fucking likely.

My promise was impulsively rash, possibly stupid. I had no *right* to interfere in her life, nor in her father's decisions about her life. Perhaps Lord Bennington was caring enough to let her marry for love, if that was what was between her and Ramsey. Or perhaps he was a typical ton father, marrying his daughter off for bloodlines, or wealth, or political or social alliances, or land, or in the right circumstances, all of those. And if he was *that* type of father, Beckwith might be able to persuade him.

Going directly to Lord Bennington and slandering Beckwith by telling the truth was simply not in the cards. And I had no idea whether young Bennington would be any more receptive to my inserting myself into this family matter.

But still...

But still... something had to be done.

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Rory

Saturday, 13 April 1816

Late morning

Earl of Glenhaven's Estate

Hampshire

A clearing near a particularly fine fishing spot

“Bugger the bishop.”

I stopped undressing and looked at Peregrine. He was already naked, having become remarkably adept at getting that way, considering how rarely we were able to enjoy a naked fuck. I stood with my shirt in my hand, admiring the view. He had planted his rump on a large stump, our fishing equipment behind it, and was leaning forward, his left forearm on his thigh, his left hand dangling over his knee. Oddly enough, his upper body was twisted so that his right elbow rested on his left thigh; his arm was angled up and out, with his hand folded palm down, fingers almost level, pointing toward his shoulder. His chin rested on his knuckles and the back of his right hand.

With the mild spring sunlight draped over him, he... *glowed*. And as usual, was unaware of just how very beautiful he was. I wished I had the talent of that French artist, Prude-something, so I could paint a picture of him as he was just then, thinking so intently. Or perhaps his magnificence should be preserved in life-sized bronze. Where is an artist or a sculptor when you need one?

But his thinking and my admiring were not accomplishing what we were here for. Not that a *little* time couldn't be used for teasing.

“I didn't realize you liked that kind of pretending.”

“Uh... what?” He raised his head to look at me, dropped his right arm, so his palm was resting on his right knee. He naturally gave in to his Edwardian instincts, and spread his legs, inviting me to look and enjoy. I declined the invitation. Mostly. Slightly.

Not at all.

But I pulled my attention away to go on with the tease as I stripped for him.

“We *could* do that, if you wished.”

“If I wished what? What are you blathering on about?”

I balanced on one foot, then the other, pulling off my stockings, tossing them out of the way. “Buggering bishops, of course. Your idea. Only... do you really think I have enough bishopness in me to be any good in the role? As I would be the one being buggered, of course. And we don't have any... what are they, vestments? ...about, and a bishop should really have vestments while he's being buggered, shouldn't he, so you know it's a bishop you're buggering and not just some naked man who's offering his arse up to you? Or what's the bloody buggering point?”

By the end of all that, I was naked, hard, leaking. “So... what kind of bishop-like position do you want me in? If it's kneeling, that's just going to get your cock sucked, not my arse fucked.”

“I do not want to bugger bishops!”

We were fortunately far enough out in the country that that shout was unlikely to be heard.

I can be *so* superbly dim-witted at times. “But that's what you said. Unless... is that the name of some new position you want to try? Or a game of chance, perhaps?”

I loved making him grit his teeth. “Not you, you bloody idiot. I was talking about the Bishop of Harwell!”

I also loved getting him to lose his oh-so-English, nothing-whatsoever-fazes-me lack of expression. I took things a notch upward. I dropped my mouth open as widely as was appropriate for portraying shock (my cocksucking mouth-opening was naturally wider than that). “You want to bloody fuck the Bishop of Harwell?” I shuddered artistically, which made my cock wiggle back and forth, which distracted him just a mite.

He started to snap back and finally realized I was giving him my best dense Rory imitation. “Bastard.”

I gave him “Shite-head” right back. We both grinned, but then his face settled into solemnity.

Well, damn. We clearly had to clear the air or this clearing was clearly not going to enjoy any fucking.

“So why *do* you want to bugger this bishop?” I held my hand up to stop any outburst. “So to speak.”

“I heard his sermon last Sunday.”

Peregrine in a church? And the Lord had not smote... smited? ...the walls with bolts of lightning, or opened the earth to swallow him up? "So? I agree, listening to most sermons is more than sufficient reason to shoot the one preaching, or yourself, if the agony is great enough."

"The sermon was about us."

"*What?*" It was my turn to shout.

"Not *us*, us, Rory. It was about friends of Edward's. About our degenerate ways, that led to the depraved attack of a horde of unknown neddy boys on two innocent pillars of the ton. Carswell and Jackson... *innocent!* Then on to the great danger we pose to the moral fabric of the nation. The even greater danger we are to children... *children*, Rory. How we are a rising plague which must be burned out before it can destroy the country. And then he urged everyone to support the efforts of Lord Beckwith to make the abominable sin of sodomy a secular, *hanging* offense, once again, to correct a gross error made in the licentious and lewd days of the early Restoration. But until that mistake can be corrected, neddy boys must be taught their place. Forcefully.

"God damn it, Rory, that fucking bishop *blessed* the bangers, encouraged them to go out and *hurt* us, perhaps even kill us, all couched in pious language that he could use to deny any such charge."

He sighed again. A lost, forlorn sigh. "And there's nothing we can bloody do about it."

Other than fight back, as we had fought at the Dock... if we were attacked. But if the bangers were roving about in packs of rabid dogs, neddy boys *were* going to be hurt. Perhaps die.

Not exactly one of the subjects I anticipated for today. Indeed, I'd been thinking more along the lines of a great deal of silence unless whimpers, moans, whines and the other interesting noises associated with superb fucking were heard.

Which brought up two questions I decided needed to be answered so we could get back to, actually, *get to*, my arse being fucked. What in the bloody hell he was doing in a church and why in the even more bloody hell we were talking about this now. So I asked him.

He looked sheepish. "Last Saturday was a quasi-regular fatherly inquisition on the nature of my life, my only somewhat reformed ways, just how much of

my inheritance I had wasted on riotous living. The usual. But then he went off on a new tangent and demanded that I accompany him to services at St. Aethelstan's the next morning. For the good of my immortal soul. Most unfortunately, Mama came into the room about that time, and her expression put paid to the set-down I was about to administer to him.

"Having given my word, I showed up on his doorstep the next morning, at precisely the time demanded, so that my lateness was one battle we could avoid. Only Mama did not go with us. Indeed, there were no women in the church. Just a hundred or so men filling the vastly uncomfortable, cushion-less ancient wooden pews. Some of the most influential men of the ton. Some who wanted to be. Beckwith, obviously. Though from his mostly concealed glares at me, he did not for one instant believe I was there as an actual or potential new reformationist."

He smiled at me, knowing my thoughts on him and church and the high potential for lightning strikes or earthquakes. Which was just as likely for me. And damned Vidal.

"As for what brought this all up... you did."

"I what?"

"You asked me how my visit with my father went. So it's your fault."

"That was *small talk*, Peregrine. Which means casual conversation on utterly unimportant matters, as you are so apparently unaware. I could have asked you how the damned weather was. If you'd had a good shit this morning. You could have bloody well just said 'Fine!' to any of those questions, and gone on from there. You didn't have to bog us down in cock-limping talk about something you already know we can do nothing about right now. Particularly since there aren't any bangers around about to attack us."

"But..."

I cut him off. Peregrine has a reasonably fine sense of the ridiculous, so that's what I went with. Ridiculous. And ridicule.

"Do you see any bangers about?" I waved my arms in the general direction of the enormous bushes and thick trees that hid us from anyone walking on the path—the same pissing path of last year's fond and somewhat *wet* memories.

"Or perhaps they're hiding? Waiting to leap upon us when we're distracted by cocks in holes? Like your bloody damned cock riding up my arse like you

promised me, you bastard shite-head! Perhaps they'll come if we call them, and we can get it over with and get on with the fucking.”

I raised my voice, and gave my best *loud* impression of proper kitten-calling, while turning in a circle and making beckoning gestures. “Here, bangers, bangers, bangers! Here, bangers, bangers, bangers!”

Ridiculous ridicule worked. Peregrine laughed.

I stopped twirling, walked over to him, stood between his spread legs. Began stroking my cock. “Now, just so we are clear on all this. How was your visit with your father?”

Peregrine choked, took his eyes away from my hardening prick, and looked up at me. He saw the “Well?” expression on my face and said, “Fine.”

“How is the weather today?”

“Ah, fine.”

“And did you have a good shit this morning?”

“F-f-f-fine,” he managed before letting loose the laughter.

I put paid to *that* by bending a bit, grabbing his ears and hauling his wide open mouth down onto my prick, and then working it into his throat. Once I was sure I had his complete attention, I said, “This is what’s going to happen. First, we’re both going to forget all this shite, forget anything other than us, here and now. Acceptable?”

I used his ear-handles to nod his head up and down in agreement. Damn, but that felt nice on my cock. Then I eased my cock back, let him get some additional air and slid it back in again.

“Second, I’m going to fuck your face until I seed your throat, to take the edge off. Is that acceptable, as well?”

I received a vigorous arse-wipish yes-grunt in reply.

“Once you’ve cleaned my prick properly, I’m going to suck your cock for a while until I’m hard again. And probably work several spit-slicked fingers up your arse to rub you inside while I do. But you’re not going to seed from that, are you?”

I gave his head a negative side-to-side move so he wouldn’t waste any of his strength. I wanted to be sure he had more than enough for the kind of fucking I wanted, needed, deserved.

“And then, once I’m ready... I won’t make you wait more than a minute or three... I’m going to get down on all fours, you’re going to tongue-fuck my arse until it’s as loose as it’s going to get from just your tongue, then you’re going to spit-slime your cock and shove it in. Balls-deep. After which you will provide me with a bloody brilliant fucking! Acceptable?”

Peregrine combined a vigorous up and down head motion, with expert licks and slurps on my cock, plus a dry but invigorating finger forcefully up my arse, bollocks fondling, and an eloquent arse-wipish moan that even a beginning student of the language would understand meant, “Yes, dear God, fucking bloody yes!”

So it was written and so it was done. And by the time a lightly sunburned Peregrine, his back and arse deliciously pink, and I realized it was time to return, the tally was: Fucks 4, Fish 0.

Once back, we naturally bemoaned the loss of all the fish that got away.

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Michel

2 May 1816

11:45 p.m.

Card room, White's

London

“Did you know there is a Friends of Edward Society in Paris?” Bennington asked as he laid down the ten of hearts and took the trick. “Just like the one in London. They modeled it after the one here.”

When Peregrine is surprised by what he is told, at a time when he is eating or drinking, those near him are in danger of needing to have their garments cleaned. It was a close call this time, but though he choked on the brandy he had just sipped, he managed to clamp his hand over his mouth, turn fiery red, and keep it all in. Why Bennington's words should be so shocking I had no idea, and if I decided it was truly important I would question him later.

We held up play to allow him to recover. Bennington led a spade, and Peregrine asked in what I knew to be a falsely casual tone, “Surely that's just some rumor?”

“Oh, no. Palmer and Biggles, the best of good chums, just returned from Paris. It's all the talk. It's called, uh, *Les Amis de la Société Edward*, uh, pardon my French—” he said as he somewhat mangled the pronunciation. “And their motto is, uh...”

I had heard the stories going round London, of course, so I assumed the French motto would be the same. I supplied him with the words. “*Nous sommes fous comme l'enfer, et nous ne sommes pas putain de prendre plus.* We're mad as hell and we're not fucking taking it anymore.”

Bennington collected the trick. “Thank you, Vidal. I would have mangled that even more than trying to say the Society's name. Anyway, the tale is that the French have their own, ah, bangers, and the neddy boys are fighting back. Winning, too, more often than not. They even have groups of neddy boys patrolling areas that are, ah, *popular* with those men.”

He led another spade. “Although I have often wondered, well, not really *often*, since I really hadn't thought about it before hearing all the tales here

about the bangers and the neddy boys fighting back, why are they called 'boys?' They're men."

"They're called neddy boys because that's what they are called," Peregrine snapped. "It is what they have always been called. From time immemorial or something. But forget names. What is this about patrolling?"

He waved away Bennington's attempt to answer.

"No, no, the idea is ridiculous. Absurd. Neddy boys in gowns and wigs, tottering around in high-heeled slippers, pounding at the bangers with beaded purses or fans adorned with gaudy, paste jewels?" Peregrine's voice was harsh and he took a large gulp to finish off his brandy. He held the glass up. The excellent waiter for our table immediately noticed and brought him another. Peregrine finally noticed that the trick was ours and took it.

Bennington was thoughtful as he waited for the trick to finish and the next play to begin. "Actually, no. They wear dominos, and sturdy clothes and carry short clubs to protect themselves. And others. They wear masks, too. I suppose they don't want their identities to be known over there any more than a neddy boy would here."

"They're not..."

I kicked Peregrine's shin, not-quite-fatally wounding my own foot in the process, and he shut up. I feared he was about to explain that "neddy boy" was an offensive term, an insult, and that the proper phrasing was "a friend of Edward's." Which would have led to questions about how he was suddenly so well-versed in what neddy boys thought to be slanderous, when moments earlier he virtually disclaimed all knowledge of their history.

Apparently Bennington had not heard the remark I cut off, as he collected the last trick and began noting the points on a tally card. He and Chuffy were winning. One rubber apiece, and we were in the second game of the third rubber, battling for this evening's championship. Peregrine and I were going to lose if a miracle did not occur. Chuffy's bragging would be bloody unbearable.

Peregrine abruptly changed the subject. To a topic I could not quite believe he had any interest in. "How is Lady Anthea these days? Has she met anyone special?"

Peregrine interested in the marital aspirations of a young lady he barely... Well, no. Now that I thought of it, since last September we have all seen her not

infrequently, talked with her at least briefly, and often, but not always, danced with her at least once. But still... surely this inquiry went beyond the boundaries of a public acquaintance and into private matters.

I half-expected Bennington to evade answering, but his reaction was, instead, simply... odd.

“Actually, she has. A Lord Ramsey. Not someone I think you might know, Somerville.”

“And yet, as it happens, I do. A fine young man. Fine family. If I had any belief your parents would listen to me, I would commend him most highly as a possible son-in-law. Have they met him?”

He had moved from a mild marital inquiry into promoting a specific marital prospect. What in the bloody hell was going on?

Bennington nodded. Another oddity was that there was an underlying tenseness in his face, in the set of his shoulders, as he talked about his sister's potential happiness.

“They have, Somerville. And though it will not be officially announced just yet, they have decided he would make... an *acceptable* husband for her, though he is not precisely what our parents would have preferred. There was another suitor...”

Bennington paused, and looked at Peregrine, and *something* passed between them. Had I not been watching closely, I would not have seen the nearly invisible nod that Peregrine gave. The type of nod that says “you're welcome.”

Bennington realized that having started on the tale, he might as well conclude it. “There was, as I said another suitor. Though frankly, if I were the father of a hopeful daughter, I would call him more of a *bidder*. He kept offering increasing amounts as a settlement, as though he was at an auction to purchase goods off a ship newly arrived from the Indies, its holds filled with treasure. The final ‘bid’ was not insubstantial, but Father declined. I cannot say I *persuaded* him to allow Anthea to wed where her heart is, but I think what I had to say might have, ah, tipped the balance of the scales.”

“So it was you who cost Beckwith his bride?” Viscount Wolsey asked. His voice was jarring, since we had not noticed him, nor realized he was listening to our conversation.

“Eavesdropping, Wolsey? Again?” said Peregrine. “Our private conversation doesn’t concern you. I suggest you move along.”

“Or what?”

“Or...” Peregrine was starting to rise, when Bennington interrupted him.

“Thank you, Somerville. But... *I have this.*”

And at Bennington’s tone, Peregrine relaxed back into his chair. The boy... the young man... had matured admirably these past months.

Bennington shifted slightly in his chair so he could look at Wolsey more directly. The movement was a subtle insult, as though the conversation was of insufficient importance for him to bother standing up. Even looking up at the older man, there was nothing subservient about Bennington.

“Now, I believe you had a question for me? S-something about Lord Beckwith and his bride?”

“No need for a question. You’ve admitted it.”

“Admitted what?” Bland puzzlement, striving for enlightenment. Most effective.

“That you cost Beckwith his bride.” Wolsey, whose temper was never far away, was starting to let it loose.

“Yet I don’t believe I ever mentioned a n-n-name. Did I mention a name?” He looked around at the three of us, who dutifully acknowledged no name had been mentioned. We ignored the slight stutter as we always did whenever it surfaced.

“You are a close friend of Lord Beckwith’s, are you not?”

Wolsey responded with a curt nod.

“S-s-...” He stopped, held his breath, inhaled. “So... since I named no names, are *you* admitting that your good friend, Lord Beckwith, was, ah, engaged in the business of buying a bride, and his bid was unsuccessful? That he could not woo and win a young lady on his own, but had to resort to purchase?”

Wolsey’s flush was of the angry variety, but he had enough control to look around and realize how many men were now watching... and listening... thanks to him. “Of course not.”

“Ah. Then, there was a simple misunderstanding. You, ah, *misheard*, perhaps?”

If Wolsey clenched his jaw any tighter, he might well lose some teeth. He looked as though it pained him to say “Yes,” and it undoubtedly did. He turned and walked away.

Bennington took a *very* deep breath, and turned back to face Chuffy, ignoring the general buzz of conversation that started up when that little scene was through.

“Now, where were we?” Bennington asked.

“I haven’t the foggiest notion,” Peregrine said. “In fact, Vidal, let’s simply concede the game. They bloody well would have won anyway.”

I agreed, and with a raised hand, a look, and a circled finger, signaled our waiter for another round. Peregrine picked up the deck to his left, set it to his right, picked it up again after Bennington’s cut and began to deal. I began shuffling the deck from the conceded game.

We looked at each other momentarily during the dealing and shuffling, and having known each other so long, could easily see that we were both thinking the same thing. A conclusion and a question. Bennington had made an enemy tonight, though he had technically named no names. Was he strong enough to handle that enmity?

We continued playing and three rubbers later, Peregrine and I remained soundly defeated. We duly paid our princely debts of honor: fifteen shillings each.

As we each went our separate ways, after a final flurry of bragging about brilliant play, and bemoaning abandonment by luck, Peregrine and I “found” ourselves side by side, waiting for our carriages.

“What can we do?”

Peregrine shrugged. “Nothing, I’m afraid. We can’t act as his protectors and impugn his manhood.”

“So we... what? Watch and wait? And hope we can intercede if we are needed?”

Peregrine nodded. Our carriages were arriving, and suddenly I wanted something more out of this night than the pleasure of being with friends, something to take away the taste of danger, and substitute... another taste.

“Ride with me.”

Only he saw my quick glance down to his “display” and up again. He grinned and nodded.

We sent his carriage home, and I told my driver to take us to the Golden Deck. A gaming hell chosen solely because even at this time of night it was nearly a half hour’s drive.

It was more than ample time, with the curtains carefully drawn, for two friends of Edward’s to use an enclosed carriage for the purposes for which it had been designed. The first part of the drive was spent with me on my knees, despite the cramped space, Peregrine’s fingers untying the ribbon that held my hair back, then threading his fingers through it to get a good grip on my head. He was almost ruthless, my Peregrine, holding my head, not immobile, but as mobile as he wished me to be, as he fucked and fucked and fucked my throat, until he finally seeded me.

Then it was my turn to disregard appearances and dishevel the sun-bright blond hair I could see so clearly in my imaginings, but not at all in the darkness, as I far more gently guided Peregrine’s cocksucking. He was not all that experienced, I learned after that first night of getting his cock into my mouth, but since then he has learned to swallow every inch... every guinea? ...of me. He practices in private, he says, but not on cocks. Zucchini, he claims. Pickles, I believe.

Some other day I will be able to fuck his face as vigorously as he now uses mine. Not because of some sort of payback, but rather because of the thrill of that kind of control. I don’t often crave it, preferring to be the one controlled, at least in terms of sucking cock. But I found myself craving it with him. And since he was the only cock in my life, other than my own, I would have to train him for it. A process he and I would both enjoy.

Not far from our destination I seeded him, and seeded him so well a bit of my seed dripped out of the side of his mouth onto my thumb. I pulled my cock slowly out, and he sucked my thumb back in to get the last of his reward for a job superbly done.

I was, of course, most apologetic to my driver for making him drive all this way only to tell him we had changed our minds about gambling, and he would need to take Viscount Somerville home and then me.

We spent *that* drive in the dark as well, kissing, caressing, fondling softened cocks until they re-hardened, and by the time we were a few blocks from Somerville House, I made him explode again, only this time, in my mouth, where I could taste him.

A *most* enjoyable time was had by all.

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Peregrine

23 May 1816

10:45 a.m.

Somerville House

London

It is a scientific truth that all bad things happen in groups of three.

The “bad things” on this occasion were letters.

Unless I recognize the handwriting on the envelope, or recognize from its size and shape that it is an invitation, I have begun to dread the delivery of the post.

The first was Bennington’s hurried, almost illegible note—does no one train young gentlemen any more to write a clear hand?—from last Saturday, begging off from an excursion to a mill. He and his family were returning to the country for the summer, slightly earlier than they had originally planned. He had, it seemed, been attacked by bangers who had mistaken him for a neddy boy, and “had your good friend and mine, Mr. MacLean” not been there, by pure happenstance, of course, he might have been seriously injured. However, I was not to concern myself. His injuries were minor, but his mama was making a fuss over him, and he thought it best not to deny her the opportunity. They would, he assured me, return to England in late summer. But definitely in time for the Birthday Ball at Alderson House.

Happenstance, my arse. And Rory had said nothing to me about it. Though I had not seen him since, and whatever he had to say about the attack, it was probably better not to put the words on paper. Except that Rory’s letter of two days ago said nothing whatsoever about Bennington or the attack.

Instead, he regretted to inform me, by the time I saw his letter he would be on his way to Scotland and Castle Strathairn. His brother had died an alcohol-induced death. He was riding in a hunt, too drunk to recognize that neither he nor his mount were in any condition, after a long day of riding and drinking, to safely jump a stone wall. Even if there had not been a twenty-foot drop behind it. His horse died on one side of the wall, and after his fall, Malcolm, the Master of Strathairn, died on the other side.

Which happened on 25th April. I had to re-read the date to be sure I had read correctly. His father had waited three weeks and more before sending word to let Rory know he was now the heir? Except it was Donal, the steward, who had written. Rory whined at me about the nearly impossible task of reading Donal's crossed pages, while ignoring the difficulties he was giving me. As Donal had been with the family for some years and was not one to panic, Rory concluded that when Donal urged him to come home as rapidly as may be to deal with Strathairn, the situation there was in some way dire.

He was, he said, deeply sorry to have to leave England. His return was uncertain. Perhaps by the Alderson Ball in September. He was, most sincerely, Ruaidhri Fearghas MacLean, Master of Strathairn.

Michel's note was shortest of all.

Dear Peregrine,

There are matters I need to think about, in a venue far quieter than London. And it has been some time since I have visited my estates and properties in person. It will perforce be somewhat of a zigzag journey, which will end at La Belle Maison. I will return in August, I believe, depending on what I find at the properties. In any event, certainly by the Alderson Ball.

With best wishes for a most enjoyable summer, I am,

Most sincerely yours,

Michel

Damn! And damn, and damn again.

I had no way of knowing when Michel was going to zig or zag in any particular direction, or even where all his estates or properties were, and thus no way of following him, or catching up with him. I could, of course, journey north and do a Viola imitation: build a willow cabin outside the gates of La Belle Maison. If I only had willows and knew how to build a cabin.

Or I could find out where Castle Strathairn was and go there.

Both alternatives seemed somewhat... excessive... just to get a marvelous suck and a magnificent fuck.

My right hand was certainly going to get a vast amount of use these next few months.

And it did.

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Rory

20 August 1816

Nearing 2:00 a.m.

Castle Strathairn

Highlands, Scotland

This has to stop.

I could have been fucked by Colin any time these past three months.

I could have been fucking with Laird McDowell's younger brother, who is a fine strong laddie with a fine strong prick that could fit in my arse perfectly.

And I turned them down.

Damn Peregrine.

Damn Michel.

Every cock stand is caused by one of them. Or with increasing frequency, both of them. Or the imaginings of the three of us. Of what we could do together, or to, or with, or for each other.

I need to apologize to him. Grovel, if necessary. Tell him the truth about me. Persuade him that he and I can be friends. That we can be the Three R's again. And that I will not assault him anymore.

Yes!

I went to the door, opened it with barely a pull. I was still unused to the ease with which it opened, but then, this was the bedroom assigned to the Master of Strathairn. The doors of the room for the second son—and until Malcolm's death, no second son in the past century or more had ever become Master—opened only with difficulty and much howling of hinges. I bellowed, "Donal!"

And then for good measure, bellowed it twice more.

Donal was old, hard of hearing, though I thought he heard far more than he let us believe, and looked as though a breeze off the loch would waft him away. He was also quite probably the strongest man in the Castle. Not a man anyone crossed more than once. My "once" was when I was ten. My arsehole still tightens with the remembered terror of that spanking. Although I don't recall

what I did to merit the punishment, I am certain I never did it again. Nor anything else that might put me at risk of a repeat.

He glared at me when he finally arrived. “Aye?”

It was not his somewhat pleasant, but never remotely servant-like “Aye”—which was the closest he came to friendliness. This was closer to the “Aye” which was actually a “nay” that indicated you were on the verge of his severe displeasure.

The longcase clock in the hallway bonged—with ear-aching loudness—twice. Bloody hell. It was gone two in the morning. And old men, even *strong* old men, need at least some sleep.

Damn.

Yet I couldn't apologize, as Donal considered apologies a sign of weakness. And will I, nill I, I was now the Master. So I looked up at him—even wizened he was taller than me—and said, “I'm returning to London. Have my things packed, and the carriage ready at ten. I'll need a hundred in ready money. Transfer... five hundred to my account at Strode's Bank.”

The bank officials would undoubtedly be reeling with shock at the size of the deposit. Father's quarterly allowance for the spare heir only *aspired* to the status of being a pittance.

“And when will you be back?”

That gave me pause. I couldn't exactly tell him that it wouldn't be until Peregrine had fucked me through every flat or vertical surface that we could find in a location that afforded even a slight bit of privacy, or fucked me bent over just about anything, and then not until I was sated. Until I somehow persuaded a man who disliked men having sex with each other, that we could nevertheless be strictly hands-off, mouth-off, cock-off friends. I opted for what I hoped was a Masterful, “I don't bloody know.”

That got me another glare, but at least no argument. I had wrested control of the family's finances away from Strathairn not long after I got here. Neal, the man whose cock might have been regularly pounding my arse, had I not been so stupidly faithful to a man who had never sworn anything at all to me, much less faithfulness, turned out to be unusually talented at business. And as the brother of a laird with two bonny, strapping sons of his own, he did not have much to do with his life. He eagerly accepted my offer, and over the past three

months we had put the Strathairns back on the road to financial stability. And on the road to making Strathairn Aged the best, and therefore best-selling, whisky in Scotland. Bloody hell, in England, Wales, Ireland, and the rest of the bloody damned Empire.

Neal could take care of matters in my absence, and contact me when something required my specific decision. I decided that if I could trust him with my arse, though I had not let him have it, for reasons unrelated to trust, I could trust him with my money. It seemed eminently logical reasoning at the time, though the reasoning may have been fueled by a bottle or three of the Aged. Still, my “logic” had been proven right.

Father, still in mourning for the ever-drunk, sports-mad, wenching-mad son so much like himself, would not notice my absence, nor care if perchance he noticed. Not so long as he had sufficient money and sufficient whisky for his needs. His new “allowance,” though none would call it that in his presence, was more than ample for his needs. And if one of those needs happened to be drinking himself to death, then I would give him a fine funeral, one the Highlands would long remember. And I would mourn him properly, as well. At least a little.

I closed the door carefully after Donal left. Rested my head against it. For all my brave words to myself I actually had no idea whether the courage actually existed to do any of it. Whether I would... or ever could... take that kind of risk.

But I knew I had the courage for at least one thing. I would leave for London as I said.

And so I did.

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Michel

20 August 1816

Noon

La Belle Maison

Northern England

Enough is enough.

Enough is *bloody* enough.

Again.

“*Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose,*” I solemnly informed my tidy, bare desk.

Fourteen months later, I am in nearly the same position I was then. Just with a *different* man. One whose cock I am nearly desperate to suck, who is so much more than a prick I need to fill my mouth. A different man who is no friend of Edward’s and whom I almost-mortally insulted by attacking him.

I expect I will have to grovel. How could I not? But if I explain to him that although I am, indeed, a *very* good friend of Edward’s, I am nevertheless a grown man, in control of himself. So he and I can be friends. That despite the separation of these past months, we three can be the Three R’s again. And I will give him my solemn oath that I will never assault him again.

At least not physically. My mind will remain perfectly free to assault him in my imaginings. Often. And often and often. Which in turn will undoubtedly result in an over-muscling of my left hand and arm from even more frequent stroking, since with the resurrection of the Three R’s I will once again have only infrequent opportunities to suck Peregrine and seed as I do.

This must be resolved.

I shattered my servants’ image of me as the ever-calm, ever-controlled vicomte, by shoving open the door to my office and letting it slam against the wall, and then running up the stairs, shouting for Henri.

When I got to my suite, and slammed the door open, though with far less effect since there was nothing for it to bang, he was waiting for me. Looking displeased. “You bellowed, my lord?” Both his tone and the “my lord” address confirmed his displeasure with me. Perhaps for my disdain for decorum.

“I bellowed, indeed, Henri. Pack. We are going back to London.”

He did not react with so much as a blink. He just turned away and muttered, “*Il est temp.*”

“Did you say something, Henri?”

He turned around to look at me. “I merely muttered something to myself, my lord. Had I wished to address you directly on the topic covered by my mutter, I would quite naturally have just spoken up, and said, ‘It’s about bloody damned time.’ But as it was, I merely muttered. To myself.”

And then, with that infinite patience of the employee so very much put-upon by his exasperating employer, he asked if he was free to continue with his assigned tasks.

I graciously agreed that he was. So long as his tasks were finished rapidly enough for the two of us to leave at first light. The other servants who had come up from London with me could return at a more leisurely pace. And haul back all the baggage that I had deemed essential for a sojourn here.

That brought him to another halt. “You are going to drive, my lord?”

“I am.”

“All the way to London?”

“All the way to London. I am, after all, a notable whip.”

“With a reputation.”

One carriage accident. *One*. And it is thrown in your face forever! Although the carriage was a total loss, Henri and I recovered nicely. He doesn’t even limp any more.

Before I could even hope to mount a defense, he somewhat changed the topic. “Are we going back to London because of a particular cock, or just... cocks in general, since you haven’t had any but your own for so very long?”

“Actually... *two* cocks. And, of course, the men attached to them.”

“Ah.” Henri nodded. “Then may I suggest, *Monsieur*, that it would be preferable to travel in a manner most likely to get you there with your cock intact and capable of standing? As you may recall, from the last, ah, *incident*, of you driving at speed, that excruciating pain is not conducive to cock standing.

“I recommend that George drive us. Most humbly recommend, of course.”

Humble? Henri? Ha!

But he was, of course, correct. As he so often is. And when he deems it necessary, reminds me of that fact.

I was, however, the master of all I surveyed, the captain of this ship, as it were. *I* would decide the manner of travel.

George drove us to London.

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Rory

Thursday, 5 September 1816

Rory's Lodgings

London

“Open up, Scotsman!”

The loud voice was accompanied by an equally loud banging on my door.

Shite! I was having a perfectly good, perfectly rotten imagining of impossibilities, where the Frenchman and Peregrine and I were all friends again, and the kiss that evening had been welcome rather than abhorred, and we were on the Dock, with them taking turns fucking my arse while others watched and wanked, and we wouldn't let them join. I wasn't close, I wasn't even close to being close, but my cock stand was more than up for the outcome.

There was another fist-hammer dropping on the door, though this one sounded more frustrated than furious.

Fucking fantasy wrecker. I kept my mouth shut, breathed carefully, though even with doors and walls as thin as those I lived within, he couldn't have heard.

There was silence, and I thought, hoped, he'd given up and gone, but the Frenchman was too stubborn.

His voice was soft enough that a man who quickly padded from the bed to the door, and was separated from the hallway speaker by the not-thick-at-all wood, could hear, but not his neighbors, who may or may not have been home just then.

“Sco... Rory. I know you're in there. The porter said you were, and I paid him enough he wouldn't lie. I'll say it once, but I won't beg. Please.”

I turned the key, which was readily heard, stepped back enough to pull the door wide and stepped forward so he couldn't come in without going through me. The light from the lantern in the hallway, and the candles I lit were enough for us to see each other. His eyes widened, and the ever-confident, ever-urbane, so very fuckable mouth dropped open. My eyes widened as well, but I managed to keep my own very fuckable mouth closed.

He had seen me naked before, though not often. Seen my cock, though only when pissing or briefly in a changing room. All purely innocent, ordinary happenings among men of the ton who boxed, and wrestled, and fenced, and hunted, and raced together often. Purely innocent except for my less than innocent thoughts about what my cock could and should have been doing to and with him, or better yet, with Peregrine participating. Though not always. Some of the imaginings were just the two of us. Imaginings I had always had to sternly rein in before my cock displayed its pointed, leaking interest.

He had not seen me hard before, though, my prick thrust boldly out, and angled slightly up. He had not seen how very thick it was when standing, nor what it looked like lightly gleaming from the thin coating of oil I had been using as I stroked.

He saw it then.

What I saw was a man who, if we had still been friends, I would have taunted about going from impeccable to not-peccable-at-all. His gorgeous light brown hair was hanging loose, disheveled as if he had been running his hands through it. No cravat! He had actually appeared in public—and traipsing across London from his bloody great mansion to my lodgings, even late at night where he was unlikely to be noticed unless he had arrived in his bloody great carriage with the bloody coat of arms on it, counted as public—with his shirt open at the throat, his beautifully pale, hairless skin visible. A waistcoat with a button unbuttoned. A wrinkled jacket.

We stayed silent. My still-hard cock and I made no move to step aside and let him in. I was indeed a pervert if I could maintain a cock stand in circumstances like these.

In honor of the sensibilities of my perhaps-home, perhaps-out-fucking neighbors, I kept my voice soft as I told him I was busy and asked him what the bloody hell he wanted. And to play with his mind since I was not allowed to play with his cock, I put my hand around my rod, twirled my fist around my bell-end, and then stroked back, peeling the skin away so all that dark-red, flushed flesh and the knob was visible.

He watched me do it, and when I dropped my hand, he raised his eyes from his cock stare, looked at me, and said, “You.”

I did my very best imitation of a gob-smacked Peregrine, all bulging eyes and fish-gaping mouth.

Michel retrieved a slight bit of his peccability, by lifting that fucking eyebrow of his and asking, “Do you think we might do this inside? Or do you want your neighbors watching me suck your cock?”

I gave him my very best, most suave, tonnish, articulate response. “Uh, I, ah, well...” And then I stumbled, more than stepped, backward and let him in.

The swagger as he walked over to the bed, turned and sat as I shut and locked the door, wasn't his usual one. It was somewhat tense, forced, as though he was acting the part of confidence, rather than actually having it.

I grabbed the chair, moved it in front of him, sat down, spread my legs. My very, very hard, very, very upright cock twitched. He compressed his mouth into a thin line. “This is difficult enough. Do you think you might put that—” and he waved in the general direction of my cock, “away?”

I twitched my cock, watched him watch the twitch. “My cock lives here. He likes to take the air from time to time. This is one of those times.”

“Bastard,” he muttered. He lifted his left hand and ran it through his hair.

I refrained from telling him that the reason my cock just then spurted a healthy spurt of my personal brand of oil was because I was imagining him lifting his hand that way, holding it, while I buried my nose in the remarkably thick hair in his pit, considering how smooth and pale he was nearly everywhere else, then sniffed and licked and stroked both him and me.

He took a deep breath, and visibly forced himself to look at me, his expression clearly saying he would have preferred looking anywhere else. “I'm sorry I kissed you.”

What? He hadn't kissed me. *I* had been the one who bloody well started the kiss. I was about to correct him, but missed my chance, since he went on talking.

“Actually, since being honest is a temporary policy just now, although I am far from sure it is the best one, I'm not sorry at all that I kissed you. I liked it. What I am sorry about is that you didn't, and that it cost me your friendship and buggered our friendship with Peregrine as well.”

Gob-smacked did not begin to describe my surprise. I would have said something, but he held his hand up, palm out, and I was not about to talk to the hand. I let him stop my words.

“So.” Another deep breath, and this time the always-assured vicomte looked away. “I am a friend of Edward’s. A very good friend, you might say. I realize you are not. But I am hoping you can accept that, and let us, somehow, some way, go back to the friendship we all built last fall.”

“If not?”

“What?”

“If I say I can’t, what then?”

He paused as if he had not thought that might be asked, or what he might respond. Followed by a very long, very slow inhalation and exhale. “I think I will take a Grand Tour. A *very* Grand Tour. Beyond Europe. I have heard that South America is lovely at this time of year. Perhaps even an extended visit to our former colonies, as zey have zees fondness for zee French.”

He reverted from mock French to tonnish again. “And I am, after all, a wealthy *French* vicomte.” Another pause. “So. Do I stay or do I go?”

He was going to be staying, but I was not quite ready to let him know that. So I offered him a *non sequitur* of the first water. “Did you mean it?”

“Of course I meant it. Do you think I’d offer to leave England if I...”

My turn to palm him. He stopped. “No. What you said when you were out in the hall just now. Did you mean *that*?”

He stared at me and then surged up off the bed. I followed my natural instincts and leaped up as well. The chair tipped and crashed behind me.

He was furious, but kept his voice low and menacing. “You bastard shite-head. You’ll agree to resume our friendship if I whore for you? Suck your cock as payment? What else? Be your cocksucker on call for when you have a cock stand and no cunt to put it in? *Fuck you!*”

I should have learned long ago that I am not very good at this type of game-playing. So I said the one thing I could think of to keep from getting my lights punched out and him leaving.

“I will if you will.”

Perhaps Michel and I should have a contest, judged by Peregrine’s friends because Peregrine would simply lie and deny he ever looked like that, to see which of us did the best Peregrine-as-fish imitation.

I relished the brief moment that Michel sputtered and stammered, as it was unlikely, once he recovered control of himself, that I would ever see it again. "I... what... you... *what?*"

I stepped closer to him, close enough that my leaking slit was going to stain his pantaloons. I didn't touch him otherwise.

"Most friends of Edward's who receive an offer to exchange one cocksucking for another would not, I think, think of that as whoring themselves. But mayhap French friends have different standards, my *French* lord?"

His face flushed nearly to Peregrine-standards, he grabbed my shoulders and shook them far more vigorously than most men would give him credit for and made a single word out of a whisper-shouted, "*You're not a fucking friend of fucking Edward's!*"

I let him shake me, although I would admit, if asked, to adding a little extra motion to my hips so that my cock was indeed smearing his groin. My cock and I enjoyed that.

Then he just stared at me. I grinned back. "Not a *fucking* friend, just now, true. But my hole is slicked up, since I was working it with a couple of my fingers, getting it ready for a dildo, before I was so rudely interrupted. I was planning on imagining that the dildo was your cock. So if you want to change that imagining to reality, just tell me, back or belly?"

"This shite is not at all funny, MacLean. You bloody well hated it when I kissed you."

I poked a finger in his chest. An *oily* finger though he didn't notice it at the time. "I didn't hate anything about the kiss, except that *you* hated it. And you didn't kiss me, I kissed you."

"You did not."

"I did."

"You..."

We realized at the same time what we were doing and stepped backwards to put a slightly more safe distance between us. Safe for him, since he backed into the edge of the bed and sat down on it. Unsafe for me, since I fell over the bloody chair and landed sprawled on my arse. We looked at each other, smiled reluctantly, and then laughed.

He got up, extended a hand. I grasped his forearm, and he pulled me up. Two foolish friends of Edward's, grinning at each other.

"You do realize where we were headed, don't you?" he asked.

"I'm a *Scotsman*, whose first name is nae 'stupid.' Any more of that and I would have had to shoot your other shoulder."

"And I would have ensured we again had a matching set."

"Or we could have a matching set of well-fucked mouths." I moved in closer, palmed the cock running down his left leg. It was, indeed, as long as I expected, hoped. Perhaps longer. And very, very stiff.

I squeezed it just a little; he shuddered just a little. Then he looked at the oily hand-print on his sleeve. Down at his crotch. "Is it your intent to ruin every item of clothing I'm wearing?"

I shrugged. "If possible. If you weren't wearing anything, I'd have nothing to ruin." I rubbed my thumb over his knob. He moaned again. It was a marvelous moan and a marvelous knob. I wondered how much longer it was going to take before I would get to see it, actually touch it, taste it.

It was my turn to whim... moan, when he repaid me by curling his fingers around my cock, and starting to stroke me, pulling my skin over my knob, stretching it out, then sliding it back again, and repeating.

I let go of his cock and began fumbling with the buttons on his placket. "I wanted to fuck your mouth the instant I saw you, Michel. Wanted to see you on your knees, your mouth straining to open wide enough to take me in, fisting your hair so I could control you, making your eyes glaze as I pumped my seed straight down to your belly."

I might have heard some cloth tear in my eagerness to set his cock free, but decided that was a type of imagining that I would do without. Yes! If not *precisely* as I imagined it, it was close enough. Long, long, long. A fine blue tracery of veins against the whiteness. A marvelously constructed knob, like the spherical cap of a horse mushroom back home, one that would force your mouth or your arse a bit wide, and then you could clamp down on the slender shaft.

I stroked him carefully, stopped with the edge of my hand pressed against the silky, lush hair at its root, admired how very much cock-length there was beyond the coil of my fingers. I bent over, lapped my tongue across the

generous slit. He shuddered, squeezed my cock and balls, released. I opened my mouth and swallowed him down until my lips pressed the edge of my hand. I was almost insane with wanting him, though I still wanted to fuck his face first, before taking in every bit of him.

I pulled off, straightened up, admiring the slick wetness as I did.

“It’s a bloody marvel, that cock is, Michel. It will go so far down my throat. Or up my arse. How far, Michel? That has to be bloody more than eight guineas. What... nine? ten?”

He stopped fondling me. Became very still. “Did you just measure my cock in money?”

My mouth proceeded to run several furlongs ahead of my mind, at a speed that set a record for the course. “Aye. Guineas are about an inch in diameter, so that would make your...”

“Make my cock about ten guineas long. Plus a few shillings.” He took a deep breath and snarled, “You bloody bastard!”

My mind was still cantering along, nowhere near the home stretch. “What the hell is wrong with you now?”

He was red-faced again, and fury has a definitely different shade of red than lust. “There is only one man in the whole of fucking England who measures men by money. *You’ve been fucking Peregrine!*”

My mind finally recognized the race, and made a valiant effort, which was unfortunately doomed from the start, to reach the finish line first. My mouth won by several lengths. “Just the once.”

Michel went all white, like the Dover cliffs seem when you’re out in the Channel. His fists clenched, his jaw tightened. He bit the next words out. “Just. The. Once.”

He shook himself and then visibly forced calmness back again. Completely fake calmness, though. My rooms, this building and a good part of surrounding London would make the ruins of Pompeii look like the Royal Pavilion at Brighton, all fresh and shiny, if he erupted.

“How long has he been fucking you?”

I rationalized answering, instead of evading, on the basic principle of, “I’m already fucked, so what does it matter?” “Since that night on the Dock. August. Last year.”

Michel closed his eyes with a “God give me strength” expression on his face. But his cock... and he hadn't bothered to cover up once he shifted this from sex to talk... betrayed him. Though he was so angry he probably didn't notice. I notice everything about cocks, hard or soft but particularly hard, when they are in my vicinity. His cock twitched and his hips gave a slight thrust. Men do not twitch and thrust at the mention of Dock-fucking unless they like what they are imagining.

“Regularly?”

“Not regularly enough. But... enough under the circumstances. More now, since, well, you know...” I couldn't quite bring myself to say “the duel” out loud.

“Does he fuck your mouth, too?” I thought at first he was just getting himself aroused by asking for details, but then I realized I heard a faint note of jealousy in the question. *Why?*

“Not often. I prefer getting fucked, and he's very, *very* good at that.”

He didn't respond, which gave me time to think. Especially since my mind finally crossed the finish line, limping badly. Michel's cock had also been twitching and thrusting when I talked about fucking his mouth. Add in that jealousy, and there was only one conclusion to be reached. Michel was a *cocksucker*. An avid one. My mind whispered instructions to my mouth.

“When did you start sucking his cock?”

Michel looked for just an instant as though he might deny it, but gave in. “30th June. Last year.”

And then it was my turn to have jealousy rear its grossly malformed head. “Did he fuck you?”

Michel's “No!” was sharp and surprisingly loud. He pretended the outburst hadn't occurred and went on. “And I just fucked him...”

His eyes widened. I finished the sentence for him. “The once.”

Michel looked at me. “You had him on 7th December, before midnight?”

I nodded grimly. “And you, on 8th December, after midnight, perhaps around one?”

I received a grim, thin-lipped nod back.

Michel stated the obvious so we would both be very clear on it. "That bloody bastard had sex with both of us the night before the duel. He didn't come to see us to really try to stop the duel, he came to be sure he came one last time, in case one of us died the next day. *That bloody bastard.*"

Michel sat down on the bed again, spread his legs, started fisting his cock back to full stiffness, though neither of us had gone very much soft despite the discussion. He licked his lips and gestured me closer. I wasn't about to reject his overtures. I did as I was gestured.

He put his long-fingered hands on my arse, caressing my hairy cheeks, opened his mouth, and gagged after taking only half my length in. He pulled back, looking first disgruntled, and then very, very determined.

He stroked my spit-slimed cock, looking thoughtful. "Has anyone else fucked your arse since you started with the bloody bastard?"

I shook my head.

"And I've sucked no other cocks."

He laughed, and it was not a happy one. "Christ, what man wouldn't want what Peregrine has had for a year? Sex on tap. An arse to fuck, a mouth to fuck, whichever he wants, whenever he wants. Did he invite you to the Duchess's ball tomorrow night?"

"I turned him down. I've been... thinking a lot about you lately, and it's ridiculous, but 6th September is, well, sort of an *anniversary*. I didn't want to be there without all three of us."

"He asked me as well, the prick. Despite our agreement that if he proposed some entertainment and one of us turned him down, he would not turn the other into a second-best choice. I, ah, I turned him down for much the same reason."

His look of determination had a whole new flavor to it. "I'm going to swallow your cock, and once I have, you're going to grab my head and fuck my face. Agreed?"

Bloody fucking of course! I nodded.

"And when you're done seeding me, you're going to swallow every goddamned guinea of my cock until I've bred your mouth."

My cock and I both found that plan highly worthy of respect. I nodded again.

“He’s used us for a year, when all he had to do was tell each of us about the other. He could have done that any damned time. All that fucking wasted time, or wasted fucking time.”

I nodded agreement, but refrained from mentioning I’d made Peregrine swear on his honor that he’d do no such thing. But he could have, the bastard, for the good of our sex life. Except the selfish prick chose to keep his stable private rather than sharing.

Michel teased the tip of my cock with his tongue. His smile was positively wicked when he tilted his head back and looked up at me. “I have always thought that if paying back an ill turn was a woman, she would be an extraordinary bitch. I think, therefore, that when we are done here, we should plan precisely how to introduce dear, *dear* Peregrine to that bitch.”

And that was indeed what we did.

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HERE AND NOW
(1816)

Rory

Saturday, 7 September 1816

Past midnight

The Duke's Library

Alderson House, London

The bastard just sat there. Saying nothing. For a man who had been so very stupid for so very long, lying to his best friends for so very long, he was smart to be silent. If he started talking, he might disclose a lie we didn't already know about.

I checked to be sure Vidal was in place. Well, bloody hell, he could now be Michel, as he had been before our mutual stupidities led to a pair of shoulders that, according to a garrulous gardener at Somerville House, would provide a wide range of weather information via aches, and twinges and twitches, but fortunately, he assured me, it would only get more accurate as we aged.

Michel lounged against the door, arms crossed over his chest after he, oh so casually, examined his nails. He was the perfect picture of tonnish *ennui*. Had I the funds I would commission a portrait of him in that pose, with that expression, and have the artist title it, "Enthusiasm at the Ball."

He looked at Peregrine, and then at me. Gave me a slight nod, a slight smile, and a slight twitch of his cock beneath pantaloons that were not covering smalls. Though possibly the cock twitch was for Peregrine, who was staring.

Very well. It was time to introduce our *dearest* friend to milady Payback, that bitch. Just a brief introduction for now. While the Duke had most graciously allowed us the use of his library, because we lied and told him we wanted to reconcile the estrangement amongst the three of us, we could not stay there forever.

"Suck my cock, ye bluidy bastard."

Peregrine's eyes widened, and then he gave that smile we both knew so well. Smug. Self-satisfied. He was more than willing to suck cock. He knew from experience that doing so would, far sooner than later, get that marv... damned prick of his in Michel's mouth or my arse. We had no problem with that smile, indeed we expected it. Lady Payback was a subtle bitch, and so smile whilst ye may, ye bloody silly, stupid Sassenach.

He looked at Michel. “Ah, I did not hear the door lock. Is it...”

Michel’s voice was even more bored as he replied. “It is not.”

“But... but the Duke, *anyone*, might walk in, and...”

“See you on your knees sucking Mr. MacLean’s prick, or having finished with him, mine?”

“Well... yes.”

Michel shrugged the shrug of a nobleman who had no care whatsoever for the concerns of any other.

“Should that happen, I rather doubt there would be repercussions for Mr. MacLean or me. After all, *you* would be the one avidly swallowing one of our pricks. And it is a well-known fact that a man with a cock stand, who has no wife, or mistress or tuppenny whore with tits nearby, will stick his prick into any readily available hole at all.”

He looked disdainfully down that bloody long, slender, *aristocratic* nose.

“If that hole happens to belong to a depraved neddy boy, as what else would be sucking cock at the Duke and Duchess of Alderson’s Birthday Ball, we, Mr. MacLean and I, might suffer some *temporary* disapprobation amongst the ton. Unlike the cocksucker.”

Peregrine blinked. And blinked again. And yet again. And said nothing at all. Nor did he move from chair to knees and lift my kilt.

We had gambled greatly on this. Gambled on our knowledge of Peregrine—or at least, on what we believed to be our knowledge.

He could have stood, just then, told us to fuck ourselves, in words or with his fucking eyebrows, or with a cold and arrogant stare and simply walked away. We would not have used force, or even a modicum of suasion, to stop him.

Of course, if he had done that, it would have been necessary to unlock the door after all, since we had lied to him.

He was indeed a neddy boy, as were we. And he would have been a *most* abnormal one if he had not indulged in frequent imaginings of what he might do with the both of us. What we might do with him. And one of those imaginings would have been precisely this. Him on his knees... somewhere...

sucking our pricks. We gambled that he wanted us enough to take the risk. We gambled, too, on his arrogance, which undoubtedly led him to believe that our talk of punishment was merely a game.

We won our silent wager.

Peregrine shrugged, got up, stepped over to me, dropped to his knees, sat back on his haunches, and rested his hands on my hairy knees. He looked up at me with that knowing smirk, and then grabbed the kilt and tossed it up and back, exposing my cock. Which had somewhat softened as we waited for his decision.

He put his right hand around the base and tugged it, which caused its inevitable enthusiastic response. And then he swallowed me, his nose buried in the thick hair around the root of my prick, sniffing audibly. He *loves* my scent, whether he's eating my arse, licking my pits, rolling *one* bollock in his mouth, as they're too large for him to take both, or sucking my cock.

He has become quite good at sucking me over this past year, when he wasn't making me spew just from fucking me. I was sure, though, that if I asked... as eventually I would... he would admit that Michel was a far better cocksucker than he. I resisted the urge to dive my fingers into his hair and curl them around the back of his head to control the depth and angle and speed of his sucking.

"Make me seed, Peregrine, and be bloody quick about it. We don't have all night for you to enjoy my dick down your throat."

I tilted my head back, stretched my arms out along the back of the sofa, so that my fingers were gripping the carved wood, closed my eyes so I could enjoy the sensations rippling through my body.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. As they did when something was wrong. As they did when I was being watched. As they had that night on the Dock.

My tension eased as I realized. I *was* being watched. By Michel.

Understanding the need, Peregrine wrapped his hand around the base of my cock, partially stroking, partially twisting, while his mouth worked the rest of the shaft and the knob. His left hand rolled my bollocks around, and then before I was quite aware of what he was doing, he slimed two fingers with his spit, pushed at the skin behind my balls, and I instinctively slouched a little, spread

my knees. My grunt was not overly loud as he forced his two fingers up my arse, curled them around my gland, and then fiercely manipulated it, while bobbing his head faster and faster. And just like that I was erupting down his throat.

He swallowed and swallowed, and did not miss a drop. And when I was clean, he pulled his head away, dropped back on his haunches, looked up at me, and smirked.

Lady Payback is a bitch, I reminded myself, and smoothed my expression out, as if what had just happened had been an ordinary, everyday cocksucking. I lifted my head from the back of the sofa, looked to Michel. I had not noticed him moving away from the door so that he stood over us.

“Fuck his throat,” I told Michel, “now that I have it all slicked up for you.”

Michel’s expression was decidedly odd. And his cock was more than soft, but far less than hard. He shook his head. “I think not. At least, not now. Later.”

That was not what we had planned, but I couldn’t precisely force a not-hard prick down a willing throat, if the owner of the prick wasn’t equally willing. I almost said something, but Michel stared at me, unblinking, and I said nothing.

“Right, then,” I said, and tossed my kilt back into place. “Let’s be off.”

Peregrine braced himself on my knees, stood, and stepped back to allow me space to stand. I did so.

Michel led the way, and somewhat ostentatiously pulled the door key from his waistcoat pocket, and unlocked it.

Peregrine let out a bark of laughter, but said nothing. We three left the room. Michel pulled the door to.

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Peregrine

Saturday, 7 September 1816

Outside the Duke's library

Down the hallway

Alderson House, London

We naturally stopped at the large mirror down the hallway from the Duke's library, instead of going around the corner, over to the stairs and down. Checking one's appearance whenever the opportunity presents itself is perhaps instinctive to Edwardian men. When two of the three were engaged in cock sucking moments earlier, and one was watching, and all three are about to return to a ballroom where everyone will be avidly watching them, it behooves them to be *very* sure that there was no disarray to give them away.

Where once there would have been good-natured raillery as we examined our appearance, tonight there was only a resumed chill. A polite taking of turns to inspect and adjust, as if I could not still taste Rory's hot seed in my mouth and feel it down my throat.

I perforce let them go first. Michel was the least likely to have anything amiss, other than a possible spot on his inexpressibles. I surreptitiously checked. I was quite good at discerning inexpressible stains from an aroused man, even when he is wearing black. An alert Edwardian eye. Alas, I had not excited him into staining. Rory, next, who had nothing more to do than examine his kilt to be sure it was not visibly stained, which was unlikely given its colors. Under other circumstances I would have played at affronted that he doubted my ability to clean his cock thoroughly.

Finished, they fixed me with a stare (Michel) and a glare (Rory) that said, "Nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. You *will* follow us." They turned and walked away, leaving me to my waterless "ablutions."

There was only a small amount to repair. An adjustment to my cravat, which was already beginning to wilt anyway in the ballroom's heat. Fingertips through the hair at the back of my head to fluff it up where it was slightly flattened when Rory briefly grabbed me. I backed up, bent forward to inspect my knees and in an abundance of caution swiped them with the palms of my hands. As I did I glanced to my right.

The door to the Duke's library was ajar. Odd. I was certain that...

I must have been mistaken.

I straightened, checked myself once more, and then turned to meet the next part of my doom.

I hoped it would be as enjoyable as the first part.

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Peregrine

Saturday, 7 September 1816

Shortly after three a.m.

Entrance hall

Somerville House, London

“My lord.”

Damn. Double, triple, quadruple, bloody damn.

The whole purpose behind sneaking in, ordering the footman who was on duty—to arouse the house if someone who was not me tried that—to keep his mouth shut, tip-toeing up the back stairs, getting my clothes and other travel necessities, and very, very quietly walking down the front stairs, was to avoid this encounter.

I could not avoid my valet, nor his annoyance at not being included in this jaunt, but he knew quite well which side of the bread was buttered, and by whom. After the requisite minimum amount of remonstrations and moans, he packed a pair of bags with what he deemed a reasonable amount of clothing for an estimated week away. I cut the clothing allotment by nearly half. I did not anticipate having much need of clothing where we were going, wherever that might be. Michel and Rory were being rather uncommunicative on the subject of our destination.

I was grateful that I was wearing a long traveling coat. The bastard shite-heads, *my* bastard shite-heads, had teased me with murmured words as they forced me to make an appearance with them at two more balls, and then at a popular hell where I was so distracted I lost a monkey at faro in short order. I had spent most of the post-Alderson hours in a state of arousal that they would not let me release.

They occasionally mentioned something about a Lady Payback, of whom I had never heard, and what a bitch she was. I assumed that eventually they would explain.

Of course, any discussion with Remington about anything was instantly fatal to even the most half-sprung cock stand. Butlers who rise from third assistant junior butler in training, or some such rank, at the time of your birth,

to the majesty of full butlerdom on your accession to the Somerville title, tend to have a rather quelling effect on most frivolity. Including any tendency to have a cock stand in the presence of one's butler. Nevertheless, I remained grateful for the buttoned coat, so that, should my wayward mind, which was sharply focused on the undoubtedly *numerous* pleasures to come, and come, and come, on this journey, cause even a partial anticipatory cock stand it would remain hidden.

“Might I inquire where you might be reached on this journey with the Master of Strathairn and *M. le vicomte*? Should the need arise?”

You might indeed inquire, but I have no answer. And how the bloody hell do you know who I am leaving with when they are in Michel's carriage outside, and I have not mentioned their names to anyone since I sneaked in?

“To be honest, Remington, I haven't the foggiest notion of where we are going. It is to be a surprise. Although, I would assume that Vidal's staff would have the answer to your question. Ah, of course, only if the need, the very important, crushingly urgent, need should arise.”

“Very well, my lord.”

It is quite amazing the amount of butlerian disapproval which can be contained in a statement of agreement.

“But before you depart, my lord, there is a message you might wish to read.”

“At three in the morning?”

“It arrived about ten last night. From Lord Bennington. His footman said it was urgent. He even wished to wait for you to arrive. I sent him back with the assurance I would bring the note to your attention as soon as I saw you.”

I sighed. “There is, of course, no possibility that you did *not* see me just now, is there?”

“Quite, my lord.”

I looked at the note he was holding out. My cock argued with my other head, and as on other occasions, though in my own defense, not *always*, my cock won.

I shook my head and did not take the note. “I do not have the time right now to address the quite probably innocuous problem which a young lordling, who

has only recently acquired even a sheen of town bronze, has blown up out of all proportion. Should he inquire again, later this morning, send word that responding to his note will be my first act upon my return.”

More disapproval was sent my way. Although I had always felt that there might come a time when Remington would act, certainly in what he perceived to be my best interests, without my approval or even, perhaps, over my objections, this was not that time.

“And when *will* you be returning, my lord?”

Ah. A very good question. After my cock falls off and my arse collapses from over-use was probably the most accurate answer, but patently one I could not offer to my butler. They had not said how long this journey to the mysterious “there” and back would occupy.

Ah, again. “Lord Glenhaven’s sixtieth birthday celebration is on 16 September. I am sure we will be back by then. After all, one *must* wish one’s father well, on one’s father’s birthday.”

Even if, at times, and many times, the word one wished for one’s father merely *rhymed* with “well.”

“And now, Remington, I really do need to depart.”

“Need” was again not quite the most accurate word, unless considered from the viewpoint of my prick. *Wanted* to leave, regardless of any reason to stay, was the driving force. From both heads at that moment.

Remington nodded, graciously giving his consent for the departure of his lord and master, who often felt like a grubby little boy not yet out of leading strings in his butler’s presence.

I grabbed up the bags and headed out the door held open by a footman. I hurried down the steps, accompanied by a footman with a lantern so I did not trip and break my bloody neck, or some other valuable body part. I helped the driver strap the bags onto the back, and then opened the carriage door. Put my foot on the step. Stopped.

I felt... *odd*. I must have *looked* odd in the flickering light of the lantern because Rory said, impatiently, “Well?”

I shook my head. Climbed inside. The footman shut the door, and turned to go back to my house. Michel rapped his walking stick on the roof, and the carriage started up.

I was between my men. Rory on my right, Michel on my left, our thighs and shoulders pressed together.

“I’m forgetting something,” I said.

“You have clothes, do you not? Not that you will have much need of them while we are there.”

My cock twitched.

Rory’s hand moved from my thigh to my groin, cupped me through coat and clothes, rubbed his thumb over my knob, and brought me to a full stand.

“You didn’t leave your cock, or your bollocks or your arse behind, did you?”

Neither question required an answer.

Michel leaned in and murmured, “You do realize, *mon cher*, that it is unlikely you will be allowed to seed while we travel.”

I gulped, and I could hear Rory’s smirk as he felt my cock surge in his hand. Michel’s fingers deftly opened the upper buttons of my coat, and then his hand snaked inside, pinching my left nipple and then my right, to cause a gasp to join the gulp.

“Of course, you will *want* to seed. You might even think you *need* to seed. How often, do you think, Rory. A few times?”

Rory was at his most tonnish as he finished unbuttoning my coat, tossed it open, and started on a closer torturing of my cock, with far less fabric between us. “Rather more than a few, *M. le vicomte*. I should think he will both want and need and be oh so very unsatisfied quite often during our travels. Quite, *quite* often.”

They were going to bring me to the edge of setting my seed free again and again, and decide for me if and when I would be allowed to seed. I would most likely die from the effects of their efforts.

I could live with that.

Except...

Except... I was sure I was forgetting something. Something important.

I would think about it tomorrow. Or the day after that.

I spread my legs just a little, enough to press against them. Just a little encouragement. And mocked them, but mostly Michel, with, “Stroke on, Macduff, and damned be him that first cries, ‘Hold, he seeds enough!’”

They took me at my word while the carriage gathered speed.

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Michel

Wednesday, 11 September 1816

Past midnight

Vidal-Sansouci's "Cottage"

Suffolk, England

Three sharp claps of thunder, one right after the other, awakened me and I bolted upright.

Or to be more accurate: I *thought* there were three claps of thunder, and when they awakened me, I *intended* to bolt upright.

It is, however, very hard to bolt anywhere, upright or otherwise, when you are warmly entangled in a comfortable bed with your two men. Particularly when the sheets are more tangled about your limbs than you realized, and the bed has an unfortunate excess of softness that creates a miniature valley down the center, putting the man in the center at risk of suffocation should the bodies on the outside (Rory and me) roll unreservedly inward.

The bolting was more a running battle with the sheets and blankets—a home on the North Sea can be cold even in early September—and a somewhat clawing scramble up what seemed for a moment to be the side of a steep hill, until I was able to grasp the edge of the bed and pull myself up and partially over.

My flailing about naturally woke them both, which was not the happiest of circumstances, as it had not been all that long before that we had all seeded royally well... *yet again*... and fallen asleep. Their inarticulate grumbles, though, conveyed quite clearly the idea of “What the bloody hell are you doing?”

I sighed.

“The thunder woke me.”

We listened for the moment to the heavy lashing of the rain, before a slurring Rory muttered that there was no thunder. And Peregrine muttered something about back to bed, and stretched out his delightfully furred arm, sliding his hand up the inside of my left leg. He couldn't quite cup my bollocks,

but he did his best with a few strokes of two fingertips. I could not believe that my cock twitched in response.

Perry's, "Back to bed, Michel," was just a bit smug.

Bastard.

Then there were three claps of thunder again, not as loud as the first. My turn to be smug about "no thunder, really?", but fortunately I kept my mouth shut rather than putting my sweaty bare foot in it. The sounds were not thunder, but raps of the knocker on the door.

What the hell?

"Someone's at the door."

"It's yer bluidy great cottage by the sea with ne'er a servant about. Answer yer ain duir."

It was well past midnight. With a storm like the one that began as we travelled from London, and continued all the while we were here, no one was journeying for the joy of it.

Some stranded traveler? I wondered as I threw on a long heavy robe over my nakedness, belted it, shoved my feet into felt slippers as I had no intention of getting a chill from walking over the cold tiles in the entrance hall. I lit a lantern and held it high to make sure I didn't break my neck on the steps or anything else. It was not as if I spent a great deal of time here anymore and could find my way around in the dark, though my parents had adored it when I was young.

I shouted "Coming! Coming!" as I half-raced down the stairs before realizing both the thickness of the door and the storm prevented whoever it was from hearing me. Lantern on the table, I quickly opened the bolts, unlocked it, and with the lantern again held high, yanked the door open.

God, in His infinite humor, favored me with the eye-blinding flash of a lightning strike, a roar of thunder that hurt the ears, and a gust of wind that sent the rain slashing parallel to the ground and directly through the door, drowning the candle in the lantern. The wind skittered around the hall, wet fingers nipping the candlewicks.

All to illuminate, for an instant, Marcel, my youngest groom, blue-lipped, storm-soaked to his skin, cradling a well-wrapped packet, a damned *letter-sized* packet.

Illuminate me, as well, as he softly said in utter amazement, “My lord, you’re *here!*”

And promptly collapsed at my feet.

I dragged him inside, but my weight alone was not enough to shut the door against the wind and rain.

Peregrine once mockingly said that with a whisper I could fill Covent Garden. His way of saying, perhaps, that I have either a big mouth or a loud mouth, or both. Whispers were not called for at that moment.

I ran to the foot of the stairs, and bellowed my most stentorian bellow.

“*Aidez-moi, mes amis, aidez-moi!*”

The wind killed the last candle. *Merde*. I picked my way in the near-total darkness back to Marcel, bent, and leveraged him up in my arms as a pair of red and gold naked men charged down the steps.

God graced us with a brief bit of lightning that let us see each other.

“Marcel. Groom. Door. Blankets. Fire.”

Le bon Dieu, how I loved these men. After forcing the door shut, without asking questions, expressing amazement, or any of the normal flustered reactions one might expect, they raced back up the stairs. Though with hands on the railings, as slick bare feet and highly polished oak are not precisely the safest combination. My slippers, carrying an unconscious man, were not precisely safe either, but I managed to get him halfway up the steps before Rory was back, carrying an enormous blanket.

Standing carefully, we managed to wrap the still-unconscious, shivering Marcel in the blanket, and then, being sensible instead of *manly*, I handed him off to Rory, who was far more capable than I of carrying the weight. It was as we shifted him that I realized he was still clutching his packet in what would not, I hoped, be an actual death grip.

We took him to our bedroom. It *reeked*. I thought it unlikely Marcel was a virgin, but even a virgin would have understood that this room had just been the site of some extremely vigorous sex. *Recently*. There were only two members of the staff at my London home who knew about me. Whatever the others may have suspected, they knew better than to ask, and certainly better than to gossip about any suspicions they might have.

Never inquire; never disclose. An informal motto of Edwardian men for quite some time. One I for the most part adhered to, as did Rory and Peregrine. I never had any intention of making this disclosure to Marcel, but once he woke, he would undoubtedly draw his own conclusions. He was young, but not stupid. But despite that risk, we could not take the far more important risk to his health of starting a fire in another bedroom and waiting for it to warm.

He could not stay in his soaked clothes, so we applied our neddy boy skills and stripped him efficiently and impersonally, dried most of him, left a towel wrapped around his waist, and then bundled him in a dry blanket. We moved him closer to the fire, put him in a deep chair, his feet on an ottoman.

I poured some brandy in a tumbler, knelt by the chair, and said, "Marcel." It took a second time before he pried his eyes open.

"M-m-m'lord, I..."

"Whatever it is, it can wait. Sip this." I put my hand behind his neck, and Peregrine, who had donned a loose shirt and trousers, supported his shoulders. The boy followed orders, gasped, and shuddered. I let him get used to the burn of fire down his throat and into his belly, before having him take a second sip. We eased him back.

"You have a packet for me, Marcel?"

He went into instant panic, with a terrified "I lost it, I lost it!" look on his face, when he realized he had no clothes on, was covered with a towel and a blanket, and there was no package for me in his hand. He started to shove his way out of his coverings, but I put my hands on his shoulders and stopped him.

"Marcel, my apologies. I did not mean to frighten you. You brought the packet safely here." I picked it up off the floor. "Would you complete your task and deliver it to me?"

It was, perhaps, a foolish thing to do, giving the *unopened* package back to him so he could hand it to me. Especially since it was obviously something of extreme urgency. But after all he had clearly endured in reaching me, I felt he should have the satisfaction of *literally* completing what he had been asked to do.

He flushed, and then a bare arm slithered out of the blankets and took it from me. He paused, and then handed it back to me. "M'lord, *Onree* bade me

tell you, uh, ask you to read this immediately, and then to return to London as quick as may be. It is of the... uh, utmost urgency.”

“Well done, Marcel. I thank you. Now, if you will just rest here for a while. Have a sip of the brandy if you wish, but not too much more. We will look at the letter, and then see about getting you some food and dry clothes.”

I rose, walked to the desk, and lit the candelabra. Sat down. Carefully unwrapped the waxed and oiled layers of the package to find the envelope. Used the knife to lift the blob of brilliantly red wax to which Henri had affixed my seal. Another indication of the importance he placed on this letter. I tugged it out, opened it, and tilted it toward the light.

M. le vicomte,

You have trusted me with many things for many years, and I beg you will trust me in this. The three of you need to return to London as fast as may be. If the horses founder under you, if you arrive so saddle-sore you can barely move, that is the speed you must achieve.

Someone, and I will attempt to find out who that is, has begun to spread vile stories about the three of you. But mostly about Lord Somerville and what he was, the gossips say, doing in the Duke's library. The tales are even more vicious about Lord Bennington. You are, the ton believes at this moment, in shameful hiding.

You unfortunately did not disclose which of your properties you were going to, so a duplicate of this letter is being sent to the other two most likely possibilities. I pray that I have not guessed wrong, that you did not choose La Belle Maison itself, or your northern hunting lodge. I am not sure that anything could be done if that is so.

In hopes of seeing you very soon, I am,

Yours most faithfully,

Henri

Neither Peregrine nor Rory said a word as they watched me read, and I made no effort to hide my dismay and my anger. Eyes shut, jaws clenched tight on both emotions, I blindly held out my hand. One of them took the letter.

I looked up as Rory finished and handed it to Peregrine. I watched as Peregrine read. First, he turned a brilliant scarlet, and then a stark, bleached white.

“*Christ!*” he said. And in all the years I have known Peregrine, I had never heard such anguish. He opened his mouth to say something more, realized he could not and looked toward the door. I nodded.

“Marcel, these gentlemen and I need to step outside to speak about... the matters you brought to my attention. Stay warm and rest yourself. We will be back shortly.”

He nodded sleepily and tugged the blanket closer about him. His head tilted and his mouth dropped open a little.

The door barely closed behind us when Peregrine whispered fiercely, “Did you close the door to the library when we left?”

In the dim light of the hallway, I must have looked as befuddled as I felt.

Peregrine inhaled deeply and exhaled somewhere between fast and slow. I had a sense from the way his fists clenched and unclenched that he had used the breath to keep from grabbing my shoulders and shaking me. “Did you?”

I thought back. “Yes.”

“You’re certain.”

I resisted the urge to snap at him. “Yes.”

He collapsed against the opposite wall. “This is all my fault.”

“And how did you arrive at that stupid conclusion?” Rory asked.

“Because someone was in the library with us. Because when we left I looked back, and saw the door was slightly ajar, and I fucking said nothing.”

“It could have...”

His hand sliced through the air in a negative. “That door is perfectly balanced. It stays where you leave it. Someone left that room immediately after we did.”

“Verra weel, someone spied. We’ll go home as Henri asked and we’ll call the bastard a liar. Three against one.”

Peregrine shook his head. “Three against a presently unknown one, *plus* the entirety of the ton who will already have decided that a story so deliciously obscene must be true. But you know that’s not the worst of it.”

He looked at us, and his face seemed to age decades as he reminded us that we were far from alone in this. "Bennington."

Rory's "Fuck!" and my "*Merde!*" were simultaneous.

Peregrine turned as if he were going to race back into the bedroom, throw on clothes and leave now. I grabbed him, and when he would have shaken me off, Rory held onto him as well.

"Listen, *mon cher*, we can't leave tonight. Not in this storm. If it's still this way in the morning, of course, but I won't risk breaking our necks or those of our horses by an intemperate start in the middle of the night."

He remained stiff, as if he might try to shake us off, and then forced himself to relax. He nodded.

"Now, we have a few problems to address. We came by carriage, and riding will be much faster than a carriage, even in this weather, particularly if we are able to cut across country in places. But these horses are not exactly trained for this sort of ride. And then there is the question of money. I had expected we would return in my carriage in easy stages, and as I was thinking of cock, not coin, when arranging to leave, I doubt I have the funds available to switch horses as often as we will need to if we aren't to kill our mounts before we even reach London."

I did not smile at the muttered, but heartfelt "Shite!" from Rory and "Fuck!" from Peregrine.

"But there is a solution. Ireton has an estate only two hours away. I know he has a stable full of horses, and if he is not there, I am well-enough acquainted with his steward to persuade him to loan us three horses and tack, and to raid his master's moneybox for some additional pounds.

"Also, Marcel is in no condition to return with us. I will ask that he stay at Ireton's until we can send for him. Agreed?"

They of course had no choice.

We realized, suddenly, that we had left Marcel's poor horse out in this storm. Rory raced downstairs to correct that failing, and get the beast into the stables, dry, warm, watered and fed.

Peregrine and I did our best to take care of Marcel.

He refused to eat anything, and we didn't push him to do so. A somewhat threadbare nightshirt from the servants' quarters engulfed him from head to toe,

and we stripped blankets and bedding from two other rooms to make him a comfortable pallet by the fire.

Rory returned, now reeking of sex *and* stable. He muttered when he realized he couldn't just strip off and get into bed. He muttered even more when he realized that while we two were quite willing to put up with the odors we had contributed to creating, that willingness did not extend to horse sweat, dung, and bits and pieces of stray straw.

He got some water and cleaned himself as best he could, or rather, just enough to get us to allow him in bed. Then, dressed in a pair of threadbare trousers he brought along for use when outside the bedroom, in case one of the servants should unexpectedly return early, he climbed in.

The three of us then collapsed into the still-reeking bed, but after a while I fell asleep. Presumably they did as well, as none of us bemoaned a sleepless night when we woke.

Very much.

The storm was still going, slowing everything down to a deathly crawl, but by eleven we were en route to London, borrowed horses, borrowed pounds, abiding fear of what we might find, and all.

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Peregrine

Thursday, 12 September 1816

11:48 p.m.

Somerville House

London

My home was not as ablaze with lights as if I were holding a party, but it was remarkably well-lit when I clattered up to the front door, and fell, more than dismounted, from the last horse I hired. Remington had always had that nearly magical way of the finest London butlers of, for the most part, being “there” when he was needed without needing to be called. I normally attributed that simply to a mathematical mind, even if he did not consciously know he was making calculations.

Milord left at a time certain, in a particular mood. Not that the mood was necessarily known to anyone other than his lordship, of course. And, equally of course, his butler. Mood recognition was undoubtedly a subject taught at the London Academy of Fine Buttlng, from which Remington undoubtedly graduated with honors. The calculations went thusly: I was scheduled to go to this dinner, that ball, this other ball, and then in the company of one or more my friends, whose names I usually disclosed, I would in all likelihood go in search of entertainment at one of my, or *their* customary venues. Knowing my customs and peculiarities, though if pressed the most he would admit to would be mild eccentricities, and factoring in that evening’s choice of friends and my mood on departure, Remington was able to calculate to a reasonable degree of buttlng probability when I would return. And be there to greet me.

He had no such facts on which to base his customary calculations since I left town without telling him where I was going, though at the time I had not known myself what our destination was. I had certainly given him no estimated return date, much less a time. Yet as I staggered up the stairs, Remington, in all his awesome butlerian majesty, opened the door himself.

Perhaps I had been wrong. It was not mathematics but magic. I was certain no one had been pressing his face to the glass panels on either side of the door in order to signal an arrival.

“My lord.” Remington’s voice was always somewhat austere, but there was an underlying gravity to his tone that was not normally there.

“Remington.”

He held the door open, and I embarrassed myself thoroughly by displaying my exhaustion and momentarily slumping and pressing my palm against the door frame to prevent an even more embarrassing collapse to my knees. When I finally stepped through, he nodded at a footman, who scurried off, and then he began issuing orders to have the horse cared for, a bath drawn, my bed warmed, my valet alerted.

I thanked him, walked to the stairs, stopped on the bottom-most one when Remington cleared his throat.

As much as I would have liked to deal with the problems raised by that damned letter the moment I walked through the door, by bathing, changing into my most glorious armor, and then storming out in full attack mode, Rory and Michel made me give my word, before we separated on the outskirts of the city to go to our respective homes, that I would get as much sleep as I could, and in the morning, moderately refreshed, *we three* would address the problems.

Logically, Remington could not know of the letter, but he had undoubtedly been made aware, if he had not already directly heard, all of the rumors which had triggered the letter. His “I have an important matter to raise” cough either meant he was going to say something on that topic, or, with the way things had been going in my life in recent days, something else entirely.

It was, indeed, something else... just not *entirely*.

“Yes, Remington?”

“I regret, my lord, that there are three matters I must raise.”

“*Must?*” Most butlers would not dare to tell their lord and master that he *must* do something, such as listen to whatever it was the butler had to say, despite the master’s desperate need and desire for a hot bath and a bed.

“Yes, my lord.”

“Very well.” I stayed where I was, leaned back against the gleaming railing to prevent a most inglorious fall.

Remington might have earned a living on the stage, had he desired a different profession. As an illusionist. One moment there was nothing in his hand; the next there was a sealed note being held out to me.

It was addressed to me, in a somewhat shaky hand I did not recognize. I lifted a weary eyebrow. Remington, while entirely unable to speak eyebrow-lift, was quite fluent in reading it.

“The note from Lord Bennington.”

Was I blaspheming when I thought “Christ!” yet again? I held out my hand, took it, used my thumb to tear it open.

And then I remembered.

Remembered what I so carelessly forgot the night of the Alderson Ball, perhaps even willfully refused to remember, simply because my cock was too hard, and my mind so fogged with lust.

Yes, in my eagerness to depart for whatever destination was going to finally lead to sex with both of them at the same time, I forgot two things.

The lesser of the two forgotten things was the door that should have been closed. All I had to do was mention it, and I am certain now, far, far too late, that we would not have left town. Michel would have known he closed the library door, would have recognized the importance of it being ajar so closely after our departure. We would have stayed in the city, and crushed the rumors.

My greater crime, my *far* greater crime, was forgetting the overheard words from Beckwith and the unknown man. And the third who laughed with them. About the man who had been attacked by bangers, to the great glee of Beckwith and his friends. The man who had been severely injured.

The man who stuttered.

Beckwith and his ilk would not care about a commoner's stutter, nor see any reason to mock it. And there was only one man among the nobility who did stutter, though it was slight and infrequent.

Bennington.

They had been gloating about Bennington's banger-inflicted injuries!

I had a gut-churning feeling I knew what was in the note.

I was right. I did not particularly care that Remington saw the way my hands shook when I removed the note from the envelope, nearly dropping it in the process.

Please help.

I was attacked by bangers who They knew me. They did not say my name but mocked my stutter. They beat me and beat me and then they they used their banger sticks on me telling me I wanted it I wanted it I wanted it as I screamed and screamed

I can not tell my father. I have no one to turn to but you. I am dear God I am bleeding down there and it won't stop and I am so afraid please come my friend please help

Andy

I was crying by the time I got to the scrawled, nearly illegible, signature. I knuckled the tears away, looked at Remington. "How is he?"

"My lord?"

"Bennington. How is he?"

I had never before seen Remington look old. Nor dismayed.

"My lord... I thought you knew. I thought you were not all that far away, that you had returned be..."

"Damn it, Remington!"

"My lord Bennington is dead, my lord. He... hanged himself two nights ago."

The night Marcel arrived at *Maison de la Mer*. Christ.

I stayed upright only through sheer stubbornness, as my legs had no desire to hold up the body of a spineless, careless man who had killed a friend.

I was not certain how much more I could bear. All things come in threes it is said, and Remington said there were three matters. My voice was a dull monotone as I said, "And the third?"

He understood what I asked. "My lord, you will have a visitor tomorrow morning. At ten."

He just stopped. We had a waiting game we sometimes played. One of us would stop a conversation, and then we would both wait for one to break, and break the silence. I let him have the win and spoke immediately.

“Would you care to explain how you know I will have a visitor in the morning, when I have just returned to the city, unannounced? I thought the Oracle at Delphi was closed for business these days.”

Heavy-handed. But if I made feeble attempts at humor perhaps I would distract myself from my crimes.

It did not work.

Remington then did another thing I had never seen him do in all the years I had known him. He looked uncertain.

“I, ah, gave your lordship’s word that you would see... this person at ten in the morning following your return.”

My jaw dropped. I doubt that even if we had been in public, surrounded by all the members of the ton most likely to mock me for any lapse in decorum, that I could have prevented myself from doing so.

My “Explain” entirely lacked the frost that would otherwise have accompanied this gross breach of butlerian etiquette.

When he was still hesitant, I said, “The rest, Remington. Who is my visitor to be?”

“Lady Bennington.”

“What does his mother want with me?” Why wasn’t it his father, waving a pistol, or a glove to slap my face and challenge me?

“His wife, my lord.”

I grabbed the railing to keep myself standing. “Bennington is not married. I... we... would have known.”

Wouldn’t we? Surely he would have told us.

“Lady Bennington, the *young* Lady Bennington, showed me her marriage lines, my lord. I agreed to notify her when you arrived, ah, no matter the time.”

Ah. That explained Timothy getting the nod and hurrying away. But...

“I am clearly not following the logic of this, Remington. Why is Timothy rousing Bennington House at this time of night, instead of alerting Lady Bennington in the morning?”

“She, ah, she is not staying at Bennington House. She is at an inn. In a not, ah, salubrious part of the City.”

Gob-smacked did not begin to describe what I am sure I looked like at that moment.

I must have shown I was about to unleash a torrent of questioning, as Remington stopped me by speaking again.

“My lord, I know you have questions. And I know I have vastly overstepped my boundaries, but I beg you to trust me in this. And not question me further. I... perhaps I should have waited until the morning to tell you all this, but I felt you would want to know.”

Christ, yes!

Goddamnit, no!

But Remington was a genuinely devout man, and so I could not say any of that aloud.

I sighed. I could, of course, not be so crass as to question him further. But this news, which Michel would undoubtedly learn from his staff, but Rory might well not, required something more from me before that bath and the unfortunate unlikelihood of very much sleep.

“Would you be so kind as to light some candles for my desk, and then call two footmen? I need messages delivered to Strathairn and Vidal.”

“Of course, my lord.”

I watched him leave the entrance hall, and allowed myself to just sink into a haze, though I remained standing. After a moment, I made myself follow him into my library. I sat down, opened the drawer, pulled two sheets out, picked up the quill, grateful that it was sharp as I was uncertain whether I could safely have wielded even so small a blade at that moment, and began to write. The messages were identical, the salutations formal and impersonal in case the notes should by some mischance fall into any of the many antagonistic hands who would be eager to use them against me, against us.

I regret to inform you, if you have not already heard, that Lord Bennington hanged himself two nights ago. Lady Bennington, his wife! not his mother, will be at Somerville House at ten tomorrow morning. I would appreciate the courtesy of your presence before then. Perhaps at half nine?

I flourished “Somerville” at the bottom, sanded each, folded them, put them into envelopes, sealed them with wax and my seal, then carefully addressed them.

Remington returned with two sleepy-eyed footmen, who were attempting to look both alert and eager. He came up to the desk, took the envelopes and distributed them. All of my staff, down to the least tweeny who was at worst in the process of learning, could read and write. So I only asked if they were familiar with how to get to their destinations, and impressed upon them the need to deliver the note *only* to the man himself, using my name and my orders as freely as necessary to achieve that result. I left it to Remington to determine how best to get them there and safely back again.

When the footmen were gone, Remington left me alone. I was so tired, both physically and emotionally, that I really didn't want to expend the energy to walk up the stairs, get naked and bathe and then make the effort to try to sleep. I decided brandy would help my efforts.

I resisted the urge to test the impact of a full bottle.

Perhaps I should have made the test.

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Rory

Friday, 13 September 1816

9:25 a.m.

Somerville House

London

We naturally arrived early, though when Michel and I talked last night, after we received our notes from Peregrine, we considered arriving *very* early—as in last night. But we could offer no ton-acceptable excuse for our arrival and our staying, and the ton *would* have learned what we had done. Which would only have added more fuel to the fires that might yet burn us into charred, smoking ruins.

Remington showed us to the library. We walked past two women seated in plain, straight-backed chairs which clearly had no normal place amidst the elegance of that foyer. They were severely dressed, one in drab browns, the other in a plain, dark dress, without any frills and furbelows, and a black ribbon about one arm. The widow, who appeared to be restraining some emotion other than grief, stared straight ahead. Her knuckles, though, were white on her reticule.

I did not blatantly look at the woman I presumed to be Lady Bennington, but did so at least out of the corner of my eye as we passed. Michel and I were lucky we were not men made of straw to scare birds from fields, or we would have been incinerated on the spot, with our ashes making a mess on the marble floor.

When the library door closed behind us I felt as if we had arrived in a safe harbor, having barely avoided, but *having* avoided, the steel jaws of a gargantuan trap.

That feeling of relief turned out to be premature.

Peregrine had not bothered to raise his head from his hands when Remington announced us, but he did when the door closed. If shite had human form, that form would have been Peregrine's.

"What is she like?" he asked.

"You coward!" Michel barked, though despite the circumstances he was nearly laughing as he did it. "You came through the damned passage."

“Uh, well, yes.”

“Passage?” I asked.

Michel looked over at me as we seated ourselves in the comfortable chairs Peregrine, or perhaps Remington, had moved in front of his desk. “Whichever ancestor of Peregrine built this pile thought it would be fascinating to have secret passages. There are three, and not one is usable for getting into or out of a bedroom without observation. The man clearly belonged in Bedlam if he couldn't use at least one for illicit sex... even if he was not a friend of Edward's.”

“When did she arrive?” Michel asked.

“Just before nine.”

“My dear, I can understand a desire to wait on speaking to Lady Bennington, if she is indeed Lady Bennington, until we arrived to provide support. But requiring her to wait in the foyer on *those* chairs?”

“What?”

Peregrine surged out of his chair, and then realized that barging out the library door and into the foyer would defeat his purpose in entering by the passage. He turned, instead, walked to the wall and yanked the bell pull to summon Remington. The butler entered within a few seconds of the yank.

How the bluddy hell does he do that? There are no bells in the hallways of this pile. Does he have bat blood?

“Remington! What's this about chairs?” He waved his hand in an “out there” gesture.

“If you mean the chairs from the kitchen on which Lady Bennington and her maid are seated in the foyer, my lord, that was her ladyship's decision. As she was early, I offered to take her to the parlor, but she declined. I offered her quite comfortable chairs, but she declined.”

“And did she say why?”

Remington hesitated, then must have decided he had no choice.

“Yes, my lord. She said that she paid an urchin to watch the back door, another to watch the stable, and another to watch the side door. She and her maid would, she said, wait and watch the front door. So that, ah, you could not

avoid her as you, ah, avoided her husband. And, ah, *comfortable* chairs might, ah, *lull* them.”

“Dear God.” Peregrine went white.

“Then we dinnae delay, Somerville. See her now.”

Remington started to leave but Peregrine stopped him. His face was distraught. “I... you two need to read this, before... before Lady Bennington comes in.”

He picked up a somewhat crumpled note and handed it to me as I was closest. I think I became as pale as Peregrine when I read it. Michel whitened as well, when it was his turn.

Our dismay was written for all the world to see on our faces, and we could not let that remain. Each of us recovered in our own way, and once we were in tonnish mode, Peregrine sent Remington out.

I rose, picked up my chair and moved it back near the large fireplace. “Here, Peregrine. Let’s not try, and I do mean *try*, to intimidate the wee lassie.”

Peregrine agreed and we barely managed to shift the chairs into a less formal arrangement before Remington ushered Lady Bennington in. She looked at the three of us, and turned her head to Remington. “Leave the door open as you leave.”

He bowed to her, as if she were Lady Glenhaven or the never-to-be Lady Somerville. And did as she asked without looking to Peregrine for permission.

She looked us over. We were, unquestionably, a collective pile of fresh, stinking shite in which she had had no choice but to step.

What we saw was a tiny woman. Shorter even than Bennington. Slender. Light brown hair pulled back into a painfully tight bun. Fine brown eyes, with long lashes. Her face was lined with the obvious strain she had to be under.

“Won’t you be seated, Lady Bennington?”

There was nothing in Peregrine’s tone to suggest doubt about who she was. Nevertheless, she opened her reticule, pulled out two sets of folded papers. She winced as she looked down at what was in her hand, pain briefly on her face, and then she regained control. Somewhat awkwardly, she put one sheet back.

She marched, and that was the only way to describe her walk, over to Peregrine and stretched out the hand with the papers. It shook only a little.

“My marriage lines, Lord Somerville.”

“My lady, I don’t doubt...”

“I don’t...” Her lips tightened again. “My lord, I am here to collect a debt of honor. I wish you to be very sure that I have the right to do so.”

Peregrine’s shock mirrored ours.

“My lady, I don’t owe your... your late husband any money, so far as I know. And, well, the wagers we made were always settled immediately between us.”

Where her look in the foyer was scorching, she was winter itself then. “Not all such debts are matters of money, my lord. Please assure yourself.”

She looked at each of us. “And let your friends be assured as well.”

None of that amounted to a request.

With no choice, he took the papers, but said, “*Please*, Lady Bennington, won’t you be seated? No matter what the debt, if it is owed it will be paid. Whether it is a debt of one of us or all of us.”

“Very well.”

She sat in the chair he pointed to, the most comfortable one, other than Peregrine’s own, but she sat perched on the edge, her back rigidly straight. We were finally allowed to sit, once she did.

Peregrine looked at the sheets long enough to have read them, though I had my doubts about whether he saw the words. I had never seen documents saying that a marriage actually existed so while I in fact read the words, I just accepted her word. Michel went through the formality as well, and returned them to Lady Bennington.

Peregrine said, “Lady Bennington, may I off...”

“No, thank you, my lord.”

Peregrine’s sigh was only internal. “Then how may I, we, help you, Lady Bennington?”

“By honoring my husband’s request for help now, as you refused to do a week ago.”

Peregrine’s face and body showed how badly that gut punch hurt.

We hadn't had the time, after reading Bennington's plea, to tell Peregrine that the death wasn't his fault; that he couldn't have known what was in the note. That in the same situation, Michel and I would have made the same decision. Not that he would have believed either of us just then. I had my doubts that he would ever *not* blame himself.

"How?"

She opened her reticule, removed the paper. It crumpled as she clenched her fist. Her chin quivered. Firmed.

"I found him."

A gut-punch for the three of us.

"I... arrived early. We... we were going to tell his parents about us. I was not what they wanted for him. I was a country girl, the daughter of a small landholder. I had no wealth, no connections. But we ar..." She stopped to blink, and force back tears. "We *were* very much in love. We were both of age; our marriage was obviously a quiet and private one. And then he did not know how to tell his parents. Tell anyone, actually. Even the three men he counted as his *friends*."

So very much loathing in that last word.

"He was not truly strong, my Andrew. He did not tell me of the slights he endured, the mockery, the pain. I did not know that, not until... *after*. But he did talk about all of you, and how much your friendship meant to him. How he was finally being... *accepted*. Because of you.

"*All because of you, you...*"

She stopped herself from uttering what might have been some very unladylike words, though I doubted she knew very many. The paper rustled in her hand. She took two slow, deep breaths before resuming.

"He wrote me a week ago, asked me to come to him. Told me that we would tell his parents together, since they had been pressuring him endlessly to marry an heiress with powerful family connections. I was supposed to arrive the day after, but I came early. *I just wanted to surprise him. To tell him...*"

A single tear leaked down one cheek.

We waited, without speaking, until she was ready to go on.

“I had a key. When I let myself in, I wondered why there were no servants around. I told Marie, my maid, to see if she could find anyone about. I walked quietly to his bedroom, hoping to find... to find... him. Just not in that way. Have you ever seen a hanged man, my lords?” She gave us no chance to reply. “It is not pleasant to see... or smell. I screamed and fainted. Like a country girl faints, with no delicacy at all and a bump on my head when I awoke.

“My scream brought Marie, who must be made of sterner stuff than I am made of, since she did not join me in a swoon. It was she who noticed the three notes on his desk, after I was awake and briefly stopped sobbing. One to his parents, one to me, and one to Somerville.

“I could not bear to open the one to me, so I went the one place I was sure I would find refuge. Bennington House. I was sure his note would have told his parents about us. The servants would not let me in, although they deigned to take the note. I was hammering on the knocker again when the door was yanked open and his parents were there. His father grabbed me, shook me, asked if I... if I was the lying slut who brought this lying note in a false hand. He very nearly pushed me down the stairs when he let me go.

“And all the time I was crying, telling them that *my* Andy was dead, he'd hanged himself. His father looked at me, finally, and said, ‘I see my son is not even enough of a man to find an *attractive* whore. He is not *your* anything, girl, and when I return with my son, you and this foul May game you are playing had best be well gone.’”

Another pause. The tiniest of slumps. Another straightening. She might be a wee thing, but she was strong. Far stronger than many men I knew.

“I did not know where to go after that, except away. We found an inn that I could afford, as no ton hotel would ever allow me in, in my country mouse dress, with little luggage. There, I read his note to me. And then I decided to see what he had written to you, Lord Somerville. It was a good thing I did, as I thought then that if I delivered it to you unopened, you would do nothing, just as you did nothing when... when he was still alive. I came here, instead, to see if I could find out where you were, when you would return. Your Remington was most kind to me, believed me, and gave me his word of honor that he would let me know when you returned, day or night, and that I could meet with you. If you have any honor you will not punish him for that courtesy.”

Had it been a man who took so many disparaging slaps at his honor, Peregrine would by this time have ignored the prerequisites for a duel and had

the man down, pounding the disrespectful shite out of him. I was not certain how much more he could take without breaking.

She looked down at the now-wadded-up sheet. Carefully smoothed it out. It was clearly the note addressed to Peregrine. But rather than hand it to him, so he could read it, so *we* could read it, she read it aloud.

It hurt so very much more that way. To hear his last words in his wife's voice.

You were always Peregrine or Perry in my head, though I never would have dared say that aloud, nor even dared to ask you if we might be on first names with each other. As you are with Strathairn and Vidal. You will be most ashamed of me, embarrassed by my lack of courage when you learn why you are receiving this note.

I do not know why you would not help me when I begged you to why you left town without a word. They are saying such vile things about you. Worse things about me. That I was your catamite, your neddy-boy. That I serviced you and you and I we serviced your friends and others, on the Doncaster journey and every

If you were here I would beg you to help me. I think I might even offer to do in secret what I am accused of if you demanded it as payment though I do not truly think you would

I am so very afraid and in such pain I am not strong enough to endure any of it.

I beg of you, if not for my sake then for my wife's sake, and dear Anthea's sake, I beg of you

give me back my name!

Lord Andrew Bennington

Lady Bennington was crying openly now, a steady stream waterfalling from each eye. She held the note out to Peregrine. "Your correspondence, my lord, not at all accidentally opened."

Peregrine's hand shook as he rose enough to reach forward, take it, and sat abruptly back down.

“And if you will not do what he *begs*, for him, or his sister, or for me, *if you have any honor at all you will do it for his son or daughter!*”

She stood up.

At that moment, she was Wellington to our French forces at the end of Waterloo. Complete carnage on the ground.

Lady Bennington was pregnant. And she'd been turned away by the child's grandfather, called a whore.

Christ.

We stood, of course, when she did, but then the spirit with which she faced us down drained away, leaving her looking lost and alone, as indeed she was. Had she been a sister, a relative by marriage, any of us, all of us, would have hugged her, offered her comfort. But we were forbidden by ton rules from that bit of basic decency.

She wavered, as if she had used up every bit of strength she possessed to get this far, and did not now know where to go, or what to do next. And stood there.

“My lady,” Peregrine said, “it is my turn to beg, and I do indeed beg you to please, *please* sit down. I know you have no reason to believe me, but I will make this right. So, please, sit, and let us see how we might contrive.”

“I... Very well.” She sank down into the chair, less than gracefully, her back no longer ramrod-straight.

“My lady, I have no right to ask, and I apologize for any indelicacy, but... have you broken your fast today?”

“I had no m...” She stopped. Flushed at the admission.

Peregrine just nodded and eyebrow-asked Michel to find Remington. Quite naturally, he was just outside the door when Michel opened it. Far enough away that he could believably say he had not been listening, but close enough to be immediately available.

He stepped just inside the door, looked at the wan, seated widow, and the disconcerted, hovering Three R's. “How may I be of assistance, my lord?”

“Would you please ask Lady Bennington's maid to join her? And then... I think a hearty breakfast, with some restorative hot tea?” He looked suddenly

dismayed at his words, and I could see the frantic thoughts whirling around as he tried to figure out how he could ask a woman not his wife whether she was experiencing morning sickness—even the phrase sounded horrifying—and thus whether his proposal of a hearty breakfast was at all appropriate.

Lady Bennington was astute enough to understand what he dared not say. “You are most gracious, Lord Somerville. A hearty breakfast would be most welcome.”

Peregrine sagged with relief. He actually sagged. Then straightened. “My lady, we must step outside to confer for a little. If you would be so kind as to rest here, I will have my housekeeper join you, to see if there is, uh, anything else you might need.”

She graciously nodded and thanked him. The words even sounded somewhat genuine. We waited until she was joined by her maid, and then the four of us left. Leaving the door open once again. Peregrine let Remington give the necessary orders, and then drew us all to the parlor.

“Remington, do you have a way to get word to my mother? Immediately? No muss, no fuss, no notice to my father?”

“But of course, my lord.”

“I’ll give... well, no, I can’t go back in there right now and disturb her with rooting about for pen and paper. Just find me something, anything, to write on.”

In fairly short order, Remington returned with a silver tray, on which there were several sheets of paper, two quills, an inkwell, sand, and a sharpening knife. Clearly understanding that in Peregrine’s present mood, in order to have a surface to write on, as the parlor held no desk, Peregrine might very well sweep his arm across one of the decorative tables and deprive himself, his heirs and the world of several valuable and not-so-valuable figurines and other decorations, Remington set the tray down on the sofa. He then neatly cleared the table, followed by setting out the contents of the tray on it.

Peregrine sat down, realized he could never write in that position, and then stood. He wrote quickly, sanded it, handed it to us. “Anything else?”

Mama,

I need you immediately, or sooner than that. Young Lady Bennington and her unborn child are here and in dire, and I do mean dire, need of help I think only you can provide. Please

manage to get here without Father knowing, as he would not help matters at all.

Perry

He blushed a little when we got to his signature. “Only she calls me that, and, no, neither of you ever will, so she will know from that alone how important this is.”

The note went off by whatever mysterious method Remington employed to get a note to the lady of the house, without her lord and master knowing.

Peregrine began pacing, then sitting and fidgeting, then pacing again. We were temporarily alone in the parlor, and for our own reasons left that door open as well.

“Peregrine.” He stopped in mid-pace, looked at me. “I would if I could, but I can’t. So would Michel.”

He blinked and blinked, and blinked again before smiling ruefully at the possibilities of comfort my words suggested. All the way from the simple hug neither of us could give him, to the type of comfort that absolutely required the utmost privacy.

“Thank you. Both of you.”

For some reason, that calmed him down, and he sat. So did we. None of us saw any reason for idle chat, so we waited in silence for Lady Glenhaven, or word that she could not, or would not come.

She arrived about a half hour after the note was handed to Remington. Even I could recognize she was in full *grande dame* daytime mode as she stood for a moment in the doorway. Then she hurried over to Peregrine, sat beside him, and thoroughly embarrassed him with an enormous hug, a kiss on his cheek, and a murmured, “My dear boy,” as she stroked his hair.

He actually needed that bit of love as much as the comfort we could not give him just then.

Then she patted his cheek with a delicately gloved hand and said, “Young Lady Bennington. And just how do you know she is *enceinte*?”

Peregrine explained, if not *quite* everything, the most pertinent facts. Our departure for a holiday after our friendship resumed, the note from Bennington which was not answered, learning of the tales being told, hurrying back only to

learn of Bennington's suicide. The arrival of Lady Bennington. The debt of honor to clear young Bennington's name.

When he was done, he looked at Lady Glenhaven and said, "Mama. I... know you have heard the stories they are telling. The three of us will deal with those, and I beg you to let us do that. Right now, our first concern must be the welfare of Lady Bennington and the heir, or potential heir. And for Anthea as well, as this could destroy her amongst the ton, if it has not already done so. For that, we quite desperately need your guidance."

"Of course, my dear." She paused. "Do you know, John Bennington has been a rude pr... ah, prude, for as long as I have known him. But this is beyond the pale. Very well."

She stood up, as did we. "My dear boys, I have so very much enjoyed our visit this morning. I was quite surprised that Peregrine had in fact returned when I stopped by earlier to check on that very thing. And then the two of you arrived. Followed—so very unexpectedly—by Lady Bennington. It was a good thing I was here, as it is not at all *comme il faut* for a noble young widow, or wife, or young miss, to be alone, maid or not, with the Three R's."

Peregrine and Michel seemed satisfied with this Banbury tale. I was not. It could never work. The servants, his and hers, would know when she actually arrived. And so I said.

My bastard shite-heads just grinned at me, all smug, and superior and annoyingly tonnish Sassenachs just then.

Peregrine then proceeded to explain the facts of upper tonnish life to me. "Of course, they will. And the ton might well actually believe them if any were so desirous of losing their positions that they would speak out and contradict Mama. But truthfully, R... Strathairn, once Mama has given her version of events, do you think anyone would dare to accuse *Lady Glenhaven* of lying?"

I snorted. "I'd bow to your superior knowledge, Somerville, except that would make you feel even more superior than you usually do, so I won't bother."

I did give a little bow to Lady Glenhaven. "My apologies, my lady, for being a doubting Ruaidhri."

She smiled back at me. Then she looked inward, considering. I wonder if that was the way Wellington looked, the night before Waterloo, laying his

plans. She then bestowed a generous smile on all of us, before inhaling generously. I could not help my generous admiration, in the most platonic sense, of that most generous bosom, though I would not confide my admiration to Peregrine, lest I find something generous of my own snipped off.

“I shall, of course, need to speak with Lady Bennington now. Privately. I will, I believe, need all three of you a little later.” She looked us over somewhat critically. “I will need you looking as fine as five pence, and I’m afraid what you’re wearing will not do. Something better, and more conservative. Quite muted. And with black armbands.”

She headed to the door, and turned back for a moment. “We will, I believe, be laying siege to Castle Bennington, and quite probably knocking down the gates. Should that be *literally* necessary, I will quite rely on you three to be my gate-knockers. Trust Mama, Peregrine. All will be well with Lady Bennington. With *both* Lady Benningtons. Lord Bennington will just have to follow along, as men so often do, as best he may.”

And so we did as we were told. We trusted Lady Glenhaven.

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Michel

Friday, 13 September 1816

Late afternoon to early evening

Outside Bennington House, then...

White's on St. James's Street, then...

Somerville House

Peregrine is stubborn. He has always been stubborn. When he is angry he is beyond stubborn. His determination then acquires the consistency of granite.

He was at his most granite as we stood at the bottom of the steps outside Bennington House. Lady Glenhaven had decided to stay a while longer, to be sure that the morning's alarms and excursions inside were done, all was quiet and would remain so. If I believed in God and saints, I would have nominated her for sainthood. I am not sure how one comparatively small woman can shatter barricades, breach well-built, long-standing walls of prejudice and arrogance and bigotry with quiet words instead of a cannon's roar.

I hoped that when she finally left Bennington House, the charm of her presence and her persuasiveness would stay behind. It would with the elder Lady Bennington, who nearly swooned when she learned that she not only in truth had a daughter-in-law, but that she was, in the not too distant future, to be a grandmother. Bennington himself was more problematic, but I think, overall, she won him over.

We talked privately with him—a boon he was most reluctant to grant, as he did not like to be in the presence of sodomites, as he so very directly informed us once we *were* private—and I thought we made some headway. As with Lady Glenhaven, we refused to discuss the allegations about Peregrine, and us, no matter how he tried, but I think by the time we left he was beginning to believe that whatever truth or falsity there might be to the stories about us, the son he so often mocked for what the boy could not help—his looks—was as manly as any father might reasonably desire. And that son had sired a child who might well be the next heir.

Throughout the hours we were there, Peregrine grew increasingly angry, though he kept it bottled up and unseen except by us. And perhaps his mother. He wanted, now that Lady Bennington was on her way to being taken care of,

to go charging off to find Beckwith and challenge him to a duel. As well as anyone else who said or might have said something about any of us or about Bennington. We managed to bring him down from a boil to a bubbling simmer as we waited for my carriage to come back, as I had instructed the driver not to keep the horses standing.

Somerville's carriage and driver would naturally wait for Lady Glenhaven. Since Rory and I arrived in my carriage, I was, therefore, in at least partial control of Peregrine's travel. A refusal on my part to tell my driver to follow Peregrine's instructions might well have resulted in Peregrine telling the both of us to "bloody well bugger off" and him walking a few streets over and getting a hackney.

I briefly contemplated appearing to agree to his destination without ever actually saying so, as once I actually said the words, I would be bound to honor them. But that plan contained a serious flaw. Even if I managed to get the three of us into the carriage without directing Jean to take us to White's, once Peregrine realized we were *not* heading in that direction, he was fully capable, at this stage of his ire, of stepping down into the street if we came to a stop in traffic, or simply leaping out while we were moving. Either would serve to make his point that he would not be deterred.

We were either with him, or he was without us.

We nevertheless made one last effort, Rory and I, to persuade him to relent, to let us go to the club and check the lay of the land, and bring back word. That idea verged on suggesting that he act the coward, but we skirted that verge and stayed on the road with the thought that we might find out more by strategically or tactically—I had no idea which was the militarily correct concept, if either—avoiding a confrontation by the substitution of careful reconnoitering. Ours.

That was our last play. If he disagreed, neither of us was stupid enough to suggest that we drive there, and he wait outside while we went in. *That* idea would have been tantamount to *accusing* him of cowardice, because even making the suggestion implied he might agree. In his present mood, I was sure that had we done so, there would have been a pair of duels in the offing. And while I was certain none of us would shoot to kill, I most assuredly did not want my right shoulder shot again, or worse, my left. Rory would have undoubtedly expressed the same opinion had I asked, though naturally his concern would have been for his previously un-shot right shoulder.

Peregrine actually did us the courtesy of considering our arguments, or perhaps he merely humored us.

Then one eyebrow lifted in an arc.

Rory had, by association, acquired some additional fluency in eyebrow-speak, but no translation was needed for that one.

You are both out of your fucking minds.

We tried our best to protect our man, but having failed to do so, we joined him.

It was worse than even I, and I am the perpetual pessimist of our trio, expected.

He was not allowed in.

George, the doorman, the quite *large* doorman, nodded deferentially to me, and with slightly less deference to Rory, who had been the guest of both Peregrine or me on prior occasions. There was no nod or bow or any deference at all for Peregrine. Instead, George angled his body so that we could pass by, and blocked Peregrine.

“Members only.” George’s voice was cold. The insult was all the greater for the fact that there was no “my lord” at the end of the sentence.

Peregrine whitened, and his lips thinned to non-existence.

“Then he is here as my guest,” I said.

“Regretfully, my lord, that is impossible. This... person... has been banned from the premises.”

Vastly worse than I imagined.

Peregrine stood very still for a moment, held up his hand when I opened my mouth, and then he blinked. And blinked again. And the edges of his lips lifted in a hint of a smile.

Ah, shite. I recognized that look. Something embarrassing was imminent.

“If you will but give me a moment?” he said to Rory and to me.

He looked at George, still blocking his passage through the open door. “My dear George, you perform your tasks most excellently well. But you see, if Muhammad is not allowed to go to the mountain, then it becomes necessary for the mountain to come to Muhammad.”

George maintained his impassive face, but I was reasonably certain he had no idea what Peregrine meant.

Neither did I. I suspected Rory was in the same condition.

We simply stared as Peregrine went down the few steps to the sidewalk, crossed over to my carriage—Jean's instructions were to not bother walking the horses, in the expectation this visit would not take long—and absently patted Thunder's neck, while looking down into the gutter and then lifting his head to look into the street.

Which he then proceeded to step into. Obviously alert, though for the most part looking down for whatever it was he sought, he dodged the odd carriage or two, a dray, several horses and riders who were irritated by his presence where he should not have been, and neatly avoided the droppings that were fresh and steaming or dried and crusty.

On the opposite side of the street and a few yards down, he bent and picked something up in each hand, and then dashed through a brief surge in traffic and returned to the sidewalk outside of White's. He went, however, to stand in front of the wrought iron fence and directly before the bow window. I could see at least one person occupying the seats, but could not tell who it was.

Peregrine let me, and indeed that part of the world on St. James's at that moment, know who that person was. His bellowed "Alvanley!" advised us.

Londoners are, of course, like all people, nothing loathe to be entertained whenever and wherever such entertainment might arise. Especially when the entertainment is *free*. The riders and drivers slowed and stopped, regardless of the irritation of those behind them. Pedestrians paused as well. Their expressions suggested that what was happening offered the possibility of being better than a raree-show.

A nobleman... for what else could Peregrine possibly be with those looks and those clothes... standing outside the famous bow window yelling the name of perhaps the preeminent member of the preeminent men's club in London? Oh, yes, entertainment indeed.

He bellowed the name again. More people stopped and stared.

He switched whatever was in his right hand for what was in his left, and then let us know what that was. His right arm came back and then swung forward. A shower of gravel flew from his hand and clattered against the glass.

There was a mild gasp from the onlookers, and George started to move toward him.

Instinctively, my left hand grabbed onto the *very* large left bicep of the doorman. Rory fluidly skirted behind me and stood in George's path, a step down. Despite the difference in height, accentuated by that step, for a moment Rory's stance and stare made him seem the far larger of the two men.

"George," I said, pronouncing his name as if he were French, "'that man' may not presently be a member, but he is still Viscount Somerville, and Glenhaven's heir. Do you really wish to take it upon yourself to lay hands on him on a public sidewalk? Without express instructions to do so?"

The muscle tension that would have translated into forward motion gave way. A doorman could enjoy a raree-show as well as any other citizen, could he not? And his only orders were to stop the former member from entering the sacred precincts, not to stop him from throwing small stones at a window. Even a *Bow Window*.

With interference from that quarter halted, the three of us watched as the next act began.

The fairly large rock that had been in his left hand was visible now as he tossed it back to his right, and then used his right hand to toss it into the air and catch it. And did the same again. And then again.

"My Lord Alvanley, I merely wish to talk," he said loudly enough for everyone to hear, and as it was perhaps ten feet, twelve, between where he stood and the seats beyond the glass of the bow window, I was certain that the occupants, if there were any more besides Lord Alvanley, could hear just as well.

"Or shall we see if my aim with this—" and he tossed the rock again "—is as accurate as I am with a pistol or a bow?"

There was a pause, while he stared at the man or men in the seats who sat in judgment on the passers-by that day. Then at some unseen signal, he nodded and tossed the rock down. He was not precisely sauntering as he walked back to the steps.

We did not have long to wait until Lord Alvanley himself pulled the door all the way open, told George to step back inside, and then came out on the stoop. A massive man, of massive elegance, and equally massive ugliness, he looked

down his nose at Peregrine on the sidewalk, casually leaning against the fence, one foot on the first step. Lord Alvanley's voice was cold. "Somerville."

Peregrine straightened, made no attempt to physically alter the image of power (on the upper step) looking down on far less power (on the sidewalk). Hubert's instructions to be always aware of position, power, and precedence crossed my mind. But he did give Alvanley a bow that was patently less than sincere. "Alvanley. You took a vote, in my absence, without affording me an opportunity to answer whatever charges may have been leveled."

Lord Alvanley's famed wit was markedly absent. "We did. You could not possibly be unaware of what those charges were. You could not possibly be unaware that there is nothing you could possibly have said that would have affected the outcome."

"What was the margin?"

"You are not entitled to know that. But I shall tell you anyway. We voted on your expulsion as we did on your membership. Then, there was no black ball. This time, there was not a single white ball."

Those bastards. My ned-sense knew, though my cock did not, that there were other friends of Edward's who were members of White's. Other men, too, who made use of the mouth or arse or hands of a man from time to time, even though the majority of the time they put their cocks to use in cunts. A secret ballot, not even with slips of paper where handwriting might be recognized, just tiny balls of black or white marble. And the cowards all voted against him.

Peregrine was too intelligent not to have expected something of this nature once he was told his membership had been revoked. But Rory and I could see the blow that those five words—"not a single white ball"—were to him, though I am utterly certain Alvanley could not. Instead, it appeared to affect Peregrine to no more degree than if he had been told he had lost five quid on which raindrop would reach the bottom of the window first.

Peregrine did not allow a moment's lapse between Alvanley's last words and his next, as any hesitation at all would give rise to rumors of his being aghast at, and crushed by, that particular news.

"And these two?" He looked toward us and then back to Alvanley.

"Why, *M. le vicomte de Vidal-Sansouci* is a valued member of the Club, who is always welcome. As are his guests. With, of course, one exception."

Alvanley allowed himself a smile, then. A cruel one. "It was, I believe, your friend, *M. le vicomte*, who remarked on some occasion or other, that men being men, when they do not have a woman available, will often make use of any hole that *is* available."

Bloody, bloody, bloody hell! I should have cut my throat before uttering those words.

"*M. le vicomte* did not have his Alicia available, nor the Master of Strathairn his delicious Angel at Annabella's, so when a willing and, from everything one has heard, exceedingly talented and well-used hole was offered..." He shrugged. "Entirely understandable, I am sure."

Alvanley turned to Rory and me, effectively offering a cut direct to Peregrine. He gestured toward the door. "Gentlemen, I have ordered an exceptionally fine beefsteak for this evening, as well as some somewhat special dishes, and indeed, some quite remarkable port, as well. Perhaps you might care to join me?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the almost imperceptible bracing in Peregrine's taut frame for a blow that was yet to descend. I regretted that his impulsive decision to come here had resulted not only in all that had happened, but in an even temporary weakening of his faith in the *three* of us as well.

I offered Alvanley my most excellent, courteous bow. "My lord, we both deeply appreciate the great honor you do us with your invitation. But... another time?"

It was Alvanley's turn to stiffen. An offer to make up two of the eight, and only eight, he ever invited to dine with him, was much sought-after, particularly given the invariable exquisiteness of the meal he provided. To refuse for any reason short of one's own imminent death was essentially unheard of. To refuse, *and* for all practical purposes request a subsequent invitation, was not heard of at all. It simply was not done.

Yet I am the *vicomte de Vidal-Sansouci*. The fife and drum corps to which I march, as Peregrine so aptly put it years ago, is unlike any other. I was known to respect the rules of conduct for men of my class, but also to go my own way whenever I felt so inclined. Alvanley understood this was one such inclination.

He nodded his head with magisterial weight, accepting the decision I made for both Rory and me. He paused. Lowered his voice. "*M. le vicomte*, a word, if I may, of caution?"

My own nod indicated my willingness to listen.

“One understands your decision at this moment. You have, after all, been a friend of... that man... for numerous years. But you must give some heed to your own well-being. You would not, I am sure, want to chance being tarred with that self-same brush.”

Bloody hell. Both Rory and I had been painted with that “self-same brush” long years ago, and while I haven’t, I knew quite well from the little time we had by the sea that Rory had had that brush up his arse. Perhaps sideways.

“I thank your lordship for your care, and your sound advice,” I murmured back.

And you can take that advice and shove it up your arse. Sideways and spinning.

Alvanley and I exchanged bow-substitute nods, and he went inside. George shut the door with not quite a slam.

The watchers, realizing that this had been an exceedingly rare raree-show, but also that these revels now were ended, and this trio of actors, not spirits at all, was not about to melt into thin air, but rather depart in the vastly more substantial carriage that had been waiting all this time, began their own dissolution. They suddenly recalled all the places they were supposed to have been, the people they were supposed to have seen, and realized they now had a need to decide whether those were the best places to go or people to see in order to disseminate this tale in the most advantageous way possible.

As we got into the carriage, Rory shoved his way in first, so that Peregrine wound up between us. We could not kiss him, nor visibly hug him for obvious reasons, but our hands were out of sight of passers-by, except perhaps for a rider who might briefly look down and through a window. We sat there, saying nothing, though Rory and I each grabbed one of his hands and held onto it, squeezing slightly. He shuddered. Closed his eyes briefly; opened them, called out, “Somerville House, *s’il vous plaît*, Jean.” My silence indicated my approval, and the carriage moved into traffic.

Peregrine tugged, and we let his hands go. He clasped them together in his lap, his knuckles going white. His voice was dull. “I killed him.”

“Dinna sae that. He murdured his-sel’.’Twas his ain choice.”

Peregrine shook his head. His jaw was tight, and his flesh was even more so across the bones of his face, as though he had suddenly lost a stone or two of weight.

“I did not tie the knot. I did not put the noose around his head. I did not do the rest of the things that left him hanging there, while he slowly choked to death. I know all that. But still, because I was more interested in cock in my mouth or arse or both, I left him hanging. Left him alone and afraid, lost and unable to find his way back. *Damn me!*”

His voice was agonized, and possible viewers or not, I started to put my arm around him to comfort him. He shook me off, not even noticing he had done it, his focus was so tightly inward.

“And damn *them* as well. And I *will* see them damned.”

He looked at Rory and then at me. “And you will not dissuade me from my course.”

Dissuasion being all the more difficult, of course, since we had no idea of his course.

“My dear, what *is* your course? Because of course if we are going to try to get you off your course and onto some other course entirely, as you know we will, should we not agree with whatever your course is, we have to know what your course is first, in order to set our own course to, ah, alter yours. Your course, that is. The one we don't know.”

That modest bit of mockery would, under most circumstances, have at least earned me a smile. These were clearly far from “most” circumstances.

He ignored me as if I had said nothing.

“He was not strong enough to face his fears alone, and but for my cock lust, he might not have been alone. We did not have to leave just then. *I* did not have to send that facile message. Your cocks and mouths and arses are not worth a man's life, and I shouldn't have listened to you.”

The surge of fury was so great, I could no more *not* have pulled away from Peregrine as far as it was possible to move in the close confines of my suddenly too-damned-small carriage, than I could have picked the fucking thing up and carried it to our destination.

He stopped speaking, blanched, looked wildly at each of us. “Oh, Christ, Christ, I am so very sorry. I did not mean that, truly I did not.”

I ignored him. Too little, too bloody late.

“Jean!” I shouted. “Faster!”

Speed in London streets was rarely possible, and even when possible, dangerous. I did not particularly care at that moment. I wanted Peregrine out of my carriage, and since I unfortunately still cared too much for him to just grab his lapels, haul him across my lap and shove him out the door into hopefully very heavy traffic, I had to make do until he could voluntarily exit at his home. Most probably with my boot in his arse to assist him on his way.

When he spoke again, Peregrine's voice was almost too soft to hear, but then he cleared his throat. “Did you know that the Bishop of Harwell preached a *special* sermon, quite ‘unexpectedly,’” and his voice was bitter on that word, “on Wednesday, 11th September, at a church that just ‘happened’ to be filled to overflowing that morning?”

“His subject was the sin of sodomy, and the moral degradation which accompanies it, particularly among the young who are seduced into that sin. And how, when the sinner realizes the vastness of his sin, the depths of perversion and filth into which he has been drawn, the only right and proper thing he can and should do is end his life. Of course, suicide is a sin and that would prevent any reconciliation with God the loving *fucking arsehole* Father, but death as a suicide and being eternally damned is preferable to indulging in such sin throughout an inevitably wasted life, and being eternally damned anyway. Better, as it were, to end it now and get started sooner on damnation. And everyone in that church, and everyone who read about it in the *Ton Tales* that Jeffreys kept for me, *knew* he was talking about young Bennington. *Knew* that he was rejoicing in Bennington's death as a sign of God's will.”

He stopped, inhaled, exhaled. Stayed silent. And finally, “I'm mad as 'ell, 'n' I'm not fuckin' takin' it anymore.”

My “What?” and Rory's sharp bark of laughter were simultaneous.

Peregrine looked at me, and those same deep lines I had seen when he read Henri's letter were etched into his face. “The motto of the Friends of Edward Society.”

“Don't be absurd, Peregrine. There is no such thing. Yes, yes, a few friends of Edward's have, over the past year, fought back against the bangers and claimed to be members, but that's just talk. Such ridiculous talk that the French, who will do anything to be in the forefront of anything at all, even emulated it.”

Damn me for calling up that memory of Bennington and his cheerful tale of the French “society.”

Peregrine let his wince be seen. “No, Michel, the Society exists. Rory and I founded it. 30th August last year. On the Dock. Right after we beat the shite out of three bangers. And though forming the Society was more Rory’s idea than mine, I naturally approved whole-heartedly.”

“Liar.” The word was more fond than accusatory, and Rory reached out to put his vast paw over Peregrine’s much smaller one. Peregrine did not push him away.

Rory leaned forward to look at me. “He reamed my arse royally for doing it, despite my best efforts to convince him that his tongue would be better spent on another form of reaming. One far more enjoyable for the *both* of us.”

Peregrine turned his head toward me as well, said, “I am truly sorry, Michel. You are not responsible for any of this. Either of you. Just me.”

I would never have believed Peregrine to be capable of so fine, if unconscious, a portrayal of early Christian martyr. Or middle Christian martyr. Or late Christian martyr. But there he was, completely sincere, and begging for the forgiveness from me which Rory, that far smarter than I will ever admit he looks Scot, had already granted him.

The anger drained away and I shifted back that tiny increment of space that put our legs together once more. He sighed and put his hand in mine. Our fingers entwined. We three sat in silence, ignoring the early evening sounds of the City around us, the clopping of the hooves.

I called out to Jean to allow him a more reasonable pace. I could almost hear his under-his-breath, “Make up your bloody mind, your bloody lordship.”

We were nearing Somerville House, and I was not willing to let this conversation die. “So. You are mad as hell, and you are fucking not taking ‘it’ anymore. So...”

“Not fucking not taking.”

“What?”

“You need to quote the motto correctly. The fucking comes before the taking, not before the not.”

Without letting loose his hand, fully aware Rory still held his other hand, I reached around and punched Peregrine’s shoulder. He yelped and then grinned.

“Very well, Peregrine. You are not fucking taking it any more. So what *are* you going to do, and what does it have to do with this Society of yours?”

He shook his head. “No idea, actually. But I am fairly certain that whatever it is, you two will be well out of it. And no, don’t leap in here with oaths of undying devotion and standing with me through hell, high water, and the fucking ton. This... whatever it is, whatever it will be... is something I have to do myself, since I set this all in motion myself.”

“No.”

Rory added, “Definitely, no.”

“Rory, Michel...”

“Don’t waste your breath, Peregrine. I recognize the voice and expression all too well. Rory, my dear, I am afraid you are going to have to learn this voice and this expression, as you will certainly see it from time to time as our lives go on...”

Ridiculous as it was, we stopped talking. Perhaps even stopped breathing. I was certain, with a certainty so very certain I would have wagered not half but *all* my kingdom on it, that we three were thinking, imagining, if not *precisely* the same things, things that were very much of a muchness.

As our lives go on. The three of us... *together*... as our lives and the years went on. And on. And on.

A most wonderful imagining. But one which had to give way to reality. For the nonce.

“This expression, Rory, is the one he gets when he has decided he is going to do something, often something quite silly, sometimes even quite stupid, but his mind has fixed on it. If he were a child, he would be on the floor, drumming his heels until finally he was given leave by worn-down caretakers to do what he bloody well wanted.” I cupped one hand behind my ear, tilted my head. “Hark! I hear a heel!”

Rory snickered, Peregrine glowered.

“We three, Peregrine. All for one, and one for all. Agreed?”

He heaved a ridiculously great sigh. “Very well. All for one, and one for all. And at least we are not in Prague, so there will be no defenestrations involved.”

Ah.

I recognized *that* expression as well. I would explain it to Rory privately. It was the one that said, “Yes, I’ve agreed to do what *you* want, but this is for your own good, so I’m going to do what I bloody well want to do anyway.” He still thought I did not know what that expression meant, and I was naturally not about to disabuse him of that misapprehension.

We remained silent for the rest of the ride back to Somerville House. Once there, Peregrine got out, shut the door, rested his hand on the window’s edge. “The Dumbarton rout. Eleven o’clock.”

We agreed. And I asked, “And do you yet know what your course is?”

“No.”

For once, I could not tell whether he was telling me the truth. And wasn’t that just fine under these circumstances?

As the carriage pulled away toward Rory’s lodgings, he asked, “Do you think he’ll do nothing at all until we meet?”

My laughter was on the somewhat grim side. “He’ll do something, and I have no idea what that might be.”

“But will he be there at eleven?”

“He will. I do not believe Peregrine will ever lie to either of us. Avoid the truth, of a certainty. Omit the truth, assuredly. Bend it and warp it, likely. But not an outright lie.”

We would find out at eleven what he wasn’t going to fucking not taking anymore. And the proper word order be damned.

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Peregrine

Saturday, 14 September 1816

10:55 p.m.

Dumbarton Hall

London

My carriage blocked easy access to the entrance. That thoroughly annoyed other latecomers, which led some of them or their drivers to consider protestations, perhaps with some degree of vehemence, but one look at my expression in the flickering light of the torches held by the link boys made them rethink what they had been about to say, and in fact, not say it at all.

My presence on the sidewalk undoubtedly gave those who saw and recognized me, which was most of them, more to gossip about once they passed the doors. *Did you see? Hear? Somerville is outside! He's not allowed in!* Their words would simply join with those already eagerly and viciously spread from the last three ton events I had been to tonight. I learned at each of them that although I had received and accepted their invitations, well before 6th September, each invitation had been revoked. The butlers who denied me entrance were not at all sympathetic to my mild protestation that I had received no such notice.

None were ever sent, of course. There were far too many smirks from the far too many received guests, who merely happened to be passing by the door when I arrived. The host and hostesses had undoubtedly spread the word of my impending humiliation with a casual mention here and there to early arrivals, so that the news would spread much as rats spread the Black Plague.

After White's, I suspected this would happen, so I wanted to endure the pain alone, without inflicting it on Rory and Michel as well. Or the additional pain to me when they were offered entrance while I was refused. If it were not redundant, I would say, "*Déjà vu* yet again." I could not even hope they might be late.

Michel's carriage pulled up behind mine. If I took the time to check the time I would just have seen it was precisely eleven.

Rory was, as I expected, in full regalia and stunning in his powerful, red-haired masculinity. He looked like he could easily throw five or six cabers, one right after the other without breaking into a sweat.

Michel... *glittered*. A black tailcoat, black inexpressibles, and everything else brilliant white, including his signature Belgian lace at his wrists. All of which formed a background for the large diamond stickpin that shattered the torchlight into flickering rainbow darts. Diamond shirt studs. A large, square-cut diamond ring on his left hand. And the ferrule of his quite-lethal sword cane glittered as well.

Michel started to wave his carriage away, but I stopped him. What was the point? He would only be needing it again in a few minutes, as I knew that once I was refused, they would not go in without me.

No.

This could not drag on and on. I had to gain access. Had to do something, somehow, for Bennington. Be damned to me.

Ah.

I looked at my dear ones, who stood close by but not close enough to elicit comment in any except the most exceptionally filthy minds. Which would, generally speaking, be most of the ton. And not just the men.

"I have not been admitted to any of the other gatherings tonight to which I was previously invited. My invitation was revoked, and each of the revocations was, must have been, quite accidentally lost in the mail. How... very odd."

My mockery was of course not lost on them. They waited for me to finish.

"I rather expected something like that, especially after White's. But I didn't want you to have to go through that."

I glanced up the steps to where the door was being held open, and the butler and two quite large footmen were just inside. Ostentatiously so. With an unusual number of members of the ton idling in the background. Well, members of the ton *always* idled, just generally not in a doorway on a not exactly balmy night. They were waiting, obviously, for *their* opportunity. "Once is enough."

Michel sighed his most languid, lewd, lascivious sigh, of which there were many in his repertoire I had learned, and said, "My dear, *once* will never be enough."

"Mibbie twa, bit ah dinnae think sae."

Michel looked at him, and actually winked. "My dear Rory, do you think... perhaps *three*?"

“Mibbie, bit ainlie barely sae. Fower wid be better.”

“Four it is, then. But only as an absolute minimum of satisfaction.”

“Aye. Noo howfur dae we decide whilk holes in whit order?”

I literally felt the despair drain away. How could I despair when I had these two to raise me up? With them, I could... stand on mountains. Make myself more than I had ever thought I could be.

I could not, of course, hug them. Kiss them. But they could see both in my eyes. “Shall we, then, march up there to the beat of *our* fife and drum corps?”

“Aye, laddie,” and “*Mais bien sûr*,” were simultaneous.

So we marched side by side up the stairs, knowing we would have preferred to be arm in arm as well. The butler, whose name was unknown, felt quite comfortable in smirking at us as we reached the landing. He had stayed inside so that he was one step above us. The position of power.

Before he could say anything, Michel spoke. In theory to just me. “Did I ever tell you what Mr. Fallon used to say about position?”

As he clearly required no response from me, I offered none and he went on.

“*M. le vicomte*,” he would say, always so very formal with me, ‘*M. le vicomte*, always consider position, and placement, and power in everything you do. But consider, too, that power most often resides entirely in the man or woman who holds it, much to the detriment of those who rely on mere *position* to achieve it. Or the illusion of it.’”

He paused, quite artificially, and then said with blatantly false startlement, “Oh. But I interrupted you. You were about to say something, were you not?” And he graciously gestured for me to go ahead.

“I wish to speak to Lady Dumbarton. Inform her.”

The red-faced butler managed to say, “Viscount Somerville, I regret...” before I interrupted him.

“I am sure you regret many things, but I frankly have no interest whatsoever in listening to a list of your life regrets or of your sins, petty, venial, minor, mortal, whatever they might be. Inform Lady Dumbarton I wish to speak with her.”

Smug. So very smug. So *stupidly* smug to believe he could have his moment in the sun, though it was, indeed, quite late at night, at my expense. “Or?” he asked.

Michel's right eyebrow was undoubtedly arched as high as my own, while Rory compensated for his arcing inability with a tightening of his lips, a straightening of his broad, *broad* shoulders, and the clenching of just one massive fist. He would, of course, only need one if a fist were to become necessary.

"Accept the consequences of not telling her."

"C-consequences?"

Remington would never have been so unnerved, no matter the circumstances. This man must not have graduated high in his class at the Buttling Academy, if indeed he ever went.

Michel stepped into the very tiny moment of silence. "What my friend alludes to, is the consequence of being turned off without a reference when Lady Dumbarton learns that you sent Viscount Somerville away, and he went instead to Lady Palmer and offered *her* the opportunity to have *her* ball tonight become the most talked about event of the Season. Indeed, most likely of any Season for the next decade or so. So. Do we stay or do we go?"

I of course knew of not only the spirit of competitiveness between the two, but sometimes the outright enmity. I could have thought of that myself. In a moment or three. What a trio we make.

"I, ah, I will, uh, ask Lady Dumbarton."

"Excellent." I stepped up and inside the door, with my men closely behind me because we couldn't quite manage three abreast. The butler looked shocked. "Surely you would not be so rude as to require us to wait for Lady Dumbarton's arrival in the cold?"

Having retreated once, it became so very easy for him to retreat again. And thus are battles and wars won... with a single retreat. "Ah, no, of course, my... my lords."

As the butler scurried away, we decided without words to help shift Lady Dumbarton's decision from a possibility to closer to a foregone conclusion. We removed hats, gloves, greatcoats, cape, and dumped them into the arms of the footmen who had been sent to the door for reasons other than this particular courtesy. Since they clearly couldn't risk their own employment by in turn dropping everything on the floor, at least not without specific instructions from their employer, they hesitated and then turned away to hang our outerwear up and safely store hats and gloves.

We waited with every appearance of insouciance, ignoring the stares of the ton who had decided the entrance hall was potentially better entertainment than elsewhere in the house.

As we expected, Lady Dumbarton arrived rather quickly, attended by her husband, who was a non-entity completely under her thumb. She was attempting that same insouciance, with an added touch of “how dare you come in when your invitation was revoked?” arrogance.

I swept her a most courteous bow, quickly followed by Michel and Rory. “My lady, as I have received no withdrawal of your most kind invitation for this evening’s entertainment, surely I have reason to believe none was sent?”

“I...”

“Particularly since honoring that invitation would give you such cachet among the ton. The Three R’s all together, in your home, after all that has been said. All the rumors? All the falsehoods? And we chose *your* ball to make our first appearance. Your ball will be the talk of the ton for *Seasons* to come, I assure you.”

She hesitated, so I went in for the kill Michel had so cleverly thought of earlier. “Or... we could simply gather our things, bow most respectfully, and see what Lady Palmer’s ball this evening is like? And if I mention I was turned away here...”

Her “No!” was just the tiniest bit too sharp. She caught herself. She was indeed on the horns of a dilemma. By all rights, she should give me the cut direct, given who and *what* I was, and be supercilious in having those large footmen escort me to the door, while being graciously welcoming to the *other* participants in this drama. On the other hand, doing so would possibly, perhaps even probably, lead to her most hated rival having the coup of the decade. On the yet *other* hand, if she acquiesced in my staying, she could not be *too* welcoming, lest she be seen as an outsider, un-tonnish as it were, in light of the apparently unanimous opinions of me.

Greed quite naturally won out.

“You are quite right, Lord Somerville. Your invitation was not rescinded. *I* would not be so discourteous.” Having set herself up as a paragon of virtue, compared to the other host and hostesses who had been so crass, she regally nodded and then turned away. Actually, it was quite a fine solution. The nod

was not *quite* welcoming, but enough so that I could legitimately enter. The turning of her back was not *quite* a cut direct (given the nod), but was sufficient to establish that she was—really, truly—on the side of the ton, and not mine.

We followed her to the ballroom. But not so closely as to make it appear she was welcoming us and guiding us there.

It was worse than my imaginings, and my imaginings had run riot tonight. I thought I was prepared for what I might experience once I was among the ton again. I was not.

I insisted that Rory and Michel not accompany me as I walked about. They reluctantly agreed.

How had I been so stupid as to believe that some of them would be willing to talk to me? To listen to what I had to say? To listen to the truth about Bennington?

Conversations stopped as I approached. The men turned their backs; the women looked away. And as I moved on, the conversations resumed, louder than before, the laughter more brilliant, even more patently false than was customary.

The first time was embarrassing. The second deeply humiliating. The third was... incendiary. The fourth was... Mount Tambora... only on English soil, instead of the Dutch East Indies.

I turned away, obviously moving toward the stairs and an exit... and I heard Beckwith's satisfied laughter. I ignored it, and him, and all of them as the ton congratulated itself on having fulfilled its moral duty. It had shown its condemnation of the sodomite who willingly sucked the cocks of such fine, upstanding men as the Master of Strathairn and the *vicomte de Vidal-Sansouci*. After all, the disgusting Glenhaven heir has been known to be most persuasive, and well, nudge-nudge-wink-wink everyone knows how men are when a willing hole is available. He is fleeing in disgrace. He'll not dare show his face again.

I veered over to Rory and Michel, who had moved apart so that they were in an island of temporary emptiness. They kept their expressions calm. I paused only long enough to tell them I was not leaving, ask them to stay where they were. Or circulate, as they chose.

They did not argue.

God, how I loved these men.

I accelerated my walk, let my face show something they might interpret as distraught, and ostentatiously “stormed” out the front door, completely forgetting my hat, coat and gloves, so thoroughly had I been routed. More fuel.

Once he saw me gain entrance, Michael knew where to take the carriage. A few minutes’ walk, given the number of other carriages that needed a place to wait for their owners’ readiness to depart. That did not matter.

I opened the hidden compartment in my carriage, pulled the contents out, wrapped them in a cloth, and went back.

The butler was waiting for me. The stupid, stupid, *stupid* butler. Barring my way yet again, though without his looming guards. “Lord Somerville, I really don’t think—”

“Yes.”

He goggled at my interruption.

“I agree. You don’t think. Twice in one night. One wonders whether you ever think at all. Do you see this?” I lifted my hand as if displaying a wrapped treasure, recovered from some ancient Egyptian tomb. “I recalled I had a surprise in my carriage for Lady Dumbarton and her guests. I *think* that now that you have had a chance to think about the matter, *you* think it might not be wise to deprive Lady Dumbarton of her surprise. Is that what you think?”

He neither moved out of my way nor answered. Rory solved the problem.

“Is the wee mon in yer way, Somerville?”

The butler whirled around at the deep voice behind him.

“Aye.”

The butler was, indeed, a small man, though not precisely tiny. And he squeaked when Rory quickly stepped forward, grabbed him by both shoulders, bent at his knees, lifted, turned and carefully deposited the butler to the side. He then patted the butler’s shoulders, arms, and chest, as if he might have suddenly gotten dusty from the move. The pats were, for the most part, gentle. Somewhat. “Dinnae move for a wee bit, aye?”

“Uh, aye, uh, yes, m’lord.”

Rory looked down at what I carried, *recognized* what I carried, looked up at me. “Well, fuck.”

I paused my fury long enough to wink, and murmur to just him as I passed, “If you ask me most nicely, later...”

Not long after that, I stopped at the top of the steps leading down to the ballroom floor. I was not, of course, master of all I surveyed, but I thought I might be, if only for a few minutes. Yes. There.

I walked confidently down, my movements followed by avid eyes that quickly looked away. It was, of course, quite necessary to at least look at me first, so that I could then be cut into tiny tonnish slivers by the looking and turning away.

There were no slivers tonight. Nor ever again, I realized. For there to be slivers there had to be caring, and I no longer cared. Should never have cared. Will never care again.

Some eyes that turned away gloated at my downfall from the pinnacles of power in the ton. Some seemed to beg forgiveness in an “I have no choice” way. Some, perhaps most, were simply members of the pack, howling when the leader howled.

I did not care.

Beckwith and the Bishop of Harwell, bloody bangers both, though they had most likely never used a banger-stick themselves, were the most blatantly theatrical of the turners and cutters. They blocked my way.

I merely knew *of* the Bishop. I knew Beckwith. I think he was surprised to realize he knew me well enough to recognize the rage that was only in my eyes just then. He gave way a little, stopped, molded his fat features into contempt that should have shriveled me where I stood, and turned away. The Bishop was more bland about the matter, but he turned away as well.

They made me go around them, to the accompaniment of a Beckwith snigger.

I did not care.

My reasonably straight passage through the dancers brought the dancing to a halt. After all, they couldn't effectively cut if they were twirling. That, in turn, silenced the musicians on their small stage. Not being members of the ton, they could not cut. Cutting does not quite work, anyway, when one is seated, with nowhere to turn.

I went up the three steps, crossed to the conductor. “You might wish to take a break.”

His affronted “My lord!” trailed away as I partially unwrapped the cloth. He gulped, nodded, and with a glare shooed his musicians off the stage, quickly following them himself.

I performed an exercise in futility: I asked for their attention, loudly enough to be heard over the artificially bright babble among all those turned-away backs.

I performed an exercise in necessity: I unwrapped what I had so carefully been carrying, tossed the cloth well behind me, let the exquisite Manton dueling pistol in my left hand point to the floor, and with the one in my right I shot out the wick of a nearby candle.

All that money spent on wafer-shooting was money well-spent.

Not surprisingly, that got me both their attention and—eventually—their silence. In that moment when they stood frozen from shock, before the screams and shouts and swoons to demonstrate delicacy, before they turned toward me, perhaps on me, I dropped the spent pistol to the floor and put the second loaded one in my right hand.

A few of the men—Beckwith and the Bishop most assuredly not among those few, as they had rapidly retreated to the safety of being behind a group of matrons and their offspring—started toward the stage. They stopped when I raised the pistol, wagged it at them, and asked which of them wished to be the recipient of the bullet, and in what part of his body.

I was unsurprised when I received no response to my most generous offer. Except a halt to forward movement, combined with an attempt to make it look as though all each intended was to get closer to hear what I had to say.

I was unsurprised when the crowd, the mob-in-waiting, stayed quiet as I raised my voice so I could be heard throughout the room. I gave the ton a modestly spectacular raree-show outside of White’s, but with a few exceptions, that was something they had only *heard* about. But here I was, already giving them the raree-show of the decade. Of the whole bloody nineteenth century. Of course they would listen. For a while.

“You have been gossiping about me, about my friends, making decisions about who and what I am, who and what they are, without ever bothering to ask

about the truth. But that's what we in the ton do, and do so well. A tale is better than the truth any day, because a tale can be turned and twisted, while the truth? So very dull. It just *is*.

“So here is the truth: I am a friend of Edward's.”

There were gasps and words and expressions that ranged from no surprise at all to complete shock, with most faces that I could clearly see, expressing disdain and contempt and thorough disgust.

“Ah, *quelle horreur je suis*. Except... I am not merely *like* you, I *am* you. Except for this one thing.

“If I were an Edmund Kean on this small stage, I would ask you, ‘Hath not a friend of Edward's eyes?’ And give you all the rest of those words.

“And of all those words, it's the affections and passions which offend you most. Affections and passions you merely *imagine*, but never see. Not unless you spy on us in a private moment, or we choose to explicitly tell you just what men who love men do together. We live *invisible* lives among you. We are affected by the same food, weapons, diseases, cures. We freeze in winter; enjoy the three days of an English spring, and sweat in our summers. All precisely as you do.

“But all of you who turned your backs to me tonight—and that ‘all’ includes the *other* friends of Edward's here who fear you will turn on them if they do not act as you expect them to—all you see is that I love, might love, might just want to have sex with, another man. Perhaps out in the Dumbarton gardens on a mild night last spring? By the fountain? Only instead of it being Lady Feath—well, I really shouldn't say—with her hands on the fountain's edge, her skirts tossed up over her back, her bum bare in the moonlight while the man who isn't her husband thrusts hard and fast inside her, it might be a man bent over, his pants around his ankles.”

I watched Lady Featherstone's face go pale, and then flush red. Her somewhat older, controlling, easily angered husband did a bit of flushing himself as he looked at her. Payback is *such* a bitch. And I was enough of a bitch myself to repay the bitch whose tongue had spread the tales so assiduously, insisting the ton should be uniform in its contempt for me. Remington should have run the country's spy services in the late war; they would have been far more effective.

“As I said, *just* like you, well, *most* of you, except for friends of Edward’s it’s cock and not cunt we crave.”

More gasps and mutterings, and a swoon or two, but no one left, no one surged forward to stop me. The Count and Countess of Dumbarton were older, and this crowd contained comparatively few young debutantes, but there *were* some, and their parents were going to have such fun explaining to the delicate dears in the morning the meaning of the words I used.

“So the Beckwiths among you want me to hang by the neck until I am dead if one of you spies on me and finds me in bed with another man. And the Bishops of Harwell among you preach *your* God’s hatred of us.

“But since this is England, a nation of law, and who I love or who chooses to love me back breaks no law, nor makes me guilty of anything more than a vast lack of good judgment should I choose the wrong man to love, you whisper and gossip, you rant and write, and with a wink and a nod and a handful coins here and there, you encourage the bangers.

“The bangers out there who hurt and maim with banger-sticks and fists and boots and knives. The bangers in here and in the rest of your houses, who hurt and maim with words that slice and scar, your voices raised in solo arias, or together in vicious choirs, and all your songs are of imagined sin. Bangers who hurt children, young or old, that you have discarded on the words of Beckwiths and bishops, because of who they are or who you *think* they are.

“*You* killed a young man just four days ago. The bangers with sticks beat him until he barely survived, but *you* bangers finished the job they started. Young Bennington was a kind man who was no friend of Edward’s at all, you damned fools! He was a *married* man whose widow is left alone to raise the child he will never get to see, because you banged him, you bullied him, you beat him down with your cuts direct and indirect and all the other ways, you hammered him with the accusation that he molested his little nephew by changing his clothes after the boy fell into a pond and got soaking wet.

“You destroyed him with your accusation that he had joined me in servicing the Master of Strathairn and *M’sieur le vicomte de Vidal-Sansouci* a year ago when we took a journey to Doncaster for the St Leger Stakes. As so very many of the men here tonight did. You rode in closed carriages; you slept two, three, four or more to a room so that you could have more funds for gambling. No one *knows* what you actually did behind all those closed doors, what kinds of

depravities you engaged in well away from the scrutiny of family. Though we can imagine.

“But you didn’t choose to imagine that. You chose to turn your vicious imaginings on an innocent man, an innocent father. You turned his parents from him, you left him with nothing at all, until the only way out he could see was to hang himself.

“And now, good people, for so are you all, all *good* people, let me remind you that as you have sown, so shall you reap.

“Have you heard and mocked that fanciful tale of the Friends of Edward Society? It is no fancy at all. It exists, and I am a founding member. And that Society will do what no one has done before. We will help friends of Edward’s, of any age, wherever they may be in England, wherever and however we are able. We will *protect* them from you, or from the hounds of hell, which is simply saying the same thing.

“And if you oppose us, the Society will, as your Good Book says, give you an eye in return for each eye you take. Oppose us with words and argument and receive words in return. Bring one of us out into the light for humiliation and ridicule and hatred when we choose to remain in the dark, as we have the right to do, then we shall hold a mirror up to *your* natures and bring your darkest and most foul secrets into the open, threefold at the very least.

“But most important of all, if you bang us, we *will* bang back. As Shylock would have said, were he both Jew and a friend of Edward’s, ‘The villainy you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will *better* the instruction.’

“And remember, if you will, the motto of our Society, which will be engraved upon our escutcheon...”

I lowered my voice, stripped it of every shred of what Rory called tonnish tones, and added the tones of the Dock where the Society had in fact been mockingly born, and then truly born here and now: “We’re mad as ’ell, ’n’ we’re not fuckin’ takin’ it anymore.”

The room was silent. I had lost my temper as splendidly, if I said so myself, as Rory might have done had it been his decision to make this stand. I knew the silence could not last; knew that even here the bangers-at-heart could erupt into violence, and I was merely one among many.

Except... I was not.

Not just *one* among many.

That moment that precedes the breaking of silence, the beginning of movement where movement has been stilled, was almost upon the room when Michel reined it in. They stirred instead, and watched as Michel, more languid and lethal than I had ever seen him before, walked up the three steps to the orchestra stage, and then over to me, his cane deliberately tapping the floor and sounding oddly loud in the lack of sound that suddenly prevailed again.

He stood to my left, looped his right arm through mine, and said, quite loud enough for all the room to hear, indeed, had he wished he could have stood on the stage of Drury Lane, and whispered a word that would be heard from the closest man in the pit to the farthest man in the topmost tier, "I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw. And the wind is most southerly this night."

He looked at me and smiled a smile that said "*Je t'aime*," as he had said last night. He looked back at the crowd. "For those who do not know me, *permettez-moi de me présenter. Je suis Michel Louis Arsenault, vicomte de Vidal-Sansouci*. I am also a founding member of the Friends of Edward Society. And I, too, have a few words for you."

He paused, and then with a reasonable imitation of the sounds of the Dock, recited our motto: "*Je suis fou comme l'enfer, et je ne baise pas prendre plus*."

For all the congratulations the members of the ton bestowed on themselves about their sophistication, which included speaking French, the reality was that few spoke more than the latest phrases, and of those few who spoke more, even fewer were fluent. Michel's voice mocked them all as whispers of translation began. Though there should have been no need for translation.

"*Mesdames, messieurs, jeunes filles, jeunes gens*, to ensure you understand, let me repeat it in your own language. I, too, am fucking mad as fucking hell and am fucking unwilling to take it anymore."

The word "fucking" had never sounded more obscene, more offensive, than it did just then, in that calm, cultured voice. But for the fucking he was verbally engaged in, you might have thought him speaking in church.

And the play went on. Rory, it seemed, had lines as well. He disdained the steps and simply leaped onto the stage, tramped over to us, pushed his way between us so that our sides were touching, and though he was the shortest of

we three, draped a brawny arm behind each of our backs, and hooked a large hand over my right shoulder and Michel's left.

Rory's loudness tended to be more the blast of a broadside from a seventy-four gun ship of the line. We managed not to wince as his voice boomed out between us. "Ruaidhri Fearghas MacLean, Master of Strathairn since m'brother, after drinkin' too much o' the finest whisky known to Scots or mortal men, killed himself and a perfectly fine horse trying to jump a wall with a big drop behind it. A very good friend of Edward's, as you might say. Ah. Me. Not m'brother."

He paused. "I'm not as... delicate... as my friends here. *Dinna bugger wi' me, ye bangers!*"

He looked at each of us, squeezed our shoulders. "I think they understand now."

He let us go, stepped to the edge of the stage and jumped down, the ones closest hastily backing away and clearing a space. He turned to look up at us, and at his most courtly, said, "Gentlemen."

He held up a hand to each of us. It could have been awkward, perhaps should have been, as we leaned forward, braced on his hand and jumped down ourselves. But relying on Rory, I realized, and was sure Michel realized it as well, was like relying on the ever-enduring sturdiness of a mountain to keep you steady.

He whirled in place, with an undoubtedly intentional speed that sent his kilt swirling high, and from several nearby gasps, some feminine, some masculine, the gaspers, and others more restrained, got a brief look at what a Highlander does not wear under his kilt. Michel and I would, of course, have the opportunity to examine what was not there, and what *was* there, far more closely in the not too distant future. Provided, of course, that we survived the departure.

We could have walked merely side by side, but we three thought the same, and with an elegance that might be associated with the movements of a pattern-dance, Rory moved to my left, and Michel to my right. Then arm in arm in arm, we began moving toward the exit. Although babbling was beginning, and would mount to perhaps a tidal wave's roar before we reached the door, the crowd gave way before us, creating a broad enough aisle that no one could possibly be soiled by our touch.

When we reached the top of the stairs and went beyond, I was startled to see Mama. I had forgotten her friendship with Lady Dumbarton, the possibility that she might be here. Had she heard? But that was answered when I realized the Earl of Glenhaven was also there. Most assuredly not my father. His voice was the temperature I imagined the Arctic might be, the kind of cold that *burned*.

“I should have killed that boy for corrupting you, for teaching you to conceal such corruption all these years. And these two disgusting freaks of nature have obviously debauched you even further. You are no longer my son.”

He paused. Inhaled deeply. “If I am unsuccessful in breaking the entail, I will still not beggar the estate, as I could easily do. After all, there is still a chance God will strike you down and your brother will inherit. But you will not receive a farthing’s worth of anything that is not part of the entail. You are barred from all Glenhaven lands, and the servants will have orders to physically evict you should you make the attempt. With horsewhips. Now get out of my sight.”

I expected something like this. I had not expected it would hurt quite so much. Yet by my side, my two men were Viking berserkers, ready to swing double-headed verbal battle axes against any foe, even my father, if I but unleashed them. That calmed me. My own inhalation, brief as it was, did more. So be it.

I gave the Earl my most arrogant eyebrow lift and the most arrogant tone in my armory. “Of course, my lord. But you are in our way. Will you let us pass, or shall we walk... right through you?”

He was already so flushed with anger, the additional amount of blood undoubtedly flowing to his face at that bit of provocation was not visible. I could not find it in my heart to wish on him the apoplexy that seemed almost imminent.

He stepped aside, pulling, no, almost yanking Mama with him. And as we walked he gave me, gave *us*, the cut direct with his back. Mama just stood beside him, watching, and though there were tears in her eyes, my heart hurt over her silence.

We were almost to the door, where the wide-eyed footmen responsible for cloaks and wraps and hats, and door openings and closings, stood gape-mouthed and wide-eyed, when she said, “Perry.”

Ah, Christ. She was the *only* one who ever called me that, and not since I was little. I could not help but let go of their arms and turn around. They quietly turned as well. She was walking toward me.

“Helen!” My father’s distraught bark—he *never* used Mama’s first name in the presence of anyone. I used to imagine he called her “countess” or “my lady” even in private—had no effect on her.

Without looking back at him, she said, “James, Perry is *still* my son.”

When she reached us, she stretched up as far as she could, which was not terribly far at all, and I leaned down so she could kiss my cheek. She settled back, took my hands in hers, whispered so only we three could hear. “I love you, my dear. Always and forever. And another day more.”

I would not cry. I would *not* cry. At least, not until we were out of *his* sight and hearing.

She looked at Rory, then Michel. “I would give you boys a kiss as well, but that might tip the balance into actual apoplexy, instead of possible apoplexy.” My men acquired matching stunned expressions.

Then back to me. “I cannot promise, my dear, that ‘this, too, shall pass.’ But I will pray for it, and as I can, work for it.”

She paused, looked at me with that tiny twinkle that ordinarily boded trouble of some sort. “Will you do a favor for your dearest Mama, my dearest boy?”

“Of course. *Anything*, Mama.”

“Get out of your father’s sight before the apoplexy becomes real. That vein in his head is undoubtedly pulsing right now. Though I wonder how you are in his sight if his back is toward you. His back is still toward you, is it not?”

I could not help the short burst of laughter that preceded my agreement to all she said. I kissed both of her cheeks, actual kisses, but when we three would have turned again and left, she abruptly reached out and put her hand on my arm.

I looked at her. She lowered her voice, as if to ensure the Earl could not hear. Most unusually, she looked uncertain. “My dear, will you give me your word that you will do... what I am about to ask of you?”

I held back the sigh. People kept asking me to give my word, and when I gave it, it seems I inevitably suffered for it. Such as the word I had given to my

two bastard shite-heads, and the sufferings I, and, well, to be fair, *they* as well, had suffered because of that giving. But still, this *was* Mama. How onerous could it be?

“Of course, Mama.”

She paused again, pursed her lips, sighed a small sigh, and said, “Very well. Do you recall Mr. Brumley?” She laughed. “How silly. Of course you remember the man who gave you all that money. Well, he’s dead now. But they still have his name on the letterhead, which I don’t understand at all, because it seems wrong to me to let people believe there is a Brumley *and* a Bainbridge, when...”

“Mama.” My dear Mama did sometime stray from her point.

“Oh. Yes. Well, you should be hearing from the firm soon. It probably won’t be Bainbridge, though he is the most senior, but since he is old enough to have set sail with Noah, he most likely does not work very much anymore. Laurel-resting and all that, I suppose...”

“*Mama!*”

She twinkled at me. Her digression had been intentional, just to get a rise out of me. My dearest Mama played me, has always played me, with all the skill of Antonini on his Stradivarius.

“If you have not heard from the firm within... a week... then you will go there and ask them.”

“Mama,” I began, masking the slight bit of annoyance I felt I was quite right in feeling, “ask who about what?”

“Why, about your inheritance from Agatha, of course!” she said in one of her “what *else* could it possibly be?” tones. “And you will probably have to speak to that Wainwright, whom I am not quite sure I trust.”

Over time I found that gritting my teeth was far less painful than grinding them when upset. I un-gritted and managed a reasonably calm voice. “So there is something which I need to learn about my inheritance from Aunt Agatha, from a solicitor you don’t quite trust, but I’ve just given my word to wait a week before walking in and strangling him?”

“Oh. You’ve *met* Mr. Wainwright?”

Grit. Un-grit. “Yes.”

“Well, then.”

Another hidden sigh. “Well, then, *what*, Mama?”

“Oh, just... ‘well, then.’ If you’ve already met Mr. Wainwright I’m sure you will be able to handle him just fine, should handling be required. And you *did* give me your word, so I of course won’t remind you about that.”

Piqued. Repiqued. Capoted.

How I loved Mama. And when a boy loves his mother, what else can he say but, “Yes, Mama.”

Another cheek-pat, and a little smile, and she swirled away to gather up the Earl and venture into the vast den with all the hounds howling for my blood. And other body parts.

I gathered up my men, and we went in the other direction.

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Peregrine

Friday, 20 September 1816

9:00 a.m.

*Offices of Bainbridge & Brumley, Solicitors
London*

“You sent this to me.”

I held up the rather peremptory letter that brought me, or rather, brought *us*, to the offices of Bainbridge & Brumley this morning.

Your lordship,

It is most important that I speak with you about your inheritance from your late, great-aunt Agatha Mayhew.

Most respectfully,

Gerald Wainwright

So kind of Mr. Wainwright to explain *which* late great-aunt, as I had so very many of them. And so very fortunate for him that he had met the deadline imposed by Mama, thereby depriving me of the infinite pleasure of strangulation on Monday. Though, based on past experience with the lying shite seated behind his desk, he might provide me with such an opportunity today.

Perhaps he thought that, having demanded my presence, I would send a note round to make an appointment. Thus giving him time to prepare for my intrusion, to set a supplicant's stage for the scene he believed he would control.

He was so *very* wrong.

We arrived shortly before nine. Like last February, the porter confirmed Mr. Wainwright's presence in his lair. Unlike last February, Mr. Hamilton made no attempt at obfuscation. When the three of us walked in the door, all the clerks naturally looked up, and two—John and Jamie were still here—promptly dropped their eyes and immediately found something to do that did not involve looking at one grim-faced and thoroughly annoyed nobleman, brilliantly clothed in the finest tonnish armor, and two supportively annoyed noblemen, also brilliantly clad.

Mr. Hamilton rose from his chair with near-grace. “My lord.” Was I the only one who heard the “we have been anticipating your arrival with great eagerness” that he did not say aloud?

Despite the cold that compelled greatcoats for Michel and me, Rory was again in full regalia, although he at least acknowledged the weather, as his cloak was fur-lined. When, prior to our departure, we expressed admittedly mild and teasing concern for the well-being of the naked bollocks beneath the kilt—we did, after all, have a certain... *proprietary*... interest in that well-being—he had scoffed at the brisk winds that would soon be swirling up his legs. He opened his mouth to embark on one of his interminable “It gets so cold in Scotland that—” stories, but a kiss from Michel, and my hand briefly squeezing those manly, cold-doesn’t-bother-us bollocks, shut him up.

We would have been impressive in a meeting with anyone in the ton. We were even more so in the solicitor’s outer office in front of people who did not regularly have contact with noblemen whose armor (clothing and demeanor) in circumstances like these was intended to shock and awe the enemy. If not into immediate submission, at least into a start down that road.

I nodded to Hamilton, bade him good morning.

“John. Jamie.” Two heads snapped up, surprise that I remembered them evident in their expressions. “Would you be so kind as to find a safe place for our things?”

Our “things,” of course, being greatcoats, gloves (two pair only, Scotsmen having no need for such effete things, unlike the Sassenachs), hats (two), a bonnet, and a heavy cloak. They jumped up to do so, motivated in part because I was courteous to them, and they were most likely unaccustomed to that, and in part because they undoubtedly remembered the meal that accompanied my last visit.

That taken care of, I tilted my head toward Mr. Wainwright’s door. Hamilton responded with a tiny nod, and an even tinier smile, quickly erased, as he looked over at the papers on his desk, sat again, resumed work. Pointedly *not* looking at the door.

I was uncertain whether the door would provide a dramatic enough slam against the wall or something else if I just shoved it open, so I settled for one very firm blow of my fist—a blow firmly in the camp of the wake-the-dead

variety—before opening it, marching in, and confronting the briefly gawking Wainwright. Who was given no chance to get out of his chair.

He toyed with the letter, cowering just a little, as we were doing a most effective job of looming over him on the opposite side of his desk.

I called out, “Mr. Hamilton!”

He appeared in the doorway as rapidly as if he had been expecting the summons. I rather suspected he had been.

“My lord?”

“Would you be so kind as to bring the two supplicants’ chairs out there to join this one?”

His lips twitched, but all he said was, “Yes, my lord.”

A few minutes later, the two very plain chairs were added to the one already there, in a row behind us.

“Anything else, my lord?”

“Nothing, thank you, Mr. Hamilton. And please, close the door behind you. I believe this should be a private conversation. Don’t you agree, Wainwright?”

His “Yes,” was somewhat terse, followed by a noticeable lag as we stared at him, before he added the proper “my lord.”

Hamilton exited, closing the door.

I let the silence continue for a moment more. Then, “I think we can all agree, can we not, that we three are not supplicants?”

Wainwright’s “Of course not, my lord! And, ah, won’t you please be seated?” was a shade too hearty, but a reasonable effort under the circumstances to regain at least a modicum of control.

That was not going to happen.

We sat, Rory to my right, Michel to my left. As always.

“Well, Wainwright? Do you care to explain that rather... *unusual*... letter?”

I let him hear the anger. I had, after all, been lied to last February, and the liar was sitting across a desk from me.

The memory of Brumley’s odd expression and voice when he mentioned the “circumstances” of Aunt Agatha’s death, together with the revelations of the

Four Dukes which were, after all, quite correct, merely added the proverbial fuel to the actual fire.

Mr. Wainwright's nervousness seemed excessive even for a solicitor who had lied to a client. It was almost as if he had not prepared some story about why he had lied, shortly after, or even before, sending that letter. Solicitors are quite good at both lying and explaining away their lies when they have the bad fortune to be caught. Whether his story would be an *acceptable* story was yet to be seen.

There were, of course, other possible causes for the nervousness. Perhaps he had been the one to disclose my finances to my father. Or perhaps it was nothing more surprising than the fact I was accompanied by Rory at his most intimidating, glowering best, and the languid elegance of Michel, who, it was well-known, could buy and sell everyone in the room multiple times over.

"Ah, well, Mrs. Mayhew's instructions were quite strict, my lord. She..."

"Instructions? About what?"

"Ah, well, your inheritance."

"You have instructions, from my late, great-aunt Agatha, about my inheritance, all these years later? Have you, perhaps, conducted a séance recently, and spoken to her spirit? Did she actually speak, or, what is that other thing spirits do? Ah, yes. Did she knock once for 'yes' and twice for 'no' on the table?"

He flushed all the way to his collar and possibly below. Good.

"Or is this about the inheritance you told me to my face did not exist, when last we spoke?"

"Ah, well, your lordship, the letter was not about that inheritance. I mean... your *first* inheritance. It was about the, ah, well, the *other* inheritance. The one I was compelled to deny."

Ah, well, indeed. I refrained from voicing the angry "What other fucking inheritance?" that was in my head, and confined myself to a reasonably quiet, thoroughly-annoyed-but-temporarily-not-going-for-the-kill, "Compelled? Indeed. Explain."

From his expression, I was confident my voice conveyed the idea his explanation had bloody well include the reason for the nearly twelve-year delay in letting me know about this "other inheritance." And the bloody February lie.

Mr. Wainwright looked at both Rory and Michel, and then back at me. “Ah, well, her directions were that when... or to be more precise, if... the circumstances arose that would require providing this, ah, additional bequest to you, the explanation was to be given in the utmost privacy.”

This *wee, sleekit, cow'rin, tim'rous beastie*, as I was certain Rory would later describe him, looked as though he desperately wished he could simply order my companions out of the room. I think Rory at his looming, even while seated, best was a large factor in Wainwright's nervousness just then. He could not seem to keep his eyes off him, and I was confident it was not because of any lust. There was something about Wainwright that made it clear he was no friend of Edward's. And quite probably no friend of anyone who *was*.

“Is ‘utmost privacy’ a condition precedent?”

Rory had been cat-toying with Mr. Wainwright, catching his eye and locking in a stare, but that jerked the solicitor's attention back to me.

“I beg your pardon?”

Ah, well, again. It would be so nice to be able to say, “Indeed, you should.” Instead, I explained. “Did Great-Aunt Agatha instruct you that if this discussion is not held in the ‘utmost privacy,’ by which, from your looks, I take you to mean just you and me in the room...”

He bobbed his head up and down.

“... that I would lose whatever this additional bequest might be?”

“Ah, well... no?”

“Is there, then, someone with whom you can consult to be quite sure the answer you just gave me is correct, and not questionable?”

Mr. Wainwright looked befuddled.

Michel sighed. “Sir, it is really a quite simple question. Somerville, here, has merely chosen to complicate it with convolutions. Does Somerville lose his new inheritance if you tell him about it in the presence of others of his choice, rather than alone?”

Michel even managed to end the string of ah-wells. “No, my lord.”

“Do we stay or go, Somerville?”

While there was a certain charm in the idea of forcing them out of the room now that I had made such a fuss about keeping them here... a decision I knew I

would pay for later, hopefully in an awesomely delayed, but eventual seed-spewing fashion... I chose to let them stay. And told Mr. Wainwright so.

He opened his mouth, possibly with another “ah, well” waiting at the gate to be let loose, but choked that back. He looked down at the three envelopes on his desk that I had frankly paid no attention to. His correspondence was none of my concern.

But apparently this was not his correspondence, but rather mine. And now that my attention was directed there, I recognized the handwriting on two. Mama's.

“There were, my lord, originally supposed to be only two letters. Per Mrs. Mayhew's instructions.”

He indicated one addressed to me just by my first name in an unknown hand, which I assumed was Aunt Agatha's. The second, which bore the inscription, “Somerville. Read this first,” was Mama's. The third bore a longer inscription from Mama: “Somerville. Don't read my other letter first. Read this one first.”

I merely smiled at him. Great-Aunt Agatha was long dead, and even had she been living at the time this second letter from Mama was given to the solicitors, I was sure this second letter from her would have been added to the small stack regardless of any earlier instructions. Mama has always been a force of nature when she wished to be, flattening all in her path. As she obviously had in this instance.

I picked it up, accepted and made use of the thin blade Wainwright used as a letter opener.

7 October 1813

My dear Peregrine,

I tried, truly I did, to speak of this to you long ago. When it happened. Or rather, after it happened and I learned of it.

I did not know. Truly I did not know how your father's attitudes had hardened, had become so rigid and unforgiving.

If I had been home that day, the day your father did what he did to young Tom, and to the boy's family, I am not sure I could have stopped it, or even lessened it. I hope you will believe that I would have tried.

All I knew then was that you had lost a friend in a most violent way, and we had lost a family who had worked for us for many years. I did try to speak of it to you, but you refused to allow me in the room. And when you finally came out you were so very remote, so very cold, that I did not try again. And my one attempt to speak to your father ended nearly before it began.

Know, then, that I did something which your father would have forbade me to do had he known, so it is just as well that he did not. The pin money provided to me quarterly because of our marriage settlements is quite generous, and it is, so far as I am able to tell, one set of funds, perhaps the only funds, that he does not keep meticulous track of.

I gave it all to young Tom's family, and provided all three with glowing letters of recommendation. Over your father's signature. I had not known prior to that time what a talent for forgery I possessed. The family, once young Tom had recovered enough to travel, left for our former colonies. I thought it best not to keep in touch beyond learning that much. I hope and pray that they all are well, or as well as can be given the circumstances of their departure.

This cannot erase what was done, and perhaps you investigated on your own, and already know of their departure. But if not, at least now you know.

If you are reading this it is because you have done what your great-aunt always believed was possible, perhaps even probable or inevitable, but which I have, I confess, never quite believed would ever occur. Mothers are, of course, generally all-knowing, as how else can they hope to cope with sons, but I confess that in this one instance, I do not know at all.

Are you quite furious, or merely annoyed-with-Mama upset, at these circumlocutions?

As I write this, I cannot know, of course, if you will ever read it. Indeed, there is a part of me that hopes you never will. Nor read my other letter. Or Agatha's, well, my dear, I am not

quite sure what to call it as the envelope I saw was so very thick! A missive? A massive tome? Although there will come a time when, if you have not been given these letters to read, I will at least gather my courage to the sticking point—

Do you know, my dear, I have always thought that must be a most uncomfortable position, and wondered as well what point on one's person would be the point which was stuck.

So, I will gather my courage and tell you all. Well, not all of it, because if you are not reading this letter then you haven't done the thing which would require it to be given to you, and therefore you would not be entitled to know, well, what it is I can't tell you here. Or afterward, if you haven't done it. But at least I can make myself tell you about young Tom.

My dear, I do believe I am circumlocuting again. Is there such a word?

I pray frequently about all this, although as you well know, I am far too frivolous to pray daily. To be honest, there are some days I pray that you never get to read this letter. And other days, well, if I cannot quite pray that you do, ah, what it is you have to do to get these letters, I pray that if you do it, it will be because you believed it was the right and proper thing to do.

Until that day, and if that day comes I am quite certain I shall hear about it,

I love you.

Mama

P.S. 7 October 1815. The solicitors were quite upset with me, and my insistence that the wax seal be carefully opened, so I could add this. Do you know, dear boy, well, of course you don't because you haven't read this letter yet, but the events with dearest Rory and dearest Michel at the Alderson Ball this year made me believe for the first time that it might be possible. "It" being the thing that you have to do to, well, I've already explained, so I won't repeat myself.

Young Tom survived!

I inhaled deeply, and shut my eyes, scrunched them actually, to prevent unmanly tears from flowing. I opened my eyes, held out the letter, but when Mr. Wainwright would have reached for it, Michel leaned forward, and touched it with thumb and fingertip. "May we?"

I nodded. Then sat in silence as Michel read it, and handed it across to Rory so he could do the same.

I was grateful they asked no questions. Questions about young Tom I could have answered, but I would need privacy to do so. The rest was a mystery.

"I take it that my mother's other letter predates this one?"

"Yes, my lord. They were provided to Mr. Brumley by Mrs. Mayhew at the same time."

"Very well, let me see what is behind the second door of this trio of doors hiding secrets."

13 April 1804

Dear Peregrine,

If you are reading this, it is because you have done what Agatha both hopes and expects you might one day do.

About the foundation, about the reason why you might, some day, one day, do this thing, I believe she is correct. I am uncertain whether I would have come to that understanding all on my own, though I like to think that "a mother always knows" when it comes to her children. But still, I might have been oblivious. And Agatha certainly had no reason to tell me her plans, and make me aware of all that might, or might not, yet come to pass. So, it is good, I think, that she has alerted me to the... possibility?

You are now just past your seventeenth birthday, and a most wonderful son. As much as I love your brothers and your sister, you are quite my favorite, and not merely because you are my first-born. You will, I am sure, be a fine and extraordinary man. Though I will not be at all surprised if, as the years pass and you grow into that fine manhood, I do not find you utterly irritating, or discover a necessity to reprimand you for doing something a fond Mama would never approve of.

And I am sure that at this moment in your reading, you find me at least annoying, if not utterly so, for not being plain-spoken, as you and I have always tended to be with each other. But what I cannot say is Agatha's tale to tell.

So you may now put down this letter and pick up hers.

I love you, my dear, always and forever. And another day more.

Mama

I will *not* cry. It has been years since she hugged me and held me close and whispered those words. Not until just a few days ago, when she had done it again. Until that moment, I did not realize how I missed those words. And here she was, saying the words, a dozen years ago.

Rory read the letter first, and when he was done, squeezed my right hand gently. Head down, I waited for Michel to finish, and discovered he had the same reaction. We sat there for a moment, each of my hands being held by theirs, and then I inhaled, they let go, and I raised my head.

If Mr. Wainwright had been disconcerted by the sight of three noblemen holding hands, he had had enough time while our attention was elsewhere to hide it.

“Mr. Wainwright, I believe it is time to find out what is behind door number three.”

He held out the last letter. The envelope was more bulky. Vastly more.

I sighed with relief that Aunt Agatha's handwriting was not the quavering, nearly illegible scrawl of an old woman, but crisp, clean, precise.

11 April 1804

My dear Peregrine,

If you are reading this, you have already read a letter from your mother, a most marvelous woman, as you hopefully still know and appreciate. You certainly did when last I saw you.

There are only two circumstances which would permit my solicitor, or a member of his firm, as Mr. Brumley is getting rather old, to give this letter to you. The most obvious, of course, is that I am dead. It is not that I had any specific

premonition of death that set this all in motion, but rather a desire to see things done 'right and proper,' as the saying goes. The second is that you have one day done something which I hope you will do. You most assuredly have not done so as of this writing, or I would have known.

That circumstance is that you have, in some manner, let it be known that you are a friend of Edward's. Let it be known, not merely to those with whom you are most intimate. And no, my boy, for so I have always felt you in some way to be, I do not mean the man, or men, you are fucking. Although my dearest wish is that what you do with him, or them, is something more than merely that.

Close your mouth, dear boy. An old woman is allowed to say whatever she pleases in her private correspondence, and if it pleases me to say "fuck" then "fuck" I shall obviously say.

As I have just said.

And prick and cock and cunt if the circumstances arise.

Though I am obviously not there to observe, I am sure your character has not changed so very much, in however many intervening years there may have been since the day this letter is written, that you have lost that most delightful gape of a fish about to be hooked when you are not merely surprised, but utterly shocked.

The way you were the day after your fifteenth birthday. The day you were aware of our meeting.

I looked much the same then as I had the only time I had seen you before that. Your christening. Your father, God rot his soul, did not invite me. There has never been any love lost between us, as there was never any love which could ever have been lost. But I arrived anyway. He could hardly make a scene in the church, so concerned had he become by then with public propriety.

Imagine me, if you will, some fifteen years younger than when you met me. Horse-faced, of course, with far fewer lines and wrinkles, a throw-back to some distant progenitor without

an ounce of beauty or grace to pass down the line. Taller than your father. I had by then been a widow for quite some years, and for the most part I still wore black. Those high-necked, severe gowns were, of course, of the finest black silk, which I could easily afford, as my dear Jonathan, though he was far from dear when first we wed, left me well-to-pass. Imagine, too, a black turban, with a dyed-black feather and a vulgar diamond brooch in the front, sitting atop grey hair carefully braided and coiled. Had I arrived in my customary garb, jet jewelry clinking, he and the other guests might well have believed I was a wicked fairy, malevolence incarnate, come to curse the precious heir.

Shall I admit to you how shameful I was? I believe I must or I would not have started down this particular path of words. My gown was, instead, of gold, a deep, burnished, patterned gold cut to properly display a most formidable bosom, even at my age. An emerald, diamond and gold necklace designed to draw attention to that display, the green of the gems carefully selected by Jonathan to match the lush hues of summer he said he saw in my eyes. A fringed shawl of patterned silk. Emerald and diamond combs to hold my hair in place.

I was a demure peahen turned gaudy peacock, and my brightness was so very, very out of place for the solemnity of that day. Or so your father said when he maneuvered a moment of private rant for me. I somehow do not think it will be surprising to you to learn that though I was family, though I was as well-, or rather, better-dressed than any woman attending other than your mother (despite my peacockishness), I was still perceived by your father to be the raven at the feast, cawing dire warnings, a harbinger of doom. Though I cawed nothing.

Later, when all the christening gifts had been opened, and approved, or at least, not visibly rejected, your father looked at me, his silent stare making everyone else turn and look, his expression clearly saying, "Well, old woman? Are you too clutch-fisted to give a gift to your great-nephew on his

christening day? Or are you simply too poor, despite your ostentatious display of jewels that are undoubtedly paste?"

I did not answer him with words, but nodded to my dearest Julia, who removed the envelope we had prepared from her reticule, and passed it to your mother. She opened it quickly and read it aloud, as she had the cards and notes that had accompanied other gifts. "On behalf of my most dear Jonathan, your great uncle, who would have rejoiced, as I do, at your birth, a token of our esteem will be presented to you on your eighteenth birthday. Use it wisely and well, my dear, but most of all, have fun with it."

If I am still living, I will give you your gift personally. If not, then the solicitors will provide it to you as an inheritance. Reluctantly. They do not approve of it at all. I hope your mother has managed to preserve my note for you. Or did your father ensure you knew nothing, so that when my solicitor appeared, you fish-gaped at him?

Are you beyond irritated, dear boy, with my maunderings? You have, your Mama has confided in me, a remarkable facility for restraint, even in the face of most undue provocation. I am an excellent reader between a wide variety of lines, so I am fairly certain that most of the provocation in your now seventeen years has been from your father. And that will likely continue to be so. Even, I quite fear, to an increase in those provocations when he learns the terms of our gift, or your inheritance, as the case may be.

The digressions are now at an end. I shall be most business-like, perhaps, for the remainder.

Your great-uncle Jonathan was far more well-to-pass than anyone knew when I married him. He had what he referred to as a "modest Midas touch" with business and investments, though I would have called it "mostly." By the time I lost him, he could have given several nabobs a run for their money. To the initial dismay of Bainbridge & Brumley, a mere woman such as I was given complete control of his fortune, every single

jot and tittle of his assets. Fortunately, they managed to refrain from making that dismay directly known, as it would have cost them one of their wealthiest clients. Actually, I dare say, the wealthiest of their clients.

They fought me bitterly over my instructions. Or as bitter a fight as they could wage, as they were in obvious fear of losing a substantial part of their livelihood if I became too much angered, and of course, everyone, or rather, every man, knows how readily women become angry or hysterical or both. But in the end they capitulated. I find men of their ilk usually do, when faced with sufficient force. Money, as I am sure you already know, or if not, you will now speedily learn, is generally sufficient force to accomplish virtually anything one wishes to achieve.

I set aside a quarter of a million pounds for you, my dear. With orders to invest it prudently in the Funds.

I looked up from the letter. Found myself fish-gaping rather than being able to speak.

“Peregrine?” Rory’s voice was soft and concerned.

I gave a quick glance to each of them, reassurance that I had not fallen off the edge into fathoms-deep water. Or into madness.

A quarter of a million in the Funds. At least a dozen years, perhaps more? Interest being folded back in to increase the principal? Mr. Wainwright was not looking at me. I coughed to get his attention.

“How much now?”

“Four—” he gulped, continued “—a little more than four hundred thousand pounds.”

When I want to be sure I understand something, I have always found it best to repeat what I have been told, just to be sure. I needed to be quite sure at that moment. Papal infallibility sure, were I Catholic. “I’ve just inherited four hundred thousand pounds? Or rather, a little more? How much is a little more?”

Mr. Wainwright sounded pained, rather than rejoicing in a client’s good fortune, as he said, “Four hundred thousand, nine hundred nineteen pounds, two shillings, thruppence. As of yesterday.”

I think, perhaps, that even Midas Michel was a little stunned. Rory just laughed and slapped my back, nearly knocking me out of my chair. “Well done, lad. And d’ye have another Aunt Aggie who might want to adopt a braw Scots lad into the family?”

“A raw Scots lad, you say? I dinna think so.”

It felt good to have them happy for me. *Genuinely* happy, without expectation of benefit. Other than Mama, that had never been so. But there was more to the letter. I resumed reading.

If the Funds have held steady, and England has not collapsed entirely under the burden of this endless war, you should have at least four hundred thousand if you dither about and delay until you are close to your thirtieth birthday.

There is a reason for this gift. I have a request of you.

I ask, but do not demand, that you use a significant part of this sum, and I leave it to your good judgment to determine what that portion is, to assist and protect friends of Edward’s. But not just the male friends. The friends of, well, Edwina’s, too, I might say, though there was no such person. There are women out there, dear boy, girls as well, who are as lost, who are as much in pain because of who they are, as any man. More so, actually. Men, at least, have some choice, some possibility of choice. Women and girls have little to none, except to do as they are told. Or go on the streets and still do as they are told by men, except in far worse circumstances.

And no, my dear, I am not an escaped Bedlamite, desperately in need of restraint, to prevent me from tossing my wealth into the air and letting people grab what they might. Or to inter me there, in order to prevent me from using my money for such an outrageously wild project that could only have been conceived by a deranged mind.

Ah.

I realize there are two parts to this request. The second is that what I am now about to relate will not be publicly

disclosed, and most especially not to your father, or any relatives of his or mine that might still survive, other than your delightful self. (That was a true compliment, my boy, not a device to encourage your cooperation.)

I am, you see, an intimate friend of Edwina's. We grew up as girls together, you might say. And your great-uncle Jonathan, whom you never met, was an intimate friend of Edward's. Not that we knew that about each other before our marriage and the, in retrospect, amusingly awkward disaster that was our wedding night.

Women, as you may or may not know, have it so much easier than men when it comes to sex. No matter our disinterest, as long as it is not painful, we can simply lie there and endure, whilst thinking of something else. My mother, in her entirely unintelligible effort to explain to her horse-faced, nearly spinster daughter, what her husband was going to do the next night, ended with that suggestion. As the Glenhavens have always been most patriotic, I decided I would follow her advice and think of England.

That patriotism turned out to be unnecessary, as, well, Jonathan was entirely unable to perform. He honestly believed that he could do so, particularly because he was marrying me under false pretenses, oh, not any pretense of love, he was far too honorable for that, but because he felt he should give the girl he was marrying at least a proper wedding night.

There were protestations all round. So sorry. Don't understand. Not your fault, entirely mine. Of course I understand. Let's get some rest. And he went back to his own bedroom.

We might well have gone on for some interminable, awkward, difficult time before learning the truth about each other, if we ever did. But fortunately for the ultimate health of our relationship and our marriage, your Uncle Jonathan was a randy arse fucker and demonstrably a quite talented cocksucker as well.

You are blushing again, dear boy, are you not? That is one of the bad things about getting old and dying. I won't be around to enjoy things like the sight of you reading this letter and learning all that you are learning.

I could not sleep, and as I had been given a tour of my new home thorough enough to remember the way to the kitchen, even in the dark, where I hoped I might find some milk to warm, a most excellent aid in falling asleep you might wish to remember when you are my age, though wine is, I have always thought, of equal value. But I am rambling.

I went downstairs, completed my milk mission, and on the way past your uncle's bedroom door I heard sounds of great distress, perhaps even pain, from within. Having taken the sickness and health part of our marriage vows to heart, I naturally opened the door. As I did, the moans of anguish became quite verbal, though hushed.

My husband's Italian valet was bent over the bed, naked, with dear Jonathan standing behind him, his cock standing quite tall (unlike earlier), as he fucked Reynaldo's arse, to the accompaniment of various words of encouragement. I am sure you can imagine what they were. Perhaps from having heard or even uttered them yourself?

I am sure most other women would have done something extremely crude, such as screaming or fainting, upon seeing a man getting so thoroughly buggered. But I did neither. I had always been interested in learning, and here was an education I most certainly had never expected. To bring this tale to a more rapid close, when your uncle had spent himself, he pulled out, spun Reynaldo around, dropped to his knees and began sucking his valet's cock.

And thus I learned of your uncle's randy, arse-fucking, cocksucking ways. Poor Reynaldo undoubtedly had to wait much, much longer that night, if at all, to get his own spend, since the moment he raised his head from watching what was obviously being so well-done to him, he saw me, and, not to put too fine a point on it, squealed.

Part of my education that night was to also learn that in certain circumstances a man of Italianate coloring may become quite astonishingly white for a moment.

It was, again looking backward, quite chaotically amusing at that point, but eventually we all found ourselves dressed, if not with the fullness of daytime requirements, but far more than my nightgown and the nightshirts the men had so obviously no desire to wear, and seated in Jonathan's library. We each had a glass of brandy. The men had tried to fob me off with some foul sherry as being more appropriate for a woman, but I had always wondered what brandy was like and decided to further my education in that realm as well.

Brandy is such an acquired taste, my dear, and I definitely did not acquire it that night. Though I did drink all of my portion.

Seated side by side, they were so very much in love, and so very nervous as well. I could have destroyed them both, seen their reputations, even livelihoods, shattered for that love, by just speaking out.

But I would never have done that, and as your uncle survived for many, many years thereafter, I clearly never did.

They explained to me that they were friends of Edward's, and even provided me with the tale of the men who helped the king escape, and were rewarded on his restoration to the throne. When I asked what the phrase was for women who preferred women, they both looked at me blankly, as though they could not understand the question. And then Jonathan replied that it was the same, his expression clearly saying, as well, "How could it be otherwise?"

MEN!

Yes, my dear boy, I know you are one of that sex, and I love you despite that inherent flaw in you.

I decided there and then, after only a brief consideration, that I was a friend of Edwina's. And so I announced it that night. After a brief discussion of the fact there was no such

person as “Edwina,” and thus no rational origin for the phrase, and even, perhaps, a muttered “women!” from one of them, they agreed the phrase was appropriate. Or rather, they would no longer argue with me about it. Particularly as neither phrase was likely to come up in the course of general conversation over dinner, or on a morning call. Though I rather suspected the original phrase might come up, in a variety of ways, not all of them very pleasant, when men stayed behind after dinner for port and their uniformly foul cigars.

We settled into an easy relationship, with Jonathan and me being perceived as a normal couple, married for convenience and not out of love. Eventually, as some years passed without an heir being born, I am sure Jonathan’s friends commiserated with him for having a barren wife, as it was necessarily the woman’s fault for there being no children.

Three years later I met Julia, who became my companion, and my dearest love.

And then there were four.

We had a good life, the wealthy, childless couple and their loyal servants. But we saw some things over the years that you are unlikely to have seen. Just as I would have been unlikely to see, had I not married “out of my class” when my father got rid of the burden of a spinster in exchange for a healthy infusion of money into his coffers.

You live at the heights of society, up on a plateau where the grass is always green and the skies are blue in an eternal spring. I am clearly not speaking of England itself, since we experience such weather only a day or two out of the year. As you mature, I doubt very much you will make the trek down to the base where life is lived in the plateau’s shadow. Nor further down into the darkness and danger of the mines.

You may think you know what’s down there, as you rush by the slums and poverty in London, or congratulate yourself on your bravery in venturing into Seven Dials, or when you make use of the Dock. Yes, yes, Jonathan and Reynaldo even

explained the Dock to me, but I have never quite understood the cock-based thinking, and I use that phrase with a great deal of mockery, which drives men there.

We heard of and saw such foul things happening to friends of Edward's just because of who they were, but we could do so little. Something here, something there, but nothing on a large scale, because in all honesty, stepping out into public to do that would have destroyed our own lives. After Jonathan died, and Reynaldo not long after, there was just Julia and me.

I never gave a damn what the ton thought of me. I was a widow and far more wealthy than anyone would ever have believed. Why did I not do what I am asking you to do?

Two reasons.

First and foremost, Julia. I could not, would not, risk hurting her, even though I know she would have supported my decision to speak out.

Second, Bedlam. We women are, as all men know, particularly men who claim special knowledge of the workings of the mind, frail creatures, easily swayed, inherently and eternally on the verge of hysteria that might tip into madness. Had I acted, your father would have acted, as well. To protect me, of course, from myself. For the good of the family. To ensure that the family's money stayed where it belonged, within the family, though I had been declared out of it long years earlier. After the men who wear the wigs of barristers and judges had given control of me to him, I doubt he would have sent me to Bedlam. Too public. Too embarrassing, considering the tours where I might be seen by friends of his. So it would have been private. He could well afford that privacy with control over my money.

And Julia would have been lost to me. And lost without me, as your father would never have made any provision for a mere companion.

My life has been cabined, cribbed and confined by being a woman. So it is only a man who can lead the way. I hope you

are that man. That you are reading this means you might be. But the choice is yours to make as you wish.

If you choose to help, then you must learn quickly that you cannot help every friend of Edward's or Edwina's who might need you. You cannot possibly save them all. So do not exhaust yourself, or my money, well, no, my dear, actually your money now, trying to do too much, too quickly.

Now, as you see, there are only a few more lines to read on this sheet, and the rest is blank. Yet you can tell there are more pages. I ask that you not look at them just yet.

The money is yours, regardless of your choice. So, will you keep the money for yourself, or give me your word that you will do what I ask? But you must decide now.

I shut my eyes briefly, to crush back the tears. I will do as you ask, Aunt Agatha. I swear I will. When I opened my eyes and read on, I burst out laughing.

Aloud, dear boy, aloud. How will whichever of my idiot solicitors—though I suspect it will be Wainwright if Wilfrid has died—know your decision, if you hide it inside that thick skull of yours?

“I swear I will do as Aunt Agatha asked.”

It was Michel who asked the obvious question about what in the hell I was talking about. I explained, with a gesture of the hand holding the remaining sheaf of papers, that I had been asked to perform a task for Aunt Agatha, and she had asked for my word that I would do it.

Rory chuckled and bumped his shoulder against mine. “Did she not provide a Bible on which you could take this solemn oath? It seems rather paltry when that kind of money is at stake.”

Michel would never do anything so blatant as bumping my shoulder with his. Instead, he subtly pressed his thigh against mine. “Probably because had she provided it, the moment this rake's palm touched it, it would have gone up in flames.”

I ignored the raillery, when under other circumstances, I might have responded in kind. I was looking at Wainwright as I gave my word, as I

assumed he was the intended recipient of my decision, but naturally looked away when my friends jested. The solicitor had been calm-faced on hearing me, but when he believed my attention was wholly withdrawn from him, he looked, not merely pained, but gut-punched. He rallied, though, and resumed the bland look used by all solicitors, barristers, King's counsel, et cetera, to convey to the mere client that as representatives of the majesty of the law, their only desire is to provide assistance, guidance and good counsel, with, of course, lining their pockets well, as the price of doing so, being the farthest thing from their thoughts. Wainwright then made what ultimately turned out to be a very foolish decision. Even if, in the midst of the joking, I had not looked down and peeked at what came next.

He gave a little "ahem!" type of cough that self-important men use to draw attention to themselves. He held out his hand. "Very well, your lordship. A wise decision, I am sure. If you will pass back the remainder of the document, we can proceed with arranging access to your funds."

"Are you *quite* sure I am to give you the rest of this document? Unread?"

"Ah, well, I am, of course, obligated to strictly follow my client's instructions. Even after death."

"Written instructions?"

"But, of course, my lord. How else could both sides of any transaction be certain of the terms if they were not reduced to writing?"

"And might I see those instructions?"

He sat back in his chair, steepled his fingers. Looked much more assured. "I deeply regret that I must decline, your lordship. I have no instructions which allow you to view my instructions."

The arsehole must have really believed all the gossip about me. The gossip which preceded my coming out, literally on a stage, to announce my proclivities and plans. The gossip which painted me as a rake who cared only for pleasure, of the type that if I kept on in that way, would surely bring ruin to my house when I inherited. And the probable gossip since the Alderson Ball, about the man who, for all his height and weight and muscles, was merely a needy nedly boy who sucked cock on command. A man such as that would certainly do as he was told. Especially when told by someone so much more authoritative, with so much more knowledge of how the world truly worked. Say, perhaps, a solicitor. A solicitor who was suddenly not nervous at all.

I could feel my two men bristling beside me, ready to leap into whatever fray was about to erupt. But they trusted me, and waited for a signal that they should go for the jugular.

I raised the packet of papers as if I were about to obey. Foolish Wainwright leaned forward across his desk, so very much too eagerly, to take it out of my hands.

“But that isn’t what Aunt Agatha said.” I gave him my very best almost-whine. The one I had raised to a near art when Michel was sucking my cock and I desperately wanted to seed.

Rory and Michel relaxed beside me, having no objection to watching me toy with my prey.

I both leaned slightly forward, and edged slightly forward in my chair, started to hold out the papers to him, and then, pulled back. He did not... *quite*... try to reach across and snatch them from me. I gave him my most ingratiating smile, and read on. Aloud.

Wainwright, I am sure it will be Wainwright if it is anyone, has just asked you to hand him the rest of my letter, without you looking at it, has he not?

The little prick.

Literally so, I understand, based on the lamentations of his wife. I learned early in my marriage that when wives are alone, discussions of flower-arranging, the fête at the church, the health of one’s children, the incompetence of the servants, and the like occupy mere moments of discussion. The meat of the matter, if I may be so bold, is cock comparison. Not merely length and girth, but cock capability as well. Wainwright did not fare very well in those discussions.

If he, or whoever it might be, did not make that request, then extend to the gentleman my apologies. If the request was made, then ask him for an accounting of the rest of your inheritance.

I paused at that. It was my turn to look gut-punched. Or perhaps just gob-smacked. Again. Four hundred thousand pounds accompanied by a request to use it for the best of good works, and there was more?

Wainwright had gone white, then flushed in humiliation at dear Aunt Agatha's prickly comments, before settling on a pained, fish-belly white. But before I made that demand for an accounting, there was a bit more on this page before her signature. I decided to read it to myself.

I hope you will forgive an old woman for testing you twice. Had you not decided to live your life openly, finally following the dictate about to thine own self being true, before your thirtieth birthday, you would not be reading this at all, and the entirety of the remainder of Jonathan's fortune and mine would have been used for other charitable works, with Wilfrid's firm in charge. At a respectable fee, of course. If you agreed to my request, then the rest of my assets are now yours. Which will be a disappointment to the firm of somewhat significant proportions I rather suspect, as those other assets would have been under the firm's control for those charitable purposes had you chosen to just take the first part—the money in the Funds.

If the period between the date of this letter and your reading has been somewhat lengthy, the opportunities for discreet, or less than discreet but still well concealed, speculation have been rife. As Brutus might have said had the subject come up about solicitors in control of one's funds, "For solicitors are speculative men—so are they all, all speculative men." Punish the speculators if you find any, my boy. Thoroughly.

There was a pause just then, which of course you cannot see. I was wondering how best to bring this to an end.

Simple is best, I think.

Oddly enough, I am supremely confident that when the time comes you will make all the right choices. That is to say, that you will agree with me, thereby making your choices the right ones. So I will close with only this additional word of advice: Enjoy the money, besides doing good with it. Use it to bring enjoyment to the man or men in your life. Yes, dear boy, men. If Letitia, Agnes and Hermione could be together for more than thirty years, though the world thought them merely poor spinsters living together just to survive, it is certainly possible

for you to have a pair of men in your life as well. If you have the stamina for it! And you are now, I am sure, blushing yet again.

I am not a very religious person, but I heard this once in church, and looked it up to be sure I could say it correctly to you:

The Lord bless thee, and keep thee. The Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee. The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.

Your most loving,

Aunt Agatha

Rakes do not weep. It is of all things unmanly. So of course I did, proving the delicacy of my molly boy nature to the disapproving Wainwright. Whose firm had just lost undoubtedly handsome annual fees from managing all this, whatever the totality of “this” might be. Even, perhaps, inordinately handsome fees.

Rory said nothing, but put his arm around my shoulders, and shoved a handkerchief in my hand, with a soft-heartedly stern admonition to use it. Michel plucked the papers from my other hand, and as I regained control, I heard the flick-flick-flick of the sheets sliding one beneath the other as he read them.

I leaned forward, picked up the parts of the letter that had fallen from my lap when I began to cry, straightened, and handed them to Rory. Wainwright opened his mouth to speak, but my hand up stopped him. The room was silent except for the shuffle of papers as Rory read his share, exchanged with Michel, and they read them through. Rory handed me the pages I had not yet seen and I finished them, after sternly warning myself to show no visible reaction. I barely managed not to gasp at the meticulous listing of those “other assets” and their valuation as of the date she prepared it.

Land. Buildings in various cities. A sugar plantation in the Indies. Farming land in England and Ireland. A mine. A trading company with a fleet of five ships, four named for famous explorers, and the fifth, well, it was the bloody *The Angry Agatha*. Warehouses in London. A small shop that dealt in high-end antiques. Part-ownership in the business of what was still one of London's

most successful modistes. And on. And on. The last line on the last page provided the total. £385,930.11s.7d.

Meticulous, indeed, my Aunt Agatha. Right down to the shillings and pence. I shall have to learn to emulate her. And if those assets had not been mismanaged, they were worth even more now.

Dear Lord, I had near a million pounds, perhaps more, at my beck and call. I knew nothing of managing that kind of wealth. But I had a lover who probably did, though I had no idea of his worth. Or rather, of his *financial* worth.

I looked at Michel and lifted an eyebrow. Eyebrow-speak is a much more subtle language than arse-wipish. Though Rory and I had not yet begun the process of educating Michel to speak the latter language fluently, we knew it was a process he would quite enjoy.

My eyebrow asked, "Help, please?"

Michel's eyebrow replied, "But of course, *mon petit* cabbage, though there will be a price."

I smiled back. Undoubtedly my mouth or arse... or... just perhaps, one, even both, of his. In sequence? I would enjoy the negotiations; enjoy paying that price even more.

"We will need to examine the Mayhew ledgers."

Wainwright looked at me, as my casual wave, with perhaps a bit of spiteful molly boyish limp wrist in it, directed his attention back to Michel. Whose wrists, and tone, were not limp at all. Wainwright inhaled carefully. Nodded. "If you care to come round a week from to—"

"No. Today." Michel looked at Rory. "Strathairn, if you would not mind, would you be so kind as to ask Mr. Hamilton to join us?"

As Rory crossed in front of us and went out the door, Michel asked, "Mr. Hamilton is your chief clerk, is he not?"

"Now see here—" Wainwright started to rise from his chair.

Michel's, "Sit, sir!" stopped him.

A "sit!" from Michel in that tone of voice would, I believe, have a horde of ravening rabid English mastiffs promptly back on their haunches, their cavernous mouths wide open, great tongues flopping out while drool pooled on the ground, eagerly awaiting their next instruction.

It certainly had that effect on Wainwright.

The door opened, and Mr. Hamilton stepped in somewhat quickly. He had had time to acquire a bit of his own nervousness, perhaps over his failure to stop our entry into the sanctum, although perhaps his quick move was because he was afraid that the glowering broad Scot behind him might just shove him through, possibly without even having opened the door first. He was still rather thin, as if he rarely had enough to eat.

“Mr. Hamilton, it is good to see you again,” I said.

He straightened just a little from a slump that had the appearance of being demanded of him to show he recognized his place in the scheme of things. “I, ah, well, thank you, my lord.”

“Mr. Hamilton, pray let me introduce my friends. The gentleman to my left is *M. le vicomte de Vidal-Sansouci*. The gentleman behind you is the Master of Strathairn. I have just inherited the entirety of the Jonathan and Agatha Mayhew estate. Have I not, Mr. Wainwright?”

Thus “appealed” to, Wainwright had no choice but to agree. I looked to Michel to continue.

“Mr. Hamilton, I am, for the moment, speaking for Lord Somerville. Not that he is mute, you understand, just that he lacks understanding.”

I let my eyes do my glaring for me. Mr. Hamilton chose to occupy his eyes by letting them dart about the room, displaying an even more generous portion of lack of understanding.

“Are you familiar with the Mayhew Estate, Mr. Hamilton?”

His eyes darted toward Mr. Wainwright, then resolutely back again toward Michel. He licked his lips. “Ah... somewhat, my lord.”

“You are this man’s chief clerk and you are only *somewhat* familiar with an estate valued at nearly a million pounds?”

“A... a... *million* pounds?”

“Quite so. And as this has clearly taken you unaware, do you not keep the accounts for this estate?”

“Uh, no, my lord.”

“Some other clerk has this responsibility?”

“Uh, no, my lord.” Hamilton’s eyes were resolutely on Michel. A muscle in his cheek twitched erratically.

“Then who does?”

“M-m-m-Mr. Wainwright, my lord.”

“Indeed.”

I once read a book, shocking though the thought may be to the uneducated masses, that mentioned the Ice Age. I was under the impression that it took a massive amount of time for all that ice to move anywhere. The Ice Age in this room was immediate, occurring with a rapidity somewhat on the order of the speed with which a harlot displays her undying lust and devotion once her fingers are curled around coin.

Hamilton’s shaking was, I was sure, due to a combination of nerves and the severe cold.

“And where might the ledgers be kept?”

Poor Hamilton’s trembling increased. He worried his lower lip with his somewhat rabbit teeth. “I, ah, I really couldn’t—”

“Mr. Hamilton, I think not only that you could, but you *should* say. After all, in this matter, you ultimately work for Lord Somerville here, do you not? And Somerville is a most generous employer, are you not?”

I took my cue and as a good ventriloquist’s dummy should do, nodded my head.

Hamilton obviously chose the Scylla of Michel over the Charybdis of Wainwright. He pointed to a door behind and slightly to Mr. Wainwright’s right, with a padlock on it.

“The key, Mr. Wainwright.” Michel’s voice was inexorable.

Wainwright unfortunately tried to make Michel more exorable. “I’m afraid I don’t—”

When Michel is in that mode, that was a big mistake. Huge.

“You *should* be afraid, Mr. Wainwright.” The temperature dropped yet again. If this temperature were outdoors we could be having a Frost Fair and ice skating on the Thames. “Afraid of what the three of us could do, recent events notwithstanding, to your reputation, your income, perhaps even your person, should you prove any more recalcitrant than you have already been.”

Wainwright surrendered to the *force majeure* that was Michel. He took a small key ring out of his waistcoat, used the first key to unlock the drawer to his right, and a second key to unlock a small box he pulled out. Inside this was yet a third key which he handed to Michel. Who in turn held it out for Hamilton.

“Mr. Hamilton, if you would be so kind? We shall need the ledgers for the Mayhew Estate. Anything else behind that door is, of course, of the utmost privacy, and should not be examined.”

Taking the key from Michel, Hamilton diffidently went around the desk to the door, skirting Wainwright carefully, as if afraid of being attacked and severely mauled.

As he put the key in the lock, Michel asked me, “Do you know when your aunt died?”

“I don’t recall the precise date, but in November of 1804.”

“Hamilton, you will select Mayhew ledgers beginning with 1803, I think. Yes. 1803 will do. At least for now. Unless we find reason to go back further.”

Within a short time, Hamilton produced a goodly number of ledgers, clearly more than one per year, from the depths of the many-shelved tiny room or large closet, and set them on Wainwright’s desk.

Michel did not open the books, but regarded them with the cat-bowl-cream look I was accustomed to receiving when he was examining my cock and paying quite close attention to it. His next expression was also one with which both Rory and I were well-acquainted. In relation to exercising his cocksucking skills, it meant he had come up with yet another plan for getting us to the stage of begging him to allow us to seed, before *eventually* deciding to do so. In this context, it meant he had a plan.

He looked at Mr. Hamilton, who clearly had neither the skill nor the desire to hide the panic he was feeling. He had in essence sided with us rather than his employer, which was something akin to going out on a high limb, sitting down facing the trunk, and then proceeding to saw the limb off in front of yourself. The results would be quite painful, and with only yourself to blame, as no one forced you to commence sawing.

Although, in a way, perhaps we had done so with Hamilton. Michel clearly felt that way, too.

“Mr. Hamilton, I rather fear that as a result of your honesty, your tenure with this firm has come to an end. I suspect, too, that any well-placed persuasions we might make to enable you to keep your position here would, in the long run, be quite futile.”

Hamilton's "Yes, my lord," was agreement, without a tinge of accusation. What a remarkable man.

Michel's voice became quite annoyingly cheerful. "Well, then, Mr. Hamilton, perhaps there is a solution. Are you good at what you do? Do you keep honest accounts, accurate to the last farthing?"

"Of course!" he snapped back, reasserting his dignity.

"Excellent. What do you earn annually?"

"Thirty pounds."

"Paltry, sir, paltry. Somerville here is quite prepared to double that, are you not?"

The dummy nodded again. Mr. Hamilton's mouth dropped open, and then was quickly dragged shut.

"Excellent! Now, Mr. Wainwright has waived any requirement he might have for notice, and has agreed that he will never say anything disparaging about your departure."

At the "He has?" in all our expressions, Michel looked at Wainwright. "You have, and you won't. Correct?"

Michel followed Wainwright's abrupt nod of agreement with, "Then, Mr. Hamilton, let's gather up your employer's ledgers and be off."

As the ledgers were not only numerous, but thick and heavy, three-fourths of our group shared them out. One of the three was, of course, the dummy whose nodding was no longer needed.

We reached the open door, but Michel turned back to look at the fuming Wainwright. "There was a line in Mrs. Mayhew's letter that quite struck me, Mr. Wainwright. She said, I believe, that money is generally sufficient force to accomplish virtually anything one wishes to achieve. Do you believe that between the three of us we have sufficient money to destroy you if you speak of anything that occurred in this room today, except as I, or rather, Lord Somerville, might direct?"

Tight-lipped, patently furious, but equally obviously unable to do anything to vent that fury, Wainwright simply nodded.

“*Adieu*, then, Mr. Wainwright.”

Michel's good troopers trooped out, with Michel at the rear. But as he was in the process of closing the door behind us, he paused, and then re-opened it. Mr. Wainwright had gotten out of his chair and was standing at the side of his desk, glaring initially at the closing door, and then again at us. He quickly painted his face in solicitor-bland.

His voice, however was not at all bland. “What now?”

“Your pardon, Mr. Wainwright.” Michel was all that was gracious. “Just one more thing. I thought you might be interested in knowing that I shall be having David Franklin review the ledgers.”

Mr. Wainwright paled, and his arse collapsed onto the edge of the desk. If he had cause to collapse, it was no surprise that he did. Even tonnish good-for-nothing rakes, who occasionally performed for free as a dummy, had heard of Mr. Franklin. In what the popular press referred to as the Case of the Purloined Penny, he had deciphered the deceptive account books of a supplier of munitions and weapons in the recent war, discovered the theft of just under a half million pounds, and managed to explain the complexities of the deception with such clarity that even the House of Lords, sitting in reluctant judgment on one of its own, could understand what he had done. And having understood, were backed into a corner with no way out other than to convict. The Case of the Folded Folio was even more interesting, I had heard.

Michel closed the door on Wainwright's dazed expression. He looked at the three of us, just standing there. His ever-articulate eyebrow asked, “Well? What are you three doing, just standing there?”

I chose to reply aloud. “You have this tendency to end a conversation, particularly one in which you have been a little, or more than a little, devastating, and then when the person you devastated starts to relax, you say, ‘Uh, just one more thing.’ After which you devastate him further. I was just checking to see if you were going to have need of another ‘just one more thing’ here.”

Michel chose his left eyebrow to remark, “*Touché!*” And then he said aloud, adding a wave of his hand to indicate the aisle and the exit door, to assure

understanding, as Hamilton was unlikely to understand the French, “*En avant, mes amis, en avant.*”

We went *avant* as required. My carriage was cramped, occupied as it was by four men whose collective size, in aggregate height and depth and breadth, was not inconsiderable, in addition to the stacked ledgers which found their way to the laps of only three-fourths of us. Michel had explained quite logically that it would be most improper for him to appear in front of his man of business, and give the man instructions, wearing pantaloons that were wrinkled and whose pristine purity was perhaps diminished by dust.

We left the ledgers with Mr. Bellefontaine, who, despite the tiniest hint of a French accent, pronounced his name in quite proper English fashion (“Bell-fountain”), along with instructions to: (a) keep them locked in the vault at all times they were not in use; (b) allow Mr. Hamilton to examine them as needed so as to familiarize himself with the records on which he would be working, and (c) require Mr. Franklin to conduct his examination on-site, rather than take the records to his own office as was his custom. Michel suggested that offering him an additional hundred pounds for the inconvenience, and the speed with which results were required, was appropriate.

As it was the dummy who would be paying for all this, Michel eyebrow-asked for my approval, and like a good dummy, I nodded yet again.

We four left the building, and as we stepped onto the sidewalk, I was jostled by Percy the prick, also known as Baron Wilding. If one rated arseholes as one did diamonds and debutantes, he would have been given the accolade of arsehole of the first water. And upon realizing it was me, and with a glance taking in the presence of Michel and Rory as well, he sneered, turned his head so his eyes would not be further contaminated, and walked away. I manfully resisted the urge to grab Michel’s walking stick and cram it up Wilding’s arse. Sideways.

But it did raise another issue. “Hamilton.”

“My lord?”

“As you saw, working for me has some potential risks for you as well. Contamination by association, as it were. If you would prefer to change your mind, I would not be offended. And in that event, I would pay you a year’s wages, here and now, and we would return to Mr. Wainwright’s office for ‘just one more thing’: a glowing letter of reference for you.”

Hamilton sensibly paused and considered his options. Sixty pounds in hand could tide him over if it took any time to find new employment, or if he found employment quickly, provide him, and his family, if he had any, with some degree of security if managed wisely. Hamilton struck me as a man with that sort of wisdom.

“I think, Lord Somerville, that I shall accept your offer of employment.” And in a risky move, he held out his hand.

It was a gesture utterly inappropriate between a man of his station and a man of mine, unless I was the one making the gesture. I admired his boldness, clasped his hand and released it. “Lord *Vidal-Sansouci* here is acting as banker at the moment. Give Mr. Hamilton a fiver, won’t you?”

Michel’s mock-glare was only in his eyes as he complied.

“That is not an advance on your salary, Mr. Hamilton. Use it for some treats for your... family?”

“A wife and two little ones.”

“Well, then, some treats it must be. And you can begin work in the morning.”

Hamilton folded the note and put it in his pocket, and let us get all of two steps away from him before raising his voice and calling out, “Uh, just one more thing?”

We stopped in our tracks, spun around, all of us thinking, I was sure, what a fine find we had in Hamilton, impulsive though that find might have been, like picking up a lump out of the muck, and finding it to be gold. That thought was accompanied by bursts of laughter at his cleverness. His smile joined us.

“Yes, Mr. Hamilton? What ‘one more thing’ might there be?”

“A matter of site, my lord.”

I blinked, utterly confused. “You require spectacles, Mr. Hamilton?”

Rory’s bark of laughter confused me further. I was new to this business of having, well, *business* about which to be concerned, and hiring employees, and if it was customary for employers to provide employees with spectacles, I was naturally willing to do so. After all, his work would require long hours and a potential for considerable eye strain.

Hamilton bit back a smile and managed to answer calmly, and entirely without the mockery with which Rory and Michel would have skewered me. "My vision is fine, thank you, my lord. I was merely inquiring where I would be reporting to work tomorrow."

Bloody hell, but I hate it when my whole bloody body goes up in flame. Having one's embarrassment ever on display was, well, damned embarrassing. Office? Office? I had no office. Had never had a need of one. Butterworth, my own man of business had an office somewhere in the City, and he simply came to Somerville House as needed.

Which brought another issue to mind. I had just hired Hamilton. To work for me. I could not in good conscience relegate him now to working for Butterworth. And I *was* going to need help with all that was now possible thanks to Aunt Agatha.

I waved away the annoying laughter on either side of me. And then had the solution.

"Mr. Hamilton, I have no office. Your first assignment is to find one." I paused to gather my hither, thither and yon thoughts. "It will need offices for the three of us, and one for you as well. Space for clerks, and records, and..." I waved my hand to indicate the wide range of "stuff" for which space would be needed.

I glared the two beside me into silence. "Yes, the two of you. If you think I'm bloody doing this on my own, you're out of your bloody minds."

I looked back at Hamilton. "Room for expansion. Good offices in a good location, but not such good offices in such a good location that we leave the impression we are spending more money on ourselves than on the purposes for which the Society is organized."

"Society, my lord?"

I took a deep breath. This was actually the first time the words would be said aloud in their new, out in the open and proud context. The first time was after earth-shaking sex, to mock the bangers who had tried to hurt us. The times since were tales of others taking up the cause, whether in truth or in mockery, though certainly in no organized fashion. The most recent time was my pronouncement, announcement, whatever it was, that while I had not the slightest idea how the Society would accomplish what I said it would do, I was nevertheless utterly certain that it would be done.

And now I knew how. Or the beginnings of *how*.

“The Friends of Edward Society, Mr. Hamilton. *That* is the work upon which you will be engaged. We will be helping friends of Edward’s, young or older or even old and at the end of their days, girls or boys, women or men, who need care, or comfort, or food and shelter, or protection from literal storms and storms that might be visited upon them because of who they are.

“I asked you for honesty earlier, but I was not then fully honest with you, though unintentionally so, as I should have made full disclosure of all this. So, I extend the same offer again. Do you stay or go?”

He thought for a moment. An excellent man, one who thinks before deciding. Would that I had more often been as excellent as that, though I would now have to acquire that skill and quite rapidly, actually.

“I shall stay, your lordship.”

“Excellent.” It was my turn to extend my hand as I paced the two steps back to him. We shook once more, to the shock of the fashionables passing by. “You will most likely find us at Somerville House tomorrow, if you have anything to report in the way of an office. If we are not there I will leave word where you may find us. And of course, keep track of any expenditures, so that you can be reimbursed. Or, no, better yet...”

I looked over my shoulder at Michel, who gave me an anticipatory eye-roll.

“*M. banquier*, another fiver, gramercy.”

After the note reached Hamilton’s hand, I told him to use that as the start of our petty cash fund. With mutual expressions of thanks, we parted.

We spent the rest of the day at Somerville House. Celebrating, discussing, planning, arguing, taking breaks from our tumultuous thoughts for a cold collation of bread, beef, ham, cheese and ale at noon, a brief nuncheon at four to last us until an early dinner at eight. Dinner, served in the lesser dining room with much less ostentation than my staff would have preferred, was accompanied by much laughter and gesticulation and more argumentation, followed by wine (Michel), whisky (Rory) and ale (me, as I wished to maintain some semblance of sobriety and therefore sense) after we returned to the library.

When we finally realized it was past midnight, we were unexpectedly exhausted, even though all three of us were well-accustomed to nights that

frequently ended at dawn. Mrs. Henderson had prepared rooms for both of my guests. There had been a coin toss as to which of them would be put in the suite of the non-existent, and now, most assuredly the never-to-exist, viscountess, with its convenient connecting door to my own suite. The other was to be banished to a guest room in another wing, though on the same floor.

Michel had insisted on asking Mrs. Henderson to supply a coin from the household funds, which he most solemnly promised to return in the morning with interest. He did not, he explained, trust any coin proffered by a gambler, even if he had the opportunity to examine it before the toss to ascertain that the two sides of the coin were different. He muttered something about rigged coins when Rory won anyway.

Not that we spent the night in separate beds. The house was quiet when we went our theoretically separate ways, and I sent the servants to bed as well. My two... yes, they were my lovers, my friends, the best of best friends in all possible worlds, but I wished for something more, something the Society could never achieve, something society would never allow. I wished, as I waited for them to join me, that they were my husbands. Michel and Rory married to me, and those two married to each other, three marriages to make us a union that was vastly greater than the sum of its parts.

I shook off the useless imaginings. Rory, of course, did not bother with a knock, just coming through the door naked, and teasingly stalking over to the quite enormous bed, then around, to climb up into it. Something like climbing up into a high-perch phaeton.

“Rumpled?” I asked.

“Rumpled,” he answered. He looked at the open connecting door, the unlocked door to the hall. “He’s slow tonight.”

“He has a greater distance to travel, arse-wipe. And servants to avoid if any should be up for some reason or other.”

Whatever reply he might have made was cut off by Michel coming through the hall door, closing it, carefully locking it, and then turning to us. He pulled off the dressing gown of black silk, with a dragon spewing flame on the left shoulder, and dropped it carelessly to the floor. The nightshirt was pulled over his head and met a similar fate.

“Rumpled?”

“Rumpled.”

The fate of their respective pillows, sheets and blankets ascertained and confirmed, he posed to allow us to admire him. And then his long, lean, lusciously languid, lethal only to our sexual stamina, self, strode across the room. He made a point, as he usually did, of his ability to get into this bed more easily than Rory because of his height. The kisses we exchanged were... unusual.

Gentle, loving, but with no intent to arouse. Our cocks remained calm and quiet. Without the need for a discussion, we three knew that sex tonight would be... inappropriate. Or perhaps unnecessary. We were celebrating such a variety of things. Aunt Agatha's generosity, of course. Surviving a day of such shocks. Discovering how well we worked together, and not merely fucked together. Rejoicing in the broad outline of a plan for the Society that we had hammered out.

Until these two, I had never had a man in bed for any period of time longer than it took to fuck, and usually, it was his bed rather than mine anyway. We had established a pattern for those rare occasions when we could actually spend time in the same bed, sleeping. I was in the center, on my back. Rory to my right, Michel to my left. My arms embracing them, at least to start.

While we slept, we discovered we moved a bit from time to time, though not the flailing movements this pair of lying lovers attributed to me. I surreptitiously lifted my leg, stretching a muscle I would say if anyone were to say anything, and looked at my foot. It was not, *they* were not, all that large. Though large would be entirely understandable, given the known scientific relationship, or so I had assured them when I explained, between large feet and large cocks. But certainly not the born-in-Brobdingnag foot size they in turn have assured me, with much swearing of solemn, albeit mild oaths, was a quite accurate description.

“Brobdingnag, Peregrine, Brobdingnag, and looking at your toes isn't going to alter the truth,” said Rory. “So will you just put the damned barge down beside the other one to make a matching, *bed-bound the rest of the night, pair?*”

“I wasn't thinking of...”

“You *were* ‘thinking of,’ my dear,” Michel interrupted.

“Well, it's *not* true.” I was sulking, but sometimes that was fun.

“Yes, my dear, that’s right. All a fantasy. Just a tease.” His pat on my shoulder was as patronizing as his tone. “Now may we sleep?”

I sighed, and grinned, and they let themselves be gathered in again. Even when we moved, if Rory wound up on his back as well, or Michel on his belly, or however else we might be, all the movements resolved themselves into three positions that required us or enabled us to touch.

As we glided down the slope into sleep, I knew they would be gone when I awakened, so as not to offend servant sensibilities by flaunting where we actually slept for at least part of the night. The rumpled beds led to a plausible early rising because of a restless night if the servants happened upon an empty bed.

I hoped that one day we might be in a place, personal, physical, where we could sleep the entire night through together, without worrying over rumpling.

Yes. I could imagine that.

And I did as I fell asleep.

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Peregrine

Thursday, 10 October 1816

Very late afternoon

107 Meriwether Lane

London

“Why?”

“Why not?” was Rory’s reply.

I looked at the pair of them. I knew them so well now, after all we had endured together, and apart, and they were up to something, some plan was even now in progress. Something beyond the ridiculous purchase they were proposing. I just could not figure out what it was.

We stood in the parlor of the middle of three side-by-side townhouses, in a less than salubrious part of the city, although it was not Seven Dials by any means. On the border of the West End, not quite inside, but managing to be neither fish nor fowl. The solicitor who most urgently wished to earn his fee by getting rid of his client’s burden of ownership as rapidly as possible, had been almost obsequious in handing over the three sets of keys to Michel. A viscount and a *vicomte*, even if accompanied by, well, a *Scotsman*, could certainly be trusted to lock up after themselves and return the keys tomorrow morning. Even a trio as notorious as we. Or it might be afternoon, depending on when our respective lordships deigned to rise from our beds.

This was a nice parlor, as parlors went. The contents—furniture, drapes, paintings, *objets d’art*—were quite good, both here and in the right-hand house through which we’d been given a most detailed tour. The tour was naturally accompanied by assurances that the other two houses were in equally good repair, et cetera, et cetera. Based solely on this parlor, that assurance appeared to be correct as to this building.

After the surrendering of the keys ceremony, Rory had suggested that we ought to buy the three houses. My somewhat loud “Why?” had been preceded by a somewhat loud “What?” of the are-you-out-of-your-bloody-minds variety.

I already owned a townhouse, and it was better furnished. Michel had a mansion in Mayfair, and its furnishings were rather beyond good or better.

I waved my hand to encompass the townhouse we were in, and the other two as well, as I said, "First, because this is not Mayfair. It is not close to Mayfair. I agree it is not in a slum, nor is there a slum towering over the garden walls, ready to leap on the houses and devour them to the last brick. But really... move to Meriwether Lane? We would be laughed out of London."

Suspiciously, there was no response. These men were *never* without a response. The idea was utterly ridiculous and I proceeded with the proof, by reminding them that we already *had* homes. I held up a hand to stop an imminent outburst from Rory about his living in rented rooms, before realizing that there was no burst about to out itself.

What the...?

After only the slightest break, I went on, with my demonstration of the superiority of my thinking.

"Yes, yes, rented rooms and all that, but the only reason you're still there, you ha' penny squeezing Scotsman, is because you are a stubborn shite. Thanks to Aunt Agatha, I have enough money to buy a townhouse in a far better part of the city and deed it to you. Croesus-cubed here—" and I nodded to Michel, who smirked back "—has enough money to buy each of us several townhouses just with the interest off the money he has in the Funds."

Michel cleared his throat. It was the disagreement throat-clearing, not the throat-clearing required to get the rest of Rory's seed or mine down where it belonged. It seemed forever since I had heard that sound, but it was actually only last night. In Michel's bed.

"Ah, not *several*, my dears. Perhaps two each, furnished, but a third only if the price was right."

I waved off his annoying, logical response. I did not need logic just then, as logic and Rory were not always the best of companions.

But Rory got logical on me, somewhat annoyed, and lost his tonnish English. Sometimes that loss is deliberate, sometimes not. This was, I was reasonably certain, a *not* time.

"'Tis nae penny-pinching, ye daft bugger. 'Tis sound financial planning, somethin' wi' which ye hae wee experience. And I'll remind ye I'm th' Master o' Strathairn noo, 'n' ah damned weel hae mah ain dosh noo, as well, ye eejit."

I looked at Michel. I was fluent in eyebrow. Even more fluent in arse-wipish, as I helped invent the language. But sometimes, as then, when Rory's brogue was so thick it could not be carved, but required a battle axe to hack through, I needed translation.

Michel smirked. "Let me see. I assume you caught the parts where you were reminded that you are well-known to be both a 'daft bugger' and an 'idiot.' As for the rest, he merely pointed out that as Master of Strathairn he now has funds available to him, and that what you describe as pinching a penny until it squeals in anguish, is just sound financial planning, something of which a frivolous, care-for-nothing rakehell such as yourself would have no knowledge."

He smiled at Rory. "Do I have that right?"

"Aye, ye do."

I sighed in exasperation. "*Some* money now, you bloody-minded Scot. We're proud that you wrested control of the land and the distillery from the Laird, and that you're improving the family's finances beyond all recognition. But not enough, I think, to buy a townhouse yourself.

"We love you. You love us. People, even friends of Edward's, who love, are allowed to give gifts. Even extravagant... slightly, *modestly* extravagant gifts like a furnished townhouse. Which I... *we*... will be most happy to give you. *Elsewhere!*"

"I'm nae charity case," he said, rough, raw and with more than a hint of an explosion in the near future. He stood stiffly, and not in the way Michel and I preferred. That Rory actually preferred.

I looked to Michel, whose blandness encouraged me to continue. "Rory, love, it's not charity. It's sharing what we have to make things better for us all. With your own townhouse, already furnished, or furnished as you like by buying an empty one in a much better neighborhood, and then buying out the shops, we would each have a home. With differences that we could share. Of course, a prerequisite for your townhouse would be a bedroom with an excessively large bed, that could, ah, *accommodate* three very, ah, vigorous men."

And then I shut my mouth.

Those bastards.

Those fucking, loving, adorable, bloody bastards.

I knew what they were planning, but I wasn't going to give in so easily. I knew I would, but I'd make them work very, very hard for *my* surrender.

I opened my mouth to continue my argument, but Rory shut it rapidly. Not with his mouth or prick, though either would have been delightful, but with his words.

“Fine. Buy me the house next door. No. 103.”

I gaped at him. I try to avoid gaping because I have been told, frequently, that when I am gob-smacked, I look like a fish with open mouth about to swallow hook and bait. A handsome, blond, ruggedly rakish fish, of course. But still, a fish.

I snapped my mouth shut and snapped at him as well. “Fine! We'll go to the solicitor's office the first thing in the morning. I'll drag your arse out of whichever bed we're in at dawn's bloody early light. And by the end of the day, you'll have your own home. We can take turns as host. Which is rather a good idea, Rory, since the combination of the thin walls of your rooms, and the volume with which you howl our names, one or both when you're being well-fucked... something for which Michel and I have a remarkable talent... has deprived you of the sheer wondrousness of being fucked through your very own mattress.”

I gave them a triumphant look, to brag about winning my point. Although “winning” that point meant I actually had no idea after all what was going on.

“But your home and mine are not *ours*,” Michel said.

“Of course they are.”

He shook his head. “They're *family* homes, my dear. With family retainers. Not all of whom are enthused about... *us*.”

I opened my mouth for yet another snap, then paused.

Michel nodded at my obvious realization. “And though your bedroom and mine are each well away from the servants' quarters, and for obvious reasons we have no wives or children or other relatives residing with us, yet still... do we not each... hold back somewhat in our enjoyment?”

“And then there are those who watch us. And make us the latest *on dit*.”

His voice reeked sarcasm. “Lord S—was seen entering the home of Lord V—late on 14th September last. He was followed shortly by Mr. M—. Neither

Lord S—nor his companion left his lordship's home until past noon the following day. Two days later, it was the house of Lord S—which was the scene of such indulgences as may only be guessed at.' And they insult Rory by calling him a mere 'mister.'"

He was, of course, correct. We were far beyond a nine days' wonder. "And what changes in all that if we do this mad scheme you two have concocted?"

"*Our* homes, Peregrine, these would be *our* homes," Rory said fiercely. "*Our* staff, who will not care what we are doing in bed because most of them will either be doing the same in the servants' quarters or elsewhere on their days off."

I blinked. And blinked again. "You want to hire a group of *neddy boys* to cook and clean, and... and... buttle and everything else?"

Rory relaxed and grinned wickedly. "Of course. Our fellow friends of Edward's are talented in so very many ways besides how they use their bodies, and are no less eager to be employed where they do not have to hide. However, given the way your eyes have traditionally roved, with your hands and mouth and cock and arse following eagerly after, you'll have to understand what will happen to you if you stray. We are, I believe, speaking of serious injury, are we not, Michel?"

I almost responded to the absurdity of the thought that having found these two, and given so much to them, given *up* so much *for* them, that I would put my cock in any hole not theirs. Responded with great offense. I fortunately stepped back from the precipice of vast embarrassment by realizing that they were teasing, and did not, after all, have so little faith in me. Or in us.

"Very well. So none of the servants will blink or run away when Rory roars with my cock in his arse, just before his mouth is shut by Michel's prick. Though... do you think they might wank over thoughts of what we might be doing?"

That created arrested expressions. "They... might," Michel conceded.

How I delighted in being the one, for a change, to disconcert *them*. I smiled broadly. "Oh, please, Michel. You know they will. Rory is both articulate and loud when his mouth is not cock-filled. A brawny Scotsman screaming 'Fuck me bluidy arse!' when I'm pounding him, or clever words like 'Suck me bluidy meat, y'French slut!' when he's fucking your face? They'll know precisely what is going on, even if they don't possess *all* of the, ah, *intimate* details."

It was their turn to look gob-smacked, though only a little so. They had clearly not thought of this. And then, not surprisingly, first Michel and then Rory... *preened*. They *liked* the thought of other men fantasizing over them.

Michel spoke first. Excessively languidly, as if the affectation of boredom would strike me blind so that I did not notice the slight plumping beneath his inexpressibles. "I don't see that giving the masses something to think about and enjoy..." He waved his hand to brush away the objection I was about to make. "Very well, very well. The *minor* masses, the small masses we will employ out of the vastness of the masses in London. Or the country. A non-stingy wage, excellent quarters and working conditions, pleasant and handsome employers, topped off with superb wank fantasies. What more could a neddy boy seeking employment ask for?"

He paused. "Though I do think we would be wise not to mention the latter during interviews. Let them learn later of that benefit. Excellent thinking, Peregrine. So... the servant obstacle is overcome. I am sure you have others to raise."

He lifted his damned eyebrow at me. Even waggled it a little, knowing how much it annoyed me that while I could lift I could not waggle.

I continued the struggle, just because I didn't yet know what they were up to.

"Very well. We'll see the solicitor tomorrow and buy the townhouse next door for Rory, the middle one for me, and the other one for Michel, if you both insist. Although I think we could do better. There are townhouse rows elsewhere in London, in *much bloody better* neighborhoods, where we could arrange to buy three side by side and accomplish the same goals."

Michel's grin was smug. Yes, he most definitely knew something he had not yet shared. "But this neighborhood has so much potential, Peregrine. And I think you will agree that friends of Edward's generally have the reputation of making the most out of whatever potential there might be."

That was his... their... plan? "A bloody... *enclave* or something... of bloody friends of Edward's in the heart of London?"

"Why not?"

And we were back to the question which started the discussion. Why not, indeed? Gathering friends of Edward's in a specific area might make them...

us... more readily discernible targets for the bangers. But we could, perhaps, as a group be greater than the sum of our parts. And protect ourselves better. Strength, numbers, that whole idea.

“Very well, I’m on board.”

“Excellent.”

Bastards. They were smiling far too broadly over a simple agreement to purchase real estate.

Michel said, “Rory, if you will do the honors?”

“But of course.” Rory was at his most suave and donnish. Although he naturally offset that image as he walked toward a small desk, by reaching around to supposedly scratch some phantom itch in the crease of his arse, which the bastard did simply to emphasize what a superbly fuckable arse it was, even fully dressed. He pulled a key out of his pocket, opened the center drawer, and pulled out a thick sheaf of papers. Almost rivaling Aunt Agatha’s missive. He selected a smaller set, put the rest back, relocked the drawer and came back to me.

“Here. The deed to your townhouse. The middle one, of course.”

“Wh-what?”

Rory was positively reeking with smug. “We bought all three on Monday.”

I snapped my gob-smacked, gaping-yet-again mouth shut. I was sure I sounded annoyed when I spoke, because, of course, I bloody well was. “Fine. I will have Butterworth transfer...”

Rory interrupted me with his best languid Michel impersonation. “But, Peregrine, my dear, people who love, even those abominations, the friends of Edward’s, are permitted to give gifts, are they not? Even extravagant, or rather, slightly, *modestly* extravagant gifts like a furnished townhouse?”

And then the daft bugger laughed at me.

Hoist with my own fucking petard. I surrendered. “As you say.”

They closed in on me, hugging me, and we exchanged brief kisses. Kisses that inevitably started a cock stand for me. Michel squeezed my shoulder, said, “I shall be back in a minute or two.”

He left the room, and Rory attempted to distract me with more kisses, and a little ear nibbling, and a wee bit of neck licking. I knew what they were up to then.

The floor plans were the same in all three. There was a rather large bedroom at the front of the house, overlooking the garden across the street. Michel had obviously gone upstairs to turn down the covers, though six hands could make really light work of getting the bed ready.

Clearly, we were going to christen my new home... *our* new home... with cocksucking. Baptize it with buggery.

I could imagine that. I *did* imagine that, and my aching cock reflected the wealth of detail in my imaginings.

Then Michel was back, carrying a silk scarf that matched the color of Rory's hair, not on his head, but the richer, brighter, redder thatch around his cock and balls. They better not have been putting Rory's cock and balls on display to some fucking friend of Edward's in order to find that perfect match. They belonged to me, damn it. Though I would naturally share them with Michel.

"Turn around, love," he said.

Blindfold me? We had never played a game like that, but then, having the time and place and leisure to explore the varieties of love available to us had previously been in short supply. We were making up for lost time. I did as I was told, wondering if my hands were going to be bound as well. Whether I wanted, would enjoy...

Hand-binding was clearly out of the picture, at least for now. I erased the sketch I had been beginning in my imaginings as they most solicitously led me upstairs. They had started out reassuring me that they would not allow me to bump into anything, but I stopped that by telling them, "I trust you, ye daft pair o' buggers."

I could quite grow to like that phrase. It was one that went trippingly on the tongue. Actually, both phrases—about trust, and daft buggers—went trippingly along.

They opened the door, brought me carefully inside, closed it. Removed the blindfold. I gasped.

The room was all golden. In part the flickering candles that were everywhere. In part the colors. Creams and whites and ivories, picked out in gold threads, gold fabrics in complementary shades. An *enormous* bed with the covers indeed pulled back. Sheets a pale... something... that I knew would make my hair a sunburst when I laid on them, and Rory's the bright red of a fire.

There was also something hidden next to the right side of the bed. A screen blocked off my view of whatever it was. Rory stepped left to a small table beside the door, came back looking unusually diffident for him. He held out a parchment scroll, tied with elegant gold ribbon.

I carefully moved the ribbon to the edge and pulled it off. As there was a candelabra standing by the large chair near the fireplace, I understood I was to be comfortable and read it there. I sat down, and Rory sat on the floor, resting his crossed arms on my knees, but would not look at me, and worried his lower lip with his teeth. Michel stood partly behind the chair, leaning forward, and resting his arms on the back. One long, slender finger reached out to caress my cheek.

"Rory's calligraphy," he murmured. "Our... or rather, a good part if not quite all... words."

Keeping my confusion to myself, I unrolled the scroll and tilted it toward the light, being careful not to disturb either of my men. Without, for a moment, looking at words I just looked at the writing. The calligraphy was stunning. Yet another of Rory's hidden talents.

I read.

The Passionate Pair to Their Love

*Come live with us and be our love
And three will all the pleasures prove
That faithful men, in dale or field,
In all our townhouse rooms, will yield.*

*There will we lie upon the bed
And watch the roué bend his head,
O'er risen cocks, from out our smalls,
Whilst outdoors, birds sing madrigals.*

*On summer's night upon cool sheet
Our skin will touch, our scents will meet,
We'll roll and slide upon that bed,
Then fuck until our minds have fled.*

*A winter's robe of finest wool
Slides off your shoulders as we pull,
Warm hands caress your curls of gold,
Hot mouths will keep your cock from cold.*

*Oiled wooden pricks of diverse size,
For holy use and lovers' sighs:
And if these pleasures may thee move,
Come live with us and be our Love.*

*A place of books, and laughs aloud,
A haven from the madding crowd,
Where rogue and rake and roué stay
And live and love each passing day.*

*We'll be thy shepherd swains who sing
For thy delight each May-morning:
So if our gifts thy heart doth move,
Then live with us and be our Love.*

I immediately began to cry. Years upon years upon years with nary a tear, and then in these past several months I am become such a watering pot that if the North Sea went dry, I could be used to fill it up.

Rory grabbed my left hand, as I had let loose of the bottom of the scroll and it started to curl up. "Peregrine, we didn't mean..."

I squeezed back. Sniffled. "Can't a friend of Edward's enjoy a good cry now and again? It's not as though *manly* men ever can."

Michel's hands were on my shoulders, caressing. Then he walked around the chair, and sank to the floor, cross-legged. Without animadversions about what I or we were requiring him to do to his clothes. A nine-day wonder!

"You do recall, do you not, how we were going to punish you that night? Take you away from Alderson House to somewhere private, fuck you at both ends until you seeded yourself several times, and then walk away from you? Leave you alone without our cocks or arses, but most especially, without *us*?"

“Well, of course I do. But you couldn’t and you didn’t. And if you had, it wouldn’t have worked anyway. For very good reasons, too.”

He eyebrow-asked, “Oh? Really?”

I really wasn’t going to attempt an eyebrow-answer, because, after all, no matter how fluent one is, eyebrow-speak *does* have some limitations. Rory’s massive hand, however, preemptively, painfully prevented any such attempt by squeezing my leg just above the knee. Hard.

“Ow!” I tried to jerk my leg away, but couldn’t, and so had to settle for glaring at him. He glared right back.

“Aloud, Peregrine, aloud. You don’t speak that fucking *English* eyebrow thing when I’m around, unless the two of you are using it to plan an unusually good fucking that involves me and my bloody arse. Are you?”

“Ah, no.”

“So what the hell did that eyebrow mean?”

“Michel said, in essence, that he didn’t really believe I knew why you two didn’t follow through with the original plan.”

“All that with just *one* fucking eyebrow?”

I gave him a bit of shoulder-speak with a shrug that said, “Well, of course.”

“I *hate* English aristocrats.”

I raised one eyebrow at him, and knew Michel was doing it as well. Both of us saying, of course, “Oh? Really?”

Rory blushed just a little. “Verra weel, I dinna hate all of ye. I’ll make an exception. Or two.” He recovered a bit of his glare. “But that’s all. Nae mair.”

I almost annoyed Rory with an eyebrow-ask again, but decided on voicing it to Michel. “We don’t want Rory *loving* any more English aristocrats than us, do we?”

“Definitely not.”

“And we won’t love any more Scottish aristocrats than the one we have?”

“Definitely not.”

I looked at Rory. “Well, then, is that all settled to your satisfaction?”

“Ah wid nae say ah wis *satisfied*, ye ken, nae juist yit.”

We smiled at each other, but Rory had dragged us back to the almost-lost point.

I sighed. “Very well. It’s simple. The two of you realized I would enjoy being fucked at both ends by cocks I adore, far too much, so there was no way it could be an effective punishment.”

Michel started to lift an eyebrow at me, then turned his head to Rory, pointed his right index finger at the partially lifted eyebrow—that long, long finger that could do such wonderful things up inside your arse, particularly when accompanied by one or two or on the right occasion even three of its friends—to emphasize he was lowering it. Rory snickered.

Michel asked, “But what about the leaving part? You would have been devastated.”

“True. But so would both of you. After... what? ...each of you fucking my mouth and arse at least once before your grand departure, once I was gone you would have realized how much you liked my talented mouth, although I do not claim the expertise of *le grand maître de tous*... what is the word? ...ah, *les cocquesuckeurs*.”

I winked at Michel and grinned at my mangled French, and saw a part of a hint of a wee bit of a grin back from each of them.

“And as for my arse, my adorable, adored, adoring men, what can I say about my arse you do not already know? How, ah, *nearly* like a virgin having his very first time, it would have been? How exquisitely tight and hot it was at the Sea House? How rarely you get a chance...”

Rory *growled*.

A friend of Edward’s who had never heard a sound of arse-wipish before would have understood *that*: “Are you fucking saying my fucking arse is *loose*?”

I snickered at him. Perhaps sniggered. Reached out to give him a “there, there, everything is all right” pat to annoy him a bit more.

“My dears, my arse right now is *naturally* tight. It hasn’t been used all that much; indeed, it hasn’t been used *nearly* enough, once I was so *well*-introduced to the glories of being fucked... ah, last December, if I recall correctly? But *Rory’s* arse?”

I extravagantly kissed my bunched fingertips and then spread them wide. “*Tres magnifique!* I am a mere student, who kneels gratefully at the arse of the master. And licks, and laps to learn. I can only hope that I have that innate talent which, when combined with years... perhaps, *years?* ...of training and experience, will enable to me to control the cocks in my hole and play them with all the skill that Antonini has when he plays... ah, yes... when he plays Vivaldi’s *Violin Concerto in B flat major*. On his Stradivarius.”

I paused. Gave him a distinctly smug smile. His arse-wipish “harumph!” conceded that I had escaped retribution. For now.

“So—as I was saying before I was so arse-wipishly interrupted, even if you had carried out your plan, you would have come back in a day, hell, within hours, apologizing and begging to pick up where we left off.”

“Bloody arrogant British blond, ain’t he?” asked Rory.

“True,” Michel answered. “But unfortunately, quite right. Though I think that when we were on the way back to him, he would have been on the way to us, meeting us fairly close to half way, and after some mutually suitable groveling, we would have been back together. And that would have been a waste of several good grovels. We should save those for a *true* problem. Later. Much, *much* later.”

We both agreed with him.

And then it was my turn to get us back on point... the *real* point. The reason they so obviously brought me up here. I carefully rolled the scroll up and set it back on the table and stood up. They stood as well, giving me a little space. We were still close enough that I could stretch my hands out, grasp a shoulder on each of them and pull them to me.

Except it didn’t work. The bastards not only didn’t move, but shrugged my hands off.

Rory shook his head. “Ah dinnae ken. All this bluidy, logical, *scholarly* analysis o’ shite haes murdurred th’ mood. Ah dinna think ah kin bugger him noo.”

“*Tellement vrai, mon cher ami, tellement vrai.*”

M. le vicomte de la prique joined Rory in the sad head-shaking.

They brought me here to fuck or get fucked, and by God, I was going to fuck *and* get fucked. And it was going to be so very easy to accomplish that. I knew my men.

A side-step put me very close to Michel; intimately so, one might say. My right hand clamped down on his cock, and I began squeezing it gently. He wasn't wearing smalls! How in the hell had I not noticed that? All the better to fondle him as he began to lengthen. "Are you quite sure the mood is *entirely* gone? Do you think it might be, ah, *revived*, if I offered to suck all of you down into my throat, and work on your nipples as I kept swallowing and swallowing and swallowing?"

Michel answered me with a sound that combined an "unh" and a grunt and a moan. He was a natural speaker of arse-wipish! Who knew? He was so fluently saying, "Yes! Suck me now!"

My look over my shoulder at Rory was understandably smug yet again. I didn't bother with an eyebrow or English. Just the universal arse-wipish sign for "come over here and let's get this play on the stage." I reached out with my left arm angled downward, palm up at crotch height, and wiggled my fingers.

Rory thrust his hips out and swaggered right into my hand. He was already hard. I fondled them some more. "Very well, let's get naked and into bed."

At that, two hands clamped down on my wrists and stopped the fondling.

No eyebrows were needed to express my surprise, my whole face proclaimed it, when Michel said, "No. I don't think so." He gently removed my hand from his cock and Rory did the same. "You see, my very dear, while you are often in charge, sometimes because it is right, sometimes because we simply let you, tonight is not one of them. *We* are in charge."

That somewhat stopped my breathing. Not with panic or dismay, but with an arsehole-clenching, hip-thrusting surge of lust.

It was their turn to step in close. I was not blond enough to object when one of Michel's hands went to my already-hard and profusely leaking cock, one of Rory's went to my bollocks, and their other hands squeezed my arse-cheeks and politely prodded my hole.

Michel leaned in, his breath warm on the side of my face, my neck. He delicately licked upward from the edge of my cravat until his tongue and lips and teeth found my ear and began to do all sorts of wonderfully cock-warming

things to it. Then he whispered, “And since you still owe us a good punishment, we’re going to claim it. Now.”

I could live with that. I could undoubtedly die with pleasure from that, but I’d have to try to avoid the latter outcome.

I nearly did not make it.

They stripped me, teasing and tormenting as they went, and placed me in the center of the bed. The mattress was firm, and I did not sink into a deep crevasse. But I did raise myself on my elbows so that I could watch them bare themselves. Regrettably, they did not do it in a teasing, taunting, tantalizing way. I had occasionally imagined what it might be like to see a man who already made my cock stiff, strip off his clothes, accompanied to music. What music, I could not conceive. But I somehow felt sure that if a composer who was a friend of Edward’s were assigned the task, he would compose something with a *hard* rhythm, and a classical-sounding name, which all the neddy boys would disdain, and call it, instead, “The Stripper.”

My men, however, were all that was efficient. They wore jackets which did not... *quite*... require someone’s assistance to peel off, but they did come off more quickly with a little help. Stickpins out and set on the night table. A tug, two tugs, a yank, and cravats littered the floor. Waistcoats unbuttoned, with only one popping off, to be lost somewhere in the room. Shirts peeled over heads to join the floor litter.

They deliberately paused, I was sure, to give me an opportunity to admire their half-nakedness, but when I did so, naturally moving my hand to my prick for preliminary stroking, Rory barked at me to move my hand away. Then they plopped those glorious arses, only one of which, *most* regrettably, I was allowed into, on the edge of the bed, to make short work of shoes and stockings. Then they stood, bent forward, and allowed me to gaze on one brawny, furry moon and one slender, smooth moon, each with a most delectable *crack* running down the center, as they stripped the rest of the way.

Michel turned to face the bed, his legs touching the side, his leaking prick making stains on the sheet, while Rory went behind the mysterious screen. Since only I could see his face he felt it was safe to eyebrow-ask whether I liked what I saw.

Fuck eyebrow-speak. Sometimes words are far more effective, though far from subtle. I licked my lips and whispered, “Bloody hell, *yes!*”

He stroked himself once, twice, from base to tip, gathered the clear ooze on his fingertips and proceeded to selfishly lick them clean rather than share.

Bastard shite-head.

My bastard shite-head.

Rory came back to us, still hard. Profusely leaking, as well. He was carrying a somewhat familiar-looking box. Then I recognized it. It was the “another time” box from last December.

He set it on the edge of the bed. I sat up, glaring defiantly at Michel, since I could obviously not see a bloody thing flat on my back, head up on pillows or no.

“This is my box,” he said, and caressed it almost covetously. “This is my box. I rarely travel, you know, without my box.”

Then he unlocked it, raised the lid, and shifted it so we both could see.

With my newfound appreciation of my arsehole, and knowing Rory’s life-long devotion to his, I could most definitely see why he would not willingly be parted from his box.

Which was full of dildos.

The long and the short and the tall. Bless them all. My mind briefly wandered to wondering what one might call such a collection. A gaggle of geese... a deepness of dildos?

And there was more than one layer!

He carefully lifted out the top tray and set it on the mattress. And the second tray.

They were carved from various woods, obviously smooth, highly polished, almost glowing in the candle light. I rather resented the fact the one made of a blond-colored wood was the smallest. Perhaps four inches long, a half inch wide. They grew and grew to the copper-red mahogany I was certain Rory had posed for. I jealously wondered whether the woodcarver got to lick and suck Rory’s prick to keep his inspiration... inspired. Onwards, upwards, outwards. To the final one. Carved from an ebony so black the striations were almost invisible. At least as long as Michel. Thicker than Rory. *Much* thicker.

Even Michel looked impressed.

I gulped. My arse clenched tight. Very, *very* tight. Surely no one could possibly...

I looked up at Rory.

The bastard shite-head just grinned at me. "Aye. *Vurra*, *vurra* real. I even got him to model for the woodcarver. What with me eating his arse, and Danny licking and slurping his prick occasionally, well, fairly often, we kept him slick and hard and shiny while the carving was going on. Though to be truthful, we did our arse-eating, cocksucking jobs so well he insisted on taking a break to fuck my arse. Danny, who was in his fifties, made the mistake of wanking and coming during my fuck.

"It was something of a mistake because my black friend, who never gave me his name, recovered quite quickly after flooding my arse, and decided he needed another good seeding before continuing with the posing. Danny eventually got hard again, and seeded his workroom floor from the pounding of *his* arse. I had never before seen a black prick, let alone *any* prick that size, fuck a white arse, so I was instantly hard again when that black log began plowing my friend's hole. Despite having several decades' more experience, that fuck was accompanied by Danny's howls and curses and pleading. Knowing I could rise again if necessary, I seeded my own palm when the black dick exploded inside Danny's arse.

"What else could I do, after I licked my hand clean, but do the same for our model? And eat every last bit of seed I could get out of Danny's arse. And enjoy the feel of all that seed trickling out of my hole."

I admit to panting at that moment. I admit to pain at that moment since I wasn't allowed to touch myself. And my cock hurt. And my balls ached. The bastard shite-heads!

And inside my head I prayed a slightly blasphemous prayer, to Whoever might be there, to lead me into temptation, deeply dildo temptation, but deliver me from ebony wood. Amen.

They smiled down at me. Rory reached over to the lid of the chest, which was about an inch or so deep, and pulled a well-wrapped vial of oil out of one of several pouches sewn into it. He was like a scout going into unknown territory, having to be always prepared. For anything that might... arise.

He lifted the fucking *blond* dildo out and held it up for me. "Perhaps we ought to start with this one. You being so nearly virgin, so very tight, and all."

“My hole is damned well better than that!”

“Oh. I didn’t quite understand, then.” He shifted the blond one to his left hand, carefully lifted the black one out and held it up by its handle in his right hand. It looked like he should have been tilted to his right side, unbalanced by all that weight. “Just go right to this one?”

I am, of course, stupid from time to time. A trait of British blonds, various friends and my pair of bastard shite-heads have assured me over the course of my life. But even I was not *that* stupid. Had I been physically backing off and backing away, I would have been down the stairs, out the door and on the front stoop already.

“Ah, no, I don’t think so. We can start wherever you like. The little blond one, if you want. You *like* little blonds.”

He winced at that. I am, of course, quite blond, but of the brilliantly golden variety. I was referring to, and he was recalling, the blatant blond with the *falsely* bright yellow hair, short, slender, pert-arsed, an *obvious* molly boy strutting down the sidewalk last week. And Rory had fucking *turned his head* to watch him. There wasn’t a *huge* bruise on his shoulder from the punch I gave him to bring his attention back where it belonged, but there was one.

He naturally said the *only* thing he could say at the moment to save the moment. “The only blond I like... the only blond I *love*... is you, Peregrine. So can we now get back to the dildo at hand?”

I didn’t like what had come out of the first two doors, so as at Wainwright’s office, I asked to see what a third door might reveal. After putting the two dildos back, he pretended to ponder, and then lifted out a cherry-wood dildo, a little bit longer than Rory, but not nearly as thick. He mock-glared at me. “We dinna care what ye think. *This* is what we start with.”

I raised my knees to my chest, grabbed them, held them wide. Rory decided he needed a “wee taste” of a nearly virgin tight arse before proceeding. Then Michel. I was aching and panting in the silence when the lapping and slobbering were done. Rory eased the oiled-up dildo into my hole, until I clamped down on it, just above the handle.

Then they began torturing me.

I lost all track of time as they worked the dildo in and out of my arse, caressed and pinched my nipples, took turns fucking my mouth without ever

seeding, and then they changed the dildo, longer, thicker, and started all over again. Time after time after time they brought me to the edge of release, always seeming to know when I was near... although actually, they most often knew because I was babbling nearly incoherently about how close I was to coming and how desperately I needed, wanted, *had* to do so right fucking then... and hauling my arse and my dick away from the edge of the precipice.

I groaned over the Rory dildo and embraced it eagerly. I whimpered over the one that was no wider but longer. I eagerly accepted the Michel-sized one, for a moment, with my eyes shut, believing it was somehow actually his prick fucking me.

I was in a fog of lust, with Michel rapidly fucking the latest dildo in and out of me, when Rory held up the black one with a wicked smile. "This is the only one left to try, Peregrine."

My eyes widened. "No! Please, no, I can't, I really, really, you'll wreck my hole, I'll be useless, you won't like it any more, no, please..." I faded into whimpering as I was dildo-fucked even faster.

"It's up to you, Peregrine," that bastard fucking, non-cocksucking, non-prick fucking, shite-head said. "All you have to do is seed for us."

I was writhing on the bed, nearing ecstasy but not there, and *no one was fucking touching me!* Except for the dildo-fucking.

"No, please, I need... I need, *Goddamnit one of you bastard shite-head fucking cocksuckers suck my prick or just just just bloody wank it!*"

"Come for us," Michel said softly, and I raised my head weakly to stare into eyes as fogged with lust as mine. I barely noticed the way the muscles of his right shoulder and arm rippled as he fucked and fucked and fucked me with that dildo.

"Come, Peregrine," they simultaneously said.

And I did.

Gloriously. Tambora last year, Vesuvius, all the rest of the volcanoes in history, couldn't compare to *my* eruption.

Even combined.

When I came back to my senses, exhausted, weak, uncertain whether I'd ever be able to move again, my arse decidedly empty with only air instead of a

dildo inside, I realized I had a duty. A most delectable, *dick* duty. My men had not yet been satisfied, unless I missed something, which was entirely possible, of course.

I managed to lift my hand from the sweat-damp pillow. They had moved, one on each side of me. I looked back and forth. "But you..." My voice was rough, so I coughed to clear my throat—most unfortunately not of seed—and started again. "But you haven't... have you?"

Michel said, "Not yet. But we will." He reached down and began stroking my overly sensitive, far-too-tired-to-twitch cock. Rory began fingering my hole.

"No, please," I whined at them. "You did too good a job. I can't seed again. Look, let me just suck you, we'll sleep, and *then* we'll fuck. Later."

"When did you become an old man, my dear?" Michel asked.

"Old man! I'm not even thirty."

"But still you have to *rest* before getting hard again?" Michel mockingly tsked, tsked at me. "What kind of friend of Edward's *are* you? If the members of the Society were ever to learn of your frailty, and I for one, cannot be absolutely certain I could avoid dropping *that* morsel into a conversation at a membership meeting, why you could be stripped of your rank, and drummed out of the Society. You wouldn't want that awful fate to befall you, would you?"

Damn him for making me smile. Double damn his hand for making my prick at least a little interested again. Two of Rory's fingers up my arse naturally helped. "No."

"Fine. Then we'll fuck."

And we did. After getting dildos and chest and used and partially used vials of oil out of the way.

They made me get on my hands and knees, or rather, knees and elbows and forearms, so my head could rest on the pillows. They took turns carefully examining, and testing my hole for what I wasn't quite sure, unless it was closedness. Then they argued over who was going to fuck me first.

Michel insisted it had to be him, because even with the dildo use, I had, as he said, closed up quite nicely. But if Rory fucked me first, he'd spread my arse

so bloody gaping wide that Michel would not feel anything at all, sort of like fucking a loosely clasping palm. It was possible to seed, but certainly not well.

I don't know whether the logic or the compliment convinced Rory but Michel won. He got on his knees in front of me, grabbed my hair and lifted my not-at-all-unwilling head so that he could fuck my mouth and get it slimy with spit. Then he got behind me and that fat mushroom head nudged my hole.

"Oil?" I asked.

Michel snorted. "You have enough oil in you right now to lubricate every device in his country that might need lubrication. Your spit is enough."

And it was. We had fucked each other since 6th September, but this one was special. Our first fucks in *our* new home. Rory stroked my again-hard cock, twisted my nipples, fucked my mouth, let his big, callused hands roam over every inch of my body, and then Michel was seeding me, shouting louder than he had ever shouted, ever been *able* to shout, as he screamed, "*Fuck, Peregrine, fuck!*" and came so very deep inside me.

Michel collapsed over me, though I managed to hold him up. After a moment or two of silence except for gasping, he slowly slid out of me and affectionately slapped my rump. "You're a good fuck, my dear. But you'll get better with practice."

Bastard.

Rory mounted me next. No waiting, no finesse. I heard him spit twice on his hand, imagined him smearing it on his cock and then he roughly thrust inside. I grunted a deep, arse-wipish grunt that said, "Oh, fucking, yes!"

Rory pays attention to instructions given in arse-wipe. He, too, was infected by the freedom offered by our home, and gave me the kind of brutal pounding he could never have given me before, a pounding I so very much wanted and needed just then. It was an unfortunately short fuck since he was so aroused by all of what amounted to extensive foreplay for each of them, that he realized he was going to seed me in very short order.

"Wank him, Michel," Rory ordered, and Michel did. Sweat had to be enough because there was no time for more.

"Come again, ye bastard shite-head," he growled in my ear, his wet, hairy chest scraping across my back as he fucked me hard. "*My* bastard shite-head. I want yer hole t'be clampin' down on my prick when I seed. *Do it!*"

And I did. And he did. And then we all collapsed onto the bed, Rory still on top and still inside me.

When we untangled ourselves into a smelling, somewhat rank mess... odors which made my cock *consider* awakening and twitching... I asked if I was *now* allowed to rest.

They graciously agreed, and we dropped into sleep.

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Michel

Thursday, 10 October 1816

A short while later

107 Meriwether Lane

London

I very carefully got out of the bed. I did not disturb Peregrine, but Rory raised his head. I do not know how or why, but of the three of us, he seemed to have an alertness to danger or possible danger that Peregrine and I did not possess. And he would be, I knew, if and when necessary, as fierce in our defense as a long ago, ruthless sabre-tooth tiger taking down its prey.

He only moved his head enough to look at me, the rest of him staying motionless, still close to Peregrine's side, and again I thought of a great cat, hidden in plain sight, ready to launch instantly into an attack. I shook my head, gave him a slight smile he obviously did not believe, but he still let the tension slide away.

I backed away from the bed. But I couldn't keep myself from looking... at the dildos. The few still on the bed. The rest in their trays. Couldn't help remembering... the look of utter joy on Peregrine's face as they were used on him, as *we* used them on him. The look of even greater joy and soul-shaking ecstasy as Rory fucked him. And somehow I knew, I was smugly *certain*, that he had had that same expression on his face while *I* fucked him.

And so I wondered. Would it... could it possibly be that way for me? If I were the one being fucked.

I shuddered with the old memories. But still... I wondered.

It would be so very selfish of me. To ask them. This was supposed to be about Peregrine. Rory and I had planned it that way. After all, we were in truth asking him both to be our love and come live with us. So we could *all* these pleasures prove.

But still...

But still...

Something told me that if I did not do this now, I would retreat. I would flee in terror from those memories and never again take even the tiny step I had just... somewhat... taken to overcome my past.

I started as if I had been poked with a pointed stick when Rory rested his hand on my shoulder. Thank God, no one would ever rely on my alertness for their safety. We would all be doomed.

His hand was large, and warm, and comforting in its gentle pressure. He moved in front of me, glanced over my shoulder at the bed, and I twisted to look as well. Peregrine was still deeply asleep, a thoroughly fucked—a *gloriously* fucked, if I thought so myself—little smile on his lips.

“Thinking of trying them? *Us*, perhaps?” Rory whispered.

I could only nod, my mouth suddenly too dry to permit speech.

He cupped his hands around the back of my neck, brought my head down for a wonderfully gentle, *caring* kiss. Our foreheads rested against each other's.

“You're not a virgin, are you? Down there.”

When did *Rory* become so perceptive? Shaking my head might be misunderstood, so I forced myself to take the next step, telling myself that I could always stop and take no more steps. Perhaps if I took enough steps, though, one after the other after the other, the outcome might slide into inevitability. I said, “No.”

“And the first time...”

He felt me stiffen involuntarily, and not in any pleasurable way.

“Times?”

I nodded.

“And they were not... pleasant?”

Another step. I could do this. “Not... not at all.”

His hands squeezed my neck lightly, carefully. “Then... are you *sure*?”

I held my breath. Said to myself, *Next step. Next step. One step at a time.* I opened my mouth.

“Sure about what, Michel?”

I twitched in surprise, but Rory did not. The bastard shite-head had been aware of Peregrine waking, listening. Another example of why I could not be the protector of our trio. Particularly not when I was wallowing... in whatever it was I was wallowing in just then.

Rory simply held me, his thumbs rubbing my neck. No effort to push me in one direction or another.

I sighed. Pushed back, and Rory loosened his hands. I straightened, looked over at the bed. Peregrine was seated on the edge, feet barely on the floor, looking adorably delicious, his cock edibly soft.

I took Rory's left hand in my right, comforted again by its size and warmth. I led him back to the bed. Sat down so that I could hold Peregrine's right hand.

"What Rory asked was whether I was sure I wanted to be fucked."

I could hear Peregrine's gulp, and then another miracle occurred, one if not quite on a par with virgin birth, relatively close. Peregrine remained silent.

"I do. Or... I *think* I do. Except... tonight was supposed to be about *you*."

He squeezed my hand. "I think I could manage to share. But really, your arse and my cock—"

I squeezed his hand back. *Very* tightly.

He winced and said, "Oh, very well, if you insist... *our* cocks."

He fell silent, and we stayed that way, the two of them waiting for me to decide. *Next step. Next step. I can take the next step.*

I took a deep breath, let it out, gathered up my courage to the telling-place, and told them everything that had happened to me. The first time. The other times. My solution—my escape. And just the fact that I had in truth been rescued from what I might have become by the unsurpassed, *unsurpassable*, Hubert Fallon.

They let me say it all, waiting during the inevitable stops, though their hands migrated so Peregrine's left entwined with my left, Rory's right with my right, and both their arms wrapped about me, creating a circle in which I felt entirely safe. And loved.

Safe enough to cry as I had never really done over those events so long ago, so ever-present.

I learned I was not a delicate crier when I let go. Gulps, what in a woman would be described as a heaving bosom, sniffles, snuffles, burning eyes, and naked as we were, nowhere to wipe my damned leaking nose. So I indelicately lifted my left arm, and scrubbed underneath my nose with my forearm.

When I put my left hand down again on my thigh, Peregrine said, “If you get that damned forearm anywhere near any part of me when we’re fucking or sucking, I’ll break it off and toss it aside. I swear I will.”

I let out a watery chuckle, at the idea of Peregrine, who Dock-fucked in heat and sweat and dirt, who was already covered with a wide variety of fluids, bodily and otherwise, dried and not dried, could cavil at a little nose-drool.

I realized, too, that my exorbitantly dramatic recitation, instead of what I had thought I could make a calm, quiet recitation of ancient history, had in all likelihood murdered the mood for my getting fucked. I had gone limp the moment I started speaking, and it seemed unlikely that a resurrection would occur. Perhaps three days would not be required, but at least one.

Peregrine let go of my left hand, lifted his, put his palm on my right cheek, turned my head to him, and softly said, “I claim your arse first... when you’re ready.” And then he kissed me, a deep, loving, *tongue-fucking* kiss that caused my cock to surge.

Rory’s right hand was fondling my balls, and their other hands had worked their way down to my quite small nipples, which suddenly seemed inordinately large as they tweaked and rubbed them. And when Peregrine ended the kiss, I instinctively turned my head to Rory for his kiss.

I never before thought to compare tongue-fucking techniques between the kisses of two men. They were as distinct, my two men, as their cocks were. I had not realized before how wide and long Rory’s tongue was, how deep it could reach, while Peregrine’s was narrower, shorter, but more agile. And as I moaned into Rory’s mouth, I couldn’t help but think that my men would, if I begged them prettily enough, allow me to compare their techniques, and the results of those techniques, when they used their tongues on and in my arse.

I whimpered, reached out with my own hands, found their definitely resurrected, definitely ready cocks, weeping steadily.

When he let my mouth go, I asked, “How... how shall we do this?”

Rory’s voice contained a smile. “We have, you know, ‘oiled wooden pricks of diverse size, for *holy* use’, of course.” Peregrine groaned and grinned as he had not done when he first read that pun.

“*Most* ‘holy’ use,” he said, “though I think, with me, there were very few sighs, and far more whimpers, and whines, and moans and pleas to fuck me

harder and deeper. Do you think, my dear Scot, we might work our virgin here...”

For some reason that irritated me. I snapped, “I am *not* a virgin.”

“Yes! You are,” Peregrine snapped back. He grabbed my jaw and forcibly turned my head. Stared at me with those shining, *angry* blue eyes. “You had no choice. You didn’t get your first arse fuck out of lust, or infatuation, or even a semblance of love. You’re a bloody virgin, Michel, and your men are going to relieve you, here and now, of a great burden you should no longer have to bear. No one of your great age should still be a virgin. It’s bloody... unnatural.”

Kissing me again was an effective way to stop any further argument on my part.

When he was done, we reluctantly... *most* reluctantly on my part, perhaps from a hope for a bit of a delay... unwound ourselves.

“How... how do we do this?”

Rory’s fingertip ran down my cheek. “On your back, so you can see what’s going into you.”

“V-very well.”

I got myself into place; held up my legs. I had not realized how *vulnerable* that would make me feel. Yet somehow safe at the same time, knowing without actual reassurance that my men would never take advantage of that vulnerability. Well, other than to each, eventually, soon, far too soon, fuck me thoroughly.

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Rory

Thursday, 10 October 1816

Right after that

107 Meriwether Lane

London

He looked so very vulnerable, on his back, his legs up, his oh-so-damned-tight hole not quite visible, the lines of his muscles, in raised neck, arms, legs, tight with tension. I almost said something to reassure him. Instead, I just smiled.

“I think we ought to start with the blond.”

“That’s what I just said,” Peregrine answered, staring at the smooth, pale, slightly oily, definitely sweaty flesh of Michel’s chest, then reaching out to rub his palm over Michel’s belly, down the edge of the fine, almost-curly around the base of his prick, then up to his chest. “Redheads get seconds.”

“The blond dildo.”

“Bastard,” he muttered as he started using two hands to knead and caress Michel’s calves, and the backs of his thighs.

“It’s a bloody long tradition among you Sassenachs, you know. Blonds. Small, delicate, dainty little things. We ought to get him used to a delicate, dainty dildo, too, in keeping with tradition. Right?”

“Bastard *shite-head*,” Peregrine answered, before his mouth descended on Michel’s hole, while his large hands both helped to support Michel’s hips at the right angle for tongue-fucking, and enabled his thumbs to spread those slender, muscular cheeks.

Michel moaned. I managed not to join him, as I had fond memories of the few occasions when Peregrine and I had had the time and place for him to eat me out... though it was always one of those “’twere well it were done quickly” things... before fucking me deep and fast.

After a minute or two of loud, look-how-much-fun-I’m-having licking noises, Peregrine stopped. He lifted his head, tilted it as he does when thinking. I was using two fingers to smear oil on the dildo, as Peregrine looked around, and then his expression brightened. “Ah, ha! I thought I remembered...”

He darted off the bed. I got into position, and seated the knob at Michel's tightly, *tightly* clenched, not-opening-at-all, there is no bloody way in hell that thing is going inside me, hole. Peregrine was smiling like a Bedlamite as he got back into bed, holding a bloody mirror in his hand. He arranged himself reasonably comfortably so he wasn't in my way, then held the mirror up, tilting it at various angles and leaning around it himself to see what was reflected. At last he got it right. "There. Now you can see what's going into you. And out of you. And in. And out. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera."

Michel looked up at him. "If you say one *bloody* word about holding a bloody mirror up to bloody nature, when we're done I will smite you."

"But I'm *smitten!*"

"With me?"

"With you. And, well, *him*." He gave a vague head-toss in my direction. "And smiting the smitten is *verboattend* in any language."

"And what is it you think you just said?"

"That smiting the smitten just simply *isn't done*," Peregrine answered in his most affected tonnish tone. "And I said it in most excellent German. Shall I say it in French, too? I know the French, most excellently well, as well. Suh nest pass dee riggerus."

Michel let loose a little laugh.

Peregrine's silliness served its purpose. Most of the tension was gone, and Michel relaxed. I eased the small knob forward and inside him. Michel's arse clamped down on the unyielding wood. He grunted, and his arse promptly began pushing back.

"It's only a *little* blond, Michel," I told him. "Surely you can let a delicate *little* blond inside you? Because if you don't or can't or won't, I'm afraid I will have to ban buggery by bigger blonds. Nor will there be any redheads rogering your rump."

"I can't have that, can I?"

"Well, you most certainly won't have *this*—" and I wiggled the little that was inside him, "nor anything remotely like it if you don't bloody *relax*."

Perhaps because he had never been willingly fucked, Michel had remarkably strong arse muscles. Not the usual outside arse muscles from riding,

and walking and boxing and exercising in general. *Inside* arse muscles. And those muscles were determined to shit the invader out with a great deal of vigor. I had a feeling that if I weren't pushing in with enough counterforce, the dildo would shoot out of his arse like a pellet from one of Girandoni's air rifles, and punch a hole in the wall.

He grimaced, and I told him what he needed to hear. Fortunately, it was also true. "And we stop the *instant* it becomes too much for you, if that happens. No code words, just a simple 'stop' and it's done. Or a 'wait' and we pause. Do you think you can remember that?"

He nodded. And then he... *relaxed*.

The blond slid all the way into him. He groaned, and it was not *entirely* in pain. Peregrine massaged Michel's still limp prick.

Many men, perhaps most men, cannot maintain a cock stand while they are being fucked. Oh, they may still get hard enough to seed, but it isn't their best cock stand; it isn't the steel one. My prick has always stood tall, from the very first time I was fucked. If the right man with the right stamina was fucking me, I could seed, wilt just a little and then stand again, and seed again. Peregrine seems to have the same innate talent. Michel... well, I think it most likely he will have to be *trained*.

We will *enjoy* that training, Peregrine and I. I momentarily lost my way, trying to calculate how many times we would have to fuck Michel... *each*... to get him properly trained in the way of cock standing during fucking.

I stroked Michel's hole with the blond dildo, then slid it out. Peregrine was doing to Michel what we had done to him, stroking, caressing, sucking, kissing, nibbling, biting, pulling... only, necessarily, far more gently. Michel was as near a virgin as it was possible to be, and he needed to be carefully stretched before he could be, ah, *used*. Even mildly.

Which turned out to annoy Michel. As I started fucking him with the third dildo, making him twist on the bed and moan, he nevertheless broke off Peregrine's latest kiss, raised his hands to clamp down on the sides of Peregrine's head, and held it still.

Michel's voice was deeper than usual, though I don't think he was intentionally making it so. "Are you going to fuck me?"

"Uh... yes?"

“Do you want me to enjoy being fucked, so you and that excessively hairy Scot get to use my arse again?”

“Uh... yes?”

He looked over at me and rolled his eyes. “We are having a Wainwright moment here, are we not?”

I nodded, but continued moving the six and a half inch dildo he had rapidly graduated to, in and out, twisting and turning it. It was a somewhat special one, the knob end curved down as some cocks do, and the knob rubbed his gland over and over and over.

“I do not *like* Wainwright moments.” He stopped for several almost-babbling words, and some moans and heavy breathing, before he regained his thought. “I want certainty. So. *Are* you going to fuck me, and fuck me well, and get me ready for Rory’s prick?”

He was holding Peregrine’s head so tight, Peregrine could not really move. “If you are,” Michel said, “nod your head.”

And Michel proceeded to nod Peregrine’s head for him.

“*Very* good, Peregrine, my dear, oh Christ!”

The outburst was because I had skipped a size and pushed a nearly Peregrine dildo all the way into him.

I loved the idea that I had turned Michel into a devout, prayerful, churchgoing man. What else could a steady repetition of “Oh god, oh god, oh god, ohgodohgodohgodohgod” mean?

While I fucked his arse with the wood cock, one of the diverse sizes we had promised in the poem, Peregrine had been sucking Michel’s prick, swallowing it to the root. Michel fisted his hand in Peregrine’s hair, and painfully yanked his head up and off his now-hard prick.

“You’re going to fuck me soon, really, really, soon, aren’t you?”

Once again, he bobbed Peregrine’s head up and down for him, so Peregrine wouldn’t have to waste any energy.

“So there’s one really, *really* important thing you need to remember when you’re fucking me. Will you remember?”

Another Michel-controlled head-bob.

And then he snarled, "I am *not* some British blond, you bugging bastard shite-head. I'm Mitchell Lou-iss Arse-naught, the bloody vycompt de viddle sansusie, as your compatriots say, and I will not be fucked delicately or daintily."

He shook Peregrine's head, though not with a great deal of force, since his own hands were shaking. "Do you *both* understand?"

We both said that we did.

"Then Goddamnit, get some cock inside me." But as I slid the dildo out of him, he gripped a wrist on each of us. "My... first time was... brutal and rough. I want, I think I *need* to be brutally and roughly fucked again, but in the way that men who love me would do that."

"Rough it is," I said.

"Brutal it is," Peregrine said.

Michel let our wrists go and briefly closed his eyes. Peregrine and I looked at each other. We needed no eyebrow-speak, no arse-wipish, to silently say, "Not *that* brutal." "Not *that* rough."

"All right, then." Peregrine slapped Michel's hip, the sound surprisingly loud. "As the saying goes, let's get this play on the way to the stage. Move your arse over, Michel."

"What?"

Peregrine just stared him down. "Do you want this rough?"

A nod.

"Do you want this brutal?"

A nod.

"Then we'll fucking do it my way. Right?"

A third nod.

"Okay, then, move your arse out of the way."

Thoroughly bewildered, Michel moved to the very edge of the bed. Peregrine plumped up the pillows Michel had been using, added another thick one, then stretched out on his back. He gave his glowing white, blue-veined prick a pair of quick strokes to firm it up, and said, "Ride me."

Michel gaped at him. Ah. Michel was a cocksucker *par excellence*. But while he might have seen some friends of Edward's fucking on occasion, those fucks were most likely in circumstances where speed was of the essence. Bum bared, cock bared, cock in, rapid fucking, cock out, bum clothed, cock clothed, separate ways. He was unfamiliar with the ways of fucking, except those he had seen with Peregrine and me, and oddly enough, neither of us had yet straddled the other.

There were far too many places where the one getting fucked could be on back or belly or bent over, to spend time with a straddle-fuck. But it was perfect here and now.

With a bit of instruction and a bit of worry, Michel got in place. I told him to bend forward, brace his hands on Peregrine's shoulders, even kiss the blond—"golden furred god" Peregrine growled—if he wanted to. He did.

They were tonguing each other, not at all daintily, when I slid three oiled fingers quickly up inside Michel's arse, rolled my wrist around and around, curled my fingers to make him whimper, and whimper again, and yet again. Then I pulled them out, grabbed him just under his armpits, and lifted him upright again.

I brought his left hand around and down so he could feel Peregrine's knob, where I placed it at his entrance. As he strained to get the knob in I spoke softly, while I braced Peregrine's prick.

"If you like this as much as I think you will, some time I could fuck you this way, and once you were fucking your arse on my prick, Peregrine could fuck your face, and perhaps, with luck, with a little twisting and turning and figuring the rhythms out, he could squat a little, and my right hand could shove three or four fingers up his arse and fuck him, and my left hand could stroke you. Do you like that image, Michel? Imagine that."

"Oh Christ, yes!" he moaned as he sank steadily down until Peregrine's sweaty golden hair was against Michel's glorious slender arse. Then he began to rise and fall, gradually increasing speed, and Peregrine's hips began working until they were slamming into each other.

"Don't spend, Michel, don't spend, whatever you do. You don't get to do that right now. Peregrine and I, we're in charge of your body."

As he began moving as fast as he was able, with Peregrine steadily working his cock, bringing him to the gasping, heaving edge and backing away, Michel

began to plead with us in a way he had never done, would undoubtedly never again do... at least not until the next time we sexed him... *begging* to be allowed to seed.

I taunted him with my denial. Told him that if he gave Peregrine a very, *very* good spend, I'd allow him to ease Peregrine's cock out of his arse, turn around, still on all fours, so he could start sucking Peregrine, while his own cock slid into Peregrine's mouth and throat, and I'd get behind him, spit on his hole, spit on my prick, and then use Peregrine's seed to lubricate my way as I mounted him all at once. And then I'd fuck him and fuck him and fuck him until he screamed out my name around Peregrine's prick, and filled Peregrine's belly as I filled his.

He was incoherent by then, but we understood the "oh yes please, dear God, yes please" part.

And that is what we did.

And when Michel collapsed from his first, though unlikely to be the last, *lovingly* rough fucks he melted into us.

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Peregrine

10 October 1816

Right after that

107 Meriwether Lane

London

We *soared* tonight.

I decided not to count up the number of times my seed had spewed. I did not even dare to look between my legs, or put my hand down there, lest I learn that my bollocks were shriveled into tiny grapes. Forever.

We finally agreed we could do no more. That sleep had become not something possibly interesting, but necessary.

The candles were safely doused. As had become our habit, I was in the center, Rory to my right as I lay on my back, Michel to my left. Shortest to longest, both cock-length and height. But the length of the bed was more than enough to accommodate us all. More than enough for Michel to scoot down a little bit so that he could nestle in my arms, too.

My arms protected them, their bodies shielded me.

As we settled in, Michel kissed my cheek, reached across me to squeeze Rory's shoulder, and murmured, "*Je t'aime tant, mes chers.*"

I reached between both sets of legs and gently squeezed and released thoroughly sated cocks and well-drained bollocks. "I love you both."

There was silence. A long silence. Followed by a sort of combined snort and snore emanating from the Highlander beside us. I raised my right arm too quickly for him to move and elbowed him in the stomach. He woofed. I pointed out I could just as easily have elbowed lower.

We could hear his grin in the darkness.

"Aw reit, aw reit, ah loove ye baith reit back, noo woods ye baith jist gang tae sleep?"

Oh yes, we had most assuredly soared tonight, would soar again, *together*, in so many ways in the years ahead. But first, a little sleep.

I loved them. And loving them meant I was concerned for their well-being. I had only their best interests at heart in wanting them to be well-rested, because when we woke I was going to make them soar again. In the process of which I was also going to make them far too sore to soar for quite some time. Their arses were mine!

As mine was theirs.

And so was all of the rest of me... all of the rest of *us*... as well.

That is, after all, how *these* friends of Edward's love: with everything we have, and are, and ever hope to be.

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EPILOGUE(S)

Peregrine

Thursday, 23 July 1818

Maison de la Mer

Suffolk, England

and

Saturday, 4 October 1818

107 Meriwether Lane

London

I admit it. Freely. Michel and I are bastards. Not by parentage, naturally, but by inclination.

And Rory deserved it. He truly did.

He had been annoying. Vastly annoying. *Beyond* annoying, into thoroughly irritating.

The Government had proclaimed that the summer of 1818 was, even though it was not yet over, the hottest summer in recorded history. Inasmuch as the Crown, or some Parliamentary committee or some hidden-in-the-corners office in Whitehall had been collecting and analyzing weather data since just before the Restoration, everyone simply assumed that the report, initially in *The Times*, was accurate.

Not that anyone could dispute its accuracy from personal experience. Everyone suffered from the heat. That was, for the most part, why the three of us adjourned from London to Michel's "quite small, really, *mes amis*, a mere bagatelle of a building," on the shore. His father had named it as simply as he had named the enormous mansion at the *Vidal-Sansouci* primary estate. *Maison de la Mer*. The bloody, eight-bedroom "Sea House."

On that July day, it appeared from all of Rory's "manly" whinging that he was far more susceptible to heat than either of us because he was from Scotland. Where, on a normal day, it was much, much, *much* colder than anywhere in the "south." The way he carried on, one might have thought that London, or the Suffolk coast, was located in the tropics that Cook explored in the far reaches of the Pacific. And then, too, "manly" men who had as much thick red hair on his chest and arms, legs and arse, though his back was

surprisingly bare, suffered more than less-hairy men like us, because *their* thick pelts kept all that heat in.

He was joking. Mostly. A little too much “mostly” for us, however.

So we relieved him.

Of his pelt.

Rory had broken his arm last year, and in providing him with a little relief from the pain while it was being set, we accidentally discovered how very little laudanum it took to render him unconscious.

Completely, shake him, yell at him, whack his bum with a slipper until it became a delicious pink, nothing-would-work, unconscious.

Michel, not unsurprisingly, recalled the amount Rory had been given then, and how long it lasted. This time, we gave him slightly more than twice that dose, which should have given us nearly three hours. More like four, as it happened, but that was all to the good.

Our initial plan was just to shave his chest.

“So you can breathe more easily, my dear,” was the line one of us was going to use.

We hauled out sheets the housekeeper, Little Richard—so named so as to be verbally distinguishable from Big Richard, the chief gardener—had set aside for mending, or perhaps disposition into cleaning rags, and folded two to protect the carpet on the floor. We gathered razors, and hot water, and shaving soap, looked down at our naked *hairy* man, grinned at each other, and gave him just what he deserved. Without a single nick.

When we were done, we sat cross-legged on each side of him looking at our handiwork, at those massive muscles, at the ridged abdomen (we could, and did, count eight ridges), all so bare and shining white, and *smooth*.

“I really think,” Michel said with a slight snigger, “that there should be a *deep* bass voice right now, proclaiming, ‘And they looked upon what they had wrought, and behold, it was very, very, so *bloody* very good.’ Don’t you?”

I could not disagree.

And then he looked at me. “But you know, God didn’t rest until *Sunday*. When the *whole* job was done, every jot and tittle of Creation. He didn’t stop

after Monday. Or mid-afternoon on Tuesday for a spot of tea. And then knock off early on Wednesday. So even though this might be considered a task well beyond even Hercules, we really should be thorough, should we not?"

Thoroughness. A quality I had always admired. Once thought of in terms of *thoroughness*, it was naturally quite impossible for us to resist shaving the rest of him. *Quite* thoroughly. Until there was not a hair below his neck. Not a single one.

Great minds such as ours inevitably run in the same channels. When we were done, the shaving soap cleaned off, every nook and cranny wiped with fresh water and patted dry, all that hairy residue gathered up and set aside for later disposal, we again admired our handiwork. And said "oil" simultaneously.

And grinned.

We had, quite astutely, worn only minimal clothes ourselves whilst shaving him—the heat, of course, we had no other motives—and old, worn clothes at that, so it did not matter that they became more than somewhat stained as we then oiled every inch of his body. After which, with a great deal of grinning over slipperiness, we managed to haul all that weight up, and get him sprawled on his back in the center of the bed, laying on another pair of casually spread-out old sheets.

There was a deep porch outside the bedroom, its roof providing shade and mostly blocking the advance of sunlight inside. With the double doors open, a breeze played little games with us, circulating the air in little teases that only provided a modicum of relief.

The heat was so very... "oppressive" was the word we agreed on, should we be interrogated... that it was inevitable that we, too, would shed our clothes. And oil our cocks. And join him in the bed, stroking ourselves, stroking him.

As we had not previously had the opportunity to learn, laudanum rendered Rory unconscious, not unable. That magnificent cock stood up from that glorious bare flesh, wide and proud. Standing, of course, with some handy help, because on its own, unlike the tower at Pisa, it would not have merely leaned, but collapsed from its own weight onto his belly.

We were both so aroused that we could quite easily have seeded his chest and belly, and smoothed and caressed it into his flesh. But we three had long ago decided that spewing on your own was a cardinal sin. Unless, of course,

you were being watched by one or both of your men and doing it for their enjoyment as well as your own. Still, it was a sin that would be most difficult to expiate.

So we wisely did not add the sin of seeding to the sin of shaving.

And fortunately, he woke up before lust led the pair of us into the ways of lewdly lascivious seeding anyway.

Equally fortunately, he awakened just as Michel was leaning over him, lapping at Rory's slit, his fist around Rory's girth the only other part touching him, while my left hand toyed with his bollocks, and my right caressed his nipple.

"Hmmm," he sighed. He smacked his lips, as laudanum left him slightly dry-mouthed, and with his eyes still closed, said, "I must have needed that nap. And what a way to wake up."

Rory lifted his right arm and reached out to caress Michel's naked arse, squeezing a cheek, before returning to his own chest and one of his favorite playgrounds. His nipples. We stopped all movement as he unerringly, of course, touched thumb and forefinger to his right nipple, squeezed, twisted, moaned...

And stopped.

His eyes widened, his mouth dropped open, and he roared "What the *fuck*?" as he surged up.

Sort of surged.

Semi-surged.

Had he been at full strength and not feeling some of the after-effects, he might have succeeded, probably knocking one or both of us aside in the process. As it was, my palm-push on his chest was enough to stop him and reverse his course. He was still strong enough to prevent himself from going flat on his back, and ended up braced on his left arm. Which in turn left him partially twisted toward me.

I had seen Rory truly furious before, on the Dock the night we met, certainly, and approaching that at times when the situation between the three of us was at its most... difficult. *This* fury, though, was somewhat tempered.

A friend of Edward's fury, though to be completely honest, *any* man's fury, will inevitably be tempered, if not totally tamed, by a talented hand, oiled, slick, working his cock, twisting around his knob just before beginning the down stroke. I helped the taming by moving my palm over the heavy muscles of his upper chest, pausing to rub my thumb around and over and around and over his oh-so-taut left nipple.

"Ye stript me nekkid!" he nearly wailed.

"But Rory," I said, as I moved my hand so that Rory's right nipple would not feel inferior by being left out of what was going on, "we only did it to help you."

"Help me? Humiliate me, more likely. Ye took away me bluidy *hair*, ye fookin'... fookin'..." He stopped because he clearly couldn't think of anything bad enough to call us. He paused, but all he came up with was, "Bastard shite-heads."

Though no one said a word, it was obvious to all of us that he made no effort to get away from Michel's cock work or my chest ministrations.

A manly man like our Scot might certainly moan when his personal cocksucker *par excellence*—a title I could never aspire to and so was happy with the role of Second Sucker (enter Stage Left)—when that cocksucker opened his mouth and throat and swallowed him to his *hairless* root. But he would never, under any circumstances, whimper with lust.

It certainly sounded like a whimper, however, when several things happened nearly simultaneously.

Michel worked Rory's cock with his throat muscles, and twisted his right nipple hard.

I twisted his left nipple with equally distracting roughness, lightly slapped the inside of his left thigh with my fingertips, which evoked the well-trained response of spreading those braw Scottish beef thighs apart, and I ignored his bollocks and slid two fingers into the arsehole we had so carefully oiled.

The sound that oozed out of his throat was most definitely a whimper, perhaps even a whinge. And so I would explain to him. Later. *Much* later. For now, I had other things to explain.

"Rory, love, you were hurting. You told us so. Didn't he, Michel?"

Michel used arse-wipish to grunt a “yes” around Rory’s cock.

“You were suffering so much from the heat, Rory.” I managed to keep a straight face on my voice, though inside I was howling with laughter, as I was sure Michel was also doing.

“What with you being from Scotland, you know, not that far from the Arctic Circle, and unaccustomed to the debilitating... Ah, that means...”

“*Unh!*” The loud grunt that first escaped his lips most likely had something to do with my rubbing his gland.

He followed the grunt with, “I bluidy weel know wha’ it means, ye arse-wipe.”

“Of course you do, of course you do.” I do patronizing excellently well. Annoyingly so.

“Now, as I was saying,” I said, and tweaked his nipple more roughly, and slid three triangled fingers inside him. I paused to enjoy his gasp.

“As I was saying, with your Scots inability to withstand all this *southern* heat, and your, ah, *fur* retaining so much heat and making you miserable, as you have told us more or less frequently...”

Michel un-swallowed Rory’s cock, and lifted his head. Looked left at our Scotsman’s face. “Hourly, Rory, *hourly*.” And went back to his happy sucking.

“You see, we love you so very much, and we hated seeing you so miserable, so we decided that since we could do nothing about the former, we could definitely fix the latter. So we freed you from your fur. Don’t you feel better now?”

He was, however, unable to answer me as he was praying devoutly to bloody fucking Christ as Michel stopped sucking and vigorously stroked Rory’s cock as our man writhed, and huge fists clenched the sheets. It took only a few strokes before he did his very personal imitation of a volcano and erupted in repeated, and *repeated* long spurts of seed up to his chin, and the hollow of his throat, his chest, those marvelous ridges, his navel, and the last few dribbles where his groin hair had been. At the same time he nearly permanently incapacitated the first three fingers of my left hand from the way his arse muscles clamped down.

Being finger-fucked and cock-sucked by the men you love is a most excellent restorative of calmness and equilibrium. Vastly more effective than tea, and far more quick-acting than ale or wine.

Of course, by then *we* needed our own restorative, as cock stands that are aching and leaking are not conducive to calmness. We looked at each other and at our man, still gasping between us, and great minds silently swept down the same channel once again.

Rory was a generous man. In all things, but in a certain matter he was more generous than either of us, perhaps more generous than either of us put together.

The sheer volume of his spend.

A left hand reached out (Michel's), as did a right (mine), and scooped up seed to join the oil already on our palms. Our hands made holy palmers' kiss with our cocks as we scrambled from cross-legged to up on our knees.

"Look what you do to us, ye bastard shite-head," Michel mocked.

He raised his head and did. "Stop."

We did. He twisted around, grabbed several of the thick pillows to put under his head and neck and raise him a little.

"Closer."

We crab-walked sideways, following orders, moving "upward" so that if we had laid our cocks on him, instead of across those rippled ridges they would have been across his upper chest.

He smirked at us, gave us an arse-wipish noise that indicated the subject of deforestation was far from over, and that if he was dissatisfied with the outcome of subsequent discussions, defenestration was entirely possible.

Arse-wipish was *such* a flexible tongue.

Almost like Rory's when it's in your arse.

"Go."

We started stroking, knowing how very close we already were, and then the bastard shite-head told us to go slower. Which we did. Which gave him the opportunity to reach between our legs, tug and fondle our balls, rub a forefinger

along the flesh leading back to what an Edwardian Moses would most certainly have called the “promised land,” and then use *two* fingers to press and caress our holes.

The noise from Michel was definitely a whimper. Mine was definitely a manly moan.

“Spread and let me in.”

We did as we were told, separating our knees even further, leaning forward, using our free hands to brace ourselves on his waist and hip, and then he ruthlessly thrust both fingers all the way inside us. Then curling his fingers to caress our glands, followed by straightening them on the way out, almost but not quite fully so, then back in for a repeat. And another, and another, as we stroked our pricks ever more rapidly.

Sex brings out a prayerful side to men, even in the most devout non-churchgoers.

Michel, of course, prayed in French. I used more normal, ordinary English. His “dear God in heaven!” (“*Dieu du ciel!*”) and my “holy fucking God!” were nearly simultaneous as we obeyed Rory’s command: “Now!”

Our spend *perhaps* equaled his, though I made no measurements. We sprayed across his upper chest, throat, face and into his mouth. Had we been capable of any thought at all, our aim might have been better and he would have had more seed to enjoy. Though he clearly enjoyed those offerings he did receive.

He made us do all the work of rising and twisting to get his fingers out of our arses. We collapsed by his side, catching our respective breaths. After a minute or two, though, what had been highly erotic became sticky and annoying.

Michel sighed. “I will order water brought to the bathing room.”

Rory raised up to his elbows between us. “Don’t bother.”

We both said, “What?”

He put his hands on our thighs, braced himself, scooted his arse down the bed, twisted round, and then backed off the bed to stand at the foot. “Perfectly good sea out there.”

“But...”

“They’ll know...”

We might have been a stage chorus with overlapping lines.

The “they” we referred to were the dozen men we had invited for a house party by the sea. All friends of Edward’s, of course. There were two couples, and obviously had bedrooms to themselves. Ours was the third bedroom, which left eight men to share the remaining five bedrooms in Michel’s “cottage by the shore.” We assigned those at random on their arrival, and then let them sort out the *actual* sleeping (or non-sleeping) arrangements both for that first night, and the five nights since.

That there was a great deal of sex going on was a given. No gathering of friends of Edward’s in private would under any circumstances be devoid of sex. *Frequent* sex. Particularly at one of the rare house parties we hosted.

The families of retainers who would normally have been providing service to us and our guests had been sent off for their own vacations, at full pay and a bit more. Our own Edwardian servants naturally came with us.

None of these men were *precisely* off-limits to our guests, sexually. But unlike the female servants (and occasional male) in the “great” houses of England, *our* servants had a say in when, where, how, and most importantly *if* their bodies were going to be used. The three of us were also unlike other members of the ton, in that if it came to a he-said-he-said between one of our servants and a guest, with respect to force or threats, or virtually anything else, we *started* with the assumption the servant was truthful, and continued that way unless proven otherwise.

What our guests chose to do amongst themselves was entirely up to them. We had not participated. We had not been naked in front of any of them, individually or collectively. Even when swimming in the sea, a frequent activity in this heat, we wore at least reasonably modest bathing costumes, unlike the ungainly garments required, for example, with a bathing machine at Brighton. Granted, some of our guests wore nothing at all, and we did not, virgin-like, blush and avert our eyes.

We were, after all, quite Edwardian ourselves. We *enjoyed*. But we did not provide the enjoyment.

I resolutely did not remind myself of Rory and me at the Dock.

And now our bastard shite-head was proposing to flaunt himself... *all of his seed-stained, oily, smooth self...* to our guests. Who would come flocking once word spread, and with friends of Edward's, when the subject is awareness of a naked man on display, it is almost as if the news spreads mind to mind, without any intervening passage of time.

“Join me for a refreshing sea swim, gentlemen?”

And then he padded to and through the open doors, out onto the porch, and down the steps. We rushed out after him, though we lost a moment or two in a mad scramble to cover ourselves with at least the trousers we had worn. We were in time to see him at the bottom of the steps. He apparently had second thoughts, because he paused. But Rory had effectively given his word, via his taunt, so he squared his shoulders, squeezed those marvelous arse cheeks in a way we both knew thrust his prick and balls out, and stepped down onto the lawn.

Three men were walking back up from the beach, a process we were both certain would be reversed as soon as they saw Rory and where he was headed. Wyndham, Gareth and our French guest, Pierre-Paul Prud'hon, an artist of some renown whose acquaintanceship with Edward was for the most part a secret. Although any friend of Edward's, looking at his male nudes, especially his glorious *Hercules and the Nemean Lion*, with that enormous cock and unusually large, unusually hairy bollocks swinging as the hero battled, could not help but be certain of the artist's inclinations.

They did indeed stop, and we were close enough to see their mouths gape at the gleaming, *hairless* magnificence that was our Scotsman. Two (Prud'hon and Wyndham) remained where they were, to admire the view, stepping aside to let him pass by, turning to admire the rearward view. Gareth did not... *quite...* run into the house to alert the rest, but it was a near thing.

We went back into the bedroom, helpless ourselves to do anything other than gather towels, and blankets, and follow him down the stairs to join the fun. We were soon joined by everyone else in the bloody house. Servants included.

A naked beach frolic ensued. Michel and I perforce joined the nakedness, lest we be branded as un-Edwardian prudes, though we three did not join in the frolicking, which went on well into the night, after we had all joined in gathering wood and creating an enormous bonfire. It might have served as a lighthouse beacon.

We had good reason not to join. Sand, we had learned from experience, is sneaky. It seems to just lie there, quite innocently, ready to adhere to you if you're moist, but then easily brushed or wiped off. That is the picture it portrays. Here for a moment, gone in a moment. Not a big deal at all.

Sand lies.

Sand is a despicable invader, creeping in silence, working its devious way into your most private places. And bloody well staying there. And *staying* there. Especially if one started out oily, or even wet. The three of us were oily, and wet with sweat, and triply wet once we had dipped into the sea.

The remainder of the day was as marvelous in its own way as what we had shared in our bedroom, and our astute Edwardian friends knew full well what had happened there. They had no need for one (or more) of Prud'hon's superb pencil sketches to give them cock stands over their imaginings set down on paper. He used the least amount of lines and shading possible, and created vivid images of a cock in an arse or a mouth, a chain of connected arses and cocks with each body, each prick distinct, or two men joined cock to mouth in a position I have always thought resembled the way *soixante-neuf* is written. He was generous with his talent, particularly since these sketches seemed to scorch the paper within seconds of the pencil point touching it, and had done a large number of them already, and simply gave them away.

The day became even more marvelous once I realized that Prud'hon had not joined in the fun. He had returned to the house and come back with his sketch pad. And spent a good part of the day sketching.

Sketching Rory, for the most part, though the rest of us were not immune. Fortunately, he understood that while his sketches might serve as inspirations for other works, none of our faces could be used, nor any particular body feature that might identify us. The well-known large scar on Wyndham's shoulder, for example.

When it became too dark to sketch, I accompanied him back to the house, and persuaded him to show me the additions to his portfolio.

One of them was stunning. I wondered aloud whether it might be done in oils. For a price. Fairly soon. He agreed that it could. But even the thousand pounds I offered him would not get me a guarantee it would be done by 6th September.

He stayed on in London, at my expense, freely acknowledging to anyone who asked that he was engaged in a commissioned work, and his patron had demanded anonymity. We met from time to time, in public, as though there were nothing between us but acquaintanceship.

I had, perforce, to admit to Rory that his anniversary gift, for we had chosen 6th September to be *our* anniversary, would be somewhat late. And refused to divulge what it was.

He tried, of course, to get me to tell him. By means subtle and direct. But not even an especially remarkable fuck—his cock, my arse—was enough to persuade me to speak. Though it was a near thing.

My painting... *Rory's* painting... was delivered on 4th October. I had not expected it to be life-sized.

Rory and Michel could tell from the size and shape of the crate that it had to be a painting. The fact that Prud'hon accompanied the delivery was not lost on either of them. They were not at all pleased with me when I ushered them out of the front parlor and locked the door while the deliverymen, supervised by the artist, unpacked the painting, and propped it carefully against the mantel.

At that moment, I was not quite sure where it would be hung, but I decided we would find the right wall space, even if it meant rebuilding the interior of the whole bloody townhouse to accommodate it. The debris was quickly cleaned up and the workmen departed, leaving only the artist and me in the room.

Michel and Rory, equally annoyed, were still hovering in the hallway. I left the room, and pointedly locked it behind me, ignoring the glares from my men as I went to the library and a few minutes later, returned, cheque in hand, went in and locked the door again. I heard a distinct, meant-to-be-heard-through-fucking-closed-doors "Bastard shite-head" from Rory.

Prud'hon was gracious enough to ignore Rory, and then his attention was focused entirely on the numbers on the cheque. That attention was accompanied by a loud gasp when he realized I had added another five hundred pounds to his fee. I endured his gratitude and that quick French kiss on each cheek before persuading him that it was indeed time for his departure, as I had a present to present.

They both glared “Well?” at me once the front door was shut. Part of the glare was because I knew that while I was escorting the artist out, they had tried the door to see if it was really locked, and were annoyed that it was.

I gave them a smile for the glares, reached into my pocket, pulled out two scarves, and handed one to each of them.

“Blindfolds, you two, and I’ll have your word that you’ll tie them so you *can’t* see.”

They split up our favorite term of endearment as they each took a scarf and did as I asked. Michel said, “bastard,” and Rory added the “shite-head.”

I guided them into the room, placed them where they would have an unobstructed view of the canvas. Lit additional candles. Moved to where I could see their faces.

I told them to take the blindfolds off, but keep their eyes shut. Their faces grumbled, but their voices did not, and they did as I asked. “Open now,” I said.

It was everything and more than I had hoped for.

There is a natural rock or stone ledge parallel to the beach, about halfway down from the house, perhaps a few inches tall. A small step. We draped a red blanket over it, somewhat brighter than Rory’s hair. Prud’hon’s original sketch captured Rory seated with his back to the sea, slightly twisted to his right, his right arm out and back, angled elbow, his hand flat against the stone, fingers curled around the edge, supporting himself. His right leg was bent at the knee, his sole toward the viewer. His left leg was stretched out, knee also slightly bent, the sole of his foot visible as well. A sudden spurt of wind had, at just that sketch-instant, pushed his hair up and away from his neck and off to his right.

The painting was all that and more. Prud’hon had changed the location from the seaside and open air, to somewhere that was almost a cave. The red blanket was draped now over something wooden and thick, a plank, perhaps, with Rory’s fingers curled over the ragged end of it. The breeze still blew his hair. And his broad shoulders, narrow waist, and glorious, *glorious* muscles were on display.

They blinked. And blinked again. Rory’s eyes began to well.

I put a stop to any incipient maudlinity. “I decided I needed a good picture to wank to.”

The outraged “What?” from each mouth spurted at the same time.

I shrugged my most nonchalant, taunt-my-lovers shrug. “Well, from time to time you’re both gone, leaving me all alone, with nothing to do but imagine things. So rather than imagine, I decided I needed something definite.”

I waved my hand at the painting.

“This is certainly going to work well. I can... *imagine* my hands reaching around those broad shoulders, and teasing and twisting a pair of large nipples. I can... *imagine* telling this, ah, *unknown* magnificent man, to continue twisting right so that he is on his hands and knees, his legs spread wide. I can... *imagine* spreading those muscular cheeks with my hands, lapping at his hole until it is thoroughly relaxed and I can drill deep. I can... *imagine*, the two of us, in that hidden cave or cavern, me mounting him, sliding my prick in his arse and then pounding him until I seeded his innards, and he seeded the blanket.”

My men were as hard as I was. They both had excellent imaginations, as I well knew.

Michel smiled at me. “And what about our agreement?”

“That no-seed-spewing-alone agreement?”

He nodded.

I waved that away. “I’m confident both of you will agree to set that aside. Especially if I offer to let you use this unknown man with the so-fuckable arse—” another wave at the painting “—to occasionally fuel your own imaginings.”

“Fook imaginin’,” Rory said, as he began undressing.

Fook imaginin’ indeed.

And in a very little while, and for far more than a little while, behind a locked parlor door, amidst randomly scattered clothes and shoes, on, over, around, momentarily under, various pieces of furniture, we *fooked imaginin’* and made our imaginings very real indeed.

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Michel

Sunday, 7 September 1856

Hawk Island

The Mediterranean

I use the tip of my little finger, the only one on my right hand not currently wet, to push the final page out of harm's way. Oh, yes, our arses had indeed been his. And gloriously so.

I look down at my belly, at both the dried, and yes, currently sticky seed there. There are some, and I will not identify him by name, but his initials begin with Rory, who, once done, customarily react to blobs of cooling belly and chest seed with the kind of "get it off, get it off, *get it off!*" response of a young child to a harmless spider wandering innocently across a hand, an arm, a leg.

I rather regard it, here and now, as proof there is life in this old dog yet. Proof twice over in yesterday's celebrations. Proof twice over since I opened the chest.

As I have aged, aged very, *very* well, like the fine wine that is no longer in the bottle beside me, I have realized what a vile calumny it is to say that it is impossible to teach old dogs new tricks. Just yesterday, for example, after an invigorating, naturally naked, swim in the sea... our hosts have a marvelous beach of golden sand across the bay from where their yacht (the *Vengeance*) and ours (the *Falcon's Flight*) are anchored... we dried our hands and anywhere that might drip, and opened the copy of the *Kama Sutra* in the wicker basket. The very special, *illustrated* translation which Peregrine had acquired on our last trip to India, and on the blankets on the beach we *adapted* one of those illustrations. Having, of course, first paid careful attention to the written description. More like *instructions* as far as I was concerned. Close reading was of course required.

The seagulls who watched were, I am quite sure, amazed at the, ah, limberosity and bendiness, if I may coin a phrase, so vigorously displayed, by such... not *old*, precisely, but let us say, rather, *well-seasoned* men. And if by chance a spyglass or two were trained on us from our yacht, the crewmen who spied with glass in one hand and the other in the most logical location, could not complain of being shocked by their employers' conduct, because to a man,

well, and three women, they are all friends of Edward's. Or of Edwina's, as Agatha teased.

We do not go out of our way to perform for our employees, but no one compels them to watch or listen. And if we sometimes imagine that they are, or might, well... It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a friend of Edward's in possession of a good cock or mouth or arse, must be in want of an observer.

And if he is not there for you to watch in turn, as he watches and wanks, you can imagine him so.

It is, after all, the ability to imagine which separates man from everything else which walks, and moves, and lives and breathes on this earth, in its skies, or in the oceans' depths.

And so I will give others some chance to imagine, to read the words and create images in their minds. Not now, of course. Nor soon. Hopefully not for some years yet. And not until we are gone.

Though given the ever-growing rigidity and narrowness of Victoria's reign, I shall have to arrange for wide, but careful distribution. Our book, finely bound in tooled leather, could never be displayed on Hatchard's shelves. It will not be an *Edwardian* version of the *Kama Sutra*, though that is something we have pondered, the three of us, from time to time, creating the most outrageous names we could think of for the positions in which three agile men might find themselves.

Arousing, nevertheless, I think. Even without actual memories to contribute to the cock stand. They were *most* articulate in writing their remembrances, I think. Far more so than I.

Getting the book to the men who will want it, who will drool at mouth and slit to own it, will be easy. A few free copies to carefully selected, agile young men in the most select molly houses, a few in the hands of the trade who service the highest and lowest in the land in London's alleys and dark corners and on the Dock, will readily and rapidly spread the word.

But I will have to ponder how to get it to the women who will want it. Or rather, I shall task the youngest Robert with that assignment. He is most certainly no friend of Edward's, but, like his father and grandfather, has always been the best of friends of three *particular* friends of Edward's. It will, I think, amuse and intrigue him, as he has inherited that intelligence and wit and sly

deviousness when necessary that we were so fortunate to find on Agatha's Day in the eldest Hamilton.

Rory does not quite believe me on that point. For all his roguishness, it shocks his sensibilities; his long-held beliefs about the sensitivity and delicate natures of women. He has never had illusions about women when it comes to fucking, nor about their innate enthusiasm for it. He was... before the advent of *us*... a fairly prolific fucker of women. But fucking does not an education make, especially not with reference to the women of the ton. And he had virtually no knowledge of them until that advent, whereas Peregrine and I had, quite literally, grown up amongst them.

The truth is, that given the opportunity, given *half* an opportunity, women will demonstrate that they have no such sensibilities at all, and are far from delicate little flowers whose soft petals must be protected from virtually everything but the man who will, he so fondly believes, eventually own them in marital fiefdom.

Years ago, when all that I have just relived was happening but was not yet complete, I recall being trapped in a conservatory of all places. Rory was, of course, not at the ball since I was there. It was also a Peregrine-free night, thus leaving me vulnerable to mothers, aunts and grandmothers of hopeful daughters, nieces and granddaughters. A particularly vigorous woman with her far-from-fragile flower in tow had been at me with all the efficacy of a pair of siege guns battering the walls of Badajoz, and as I felt the walls were perilously close to being breached, I dodged and twisted, and ultimately slithered away to the safety of the conservatory. A most unlikely haven for a known roué, so I was confident I could stay awhile out of sight, then quietly locate the host and hostess, friends of my parents, a fact which had thus compelled my attendance, and depart with my freedom still intact.

I had not anticipated the four women who came quietly through the only unlocked door, promptly locked it, and turned up two lanterns to brilliance that fortunately did not reach to the far shadows where I had initially cowered like a fox on the verge of being caught by a four-woman pack of hounds.

I did not recognize their voices, but then, there was no reason I should. Though I had an excellent ear for men's voices and a hard-on for some of them, even knowing that some of *that* group would have abhorred that knowledge, I had no such recognition skills for women. With few exceptions they all sound

the same to me. All I could discern was that they were three women of the ton, and one who most assuredly was *not*.

An old voice, a not-so-old voice, a young, debutante-young but decidedly not silly, voice, with the oldest demanding to know if the book had been brought. A women's book club, a bloody discussion of bloody *literature* at a ball already awarded the accolade of being a sad... bad? mad? ...crush. I nearly moaned intentionally aloud to alert them to my presence and then with profuse apologies make my escape, but the name of the book from the lips of the woman who was "*not*" stopped that.

The Priest and the Penitent.

No wonder the meeting was behind locked doors. The woman who was "*not*" was the purveyor of what the French (we French?) call *pornographie*... oh so very explicit, erotic tales, sometimes in words alone, sometimes in drawings ranging from crude to exquisite art, but always delightfully explicit, and sometimes these works had both words and art.

It was a book I was familiar with. Indeed my copy, well-thumbed, well-used, is safely locked up in the vault back home. A tale told through dialogue and drawings that were closer to the exquisite end of the artistic spectrum, the combination enough to cause even the most jaded cock to rise to the occasion. An older priest, balding, muscular, well-cocked we eventually discover, seduces a handsome young farmer, even more well-cocked, who comes to confession and stays to come.

Though the drawings may not have been exquisite, the detail in which the women discussed each of them was. The size of the cocks and balls, the firmness or not of the arses, whether the farmer's virgin penetration was painful, and how much pain he endured before finding the pleasure, which he so visibly did. The combination of my memory of the book and their explicit discussion of every inch might have gotten me hard had I not been so horrified by the shattering of the last of my illusions about women.

When they were finally done discussing, they quarreled over who would take the book home and how long it could be retained before having to be turned over to the next, during a morning call which quite naturally occurred in the afternoon. And then they finally left.

I mentioned the tale to Drake, a retired molly boy who then owned his own very much upper strata house. He died some years ago, peacefully in his sleep,

with a smile upon his face I heard. I assumed he was thinking of his own version of heaven, a land of wine and whisky, and seventy-two virgin young men to pleurably debauch. I discovered from Drake that I still had illusions about women that could be shattered.

They like watching.

Actual watching.

Men fucking and sucking. Or performing any of the innumerable things, and variations on things, that men may do when we are rutting with each other.

Their husbands, fathers, sons, nephews, uncles, grandfathers, who do these things they publicly profess to find offensive and obscene, are certainly not performing at home where they might be caught. With equal certainty, women cannot cruise down a molly walk in a park, or go into certain seriously dark parts of Vauxhall Gardens. The Dock would be impossibly dangerous.

Enter Drake and one other, who allowed women into their houses, for a not inconsiderable price, to peer through peepholes into well-lit rooms. Anyone who fucks in a molly house, or any brothel, has to be a damned fool not to realize there is always a possibility of being observed. Sometimes the women selected the molly boys they wanted to see in action; sometimes it was mere chance. Most often, the men and their clients were unaware of the watchers. But sometimes they knew, and put on an extra vigorous display, even to performing, naturally for a fee, as requested. It was with even greater rarity, Drake let me know, that the molly boy or the client knew it was a woman who was watching. But of course, never *who* the woman was.

I can appreciate the beauty of a woman, inner and outer, to precisely the same, somewhat austere degree, with which I appreciate the beauty of fine porcelain, the flowing grandeur of an Arabian stallion in motion, or the sounds of Beethoven's "Eroica". But I cannot quite comprehend why women would enjoy this, when the idea of observing two women doing whatever it is they would do to each other, though I could logically figure it out if I bothered, is offensive at worst, boring at best. I barely comprehend desire between a man and a woman, even though I have imitated it on necessary occasions in my thankfully long-past youth.

But after the night we stepped out of the closets in which we had been hiding, they knew. The ton knew. The broadsides and scandal sheets ensured

the country knew, or those who cared to know, that it was not merely two men together, but *three*.

The men who had never had sex with men before wondered about us. Imagined what it might be like to use one or more of us, perhaps while the other two watched. But they dared not be seen with us in anything remotely approaching privacy, to whisper and hint about what they wanted. Sex that dare not speak its name. Or at least sex *they* dared not name.

The friends of Edward's knew damn well what it was we did, still do with each other, and some wished to watch and wank, some to join in. Some were even bold enough to ask. Though they never got their wishes then, nor ever since. They will simply have to rely on the elaborate paintings in their minds or stories they tell themselves in intricate detail before they seed.

At least until the book is published.

The women, though. I wonder if they wonder in detail what it is we do when the doors of the three houses are shut and locked. When the servants are gone. When the doors between are opened.

I wonder how *vivid* their imaginations are, if they are amongst the vast majority of women who have never actually seen a man's cock in a man's arse or a man's mouth.

Do they imagine the roué naked, on his knees in Rory's sitting room, while his two men stand fully dressed, the plackets unbuttoned and down, their weeping cocks out as he sucks them in turn, caressing and tugging on their bollocks until they each explode down his throat?

Do they... rightly? wrongly? ...imagine the rogue with an enormous thick cock dominating us, first putting the rake on his belly on the bed, that rakish prick rubbing the sheets, then fucking him with long, pounding strokes until they both explode? And after a miraculously short recovery time, since this is, after all, their fantasy where all is possible, the rogue lifts the long, wiry, lightly haired legs of the roué over his shoulder, fucking him even more brutally, commanding him to fuck his own fist, until the clenching of the roué's cock as he spews seed in long, arcing spurts up to his chin and then dribbling the last drops onto his hairless belly brings the hairy Scotsman over the edge once more and he fills a second willing hole?

Or do some of them, the ones with daring and I-can't-believe-how-wicked-I-am imaginations, imagine something like the red-haired rogue, gloriously red-

haired everywhere, on all fours while the rake devours his arse, getting it dripping wet with spit and sweat, then using only that and the pre-seeding oil that leaks from that wide slit, shoves in balls deep to howls of delight, before the howls are cut off by the long, slender roué's cock that fucks his mouth fast and deep as well, until at last the short, thick, angrily red Scots prick seeds the bed and is rewarded with an arse and belly full of his lovers' spending?

All those imaginings. And more, far more, than those random thoughts of only sex, or of sex as the only way to know and make known love. Those imaginings, though, I imagine were only imagined long and long ago, when we were so very young, more vigorous, less lined. They have turned their imaginations, women and men alike, or as alike as women and men can ever be about anything at all, to images in their heads who are currently young, vigorous, handsome and lined not at all.

Fools.

All of them, fools.

For as Enobarbus would most certainly have said had he known Rory and Peregrine, as he knew Antony and Cleopatra: "Age cannot wither them, nor custom stale their infinite variety. Other men might cloy the appetites they feed, but these make hungry where most they satisfy."

Enough! We will renew their fantasies with our book, taunt them with our tale of *Love's Labours Ever Won*, and in a way live riotously after, when we have gone to our rewards, if rewards there are at all, whether just or unjust. Though if just, our rewards should be most glorious, indeed.

I rise, stretch. Carefully stack the pages, replace them in the chest, and lock it. Rinse the wine glass in the bucket and place it stem up on the provided cloth.

I return to our room. Look down at my husbands. For so they are, though not at law, nor even church-sanctioned. By *any* church. We were married by an elderly Catholic priest in Rome a decade ago. A priest who, we had discovered by accident, quietly and quite in violation of doctrine, actually believed in God's generous love. He was a friend of Edward's, but unlike so very many of his colleagues, Father Petrelli kept his vow of celibacy. And with equal quietude did all he could to help those friends of Edward's in his country who were beleaguered by Italy's own bangers.

He was bemused by our request for three ceremonies, Peregrine to me; Rory to Peregrine, and Rory to me, but complied with appropriate solemnity,

accompanied by the slightest of twinkling in his eyes, and a great deal of love. A quite generous love that expected no return except for us to love well and long. He was most shocked at the size of the gift we put entirely at his disposal, and only his, for the uses he saw fit.

My husbands are naked, sprawled on the bed, sheet on the verge of sliding off the end. The brilliant moonlight filters through the sheer drapes that rustle softly in the slight breeze, painting them in cool blue that belies the actual heat. Peregrine is, as always when we sleep together, in the center, on his belly at the moment. Rory is on the left side of the bed, on his back, half-hard cock flopping on his thigh, one red-and-grey haired calf closely pressed to the still-golden fur of Peregrine's leg. I carefully drape the robe across the back of a chair, and climb into the bed on the right side.

As usual, when the three of us are finally together and presumably ready to sleep, Peregrine wakes enough, though he is not truly conscious, to squirm and turn, flip and flop, knees, elbows and those somewhat Brobdingnagian feet flailing about, sometimes endangering delicate and not-so-delicate parts of our bodies—which he most vigorously denies when we point to the occasional bump or bruise, and contrives most fanciful explanations for them that do not involve his guilt—before he finally quiets and winds up on his back between us.

His arms curl and draw us in. Heat or no, touch is a necessity for us. As it always has been, as it ever will, for after all this time, these three dogs are far too old to learn, or wish to learn, any new tricks that might change what we have.

I press my knee against Peregrine's leg, just a light touch and release to say "good night."

His name means traveler, wanderer. And tomorrow we will begin readying for our leave-taking, and on the day after, board *Falcon's Flight* and begin our peregrinations again.

Peregrine is our falcon. A fine falcon, indeed. He ripped our jesses off that night, and though the hoods yet remained for a little while, we got free of them as well. We flew then, by God, we *soared*. We, Rory and I, were not the wind beneath his wings, lifting him higher. We were, we *are* his wings, stroking in heartbeat synchronicity for forty years now. And if we no longer fly so high, if our wings are no longer as strong as once they were... yet still we fly. And still we love.

And in all those years, in all those flights, of fancy and otherwise, his mother's words to him were shared and said between us, often and often, or heard without a word being said.

I love you, my dear, always and forever. And another day more.

Imagine that.

Fin

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Author Bio

Eric does not do well with third person writing, as his own writing attests. Nevertheless, he's giving it a go. Eric is a Midwesterner, and older than dirt. Or as Lady Glenhaven might have said, "He's old enough to have sailed with Noah." He has had an intimate connection with the arts during these many years, and in the real world he writes for a living, but not fiction. (Though there are those who might differ about what he and his colleagues do.) He started reading at five and has been a science fiction/fantasy addict ever since. That's why, with rare exceptions, most of his writing, has been and probably will be in those genres. There are exceptions, though, as you've just read. Hopefully a book of poetry with a working title of A Rollerblade Day will be published by December of 2014. He's working on two more M/M romance novels, though not quite as long, in "another England": no way out and The Serpent Mark. The former is possible by the end of the year. The latter—who knows? He's also acquired the rights to use an incredible piece of "dragon art" called "Worldbreaker, Worldmaker," by the very talented Rachael Mayo, as a book cover—besides buying the original for his office wall. If you're interested, you can find her portfolio at DeviantArt. Now he just has to think of a dragon shifter tale to go with it.

Contact & Media Info

Questions? Comments? You can contact Eric via email.

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