



Post Obsessions

By Julia Talbot

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## *Chapter One*

The letter came not by the post but by paid delivery. Urchin delivery, if his man was to be believed, and why should he not be? There were finger imprints upon the vellum, distinct, grubby marks, utterly out of place upon the fine fabric, folded tightly and sealed with a single, unstamped round of wax.

It was addressed in a neat hand, yet the writing was strong and sprawling enough to indicate a male sender. The only words the address contained were "Viscount Farrington." No use of his familiar name, no street direction. A stranger, then, and yet one who knew his whereabouts well enough that he had no need to write them out.

Markus took his time in deciding to open the missive. Odd letters simply did not find their way into his home. If they did, they were invariably reports of dire events. Still, he could not simply stare at it and hope it would disappear. Nor could he turn it over and over in his hands and hope that it would burst into flame or something equally dramatic.

So, with that lack of options presented to him, Markus opened it. The penmanship was the same, somewhat less neat, looser, more relaxed. The words, however, were anything but relaxing.

*My dear Lord Farrington,* it began:

*By the time you have finished with this missive, you will no doubt think me quite mad. Nevertheless, writing to you was a necessary thing, no more to be denied than the rain outside my window.*

*I have seen you, you see. Not at your soirees or during your gallops in the park. I have seen you in your less than discreet moments, my Lord, with your young man, at the hell where you obviously feel safe from any eyes that might know you. I have seen the way you touch him. I have seen the lewd acts you perform with him before you take a room upstairs and have your way for the night.*

*What has this to do with me? Do you fear me now, my Lord? Perhaps you should. Not because I wish to harm you. This is no base plea for gold to keep my mouth closed. I have no intention of telling your secrets. That is between you and your priest. I want something far different.*

*You see, I wish to be the one with you. Not merely the one who sees you. Sadly, I am too far up the ladder to put myself up for rent, and most likely too old to appeal to your... tastes. Yet I am not far enough into your sphere to meet you socially. It would seem that I must admire you from afar. Perhaps it will be enough to know that now, whenever you are out, you shall be looking for me.*

*Yours very truly,*

*E*

Markus stared at the letter, dizzy and sick. He was so careful. So precise in his care in choosing partners and locales. It would seem he was not careful enough. Now what was he to do?

"My Lord? Are you well?"

Markus jumped, the sound of his valet's voice loud, almost strident in the ringing silence.

"No. I fear I am not. Who among the staff do we trust, Gilders?"

"Male or female, my Lord?"

"Male, I suppose."

"Hartney, sir. He's a good lad."

"Fetch him. I need to send a message, along with a packet."

"Very good, sir."

While Gilders was away from the room, Markus threw together a bag of coins and trinkets that would suffice to satisfy his latest companion. His heart raced, and he felt sweat gather under his arms. The situation was intolerable. He would have to find outlets for his baser urges in some other way, obviously, and not give the madman who wrote to him any more ammunition.

The letter. He must burn the letter. The only purpose served in keeping it would be to put himself in more danger. He struck a lucifer match and tried to set fire to a corner of the cloth, but to no avail. Undeterred, he threw the thing into the fire grate and poured brandy on it before striking fire again. This time the thing caught and was burned almost to embers when Gilders returned.

"Hartney, is it?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"Take this and go to the Gray Dove theater." He handed Hartney the bag he had packed. "Give it to a lad named Adrian, and tell him that the Viscount will no longer be able to patron his theater career. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my Lord." There was no hint of any expression on Hartney's face. Good man.

"That will be all. I wish to have some time alone. Gilders, tell Barnsly that I will not be receiving."

"Very good, my Lord."

Markus nodded, watching them leave the room, and tried to remember if there was anyone else he needed to contact in order to rid himself of the nightmare he now found himself in.

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Adrian was pleased with his reward, according to Hartney, and Markus suspected the boy had another patron waiting in the wings. They were beginning to tire of one another, and so it was of no great import that they split. Luckily, chief among the boy's attributes, which were many and varied, was his discretion, and Markus worried not at all that Adrian would expose him to anyone.

The life of a hermit chafed him sorely. Markus had taken to staying at home and rarely receiving visitors. His social outings he restricted to a single weekly trip to his club. The writer had said that he was not of an equal station, and so Markus had no qualms that he might gain entrance to his exclusive club, thus causing difficulties.

Still, his morning rides in the park were curtailed, and his trips to the gaming pits were no longer viable, and it irked him. Even more bothersome were his more intimate needs, which were simply unsatisfied by his own hand. Still, until he was certain the scoundrel who wrote such inflammatory things was well and truly gone, he could not take a chance on satisfying himself.

A long time, perhaps a fortnight, perhaps more, passed with no more missives, and Markus began to relax. Perhaps it had been an aberration. A jest, played by one of his jaded companions. His routine he did not vary, still making himself unavailable, but the burning itch at the back of his neck began to recede.

Which was when he got the next letter. It sat upon his desk when he entered his study, gleaming pale against the leather blotter and mahogany wood. His heart jumped fair into his throat, and his head went light. Long minutes passed while he stared at it, and finally he sat at his desk and took up his letter knife to open it. His hands shook so that he cut

himself in the process, and a drop of blood, bright and obscene, fell upon the expensive cloth.

*My dear Lord Farrington,*

*I have missed the seeing of you, my Lord. Nearly a week passed before I realized I had scared you away, but when I saw the young actor on the arm of the Earl of Whittington, I realized you had paid him off and were no longer amusing yourself with him, no doubt because of me.*

*I was saddened, for it is nigh impossible for me to see you now, to feed my longing, but I also rejoiced, for I knew that I had affected you in some way, no matter how small.*

*There have been times since when I have come by your house on my way and stopped to stare, and wonder if you were inside. Does someone come to you, now, to ease you? Or would that be too much of a risk. How long will it be before what you, yourself needs drives you out, back into my realm?*

*I dream of you, my Lord. Of your hair, of your skin, of the scent of your body. What, I wonder, do you dream upon.*

*Yours very truly,*

*E*

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Bugger.

Markus was in need. Painfully. Angrily. He wanted the company of a young man, with a sweet mouth and a round bottom. Someone who took pain well and whose skin took marks easily. Preferably immediately. Damn the man who kept him a prisoner in his own home. Miserable, pox-ridden, whoreson.

The carpet began to wear from his pacing. Gilders and the rest of the staff avoided him like he had plague. The men of his club commented upon his surliness, and his few friends told him to find a willing whore before he simply burst.

If only he could.

Two letters. Two in as many months, and look at him. Cowering in the corner like a beaten dog. Well, he would not stand for it, not any longer.

"Gilders!"

Stoic of expression, Gilders came to him, standing stiffly next to his chair. "Yes, Lord?"

"My coat, Gilders. The carriage, as well. I am going out."

"Very good, my Lord."

The alacrity with which Gilders followed his commands showed more strongly than any words how difficult he had been of late, but it was not much in his nature to apologize. He simply nodded at the older man when he brought his coat and left with an admonition not to wait up.

"Oh, and Gilders? Should a letter arrive for me, do your best to detain whoever delivers it."

"Yes, my Lord."

With no more than that, he was off to find a discreet house with a willing and warm lad, and to the very Devil with the consequences. The carriage was cold, and his driver half asleep, and Markus seethed, because his very household had become complacent because of this anonymous E.

The house he chose was far enough away from his usual haunts that he felt a certain safety. 'Twas far more expensive, as well, but worth the price if he was able to find some ease, as well as some privacy. The proprietress, a lady of tall stature and enormous



bosom, gave him his choice of boys, and he chose a fair-skinned lad with golden hair and eyes like cobalt and took him upstairs for a night of debauchery. By the time he was done, the boy was bruised and exhausted, and he was relaxed and happy, and he felt better than he had in who knew how long.

And if the ominous E was watching, then so be it. A man could only deny his nature for so long.

Markus took his breakfast the next morning in the breakfast room rather than the bedchamber, much refreshed and once again ready to face the world. Let the man watch, he thought, and bedamned to him.

His smug complacency lasted all of a quarter hour, for when he sat at the table, a beautiful cream vellum envelope sat propped against his plate. On his feet again, Markus tightened the sash of his dressing gown and strode to the kitchens, where Gilders was sure to be taking his own breakfast.

"Gilders!"

"Yes, my Lord?"

"I specifically told you to make certain you detained any person who delivered a letter!"

Blank-faced and placid, Gilders inclined his head. "Yes, indeed, my Lord. However, the letter was slid through the kitchen door. Cook found it early this morning. Therefore, no person could be detained."

Good gad, he hated it when Gilders out-Lorded him. The man was not human, surely. Markus nodded, shoulders rounding against the weight of his apprehension. "Very well, Gilders. Thank you. I should like coffee this morning, rather than tea."

It was a petty request, and the turn of Gilder's nose said so. "Yes, my Lord."

Returning to his breakfast table, Markus sank into his chair and stared at the offending missive. Really, this was getting ridiculous. Farcical. The situation was so out of the realm of his usual existence as to be unreal. Taking up his knife, Markus split the plain wax seal of the letter and folded it out to read.

*My dear M,*

*The tumult of my thoughts can scarce be described. Last evening, when I saw you, I was both overjoyed and dismayed almost to the point of pain. To see you was a wondrous thing, and believe me, I made the best of it, following you about like a moonstruck pup. Yet I knew you were out to find someone to be with, if even for a short time, and how I wished that someone was I.*

*I did not follow you after you left your young companion's bed and returned home. Instead I took all of my silver and my courage and became his next customer, exhausted and bruised and sated as he was. I wanted to smell you upon him, Markus. To touch the places you had touched, to make love to you through his willing, if worn, form. Yes, I would much rather be with you, but I fear it was as close as I shall ever come, and the pleasure was simply astonishing.*

*I will hope against hope that you will not let me frighten you away once more, my dear, and that it will be my pleasure to look upon you again, very soon.*

*Yours very truly,*

*E*

Markus folded the letter carefully, even though he shook. Shook with rage and not a little fear and almost unbelievably, arousal. Damnation.

Another fortnight passed, establishing a pattern. After a sum of too many days spent hiding at home, Markus returned to the stewes, venting himself upon the willing flesh of a pretty lad. The morning next, he awakened to a letter on his breakfast tray, sharing space with his chocolate and eggs. The letter shocked with its explicit recital of every

mark and bruise he'd left on the porcelain doll skin of the boy he'd had. The maids were two days cleaning his bed and sweeping up the splinters of his father's favorite spindle chair after his reading of it.

'Twas a matter of almost a week before his base nature drove him out again, taking a hired coach he met at his club, going to a very private house indeed. There he spent the entire night, going from boy to boy, three in all, feeling like a desperate, sulky child for whom no toy was satisfying.

He received no letter the following day and so felt smug. The cream vellum was there bright and early the day after, though, and his study bore the signs of an over turned inkpot and shards of a broken vase as explicitly as his breeches showed signs of a very reluctant passion.

Finally, feeling like an utter fool for not coming to the idea sooner, Markus visited one of his old haunts, where the proprietor was to be trusted, and paid the man a small fortune to deliver to him a description, and if possible a name, of the man who next chose his young companion for their pleasure.

The letter waited for him, shockingly white against his mahogany sideboard when he breakfasted the next morning. Gold wax, he noted, rather than red, and distantly he wondered if there was some meaning in it.

*My dear M,*

*How very clever you are. My admiration for you grows daily. Setting Gustave upon me. Brilliant! Sadly for you, and perhaps luckily for me, I had not a sovereign to my name and was unable to play my favorite game. The look upon the face of the Baron Edlingburn was most amusing, I must admit, when Gustave confronted him about his deviance. "Surely, Gustave," he blustered, "you of all must know that everyone here is such."*

*So, I escaped your notice once again, dear Markus. Some day soon one hopes I will not be averse to being caught, just as I hope you will be eager to catch me. I must tell you, though, that it was difficult not to take my ease with young Thomas. Instead I was forced to return to my lodgings and take myself in hand, until I found relief in imagining your face in passion and your body above mine.*

*Some day, my Lord. This I promise.*

*Yours as ever,*

*E*

Three more letters came to him in the next month of days. Markus went to the opposite extreme from his cloistered existence of the previous weeks and went out nearly every night, receiving each morning a crisp cream vellum envelope with an increasingly heated note inside from the mysterious E. The response he felt toward said notes was increasingly heated as well, less in temper than in arousal.

Perverse, Markus decided, should be his new moniker. Why, oh, why did these missives excite him so? So caught up was he in the game of cat and mouse he played that he locked the door before he read the letters, so that when he found himself opening the buttons of his breeches to take himself in hand there would be no interruptions. Such things should prove awkward.

What truly frightened him in time was that he began to anticipate the letters. Began dreaming of them. Was unable to perform without thinking of them. It was infuriating; it drove him utterly mad. Perhaps he was mad. 'Twas the only excuse for such folly.

By springtime, Markus had received some twenty letters, not including the ones he had destroyed. He kept them all in his knife box, neatly stacked in the order of the day he received them. They were as a physical presence to him whenever he was in his study, and they drew him to read them over and over, so that the beautiful vellum was wrinkled and smudged.

How he hated the anonymous E. Perhaps it was time to leave town for a time; he owned a country estate that got little enough use. He could play country farmer for a time, leave the thrice-damned letters behind, try to take control of his life. Yes. As a plan of action, it was most satisfactory. He would leave on the morrow. He informed Gilders of the change, and the man simply stared at him until he fidgeted, then nodded, and said he would make the arrangements.

The only thing for him to do, then, was get out of the house while the servants did their magic, so Markus called for his riding clothes and had a groom ready his horse, and went to take his morning ride in the park. He would put E and his indecent missives out of his mind. Hopefully for good.

*My dear Markus,*

*I see that you are in the midst of closing your house for a trip out of town. It is my presence you wish to escape, I wonder? Do you run from me, or from yourself?*

*Every day that passes becomes more difficult, Markus. You are no longer some distant figure to me, no longer a nameless lordling. You are flesh and blood, and you call to my own flesh, drawing me to your bright flame.*

*I will follow. There, I have said it. Wither thou goest, as the Good Book says, though I imagine Ruth would be scandalized by my behavior. Be that as it may, I am content to watch you from afar, but not from such a distance that you are out of sight.*

*Look for me and you will find me, for I will follow.*

*Yours ever truly,*

*E*

## *Chapter Two*

Limping into the nearest posting station and inn, Markus handed his lame horse over to the stable boy and slowly made his way inside, cradling his injured arm against his chest. Thrice damn the furry little beast that spooked his horse into jumping straight up and coming back down running, ending with a spectacular throw that left him rolling on the ground, clutching his wounded shoulder.

The innkeeper was all concern, knowing Markus to be a man of stature, and had him ensconced in a private parlor soon enough with a bottle of brandy and paper and ink with which to write to his estate manager and request a carriage from his country home, which should have only been another half day's ride away. Hellfire and damnation.

The good man insisted upon feeding him a soup of some smelly mix of meat and vegetables, and insisted as well upon getting him a physician.

"Tis not necessary, I assure you," he told the man. "I will be quite all right."

"Oh, but we have one staying here the night, sir. Won't take but a moment to fetch him."

And off the fellow trotted, utterly ignoring his wishes, and if he were not so busy clenching his teeth over the pain and trying not to breathe in the noxious fumes from the soup, Markus would simply have started screaming.

The physician was indeed only a matter of moments in returning, and he looked shockingly young, barely old enough to shave. Dark curls framed his face, and his deep brown eyes twinkled, and he was a very attractive fellow indeed. At least he was not a crusty old sawbones, for which Markus was grateful.

"The innskeep tells me you've had an accident, my Lord. If you will just be so good as to tell me what pains you?"

"My shoulder." The man smelled of soap and pine. "I fear I have twisted it."

"Very well. Let us remove your shirt."

The next minutes were simply agonizing as the young doctor removed his shirt and realigned his shoulder joint, which was indeed out of place. After he'd sat for a while with his head between his knees and his head stopped spinning, he took the opportunity to thank the man.

"Twas no trouble, honestly enough. I am glad to have the opportunity to work. I find traveling quite tedious."

"As do I." He watched the doctor put his bag to rights. "Shall I pay you for your services?"

"Not a bit, my Lord. The pleasure was mine. If you should have further need of me, just send the innkeeper."

"I will." Strangely, Markus was reluctant to let the man leave him. "I do not even know your name, sir."

"I beg your pardon, my Lord. My name is Ellis Houghton. At your service. Good day." With a nod and a smile, Markus was alone and somehow bereft.

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*My dear M,*

The letter, which was delivered by the innskeep early in the morning, who said only that it was hand carried, began the same way as the rest of them had.

*Oh, my dearest M. To be so close to you as I have been, and not be able to speak, is torture. Sweet torture, indeed, for at least I am not completely bereft, am in fact closer to you than I have ever been, and yet I cannot approach you with my desires.*

*Not yet.*

*I hope that your pain is less than it was on yesterday afternoon. You appeared quite distraught. What a wonderful suffering hero you make, my lord, all stoic face and tight body. Quite affecting, I assure you. How I long to ease you, to let you find solace in a touch, or a kiss.*

*May I confess to you, Markus? After I left my watching of you, I found a quiet place where I might relieve my need, thinking of the delicious pain we might inflict upon one another.*

*It is my fervent hope to see you again soon.*

*Yours as ever,*

*E*

Damnation! His prick was hard as a stone. Markus groaned, knowing himself for a fool and a lord of nothing more than perversion. The man stalked him like a cat with a mouse, and he could do more than grow heavy and hot with it?

How? How did the man stay so close without Markus seeing him? How did he know the things that happened, practically before they did? How did his own hand betray him by opening his own buttons and stroking his flesh without conscious thought? A gasp escaped him, as did his seed, as Markus found his pleasure.

Damnation.

The rest of the trip seemed long to Markus, arduous in every sense of the term. His injuries had no time to settle as he jolted about, there was no good food, indeed, no



comfort. The situation worsened when he reached his country to home to find the place well ready for him, bath and fire and meal laid out, and a pristine parchment envelope awaiting his leisure, sealed with an E.

How on the face of the Earth had the mysterious E managed, in the scant two days he was confined to the inn due to his shoulder, get to his home before he?

The letter got a vicious swipe of his silver letter opener, so much so that he gouged a hole in the opposite sleeve of his dressing gown.

"Damnation!"

"May I help you, sir?" His valet popped in, eyebrows lifted.

"Is your name 'damnation'?"

"Naturally not."

"Then you may not."

"Very good, sir."

His man withdrew and Markus opened the letter, disgusted at the fine tremor of his hands.

The writing was becoming as familiar as his own.

*My dearest M,*

*Oh, Markus. What tender lads you have here in the country. I had one last night, and I vow he was not up to your games, not at all. However do you expect to find amusements?*

*Surely you do not feel that your own attentions will be enough to satisfy the urges in you that I know intimately. For I share them, you know, and this lad, while sweet, and pliant, was easily frightened.*

*Dare I hope that your desperation for attentions will send you to me eventually? You will not know it is I, but I will, and the thought even now strains the fabric of my trousers.*

*How I long to feel the touch of your hands, and not simply phantasms of my fervid imagination. I await you, Markus, and I know that now that your pleasures are so limited by location, you will come to me. I know it. I vow it.*

*As ever, yours in all things,*

*E*

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Markus sat at his desk, freshly sharpened pen in hand, and contemplated his words with great care. How did one write the letter he attempted to write? Perhaps one must simply write it and not think too hard. Dipping his pen and setting it to parchment, Markus began.

*To the most irritating E,*

*Dear sir. I begin to feel as though you receive some sick pleasure in the idea that I fear you. I do not, and I will prove as much should you chose to stop taking the cowardly way out and show yourself.*

*Thus, I have decided to issue you an invitation. Come to my home on the morrow, at seven o'clock in the evening, to dine with me, and we shall discuss your relentless pursuit. You say that you prefer me to come to you, all unknowing. I will not. This, at least, I will have on my own terms.*

*You have my word that no harm shall come to you, nor will a magistrate be present.*

*Most sincerely,*

*Markus, Viscount Farringdon*

Markus snorted. Most sincerely. Good gad, what an idiot he sounded. Stuffy and pedantic and altogether ludicrous. Sanding and sealing before he could change his mind, Markus addressed the envelope simply, to E.

"Gilders!"

"Yes, my Lord?"

Markus jumped. Good heavens, but Gilders was as sneaky as the mysterious E, to be right there. "I should like for you to make a show of placing this letter outside, where the last letter was found."

One white eyebrow gyrated wildly. "Outside, my Lord?"

What an insufferable tone. Staring Gilders down was never easy, be assayed it this time.

"Outside, Gilders."

"Very good, sir. Shall I keep watch to see who collects it?"

"No. That will not be necessary. I would like you to make a fine menu for tomorrow night, however, and have me approve it."

"If you are quite certain, my Lord."

"I am. That will be all."

Gilders, for once, withdrew without having the last word, and Markus sat back, feeling a hard knot take root in the pit of his belly. Well, he thought, now we shall see.

The letter was placed outside just as he had asked. Gilders, for once, did not argue or disagree, or even use subtle disobedience and forget to deliver his letter. And indeed, in the morning, it was gone as though it had never been.

So.

So the so mysterious E had his challenge.

All that was left to do was to wait, in an agony of anticipation, to see if his challenge was met.

Gilders had Cook prepare a veritable feast. Roasted hens, root vegetables, soft cheese baked into a flaky pastry, breads, and cakes. The table was set with two places, snowy white cloth and good china shining under the light of the candles in the overhead lamp. All that was left was for his mysterious guest to arrive.

Which, naturally, he did not. Seven o'clock passed, as did eight, and Markus sat in the dining room, picking at his food. Damn the man. Damn him all to Hell and back.

"Gilders!"

The valet-cum-butler popped into the dining room like a child's toy on a spring. "Yes, my Lord?"

"My guest is obviously not arriving. Have this cleared away. The servants are welcome to the meal."

Something like sympathy cracked the impassive facade on Gilder's face. "Yes, my Lord. Will there be aught else, my Lord?"

"Yes. Prepare my clothing. I wish to go out."

"Are you sure that is wise, my Lord? You are still not entirely well."

"Do not question me, by damn."

"My name is no more by damn than it is damnation, sir."

Markus sighed and spoke through gritted teeth. "The silver brocade, Gilders. No wig. I shall wear my hair as it is."

Gilders made to withdraw, nose high. "Very good, my Lord."

A single crystal goblet sailed across the room and shattered against the marble hearth against the far wall, the sound shockingly loud. Thanks to the bugging bloody E, he had a need to slake, and tender country lads or no, Markus intended to have his need filled.

And he would simply have to find another way to outwit the bastard. He would.

The night was one of frustration. The very irritating E was ultimately correct in the assumption that few boys of the caliber he was accustomed to could be found in the backwater in which he currently resided. None, in fact, this night, and Markus found himself at the local tavern, unwilling to admit his defeat to Gilders by going home so early.

Every patron in the place looked up when he entered, and there was something of a stir, which Markus could forgive them, for he never showed his aristocratic face in such a place normally, and many of the townspeople had never seen him.

Still, the drink was strong, and the fire warm, and Markus soon fell into a sort of fugue state, staring at the sullen flames and sipping ale. No one spoke to him, nor he to them, and it suited him perfectly, as he set about dulling the need in his belly.

A shadow fell across him some time later, he had no idea how long, and he looked up to see a vaguely familiar face.

"My Lord? How fares your shoulder and arm?"

Ah, yes. The young doctor. Edward. No, Elias. No. "Ellis. Much better, thank you. Your care made all of the difference in my recovery."

The fellow smiled at him, and once again Markus was struck by how attractive the doctor was. "How very kind you are, my Lord. Do you suppose I might join you? The other patrons seem rather uninviting."

"Certainly." Waving toward the bench opposite him, he smiled in return. "You may amuse me by telling me all about yourself."

"Oh. I do not know if that will amuse, my Lord, but I am certainly willing."

"Then you will be the only willing companion I have encountered this night."

Something sparked in those deep brown eyes, but was so quickly banked that Markus took it for a trick of the firelight. "I am certain you will find me that, at least. If not more, my Lord."

The tone of that smooth, urbane voice was no trick of the light, and Markus shifted as his prick took a sudden interest. Perhaps the night would not be so dreadfully dull after all. The doctor was very intriguing indeed, and Markus spent a most pleasant hour with him in front of the fire, drinking brandy, and teasing both Ellis and himself with reckless abandon. Such stimulating company had not been his since those damnable letters began to arrive, and Markus fairly bloomed under the attention.

For his part, young Ellis offered flirtation of such a suggestive nature that Markus hardened from it, forcing him to hide beneath the tail of his coat, and he could not have been happier. If there was not a willing lad to be found, he could at least have something to fuel his self-flagellation when he returned home. Gilders certainly did not do such for him.

The very thought made him snort.

"What amuses, my Lord?" Ellis asked.

"A fanciful thought. One that tells me I should most likely return home and find my bed."

"Oh." Disappointment showed in those dark eyes. "Alone, I assume."

"How very forward!" He could not help but be charmed by such candor. "Are you making me an offer, sir?"

"I fear I am. Have I offended?" There. That was the twinkle he preferred to the frown. Though how he knew what he preferred from Ellis already was a mystery.

"Not at all. Would you like to accompany me to my home?" His heart beat hard as he offered, for this was no callow youth, no paid whore. This was a man, fully as experienced as he, no doubt, and such things could become complicated.

"Yes. I would."

The hand Ellis offered him was warm and strong and when he stood, Ellis used the grip to pull him close for a tiny moment.

"I very much would like to," Ellis said, breath fanning his cheek.

"Then let us go."

He might very well regret it later. But for now it would give him pleasure to be with this man, and that was reason enough.

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They went back to his home. The relative wisdom of taking a stranger there did not cross his mind until he lay on his bed, his fine silver brocade hanging from an unlit chandelier, Ellis between his legs. Ellis' smooth cheek rubbed against his most sensitive skin, soft sounds and breaths brushing over him. The tip of Ellis' tongue ran over the head of his cock, making him shudder.

"Your flavor is exquisite, Markus. May I call you Markus?"

"I can hardly take issue with familiarity with your mouth on my prick, Ellis." He gasped as Ellis took him all of the way in, voracious mouth claiming him. Ellis seemed determined to taste him all. They had started with a kiss. A single, mind-bending kiss where Ellis took control and did not stop until they were both nude with Markus on his

back, Ellis' hands and mouth exploring his skin with a thoroughness that made him wonder at it.

Ellis took Markus' prick in one hand and stroked his balls with the other, smiling up at him, dark eyes beguiling him utterly. "No. I should think not, Markus. You have no notion what you do to me."

He could not fathom it. Ellis acted as though they knew one another far more intimately than they did, and indeed, Markus too felt the connection. How else could he explain the stranger in his bed? His. Where none had ever really been before. Always with his actors and fancy boys he had gone to them, whether to a hell or to a house he had rented for that purpose. This instant need for Ellis was at once thrilling and frightening.

Soon enough, Markus stopped thinking, the perfect suction of Ellis' lips, the rough slide of Ellis' tongue drowning him in sensation. Ellis was just as focused, drinking him down and rising above him to kiss him again, blotting out the world. The damp heat of Ellis' prick against his thigh made him gasp, the sharp sting of his nipple being pinched made him yelp. His spent prick jumped, making him stare down his body, and perhaps Ellis took exception to him looking at himself, for his other nipple received the same treatment, or perhaps even more so.

It throbbed, his skin burning, and it had been so long since he was on the receiving end on such sweet pain that he simply gaped. Ellis laughed, the sound low, deep, making his skin shiver.

"Do you like the games, Markus? Do you long to play with an equal as I do?"

Yes. Oh, yes. Though he did not wish to say so aloud. He simply nodded mutely, amazed at himself for his own retiring behavior. The idea of letting another lead was novel, and Markus found it unbearably exciting, his prick firming once more. Ellis nodded, lunging atop him, holding his hands on either side of his head. Ellis' body was weighty on his, sending him deep into the feather ticking. They met at the hips, cock sliding against cock,



the feel of it more than he could bear without writing against the sheets like a practiced whore.

"Let us play then, Markus."

"Yes," he said in return. "Yes."

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Everything they could do to one another they did. Ellis tested his strength, his resolve to remain untouched at the very core of himself. They bruised each other. They bit and clawed and struggled for control, the battle as epic as it was satisfying. He took and was taken, the feel of Ellis' body closing about his prick exquisite, the feel of Ellis inside him even more so.

There had never been a night in his life to match it.

Markus woke sated and sore, thighs singing with delicious pain. The burn and pull in his backside was relentless, and he wanted to do it again. Immediately. He turned to his side, reaching for Ellis. He found only empty Egyptian cotton sheets. Abruptly, wincing at a pain that was no longer pleasurable, Markus sat up, searching the room, finding only a rolled parchment sitting on the dressing chair beside the bed.

A deep foreboding came to him as he picked up the parchment, fingering the ribbon that tied it. The ribbon had tied Ellis' hair back at the base of his neck the night before, a deep blue silk. The writing, when he opened it, hit him like a horse kick to the belly. It began:

*My dearest Markus,*

*By now you have discovered my secret. I am sorry for the necessity of the deception, but not for the act itself. To hold you, to be with you as I was has been the greatest joy I might experience. I think perhaps you knew last night and did not wish to admit. Some small part of me hopes you knew.*

*But I have begun to know you, my Lord, and I know that now that I have had you, now that I have been inside you, you will begin to resent me.*

*I would rather have one perfect night than have the glorious feeling in my heart shattered through your disdain.*

*Thank you for the one night, my love. You cannot know what it meant.*

*Yours ever,*

*Ellis*

The E in Ellis was exact to the ones on his other letters, leaving him no doubt, if he had any.

Melodramatic bastard.

"Gilders!"

"Yes, my Lord?"

Gilders was there instantly, leaving him no doubt either that the old relic had been waiting just outside the door. Damn him.

"Ready my things. We are moving back to town."

"Yes, my Lord."

Gilders did not question him and as much as it pleased him he thought it might be because he was nude, still streaked with blood and bruises from the night previous. He would find Ellis. He would, if it was the last thing he did. And he would have him again.

Ellis was indeed ever his.

## *Chapter Three*

Markus packed his own chest of letters rather than letting Gilders touch them. How dare he? No one left Markus. No one. He did the leaving, please and thank you, and he was not finished with Doctor Ellis Houghton at any rate. Not by a good deal.

While he waited for Gilders to get his carriage ready and his trunks packed, Markus composed a letter. Not to Ellis, naturally, as he had no idea where the man might reside, save the city. Instead he wrote to his solicitor, an old school friend and one-time dalliance.

*My dear Robert,*

*I trust this missive finds you well. Caroline is well also, one hopes, and the heirs.*

*I have a mission for you, one I imagine you will enjoy, as you have always fancied intrigue. I need you to find the direction of one Ellis Houghton, physician. I know he lives in the city, and I imagine he is not well off. Not destitute, by any means, but I doubt you will find him in any of the finer neighborhoods.*

*He is a young man, with dark hair and brown eyes. His hair has a tendency to curl, and he has a well schooled accent, though with shades of the North country.*

*If you find him for me, Robert, there will be a sweet reward in it for you. Also, if you do find him, please do not contact him in any way. I will do that myself. I have the distinct urge to begin a correspondence that will surprise him.*

*This is most important to me, Robert, and I entrust you with it knowing you will be discreet. Please let me know as soon as something maybe found. I will be at my house in the city, for I am moving back there this very day.*

He began to sign it with his usual casual "Yours," but he realized that he had no wish to say such a thing, even in an offhanded manner. Markus clenched his teeth and wrote instead:

*With much affection,*

*Markus*

Damn that Ellis anyway.

\*\*\*

A fortnight passed with no word after Markus returned to the city. He tried not to let it bother him, for London was large, and one pleasant and unexceptional doctor could easily go unfound for some time. If there was panic in him at the thought of never seeing Ellis again, well, so be it.

After the third week passed, Markus decided he would stop mooning about like a love-struck cow and resume his usual activities. Perhaps find a new talent to sponsor. He began accepting invitations, had his tailor in to fit him out with new jackets in sparkling silks and brocades, and began to visit his old haunts.

None of it worked. None of the lads he found had dark curls and sloe eyes. None of them were men of experience, which he found to his own surprise he preferred. They were pliant, complacent, and Markus found that he resented it.

Finally he wandered into a tavern in a part of the city he would never normally frequent, and he found someone there, a man whose skin was too dark to look entirely like his E but who had the same twinkle in his eye, the same air of challenge. They went upstairs to a room that smelled of cabbage and ale and something sour. The bed was narrow and the

ropes sagged and Markus could not bring himself to do more than let the man use his mouth upon him and to use his hand in return.

He went to his own home that night and scrubbed his skin until it looked raw, cursing viciously. Feeling bereft.

His bed seemed cold, empty, and Markus berated himself for being not just a fool but the worst sort -- a love-struck one.

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The missive came some six weeks after Markus had returned to town, just when he was about to give up his quest. Just about the time he stopped looking at his mail tray for a letter with Ellis' distinctive flourish.

It was not from Ellis. The note was from Robert, along with a calling card noting the time Robert would return for a personal conversation. Markus tore open the seal impatiently, scanning the brief note with great enthusiasm, heart pounding.

*My dear Markus,*

*I think I may have found your errant Doctor Houghton. Please allow me to present the evidence this afternoon at two. I shall look forward to seeing you again. Caroline sends her best, as you will no doubt hear when we meet. I intend to take shameless advantage of your eagerness to force other items of business upon you.*

*Until this afternoon,*

*Robert*

Oh. Oh, excellent. Though it would not do to get his hopes up. Still, seeing Robert would be no hardship, business or no. Markus rang for Gilders.

"Yes, my Lord."

"Really, Gilders. I think you have as much invested in my post as I do." The quick appearance certainly led him to believe Gilders had been hanging about just waiting.

"Since it seems to directly affect your mood, my Lord, it behooves me to be. So that I might warn the rest of the staff."

"You are impertinent."

"Yes, my Lord."

Really, the old fool was lucky he was in such a good mood. "Have a light repast prepared for this afternoon. Sir Robert will arrive then."

"Of course."

"And see that I have plenty of writing supplies. I anticipate a correspondence."

He got a raised eyebrow, Gilders looking surprised for a moment before Markus' glare nipped the questions before they began. He flapped a hand and Gilders left, and the moment was one he actually savored.

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Robert was prompt, as ever. He arrived at some five minutes before two o'clock, for as Markus well knew, it took that long for the involved process of seeing him to occur. He sighed as he listened from his study to the elaborate ritual. Servants. They had far more societal regulation than he.

Finally Robert was allowed entrance and Markus stood, hands out, greeting his old friend happily. He found it was genuinely pleasant to see Robert's good-natured face. Really, he had been too much alone these last months.

"Robert! Excellent. How are you?"

Robert waited until a dark glare sent the maid assigned to escort service scampering and the door was closed to come to him and take his hands, kissing him on the lips. "I am quite well, Markus, though I confess I have missed you. You have not called a meeting with me in some time."

The reprove was gentle, as all things with Robert were. Sadly, that was why they had not been able to remain lovers. Robert, while never bland, was far too sweet, They did not suit that way at all.

"I apologize, Robert. I have quite a tale to tell you," he said as he decided right then and there to tell Robert the entire sordid story. He could trust his friend, and really, he was about to burst with it. "I will tell all. But first, tell me what news."

"About your young doctor, eh? He's quite the catch. And quite the rabbit in the hole. It took me some time to track him down."

"I did notice. I never lost faith in you, my friend." Which might have been slightly untrue, but it made Robert beam at him, so it was worthwhile. "So where is he?"

"Islington."

"Really? How bourgeois." He tried to sound offhand, but he could see that Robert did not believe it.

"Yes, indeed. That was why it took me so long to find him. You gave me so little, so I began in your stratum, you see, and worked my way down. Then when I had no luck, I went for the poor, and worked up. Somehow, my dear, I never expected you to be interested in someone so...average."

Average. Oh, dear. Ellis was the farthest from it. Markus simply smiled and shook his head. "Pour us a brandy, Robert, and let me tell you about him."

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"Are you mad?"

It was some time and more than one drink later when Markus sat across from Robert, listening to him ask about his sanity. He'd questioned it himself more than once of late, so he did not complain.

"I do wonder. But no, I think I am not. Just intrigued and most definitely aroused. He has a certain knack."

"I did notice."

Abruptly, Markus became aware that his was more than half hard, his cock stretching the front placket of his trousers. He covered it casually with one hand.

"Yes, well. The things he is capable of, Robert. You have no idea. Should you like to read some of his letters?"

He had no idea why he offered; perhaps it was because he knew then Robert might see the attraction. Or perhaps there was simply something illicit in sharing them with a former flame.

"Yes. I believe I would. Perhaps then I might understand."

"Very well."

Markus went to his desk and got the box, bringing it back and handing Robert the first five from the stack. Robert read for a long while, every so often giving him a shrewd look from those light blue eyes. When Robert was done his cheeks were quite pink, and the man was breathing somewhat more heavily.

"Goodness, Markus. He is...ardent."

"Yes. Let me assure you that in person his attentions are even more so."



The memory of them, sticky and sated in his bed, covered with the bruises of hard lovemaking...oh. Yes, ardent.

"Markus." It was more a groan than a word, Robert looking at him with the old heat in his eyes. Markus felt his cock jump and rose, making his way to Robert's chair, bending to plant both hands on the arms of it and look Robert in the eye.

"If we do, I want no recriminations."

"None, I vow. I gave up guilt long ago."

He nodded, straightened, hand out to help Robert up. "And you know that I am attached to Ellis now."

"Oh, good gad, Markus. I am married and I adore my wife. I think I know attachment."

"Just so we're clear."

"We are."

"Excellent."

Why Robert was different from the man at the docks Markus had no idea. Perhaps it was that there was no illusion here, no similarity. Robert was an old friend, they were both aroused by Ellis' letters, both in need, and aware of what they were doing.

Finally they reached his rooms and Markus stopped making excuses, choosing to enjoy instead, and turned to kiss Robert on the mouth. Oh, that was nice, slow and deep, easy as falling off a cliff. They undressed just as slowly, Robert bare for him, big and broad and buff, covered in blonde body hair.

Markus found the oil and began to prepare Robert for his entry. He never let anyone else do such a thing to him, had not since he was much younger, which made Ellis even more of an aberration.

Robert moaned, rocked, big hands reaching out to touch him, almost too gently. He thought of how Ellis had held him down, had pounded him, and Markus moaned, slicking his cock and pushing into Robert, needing release.

Spreading, grunting, Robert let him in, and, oh, he was so tight. So tight. "How long..."

"Not since you, Markus." Robert smiled, the expression strained. "I've been happy with Caroline."

"Good. She's a dear lady." He liked Robert's wife. Still, he liked Robert's arse, too, as tight as an untried youth. Markus rocked back and forth, riding in and out, pinching Robert's oddly pale nipples, reaching for Robert's hard, red prick and stroking.

It did not last long, could not, as aroused as they both were, and soon enough Robert arrived, great spurts of spunk covering their bellies. Markus closed his eyes, let his hips ride the rest of Robert's orgasm, then he set to, pushing deep, grunting as he spasmed and let loose.

"Oh. Thank you, my Lord."

So formal. Markus chuckled. "Oh, Robert, you are a delight. I shall even listen to your business clap trap. I only ask one thing."

"What is that?"

"That you have someone deliver a letter for me posthaste."

Robert laughed aloud. "Of course, Markus. Of course."

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*My dearest Ellis,*

*I hope you do not think you will escape me so easily?*

*Your apology was entirely unnecessary. What I am uncertain about is if I can forgive you for leaving me. Yes, I am about to become rampageously sentimental. I hope you will forgive me that.*

*I desire you, Ellis. Very much. Both in body and spirit. I have done nothing save think of you since you left. I even went out one evening and found a young man who looked like you. I would not let him speak, though, for it ruined the illusion.*

*I want you to come to me, Ellis, so that I am no longer dependent upon my hand, or upon the grace of strangers. I want you in my bed. I want to do the things we did and explore whole realms of things we did not. I think you want this, too. At least I pray you are not so fickle in your affections and have not moved on to a new correspondence.*

*Please say you will at least consent to write to me. I find I have great need of you.*

*Yours, indeed very much yours,*

*Markus*

Markus sent the letter off with Robert, the afternoon foreboding, dark and rainy. He could only hope it was not an omen.

He was met with only silence for some two weeks. Markus began to despair. The servants moved about him on tiptoe, silent and ghostlike. More than one figurine or decanter met its untimely death against the solid planking of his study door. Markus paced. He abused himself until his prick became raw. He drank and read Ellis' letters and generally acted like a lovesick idiot.

Perhaps that was what he was.

When the letter came it was totally unexpected, served on a tiny silver salver beside his supper plate where he ate in this study, not deigning to satisfy Gilders by eating in the dining room, though the table there was impressively and pointedly set.

He ripped it open with his butter knife, leaving a long smear of grease on the back of the paper.

It read:

*My dear M,*

*I am not sure I can believe my good fortune.*

*Truly, I am in a quandary. What an agony of hope you have given me. I cannot bring myself to come to your home. I pray you will meet with me at Madame M's, this coming Friday evening. Your usual time there, do you remember what it was? If you come I will know that you mean what you say, and we will come to some arrangement.*

*Listen to me. I sound so formal when I am positively giddy. I have missed you so, Markus, and have told myself over and over not to see you, not to go near you. I fancied that you were still in the country, or that you had perhaps gone on a tour of the continent, off in search of new sensation.*

*Oh, what wondrous thing that would be to do together. But I presume too much.*

*I beg of you, if you are toying with me, please end it now. I do not think I can bear it.*

*Yours,*

*Ellis*

Oh. Yes.

Markus only realized he had shouted when no less than two maids, a footman, and his valet all stuck their heads in to see what was about. He glared them all down and finished his meal with much greater satisfaction.

"Gilders!"

"Yes, my Lord?"

"Have a bath drawn."

"Yes, of course."

Knowing he has some time before the bath would be at the ready, as Gilders never hurried, Markus drew out a parchment and a quill, dashing off a quick note to Robert.

*My dearest friend,*

*Success! He's written to me. Thank you so for facilitating this correspondence. It means the world to me. Truly I sometimes wonder at my sanity, but this man affects me as no other, and I could not rest until I had found him again.*

*You have ever been a true friend to me, Robert and I fear I have not given you the approbation you warrant. Should there ever be anything you need, I am in your debt.*

*Affectionately,*

*Markus*

He sanded and sealed the letter, setting it on his mail tray for the footman to take out, and stood, stretching.

Markus sniffed. Gads, he was rank. He needed to bathe and shave. His spirits though, were lifted hugely, and he thought he might be able to face the next few days until he could see Ellis again.

Just a few short days.

Thank God.

## *Chapter Four*

On the evening of their assignation Markus arrived at Madame M's early, wishing to arrange things to his satisfaction. He had already been in contact with the formidable lady of the house, informing her that he wanted her best room, providing her with a menu, and a request for his two favorite young servers.

He feared the initial meeting would be awkward, and it was his thought that a feast, served by lovely young men and enjoyed in good company, might ease things. Perhaps then the difficult conversation he feared would become easier. He was dressed in his best, a silvery gray silk coat over a black and silver embroidered waistcoat. He wore short trousers of charcoal wool and silk stockings in a harlequin pattern of stark white and silver. His hair and face he had left unpowdered, for he hoped that the evening would end with tasting one another, and he found that he did not care for such things under his lips. Why then, should Ellis?

Madame met him in the foyer of the club, her hair rising to magnificent proportions, studded with bows and dead birds in the French style. Markus cut her a bow. "It is all prepared?"

"As you requested, my Lord."

"Excellent. Thank you." He passed her a small bag, the coin within enough to keep her in business for fully a year. True to her fine sense of discretion, however, she did not look. She simply smiled.

"These," she said, waving her red lace handkerchief, "are the lads you required. I hope they please?"

Oh, they were perfect. One dark, one fair, both lithe and pliant. They smiled at him, arms about each other, and Markus nodded at Madame. "They will do nicely. Above stairs, if you please. I will be up directly."

He turned back to his hostess. "I will wish to see the preparations above, naturally, but if I might have a pen and a parchment first?"

"Of course." She rang, and soon enough he had a fine quill and a pot of ink, a fresh sheet of parchment, and a small lap desk that he could use to compose his note. He thought that it would be the most appropriate to begin Ellis' evening with a short missive, in keeping with their theme of correspondence.

Unstopping the ink, Markus dipped the pen and began.

*My dearest Ellis,*

*I imagine being handed this note upon arrival will make you fear I have changed my mind, which is not at all my intention. I simply wish to assure you that I await you above. I have engaged us companions for our meal and hope that you will join me with all due haste.*

*Yours,*

*Markus*

Waving the parchment gently to dry it, Markus sealed it with the wax Madame provided him, handing it off to a liveried doorman with an admonition to give it to Ellis Houghton when he arrived. Then he ventured up the stairs to the room he had requested.

Perfection. Really, Madame might be flamboyant in her personal attire, but this room was a soothing mixture of creams and golds, with dark woods and a few splashes of deep

crimson, such as the decadent feather bed with its huge canopy. The sitting room was set with a round, low table and cushions on the floor, all covered in silk. Silver chafing dishes sat upon the table, scents both savory and sweet emanating from them.

The lads sat in the corner, nude, wrapped about each other and exchanging slow kisses. Markus hesitated to interrupt, but he had engaged their services, after all, and deserved their attention. He cleared his throat and the two young men sprang apart, guilty looks given from under soot-darkened lashes. They both smiled then, both of them coming to him, twining about him like a pair of cats, their hardened shafts rubbing against his thighs. Markus smiled, pushing them away just a bit, as he was not ready to begin until Ellis was with him.

"Prepare to serve the food. We await another."

"Yes, my Lord."

Such wonderfully trained lads. Markus eschewed the bed and the floor cushions in favor of a small chair, striking something of a pose. Or, at least, whatever pose his tight coat would allow. He hoped his agony of anticipation did not show on his face.

He swore the candles had burned down by half when the knock finally came upon the door. Undoubtedly he exaggerated, but he felt it. He motioned for one of the lads to answer the door, and soon enough there was his Ellis, striding into the room, Markus' note clutched in one fist. Markus simply looked his fill to begin, admiring the form Ellis cut in sober blue velvet and brown broadcloth, his fingers itching to pull the ribbon from the dark hair.

They stared at one another, and Ellis opened his mouth, but he closed it when the lad who had bade him enter stepped forward. "May I take your coat, sir?"

"Yes, of course." Ellis slipped the coat off and handed to the boy, surveying Markus' preparations all the while. Then Ellis smiled, dark eyes twinkling as they had at their first



meeting, when he had captivated Markus so, despite the injured shoulder. "It would seem as if you were looking very much forward to this, my Lord."

"You know very well you are to call me Markus." Markus stepped forward, holding out his hand, his breath caught in his chest as he waited.

"Very well, Markus." The brilliant smile he received made him breathe again, and Ellis stepped close, hand folding around his, warm and firm. "I have been anticipating this myself, hoping you meant what you said in your letter."

"I did. Kiss me?" Markus would not normally be so tentative, but he had to make sure that Ellis knew what he wanted, what he asked for. He wanted to be sure.

"Yes. Oh, yes." Ellis bent near, lips coming to cover his, staying gentle and sweet only for a moment before Ellis tilted his head and took his mouth so thoroughly that Markus could not draw air. He would gladly give up the air, however, and the kiss went on until a tiny moan broke the silence in the room.

Markus and Ellis drew apart, and Markus looked upon the two lads standing near the table, arms wrapped about each other, watching them with hungry eyes. Markus smiled at them, then at Ellis. "Shall we dine?"

"I believe so, yes. T'would be a shame to waste such a feast as you have laid out for me."

"So it would." Using the hand he still held, Markus pulled Ellis to the cushions beside the table. Ellis forestalled him for a moment, reaching to remove Markus' tight, restrictive coat. "I'm certain you will be more comfortable this way, Markus. Indeed, perhaps we should make use of our young companions to play valet?"

"Oh. Yes." Yes. He would like nothing better than to feed Ellis while lounging nude. He motioned to the boys and they came forward eagerly, separating to come to them one each, sweet hands carefully removing their attire and setting it aside. Ellis watched him all the while, dark eyes studying him with an intensity that made his heart pound and his cock rise.

"You are very beautiful, my Lord." That came, unexpectedly, from his young companion, and Markus rewarded him with smile and a kiss, cupping the sharp chin and tilting the rosy lips up to meet his. The lad tasted sweet, and the feel of the young man's hot hands sliding up over his shoulders was equally pleasant. Still, Markus pushed him aside gently.

"What is your name?"

"Jack, my Lord. And that is Matthew."

Matthew gave him a slow, happy smile as he pulled the last of Ellis' clothing off. Ellis simply stunned Markus with his beauty. Firm, lean muscles under milk-pale skin moved and bunched as Ellis stroked Matthew's hair. They looked good together, Ellis and the young one, but Markus knew he and Ellis would look even better, and he motioned for them to sit beside the table. Joining him, Ellis sat close, one arm going about his waist, and Markus caught his breath at the sensual pleasure of all of that skin rubbing against his.

"Feed us."

The lads nodded almost as one person and sidled close, picking up bits of this and that. The fair Matthew stayed at Ellis' side, the darker Jack serving him, and Markus found it a pleasing contrast. Almost as if he looked in a silver mirror. A candied violet touched his lips and Markus opened, licking it from the lad's finger. Ellis made a soft sound and Markus turned to him, leaning to share a kiss, share the taste. He savored the flavor of brandy in Ellis' mouth, the tiny bit of heat it created between their lips.

They separated once more and the meal went on in the same vein, the boys feeding them, Markus and Ellis licking the nimble fingers that fed them, then sharing the tastes with one another. Slow, sensual, the meal lasted well into the evening, with the boys feeding each other at the end while he and Ellis curled together, sharing kisses.

The need was there, the urgency only banked, not abated. The boys made them perhaps more circumspect, which sounded odd when one was nude and sitting practically aside

one's lover, but there it was. Ellis' hands braced his hips, and those dark eyes sparkled with lust and affection. "Shall we send the boys off, my love?"

His love. Oh. Markus enjoyed how that sounded from Ellis' lips. Still, it seemed unfair to leave Matthew and Jack unrewarded. "After they give us a bit of a show, hmm? I want you to taste each other, lads. Bring each other off."

Ellis nodded, giving the boys a bright grin. "Oh, yes. Lovely."

The lads gave him a grateful look. If he sent them off now they would have to work the night out with little or no satisfaction. They had been so good, so fine. They deserved it. As he and his beloved Ellis watched, Jack turned to Matthew and pushed him down, turning them on their sides, heads to hips. Lovely to watch, just as Ellis had said, as those soft, swollen mouths closed around hard shafts, both of the young ones moaning and arching.

Ellis reached out, ran his hand down a flank, adding to the sensation for Matthew, and Markus moaned along with the lads, hands moving upon Ellis' skin. The scent of their feast soon dissipated under the smell of male need, intoxicating him. Ellis was similarly affected, shifting restlessly under him. The boys moved faster and faster, the wet sounds of mouths on flesh filling the air as their heads bobbed back and forth, the shining pale color of Matthew's hair a stark contrast to the dark curls at Jack's groin. Markus moaned. That was how he and Ellis would appear, he knew.

"Now. We wish to see. Now, Jack."

Jack was so obviously the leader of the two, and he nodded, moaning for them, taking Matthew down to the root, hands making some magic he could not see. Matthew practically screamed around Jack, hips snapping as he spent, and soon Jack had joined him, spilling into Matthew's mouth. It was utterly entrancing.

The boys uncurled, licking their lips and blinking, and Markus rose from Ellis' lap to give them both a kiss. "You've done so well. Get into my coat, There's a small black bag there for you. Do not share more than a third of it with Madame."

So pretty, those smiles. The boys assumed their clothing and left, and at last he was alone with Ellis, turning to face him. "Did you like the repast I prepared, my Ellis?"

"It was most satisfying. And yet I find I need another morsel. Come here, my Lord M."

He went, sliding easily into Ellis' arms as if it were the most natural thing on earth. Perhaps it was. It certainly seemed so. Markus took a kiss, his lips sealing over Ellis', tongue dipping in to taste. The flavor was like opium, addictive, sending him into the delirium that only Ellis had ever produced. Indeed, when he thought on it too long, it made him fearful. Markus chose not think.

Ellis held him, hands strong upon his back, digging into his skin. It was as if the tenderness had left the room with the boys, for his own fingers scraped down over Ellis' chest, his short nails leaving lurid marks there. His marks. The idea excited him, and he bent to the task with extreme pleasure, lips sliding to mark Ellis' neck with a purple bruise.

Ellis moaned, the sound rough, raw, and pushed him hard, so that he tumbled to the floor, the silken cushions breaking his fall. Ellis moved astride him, legs on either side of his thighs.

"I fear I must apologize, my Lord, for while I enjoyed your dining arrangement, I cannot abide more teasing. I must have you now."

"There's oil." He waved his hand in the direction of the other tray of preparations; it contained a selection of oils and toys.

Nodding, a smile growing on his face, Ellis reached for a stoppered bottle of clear oil and opened it, sniffing appreciatively. "Only the best for you, hmm?"

"For you." He stroked Ellis' chest, pinched the flat male nipples. "Hurry."

"Yes."

He waited eagerly for Ellis to prepare him, but instead Ellis wet his fingers and slid them back behind, pushing them into Ellis' own body. 'Twas a trick he had seen before, but it had never looked more erotic, had never aroused him to such a fever as it did now.

Markus panted, reaching down to squeeze the base of his prick so as not to spend as he watched.

"Yes. Yes, precisely."

Ellis pulled his glistening fingers away from his body and rose up, working up to sit astride his hips before seating Markus' cock at the wet entrance of his body. Markus gasped as the head slid home, Ellis hot and tight around him. When Ellis' buttocks met his thighs, he thought he might simply expire with bliss.

They moved, Ellis rising and falling upon him, Markus arching up. Their hands moved as well, pressing, bruising with the intensity of their touches. The sight of a deep blue mark rising on Ellis' hip made him moan, made his prick twitch inside Ellis. Then Ellis shifted, leaning both hands on his chest to wiggle and press and Markus knew precisely when he hit the spot inside Ellis that brought the most intense pleasure, for Ellis tightened down upon him like a vise.

"Yes. Oh, yes." Ellis' voice came, breathless and deep with need. "Please. Again."

"Mine." He gripped those lean hips hard, wrenching Ellis down upon him again and again, and was rewarded by the rolling of those dark eyes, by the loud exclamations. With one hand he reached for Ellis' prick, thumb scraping the foreskin back and forth, and was rewarded immediately with Ellis' seed as it splashed over his hand.

He managed to hold his own climax long enough to see Ellis' face as he spent, to watch those eyes. Then Markus let loose his control and shot deep and hard into Ellis' body, his little death roaring in his own ears, making him weak and dizzy for long moments.

Such things this man made him feel. Such wondrous things.

"Shall we adjourn to the bed, Markus? I imagine your back must be protesting, hmm?"

Markus blinked. Tried to bludgeon his overheated brain into thought. "Yes. We should bring the wine as well."

They finally moved, Markus sliding from Ellis' body, Ellis rising to offer him a hand up. They washed off before climbing into the large bed and curling together, a luxury of time that they had not enjoyed before, at least not for very long.

"Promise me you will not slip away and disappear, Ellis."

"You have my word, Markus. You will not see the dawn without me this time."

"Good." He stroked Ellis idly, with no real intent. It was simply a fine thing to have their scents mingled, their limbs tangled together.

"There is something I must ask, though."

"Yes, my love?" Oh, he liked that, calling Ellis "love." It made him giddy. Markus found it rather amusing, as he had never been one for unrestrained giddiness.

"Are you sure you do not take too big a risk with me, Markus?"

He met Ellis' eyes, a scoffing remark upon his lips, but soon enough he could see that Ellis was deadly serious. "Whatever do you mean?"

"I mean that it is one thing to take up with a young actor, or to visit Madame M's for occasional pleasure. Even the stodgiest of the old guard can abide such small decadence. But you are a peer, Markus. Taking up with a mature man such as myself, and with some stability, might cause you great difficulty."

"Nonsense. I am a lowly Viscount. No one cares what I do, not even my father the Earl, I assure you."

"Are you quite sure?" Ellis stroked his cheek, kissed his mouth. "I would never be the cause of any difficulty for you."

"Then simply do not run away from me again."

"I will not. I vow it."

"Excellent. Have I thanked you?"

Ellis laughed, the sound pushing warm air across one of Markus' nipples. "For what, my Lord?"

"For beginning our correspondence?"

"No. But if you thank me for that, then I must thank you for continuing it."

Now it was his turn to laugh. "Yes, well. Then we will consider ourselves equal."

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure, my Lord. Shall we continue it even now? I vow, it intrigues me to see who might outdo one another."

The thought intrigued him as well. "Yes. I think we shall."

"Excellent."

There was little talk after that, simply another effort to see who might come out on top.

## Chapter Five

*My dearest E,*

Dipping his quill again, Markus began his newest letter to Ellis. Somehow, even though they were well acquainted now, it was thrilling to have a written correspondence. The very idea seemed...illicit. Dangerous, as well, should someone intercept the missives, for they were quite explicit.

*We have been too long apart. I hope that you will indulge me with a meeting this coming week. I have need of you. The marks of your passion fade from my skin even now, and I would have new ones as delicious reminders of our time together.*

*Your last missive found me most intrigued. I should love to accompany you to this place you describe. The very idea... In all of the time I have enjoyed the sort of amusements I indulge in, I have never done such things, not for lack of desire, but for lack of opportunity.*

A spark of mischief made him add the next paragraph.

*I am curious, though, to find out just who gets flogged at such a place. Do tell me, my darling. Are there boys willing? Do we find someone among the other guests? Or will I be able to exercise my strong right arm upon your flesh?*

*Oh, E, the very thought hardens me, even now. I must have you, and soon. Do not make me wait much longer. I cannot bear it.*

*Yours as ever,*



*Markus*

Once the tone of desperation might have concerned him, Markus thought. Now, though, he knew that Ellis felt much the same about him, and he did not care that he let his need show.

The missive dried, and Markus folded it, sealing it carefully. They knew now to look to make sure their correspondence was not tampered with, as it could mean ruin for Ellis, at least, should the letters be read. Markus had very little reputation to ruin, for all that he'd panicked well and truly when he first began to receive Ellis' letters. Or perhaps Ellis simply made him feel reckless.

He sent the letter off, hoping for a speedy response from his beloved E. He had need. Markus sat back, rubbing at the front placket of his trousers.

Great need, indeed.

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The return letter came while Markus was engaged in business, which he dabbled in from time to time. This venture was a canal scheme, and while it seemed farfetched, Richard was a good friend, and Markus wanted to help him by providing some capital.

Gilders, damn the man, brought the letter in on a salver and set it beside his elbow on his desk, fading in and out of the room like a ghost. Really, the man did not seem to easily accept Markus' good mood of late and had done everything in his power to ruin it. Markus would have to come up with some diabolical task as fitting punishment.

His hands twitched, but he did not reach for the letter. Richard must have his say first and leave, for it would not do to sport red cheeks and a hardened shaft while listening to prattle about locks and mule teams.

"Markus, really. Are you even listening?"

"Of course I am." Though for the last who knew how long he had not been, and he and Richard both knew it. Markus smiled, cheeks heating slightly. "I am sorry, Richard. I admit I had decided to back your venture, and from there I lost track of the technical details."

"You'll back me? Excellent!" Richard stood, reaching to pump his hand enthusiastically. "Shall I have papers drawn then?"

"Yes, that will be fine."

"Thank you, Markus. I vow you will not be disappointed."

"Of course, not, Richard. I trust you."

He trusted Richard as much as anyone he invested in, any road. He would not tell the man that any money invested in such ventures for his friends came from a fund that he could easily afford to lose, as he set it aside just for such things.

Markus had no intention of becoming one of those silly destitute nobles who was forced to marry to regain a fortune lost to gambling and bad business.

Richard finally rushed out, full of ideas and energy, and Markus went to lock the door after him, not wanting to be interrupted while he read Ellis' missive. It would be just like Gilders to burst in and catch him with his prick in his hand.

He finally settled not behind his desk but in the large reading chair by the back window. He had closed the heavy drapes so no curious gardener or, indeed, valet might see. Only then did he take up his letter opener and break the still-perfect seal.

*My dear Lord M,*

*I too am feeling the distance between us keenly. We have been too long apart indeed.*

*Let me tell you why I have not been able to attend you. In the last fortnight, I have been called upon inexplicably by my father to attend my mother's sickbed. I say inexplicably,*

*for while she is frail as she always has been, she does not appear to be suffering any discernable illness.*

*This leads me to wonder if perhaps my father has heard aught of our arrangement. I cannot believe he has, for the social circles in which you move and those he inhabits could not be more different.*

*It could simply be that my father is the one suffering some illness and that he reluctant to tell me. Indeed, he is most stubborn, and I am working to glean what his real motive is. Until then I fear it is not safe for us to dally, for his summonses come at all hours of the day and night.*

*I miss your touch, Markus. I miss your mouth, and the way that you fight me every step of the way. I am sorry if this sounds...inelegant. Indecently needful. But there it is.*

*The place I wish for us to go is full of choices that will make your head spin. There are exquisite young men who will do any bidding, or we might choose another guest to be with us. As for what you suggest, I vow Markus, I have not done so for any other, man or woman. For you, though. Oh, my darling M, for you I might, just so that I might wear your marks on me for days afterward.*

*I vow, Markus, the thought intrigues me beyond bearing.*

*As soon as I know what my father is about, I will find you, and we will go together to Arnaud's, and we will see who is able to leave marks upon whom.*

*Until then, I shall dream of you.*

*Yours ever faithfully,*

*E*

Indecently needful? Hardly. Markus found Ellis' letter unbearably arousing and wasted no time opening the tiny buttons under the placket of his trousers, pulling out his prick and fondling it roughly.

Markus stroked himself quickly, the thought of Ellis stretched beneath him, skin mottled with dark marks made by his own hand teasing him, enticing him so that he panted and wriggled and acted like an untried youth at his first sight of a stocking-clad ankle.

When he spent it was explosive, his breath bursting from his lungs, and Markus sat for long moments with his hand wrapped about himself, blinking at the very violence of it. He hoped that Ellis' father would reveal himself. And soon.

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"Gilders!"

"Yes, my Lord?"

Markus finished his scribbling, noting with irritation that his quill was in want of sharpening. He did not seal the parchment, waving it dry instead and waiting impatiently for the rest of Gilders to catch up to the disembodied voice.

"Shift it, Gilders."

"My Lord!" Gilders appeared, wrinkled face pinched in lines of disapproval.

"I have a list of things I want prepared." Markus handed the newly inked list to Gilders.

"I want all of it very particularly, so no cheating."

A noise escaped Gilders that reminded him of steam escaping a kettle. "Cheating? Have I ever given less than perfect service, my Lord?"

"Do you wish me to answer that, Gilders?"

"No, my Lord." That long nose went up. "Was there anything else, my Lord."

"As quickly as possible, Gilders. I wish all to be in readiness by tonight."

"Naturally you do."

"That will be all."

Gilders positively sashayed out of the room, every line of his body bespeaking injured dignity. Markus smiled, enjoying getting the better of the man. It did not happen often.

His plan was a sound one. He had sent a runner to make sure that Ellis was at home and that his father was nowhere to be seen. Poor man was evidently exhausted, and Markus felt for him, but he needed. He knew that Ellis no doubt needed an outlet for his own urges, and Markus wanted to accommodate that in every way.

By the time he was dressed in a deep blue velvet coat with gold embroidery, a gold and cream waistcoat and cream trousers, his hair pulled back under a hat, his carriage was ready. The crests were covered as he requested; the coachman was one of his most trusted men. For all of his faults, Gilders could be efficient.

"I will not be home this evening, Gilders. Please remove the knocker," he said as he assumed his greatcoat and gloves, Gilders holding them for him gingerly.

"Yes, my Lord. Shall I take in the bootscraper as well?"

"You are not amusing."

"No, my Lord."

He did not let Gilders see his laughter, for that was undeniably against the rules of their sparring. Instead, he swept past much as Gilders would have and climbed up into the carriage, nodding at the two stout footmen hanging onto the back. They nodded, both of them looking well satisfied with their assignment. Who would not? 'Twas exciting.

The carriage rattled across the cobbled streets, taking him to a very different part of town than his own, and Markus sipped brandy from a small silver flask, keeping the windows

carefully covered. He did not wish to be seen, and the more they traversed into Ellis' home area, the more it smelled. He had asked Ellis to let him buy a house in a better section, but Ellis argued that he must treat his patients day and night, and he could not if he moved.

They reached Ellis' home in due time, Markus feeling restless and twitchy by the time they arrived. Perhaps he had been too hasty about this. Still, as he listened to his footmen pound upon Ellis' door, he felt flutters of excitement in his belly, felt his prick begin to stir. The temptation to look out the window was enormous, but he managed not to, waiting instead. He heard breathless shouts, the sounds of a fierce struggle, but soon enough the carriage door opened, and a bound blindfolded Ellis fell through the door, landing on his knees as the door was shut firmly behind him.

Turning his head wildly, Ellis spoke roughly as the carriage lurched into motion. "Who are you? What do you want?"

Markus reached for the blindfold, unable to abide the fear he could hear under the sharp words. While he loved seeing Ellis bowed and tied, he did not want real fear to ever factor into their assignments. The blindfold came off, and Ellis blinked at the light from the small interior lantern, relaxing visibly at the sight of Markus.

"Markus? What is this about?"

Helping Ellis up to the seat across from him, Markus dusted off Ellis' clothing but did not move to untie him.

"I am spiriting you away, my love. I have been unbearably patient. I will wait no longer."

Those dark eyes burned for him, Ellis looking at him as if he were something new, exciting. Markus smiled, pulled out his flask. "Would you like a drink?"

Ellis simply nodded, and Markus gave him a sip of brandy, wetting Ellis' lips with it before leaning to kiss it off. A gasp breathed into his mouth, Ellis' lips opening so his

tongue might press inside. When Markus leaned back, both he and Ellis panted for breath.

So deep, the need between them. So heated. Markus stroked Ellis' smooth cheek, feeling a day's worth of whiskers. The dark circles beneath Ellis' eyes drew his fingertips as well, and he stroked them, feeling Ellis' eyelashes flutter against his skin.

"Will you untie me?"

"In due time. I have plans for you."

A flush rose in Ellis' cheeks, the uncertainty as delicious as it was unusual.

"What sort of plans?"

"I intend to take you to Arnaud's. I intend to have my way with you. And I intend to keep you there all night, where your father and your patients and my valet cannot disturb us."

Those eyes went fiery. "I have need of you as well, my Markus."

"I know." He sat back, waiting for them to arrive at their destination. Instead of awaiting Ellis, Markus had contacted Arnaud's and had found that a bit of coin went a long way with the canny French proprietress. She had agreed to let them enter through the rear and take a private room at the top of the back stairs, for ease of entrance and exit. He also provided for their late meal, and for various...accoutrements.

The carriage jolted again, creaking to a stop, and Markus reached to brace Ellis, who could not do so with no help from his bound hands. They pressed together for a moment, and Ellis searched out his lips, begging a kiss. It was odd for them to not be on equal footing, for Ellis to be suppliant. Markus found that he liked it, but he knew he would need to play the same role for Ellis at some time. They were truly equals.

"Are you ready for my game, my love?" he asked, stroking Ellis' cheek.

"Yes. I trust in you."

"Thank you."

They struggled out of the carriage, Markus' footmen giving them aid, helping them up the back stairs where a lovely young woman with a face like a cut stone unlocked a room for them, showing them in. The room smelled sumptuous and was appointed beautifully, something Markus did not expect from its location.

He had the men leave Ellis seated on the large bed, telling them to leave him until the morrow. Ellis simply looked at him wordlessly until the door had closed with a click and Markus had worked the filigreed latch.

"So what now, my Lord Farringdon?"

"Now we play."

Markus walked to stand just before Ellis, pulling off Ellis' greatcoat and tossing his hat aside. Ellis looked at him, breathing in deeply, his eyes going so dark.

"You are beautiful, Markus."

His cheeks flushed. Sometimes the pleasure he felt at Ellis' admiration made him feel like an untried youth rather than the experienced rake he was. He smiled. "Thank you, Ellis. So are you, but I think I might know how to enhance you."

Oh, yes, he very much thought they might enhance that beauty. First, though, he must rid Ellis of those clothes. His own coat and waistcoat he stripped off and laid aside, leaving him in breeches, boots, and shirt sleeves. Markus went to the table next to the fire, where all of the preparations were laid out. Excellent. He took up a silvery knife, testing its sharp edge. Perfect.

Ellis' eyes widened as he turned back. "Markus. What are you about?"

"Do not fear, Ellis. I have clothing for you to assume in the morning." He moved to play valet, taking Ellis' boots off first, then setting his blade to Ellis' stocking, tearing right



along the seam with his knife. Goodness. 'Twas like hot tallow. The breeches went next, and every glimpse he snuck of Ellis' face showed red cheeks and wide eyes. The shirt went last, and only then did Markus realized he'd taken Ellis with no protection from the cold.

"Shall I stoke the fire, love?"

"No. Thank you. Have we any more brandy, though?"

"Yes, of course." In fact, they had better brandy now than any he carried in his flask. Markus poured a glass, admiring the fine crystal, and brought it to Ellis. "I must say, this is a most agreeable establishment."

"It is." Ellis drank from the glass, licking his lips when he pulled back. "Thank you."

The firelight made Ellis' skin glow. He could only imagine how his marks would work on it. "You're welcome. Kneel up for me, love." Markus helped Ellis to kneel, head bowed, hands bound at the small of his back. The rounded cheeks of Ellis' buttocks were left uncovered, as were his upper thighs. Just what he wanted.

"I want to leave my mark on you, Ellis. But I will not if you are not willing. I promise you I would have you do the same to me."

"The very thought excites me beyond reason, Markus."

He could see it was true in the way a flush moved down Ellis' back. He heard it, also, in the quiver in Ellis' voice. Yes. They would play this game well. He went back to the table, setting the brandy aside. He was uncertain as to what instrument to use, so he picked what he thought the simplest, a single whip that looked almost like a riding crop. He swished it through the air, listening to the sound it made as it cracked against his boot. The sound made Ellis jump.

The hardest part became walking back to the bed. He had chosen this game, and he would see it through, but he was uncertain. Markus almost laughed. He had bruised, marked,

and tied many a boy. But he had never beaten one, and never had he thought of it with Ellis until the man himself had mentioned it. "You will tell me, somehow, if it becomes too much."

"You will know if it does. You know me like no one else."

Markus hoped sincerely that it was true. He nodded, stroking Ellis' back. "Very well, then. Let us begin."

The first blow landed on Ellis' buttocks and barely made a sound. A soft sigh came from Ellis, a simple exhalation, and he would swear Ellis pushed back, inviting more. He knew he must do better than that, and so his next blow held more sting, cracking across Ellis' skin. A dark mark bloomed across Ellis' backside, and Markus was amazed to feel how it affected him, his prick positively jumping.

"Again?"

"Yes. Please. That's...oh."

Oh, yes. The tremor in Ellis' voice and the shiver of his muscles was lovely. Unutterably so. So Markus hit him again, and again, until a pattern of stripes crisscrossed Ellis' fine skin, red and raised. He stopped when there was nowhere his touch had not landed, holding his hand over the skin to feel its heat.

"Are you well, my love?"

He tilted Ellis' head up, meeting those rich, dark eyes. Ellis appeared transformed, face flushed, eyes streaming. "I am. Oh, Markus..."

Ellis' voice broke, and he shuddered, and suddenly Markus needed him with an intensity that caused him physical pain. He went for the knife, cutting Ellis loose and tossing the ropes and knife to the floor. He turned Ellis into his arms, kissing him soundly, receiving a deep moan for his troubles.

As if unable to remain in the passive role any longer, Ellis grabbed him and pushed him down on the bed, tearing at his clothing. "Oil, Markus. Where is the oil?"

"On the table." He gasped it out, the sudden shift in the balance of power stunning him. Ellis went for the oil and returned quickly, slick hands positioning him just so, two fingers sliding inside him without preamble. Markus grunted, opened his thighs widely, begged for it wordlessly. Ellis wasted little time before pushing the broad head of his prick against Markus' opening, pressing deep inside.

They moved together, his hands clutching Ellis' shoulders before slipping down to touch the welts he'd left. They fairly throbbed under his fingers, and Ellis cried out, hips pumping as he took Markus hard, their skin slapping louder than the whip had on Ellis' back. His eyes rolled back in his head, his prick rubbed Ellis' belly, and Markus shot so hard that lights burst before his eyes.

Ellis was not far behind, straining above him, eyes wide. Then sweet heat filled him as Ellis spent deep inside him, coming down to rest upon Markus's chest, face tucked into the hollow of his neck and shoulder.

Markus smiled at the trompe-l'oeil ceiling as he stroked Ellis' back. "You enjoyed my game, then?"

Ellis nodded, cheek rough against his skin. "I cannot wait to play a game or two of my own, my Lord."

"I shall look forward to it. Do not leave me alone again so long in the future."

Ellis leaned back to look at him, the smile he received one Markus knew only he saw. "I vow, I will not, my Lord. Despite how I enjoyed the result."

"Excellent." Markus nodded, his satisfaction complete. Still, if Ellis did allow too much time to pass, he knew how to remedy the situation. And he would put his plan into motion whenever necessary.

## *Chapter Six*

*My dear Lord M,*

*You asked me to be sure that less time went by before I contacted you again. I have endeavored to do so, but you have not answered my letters. I refused to believe that you had lost interest in me, my M, and so I came to your home to find the knocker removed from the door. You have left town on what I can only assume is an emergency.*

*I admit to being frightened, my Markus. I fear that you will find another. I fear that your father has learned of our liaison and has decided to put an end to it. I fear many things, chief of which is never seeing you again. Please, Markus, if you receive any of my missives, please reply, so I might know that you are safe, even if you wish to sever our friendship. Though I pray you do not.*

*I miss you, M. Please let me know.*

*Yours as ever,*

*Ellis*

The letter finally reached him more than a fortnight after his arrival at his father's home, and Markus was furious. He had not wished to go so quickly when summoned, so quickly that he had not even been able to dash off a note, but to know that the letter he had sent to Ellis since had not been delivered made him livid.

His father had indeed called him hither under some pretense he had not been able to sort out yet, and Markus felt it was perhaps time to beard the lion in his den so he might return to Ellis and reassure him that he was indeed still desired. Greatly.

Late in the afternoon, Markus stormed his father's study, invading the man's inner sanctum. His father sat behind the gilded desk that had been in fashion when he and Markus' mother married, wig askew and waistcoat unbuttoned. Markus shook his head. Really, the man was sinking into the role of country squire far too intently.

"I demand to know why I have been summoned this instant, father. And why my mail has not been allowed out of the house."

"Your mail?"

Oh, his father had a maddening way of looking perplexed when he wanted to avoid the subject and on fixating on the lesser part of the question. Those graying brows gyrated, his father trying to think of something creditable, no doubt, and Markus cursed roundly. At least Ellis' father had used the excuse of his ill mother.

"My letters. Why am I here, Father?"

His father sighed, sitting back in his chair and steepling his fingers. "I have ever been patient with your amours and indiscretions, Markus. But this I feel I must put a stop to."

"This?"

Markus crossed his arms over his chest, staring down at his father, refusing the implied order to sit. He wanted to stand on his own two feet, firmly planted. This was the first time his father had ever directly mentioned his amours, and Markus feared it would only get worse.

"This thing you have begun with the young doctor. Oh, yes," his father continued, obviously hearing his indrawn breath. "I have known about it nearly since your first meeting. You are indiscreet. It worries me, son."

"Indiscreet..."

He could not fathom it. He and Ellis had been far more clandestine than Markus had been with any of his young actors or other paramours. How could his father think it so obvious?

"Yes, Markus. It is one thing to go about with some young trollop of no consequence. But really, Markus, Ellis Houghton may not be gentry, but he is a medical doctor, and his father is rather well known in the realm of classical history."

"Really?"

He had assumed that Ellis' claim of rather humble origins was more true than perhaps it was. Of course, Ellis was a modest man when it came to that, so perhaps to him it was so.

"Yes, really. Markus, I have never been difficult, even though the knowledge that you had no desire to reproduce disappointed me. But this I must address with a firm hand. People have begun to talk."

He tried not to snort. People talked. The more they talked the less he cared what they said.

"I am sorry it concerns you. But I assure you, it is my own business."

"It is until someone tosses you in gaol for sodomy, my son. It is a jailing offense, you know."

Markus stared. "Who am I harming?"

"Young Ellis' reputation, for one. I have a letter from his father. His peers are starting to question his fitness to practice his profession."

Markus finally sat, his eyes wide and mouth open. He had no idea...well. Perhaps he had and he had simply ignored it. Still, he would not let this stop him from seeing his Ellis,

and if Ellis' letter was any indication, he did not wish Markus to stop either. That was that. He snapped his mouth shut and squared his shoulders.

"I am not your sole source of heirs, as you well know. So I do not thank you for your interference. I am going back to town now."

Markus stood, intending to leave the room in a great huff, only to be stopped as his father clapped his hands and two stout footmen stepped forward, cutting him off. He stared them down, both of them having been childhood friends, but they only looked away, hands clenching.

"You cannot really expect to keep me here this way."

"I can and will. I will let you write your paramour exactly one more missive. One in which you break it off. Do you understand?"

He did not, and he would not, but Markus recognized the look in his father's eyes. He saw it in the silvered glass of his own dressing room daily. So he nodded.

"Yes, Father. I understand."

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*My darling E,*

Having found a footman who was not only bribable but, through childhood guilt, inducible to lie to his father, Markus sat down to write a missive to Ellis that his father would not see. The one he would send on his father's order was already written and in his father's hand, being scrutinized for any indiscretion, no doubt.

*You must ignore the letter you will receive with this one, declaring my intention to break off with you. I mean to do no such thing. I tell you, Ellis, our fathers are conspiring against us. Mine has me under house arrest at his country home in Surrey, and I cannot even begin to speak my fury. I will say that you must not despair. I will find a way to slip*

*the bounds of my father's will, for I am a grown man and fully capable of making my own decisions.*

*That being said, I must also tell you that my father says our liaison might affect your livelihood, and I have no desire to hurt you in any way. I will understand, and yes, mourn, if you wish to end our association. I hope you will not, as we still have much to learn, my E. So much to share. But please know that I am thinking of you every day and that as soon as I am able, I will see you again unless you tell me aught to deter me.*

*I hope that I will see you, or at least hear from you soon. I ache for you, my E. So very much.*

*Yours in all things,*

*Markus*

The very tone of the letter depressed his spirits, for he was truly unused to needing anyone. Yet he did. He needed Ellis.

More than he ever wanted to admit, even to himself.

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It took more than a week for Markus to find a way to see if the letter had been safely delivered. He wanted to know that it had been put right into Ellis' hands. Finally he was told it had been taken just so, and Markus set his mind to finding a way around his father's erstwhile prison.

'Twas a week after that still that he thought he had found a way to get away, and then he knew he must be careful, or he would be caught. That was when the footman brought him Ellis' letter.

"It came this morning, my Lord. I knew you would want it immediately."



He rewarded the man with a smile, and with some coins from his purse as well. "You did well, Roger. Thank you."

Once the door closed behind Roger, Markus slipped the latch and opened the letter, his heart racing.

*My dearest Lord M,*

*How relieved I was to get your letter. Your true letter.*

Markus smiled. Ellis had gotten his real missive then, finally. Thank God.

*I would not have you thinking that you are hurting my life as a physician. Contrary to my father's opinion, I will never work at having clients who are powerful and rich, and the people I treat for the diseases of the poor and desperate do not care what I do or with whom I do it.*

*That said, as I believe you said yourself, I would not cause you trouble with your father.*

*Now that I have been noble, I must tell you that I miss you. Desperately. I ache for you still, my M, and grow needy to the point that I fear for my sanity. I must see you. Tell me how I may. I have been hesitant due to the collusion of our fathers to come to you as I did when you retreated to your own country home, for I felt they would know we were making the attempt and stop us.*

*How maddening it is to be treated as a child. I know that my father has his heart in the right place, but I tell you, Markus, it wears upon me to have his interference.*

Here something was scraped away with a sharp implement, and Markus could not read it. Damn the man, that sort of thing would drive him mad.

*That, I suppose is between my father and me.*

*I wander from the point.*

*Tell me what we may do, what might happen to bring us together. I will do whatever I must. The relief when I knew that you had not forsaken me, oh, Markus it was crushing. I love you so.*

*Write to me soon.*

*Yours,*

*Ellis*

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He had to get away. Letters could no longer suffice to make sure he communicated his feelings to Ellis. Ellis who said he loved him.

Markus simply stood and held the letter for a long while before tucking it carefully away in his clothing. He did not wish his father to see it should they meet while Markus made his arrangements. If he had his way he would be with Ellis, and soon, and no one would stop them.

He loved Ellis just as much as the man did him.

They would find a way.

## *Chapter Seven*

Markus made good his escape in the middle of the night, taking only what he could carry on horseback. He had arranged with a dear friend whom his father would never accuse of collusion to stay at a hunting lodge some miles away from any sort of civilization, and he had sent Ellis a letter, rather cryptically inviting him to join him there.

*My dear E,* it read.

*I believe I may have found a temporary solution to our difficulty. Please contact Mr. Farrell Easton at this direction in town. He will know what you ask, and will give you all of the information you need.*

*All my regard,*

*Markus*

He enclosed in the letter a card containing Farrell's direction in town, and sent it off with the footman he trusted. He also wrote a note for his father.

*Dear Father,*

*I fear the constant watchfulness in this house wears upon me. I am going to the hunting cot. Please do not send your watchdogs after me, or I vow I shall disappear forever. You may expect my return in a fortnight.*

*Your dutiful son,*

*Markus*

Having dealt with the preparations, Markus fled, hoping against all hope that Ellis would await him or would soon be with him once he arrived. He longed to feel Ellis' skin, to taste Ellis' breath. He longed to hear Ellis tell him of his love aloud. Yes, that above all things.

The hunting cot was more or less clean, and as soon as Markus got a fire going, it was warm and cheery as well. He was relieved to see that his friend Farrell had indeed provided new bedding and a good bottle of brandy. How lucky he was to have good and reliable friends.

Markus waited. He paced. He spent a good day and a half looking out the window to the front of the lodge and eating bread and cheese. Damnation. What if Ellis had not gotten his missive? What if Ellis had tried to come to him and was foiled by his father?

Finally, on the second day of his self-imposed exile, Markus heard hoofbeats outside his door, soft on the loamy ground. His heart in his throat, he looked out, and sure enough, it was his Ellis, dressed in a caped greatcoat and hat, swinging down from his mount to come and knock eagerly at the stout door.

Before he even thought, Markus had opened the door and taken Ellis in his arms, smelling horse and damp and man, and it made his heart leap.

"Oh, Ellis. It has been too long."

"Yes, my Markus, it has. Where shall I stable the nag?"

"Come. I will show you. We are quite without servants."

"Wait. There is something I must do first."

"What...mmm." Oh. Ellis simply grabbed his shoulders and pulled him close for a searing kiss, that mouth he dreamed of opening upon his, tongue pushing into his own mouth. There was no more time for talk, no more time for anything but their urgency as Ellis pushed him right up against the cold wall and took his mouth like there was no tomorrow.

The thought chilled him even more.

Markus struggled out of the embrace.

"I intend that we shall not need to leave the comfort of our bed for at least a day, Ellis. Let us stable your mount first, so we need not worry on it."

"Very well, but I do so grudgingly." The smile he received took any sting from the words, and Ellis walked along beside him to the small barn. "Has it been very bad, you and your father?"

"It has." Even now the idea left his cheeks red and his chest tight. "He intercepted all of my mail and had the footmen treat me as a prisoner."

"He really held you against your will?"

"He really did."

"Well, Markus, it has not been the least amusing being separated from you, but I must say that is an experience you may dine out on for years to come."

Ellis' eyes simply twinkled at him, and Markus laughed aloud, the joy he took in Ellis' company coming to the fore.

They got the nag stabled and fed his own horse, and off they went back to the lodge, touching frequently on the way. By the time they reached the lodge he was breathless, needing, his prick hard in his trousers. Ellis seemed just as eager and pulled him inside, pulling him close for another kiss that warmed him clear through.

"Oh, how I missed you, my love," Ellis said.

His love. Ellis' love. The words sent a shudder through him. Markus took Ellis' face in his hands, kissing the man deeply, tasting him. Their lips bruised one another's, teeth biting into the tender insides. How could he ever have known, when this strange correspondence started, how he would someday feel about his mysterious E?

Fingers fumbling, Markus worked the fastenings on Ellis' rough clothing, finding the smooth, unmarked skin beneath. That would never do. Markus bent, pressing his mouth to the base of Ellis' throat and sucking up a mark, lurid and red. Ellis gasped, Markus' name coming in broken syllables from Ellis' mouth.

"Markus. Please."

"Yes. Help me. I want to see you."

"Yes."

They struggled out of their confining garments, and once bare they tumbled on the bed together, both of them touching, reckless and fast.

"Markus. Oh." Ellis looked at him, eyes wide and inky, then slid right down his body to put that fine mouth on him, right at the head of his prick, sucking it in and rubbing the foreskin with his rough tongue.

Markus shouted, body bucking uncontrollably. Hot and wet, Ellis' mouth worked him, making him crazed with need, and Markus reached for anything solid in his spinning world, his hands landing on Ellis' shoulders. One hand stayed there, the other grasping at the curls at the base of Ellis' neck, directing the movement of Ellis' mouth on him.

It went on and on, Ellis' lips soft against him, then a hint of teeth scraping across his nerves, making him jump. Clever fingertips found his balls, rolled them gently, then pulled them down to keep him from going off too fast. Markus shook, shuddered, cried out Ellis' name, but just as he thought he would spend himself with a violence heretofore unknown, Ellis stopped.

"Ellis! What?"

"Hush. I want more than that."

Spreading him wider than Markus thought possible, Ellis bent to lick behind his balls, all the way back to his entrance, licking around the tight muscle there, shocking him to silence. 'Twas not long before Ellis slipped two fingers inside him, wet tongue easing the way for them, stretching him good and deep.

"I would be in you, Markus. I want to see your face as I love you. Want you to know that you are mine."

"I am." He could scarcely speak for his excitement, for his terrible need. Markus opened himself, offered himself, let Ellis have him, and Ellis slid home so deep and hard that it rattled his teeth. The very act rocked him to the core, for it was possessive, fierce. Markus clung to Ellis, head falling back as Ellis bent and set teeth to his throat, and wondered once again at the circumstances that could make a man such as he surrender so.

Ellis' prick stretched him, opened him, smooth and hot inside him. Their balls rubbed together, their bellies and chests touching. Ellis took his hands, planting them on either side of his head and holding tight, rendering him unable to move, even if he wished to escape. How could he wish it, though, with such exquisite sensations washing over him?

Arching, pushing, Markus took all of Ellis and more, rough words bursting from him with each panting breath. They moved together rough and hard, skin slapping, bruises blooming under eager hands. Ellis simply took him, possessed him inside and out.

Finally Markus knew he must have release, and he reached for his prick, stroking it hard in time with Ellis' thrusts. Ellis moaned, eyes on him, watching his movements even as Markus watched Ellis' face. When he spent, the violence of it astonished him, so much, so big that he practically screamed his pleasure out to the world. Ellis followed hard upon him, prick jerking inside him, filling him with wet heat, filling him with the very essence of the man.

They lay together for a long time after, stunned at the force of their joining, Markus stroking Ellis' damp back.

Then, very quietly Markus whispered to his love.

"I love you too."

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"Come away with me."

"What?"

Markus rose up on his elbow, looking down at Ellis with his brows drawn together. Ellis simply lay there, smiling at him.

"You have said you love me. Come away with me, Markus. Let us go to the continent and live, together. It would be grand."

"You are mad."

He could not help but laugh at such an offer. Leave his home? Leave behind his country house and his father and mother and his perfectly good life? He was...comfortable as he was.

"No." Ellis sat up. "I am not. There would be no interference. We could find a village in France, or take a villa in Italy. Only think of it, Markus. Just the two of us, together and able to enjoy our pleasures."

"I cannot, Ellis. I have responsibilities."

"Like what, pray tell? You know as well as I that you merely dabble in your father's accounts."

"Nonsense." Pulling away from Ellis, Markus stood up to pace. "I do a great deal for him. And I have my own estates, you know. People who depend upon me."



"You have excellent overseers who could send you correspondence on the continent as well as they could in the city."

"No. I cannot."

The bald statement shocked even he, and Markus stared at Ellis, who stared back, expression turning furious.

"You said that you loved me."

"I did. And I do. But, Ellis, I cannot leave all that I know. I like my life."

Ellis stood as well, nude and proud. "I see. Well, as pleasant as this dalliance has been, I must return to town. I have patients who need tending."

His mouth fell open. "You are leaving now?"

"Yes. I need to get back to my life, as you would say."

Cheeks flushing, Markus advanced on Ellis, incredulity turning to anger. "I think not. These are two very different things, what you ask of me and what you are doing."

"I know." Dipping his chin, Ellis acknowledged his point. "Yet it pains me."

"And I am sorry for it." Markus sighed, wrapping his arms about Ellis' waist. "You surprised me."

Ellis was stiff, resisting his advance. "I should go, Markus. I need -- well, I need to think on it."

"No, you need to stay here with me. Please, Ellis. It has been too long."

The expression on Ellis' face softened. "It has been. I will not press you any longer. We should enjoy our time together."

"We should." Relieved, Markus took Ellis' hand in his and led him back to the bed.

"What should we do now to enjoy it?"

He got a smile, but Ellis' eyes remained shadowed with hurt. "I am sure we can think of something."

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Markus woke alone. The bed beside him was cold, and the fire had burnt down to mere embers. His heart sped, and Markus sat up, looking about.

Gone. Ellis had gone.

Throwing back the covers, he flew from the bed, running to the door before thinking better of it and finding clothes and shoes. When he got to the barn he found Ellis' mount gone as well. Swearing viciously, Markus returned to the lodge and combed through all of his belongings.

Sure enough, there was a letter from his most devoted E.

The bloody coward.

*My dearest Markus,*

*Please do not think I have left you for good. I know that you may well not forgive me for this, but I felt I had to go. I admit, 'twas a case of me wishing more from you than I deserve, and I know it, but now I must have time to adjust my expectations. I am going back to the city, where I have a few patients I must attend. I will try to contact you very soon so that we might continue our correspondence.*

*I do love you, my Lord M. Never doubt it.*

*Yours,*

*Ellis*

Damn it.

Markus knew he had promised his father he would return, but he could not. Instead he would go to town and find Ellis and beat him black and blue. Then he would make love to him until neither of them could stand.

## *Chapter Eight*

*My dearest E,*

*I cannot believe I find myself writing this to you, but indeed, I fear for your safety and your freedom.*

*I fancied that I would come to town after you, find you, and -- shall we say -- reconcile? I was forced to stop at my father's estate, however, after leaving the hunting cot, to procure food and clothing, and there I was arrested.*

*Yes, my E, I am in gaol. For obscenity and sodomy. How they intend to prove this, as you are not here, I do not know. But I warn you to beware your father. Mine had a hand in this, according to my solicitor, who will see this delivered safely to you.*

*My biggest regret in all of this is that now you will not believe me when I say that I was going to go to the continent with you. Now you will believe it a product of my wish to escape this prison. I wish you could know that it is not with all certainty.*

*You were right, E. Any life we might find together would be better than the empty life I led before you came to me. I fear now that it is too late. I am not sure if I will see trial for this charge against me or if this is merely my father's way of punishing me, but you mustn't get into the same predicament. Go about your life and work, and should I be freed I will find you again. I promise you.*

*I cannot believe I let you leave me. What a fool I have been.*

*With all of my love,*

*Your M.*

Markus' fingers showed evidence of his incarceration. As he folded the missive and sealed it, he looked at them, rough and cut, dirt under the nails for the first time in his adult life. His cell was not what it was for other prisoners, he knew. He had a chair, good blankets, wine with his meal. He had candles and books. No doubt his father had seen to that.

Still, he was in gaol. Him. Markus could not find words for his fury, nor for his bewilderment.

His own father. When he had arrived at his father's house, several large guards awaited him, along with the local magistrate.

"You know that buggery is a capital offense, father," he'd said. "They could execute me."

"Nonsense." All bluster, his father, all red face and worried, tired eyes. "This is not the city. I am a man of influence. But Markus, you must be made to see the error of your ways. Since I cannot, I hope a sojourn in gaol will do it for me."

Markus had simply stared before turning his back and offering his hands to the guards, who all appeared as uncomfortable as they could be. They had not bound him, only taken him away.

His mother had visited him every day.

Robert had come at the end of the first week, providing him a dressing gown, parchment, and a quill with ink. "Write to your doctor, Markus. I will see it delivered."

Tears had stood in his eyes as he kissed Robert's cheek. "Thank you, old friend."

"'Tis the least I can do. Markus, why has your father done this?"

"I think because he never felt like my amours were serious ere now. This one...well, this one has consumed me."

"I know." Robert had looked sad for a moment, but then the expression was gone. "What else can I do?"

"Go to my father's home and find Gilders. Tell him to get in my trunks and get my letters. You must take them and deliver them to Ellis. I do not want my father to have any proof."

"Of course not." Robert had wandered around his cell, looking at the crumbling walls, oddly juxtaposed with the silk covering of the red chair. Fingers trailing over the iron bars about the window, Robert had looked back at him. "I will do my damndest to get you out of here, my Lord. I swear it."

"Thank you. I have ever been able to depend upon you." Markus tried to pull his jangling thoughts together. "Robert, you may do something else for me."

"Anything."

"When I get out of this place, I want to leave town." Yes. The continent. Italy perhaps.

"Remove to your estate?"

"No. I want to go to the continent. I will need enough money to buy a home, and to live off. I will need overseers for my other estates. Thomas will do for my main country house. Close up the house in town, and keep just a skeleton staff."

"You're removing to the continent?"

Poor Robert. His face showed every thought, and right then it evinced deep sadness. Markus had moved close, his hand on Robert's cheek.

"'Tis the only way, Robert. I will never escape my father's machinations otherwise. In fact, I expect you will need to move funds quickly, without his knowing."

"Oh!" Eyes wide, Robert nodded. "Yes, of course. I will make sure you are taken care of in style, Markus. You may depend upon it."

"I will, Robert. I will."

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*My Lord M,*

*I assume that I may safely send this letter, as it will be delivered by your solicitor, and thus taken off when he leaves.*

*I have been in the depths of despair, Markus. Not because I fear I will never see you again. I know that I will if I have to dig you out of your prison with my bare hands. No, indeed, I despair because this is undoubtedly my fault.*

*My father came to me just before your letter arrived, and he was as smug as I have ever seen him. He knew, Markus, and he threatened me with the same if I did not bury my inclinations, as he called them, and immerse myself in my work and in a search for a bride.*

*It is intolerable, Markus, what they have done to you. I will not bear it. Know that I will do all in my power to see you free, and that I love you and will be happy to flee with you to the continent.*

*I cannot wait to see you again, Markus. There will be a hot bath, and I will wash the grime from your imprisonment away, and we will be together so that you might relieve the fury of your seclusion on my skin.*

*I look forward to it as ever.*

*Your E*

The letter cheered him immensely. Ellis was still willing. He had not ruined his chances with the man. Markus stood, pacing, waiting for Robert to return and take the letter away. Else he would have to burn it, and he did not wish to do so.

He had been...lazy. Sitting and waiting for his father to let him go. 'Twas time to take responsibility for his own destiny, as it were, and get himself out of this mess.

"Are you finished, Markus? I will take that with me and put it with the others."

Robert came in, and Markus gave him a smile. "Yes. Here. Robert, I must get out of here."

"What does your father say?"

Of course, Robert would want him to reconcile with his father. "He has not come to see me this week."

"Oh."

Yes, oh. The more stubbornly he resisted his father's plan for him, the more his father seemed determined to let him rot in gaol. The wine had stopped coming, in fact, and the meals had become soup and bread.

"Well, then, tell me what I can do."

"Have Gilders pack my things and remove to my house in London. I will stop there on my way out of the country for some things. Have Ellis prepared to meet me there."

Something in Robert's expression gave him pause.

"What is it?"

"He is here, Markus."

"Here? Where?"

"He cannot come to see you, of course, but he enjoined me to get him a cot here so he could be nearby. He fully intends to see you free."

"But he said...in his letter. His father."



"His father thinks he is away in Scotland at a meeting of physicians."

"Oh. Oh, dear." Markus sat in his chair, legs weak. This could get Ellis in serious trouble should either of their fathers hear of it.

"Yes. He stubbornly resisted any attempts at being convinced to stay behind."

"Good God." He could not bear it if Ellis was caught up by his father and jailed as well. Ellis needed to be free to meet with him and leave the country. And Ellis needed to suffer as little as possible for Markus' own stupidity.

"You must send him a missive from me."

"Of course."

Markus reached for the writing box Robert had brought, jotting off a quick note to Ellis.

*My E,*

*I vow, you have taken leave of your senses. You must return to the city with Robert. I will come for you when I have won freedom. Please promise me I will not need fear you being incarcerated.*

*Yours,*

*Markus*

That would have to suffice. Robert would have to leave, as the guard had just announced his father's imminent arrival.

"Keep him safe, old friend."

Robert kissed his cheek. "I will. I promise."

Then Robert was away, and before Markus could do more than hide the writing box, his father was there, arriving with a jug of wine and the most delicious smelling basket. His

mouth watered at the scents of roasted meat and gravy. "I thought you might like a good meal."

"The last meal of the condemned man?"

"Do not be more melodramatic than you must be, Markus."

"You are the one who put me in gaol. Who was melodramatic then?"

"And it has done you no good." His father handed over the basket and Markus dug in, pulling out food and eating with his fingers. Oh, heaven. "Markus, really. Must you be a pig?"

"If you are going to treat me like one," he said around a mouthful of quail, "penning me up like this and feeding me slop along with the occasional treat, then I shall act like one."

Sighing, his father leaned against the wall by the window, and Markus wondered if he knew how much grime would come away with him when he stood straight.

"Markus, please. If you can only assure me you will do as I ask. Your little friend has retreated to Scotland, you know. You need only to go back to London, seek a wife."

"A wife." Snorting indelicately, Markus devoured a baked apple. "You know I have never been one to dally with women. I am sorry, father, but I am too old and set in my ways to start dissembling so now."

"Then you will have to face trial."

"So be it."

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No one had come for nearly two weeks. Not Robert, not his father, not even the magistrate. Markus became convinced that he was simply going to rot in gaol, wasting away as the food became worse and worse. Really, it was the most ridiculous thing.

Perhaps he ought to try to dig his way out with a spoon. Bribing the guards had not worked, and why should it? No doubt his father was paying them more to keep him *in*.

There had been no more missives from Ellis, and while Markus missed him like a lost limb, he was glad. At least perhaps Ellis was getting on with things, treating his patients and living day to day. How ironic, he thought, that he had protested leaving the country with Ellis because he did not want to leave his life and that he was the one for whom life was suspended.

He had thought about writing his memoirs, but really, he hadn't enough parchment, and they would sound more like a book of erotic instruction, so instead Markus amused himself by pacing and by thinking of what he would do to Ellis' fine, pale skin when he got hold of it again.

That, of course, was when the door opened, the guard coming in with a foul-smelling stew and some dark, stone-like bread. The door stood open, and for a fleeting moment he considered running. Too bad there were more guards to get past once through the door.

Nodding, the guard plunked the food down on the table and walked away. Markus stared at it rather listlessly, only to look up in surprise as the guard came back into his cell. Backward, with his hands up.

Markus scrambled to his feet, peering out the door, and he almost expired on the spot from the shock.

"Gilders! What are you about?"

"Saving you, my Lord. Tie this one up, if you please."

His old valet looked rather ludicrous holding Markus' own dueling pistol in his veiny hand, but there it was. Markus bound and gagged the guard, a laugh in his chest when he thought where he'd gained that particular skill.

The whole of the gaol seemed extra quiet, perhaps because he was trying not to alert anyone, and as soon as he was done, he and Gilders left the cell, locking the door with the guard's keys.

"Follow me, my Lord."

He followed Gilders through a veritable maze of hallways and finally out a small, ivy and moss covered door into the late evening light, his eyes squinting against it.

"Gilders," he said, "good man. But why?"

"I am a gentleman's gentleman, sir. Your father had demoted me to butler's assistant. It could not be borne. Your solicitor awaits you at a rented cot, sir. This way."

Just in the hedges outside the gaol, Gilders had a stash of clothing and wine, and sufficiently cloaked and fortified, they made their way to a small, rented cot just on the outskirts of town. The fire burned brightly there, lights in the windows making it look cheery and good.

Robert awaited him by the fire. So did Ellis.

Markus did not know whether to kiss him or kill him. He settled for smiling at Robert and reaching for Ellis' hand.

"My friend. Thank you."

Standing, Robert came and kissed his cheek, just as he had on their last meeting. "I have much for you to look at and sign, Markus. But it can wait until the morning. Gilders and I will be staying just across the way. We will have a carriage ready at the crack of dawn, so the two of you must be ready to go. Until then, you can do what you will."

Oh. Bless them. "Thank you again."

"You're welcome."

His valet left along with Robert, and Markus turned to Ellis. "I thought I asked you to remove to the city."

"You did." Thumb rubbing over his hand, Ellis stood, moving close. "That was when I knew you had given up. I could not allow it."

Had he? Perhaps he had. "I stink."

"You do. I have a bath ready for you, as I promised."

A bath. Markus could have cried. The far side of the simple room did indeed hold a copper tub, steaming gently, and several more buckets of water besides. He began to strip.

"I think what stole my spirit was that it was my own father."

"Those who love us hurt us most, Markus. Surely you must know that by now."

"Like I hurt you?" Nude, he stepped into the tub, unwilling to touch Ellis until he was clean.

"Very much like that, yes." Ellis got a soft cloth and a pot of soft soap, lathering the cloth and washing Markus' chest. 'Twas the most erotic thing he had ever experienced. Amazing, how arousing the subtle rasp of the cloth on his throat was, how his cock rose at the swipe of it over his belly.

"My Ellis."

"Yes. As you are mine, my Lord." Cleaning even his nails, Ellis washed him thoroughly, the cloth and Ellis' hand finally wrapping around his prick, stroking firmly.

He gasped. "Yes. Yours. I do love you."

"I know." Ellis bent to kiss him, now that he was clean, now that he could kiss back without feeling like he would infect Ellis with some sort of dread disease. Markus

reached up, one hand on the back of Ellis' neck to draw him down. They kissed deeply, Markus putting his heart and soul into it, wanting Ellis to understand.

Perhaps Ellis understood better than he did. The kiss went from deep and gentle, exploratory, to hard and needing, Ellis's free hand coming up to pinch and pull his nipples. The other hand stayed where it was, stroking him to near madness.

"Ellis. Please."

"Please what, my Lord M? Please let you spend? Please join you?"

The look he received was pure wickedness. He smiled in return. "Yes."

Ellis laughed, pulling at Markus' prick. "This first, then the other."

His balls went tight as Ellis bit at his neck, surely hard enough to bruise. Marking him. He cried out, the water sloshing against the sides of the tub. His prick fairly danced under Ellis' ministrations, and he felt his climax rising along his spine until it left his body, spending with a force that left him panting and shaking.

"Now the other."

Drawing him up to stand, Ellis rinsed him with buckets of hot water, then towed him dry with a bath sheet. Languid, sated, he allowed Ellis to lead him to the box bed by the window, stripping off and pushing him down. A chest by the bed yielded a bottle of sweet oil, and Markus smiled.

"How long have you been planning this?"

"Weeks. We had to establish the patterns and make sure neither Robert nor I were implicated. And I had hoped, when you won freedom, that you would want this."

Spreading his legs, Markus made the invitation. "I do."

"Then let me in."

It took mere moments for Ellis to prepare him with slick fingers, to slide inside him as if he belonged there, the heat and strength of him making him groan. He let Ellis in, let him ride out his storm of need in his own willing body, holding Ellis close as he did.

"Love. My very own E."

Ellis nodded against his neck, panting and kissing. "Now will you come away with me?"

"Yes, " Markus replied. "Yes I will."

## *Chapter Nine*

France was inhospitable, so they settled upon Italy. Correspondence came slowly there from England, but Markus found he did not mind. The life he had so vehemently defended to Ellis he did not miss. Not one bit.

The arched window looking out from his study gave him the perfect view of their vineyards, and intense satisfaction ruled him when he saw them. They had built this together, he and his Ellis, and he could not be more proud.

A rolled scrap of parchment caught his eye where it sat on his desk, tied neatly with a red ribbon. His heart speeded, and he grabbed it, unrolling it eagerly.

*My dear Lord M,*

*You may think me bold, indeed, too forward, but I have need of you. I always have need of you, do I not? Really, I am sure Gilders finds it most unseemly. I thought we might give him a reprieve from our antics today, my M, and meet in the stable. There is a stable lad who shows much promise, and I vow we shall give him a show such as he has never seen before.*

*Come to me, my Lord, as soon as you can.*

*Yours as ever,*

*Your constant E.*



Yes. Oh, yes. Once Markus had feared that he and Ellis might tire of one another; now he knew better. They constantly found ways to amuse each other, Ellis by far the more inventive and imaginative of the two.

He rolled the parchment back up, tying it off, and stuffed it in his desk before hurrying out for the stable, wondering what sort of earthy delight Ellis had in store for him this day.

The stable was dark and cool, a direct contrast to the sunny, heated day outside. The stamp of hooves and the flick of tails echoed around him, and Markus strained his eyes and ears for any sign that Ellis waited within.

Nothing came save the soft nicker of his favorite mare. Then, just faintly, he thought he caught a sound from the tack room.

He followed the sound, pushing the heavy plank door open, and the sight that met him took his breath.

"Markus! Come and see the gift I have prepared for you."

The "gift" was the stable boy, obviously. More a man than a boy, at that, well muscled from work, brown as a nut. His curly black hair hung over his face, damp with sweat at the temples, and his eyes spoke eloquently of his predicament, which was that of being bound with tack straps, his entire body criss-crossed with black leather. The lad draped inelegantly over a saddle on a post, his bottom high in the air, and that was equally striped, only this time with marks from a lash.

"Oh. Ellis, he is exquisite. I assume he prefers this to watching?"

"Oh, yes. He evinced a great deal of interest when I came down to arrange things to your liking."

"I like it, my love." Markus walked around the lad, hand trailing over the abraded skin.  
"What is his name?"

"Giorgio."

"Of course."

Such fine skin. Drawing back, Markus smacked that firm bottom hard, watching his handprint appear, listening to the delicious gasp.

"And to think we worried we would become dull, boring old vintners here."

"Indeed. Would you like to test his mettle? I only warmed him for you."

"I would." He took the light crop from Ellis and tested in the air, smiling at the swish slap noise it made. Most satisfying. The sound of it connecting with Giorgio's raised bottom satisfied even more, A gasp and a jump answered, as did a low moan from Ellis.

"Markus."

"Yes, my Ellis. He is perfect. Thank you."

"You are welcome, love."

Yes. They would have great amusement with this one. Markus used the crop again, over and over, leaving stripes on that sweet flesh, testing the resiliency of Giorgio's muscle. All the while the lad made no sound, but Markus could see how it affected Giorgio in the sweat that ran along his back, in the way the red, swollen balls pulled up for him.

"Look at his face, my M."

His arm had not even begun to tire, but Markus did as Ellis bade, coming around to look. Giorgio's face was red, his eyes watering, but he had a look of purest ecstasy in his eyes. Markus moaned happily, his prick straining his buttons.

"He should see us, Ellis. You said he likes it. That he would want to watch. Let that be his reward."

"Oh, yes." Dark eyes shining for him, Ellis nodded and began to strip down, clothing dropping onto the floor. The smell of leather and liniment mixed with the scent of Giorgio's need, and it was simply more than they could bear. Ellis reached out to Markus when he stood nude, and Markus went to him, allowing Ellis to act as valet.

They came together, warm skin fusing, dust motes dancing around them in the low light. Giorgio started moaning as soon as they touched, a lovely musical accompaniment. Markus' hands shaped Ellis' throat, his shoulders, fingers sliding across Ellis' skin, finding the bruises he'd left there last night.

"Markus."

"Yes." He turned Ellis so that his back was to their captive audience, so that Giorgio could see he was not the only recipient of the lash. A smothered sound, deep and needing, came from Giorgio, and Markus grasped Ellis' buttocks, squeezing, putting on a show.

Ellis ground against him, hips rolling, pushing both backward and forward. "Oh, Markus, please."

"Please what? I think I would like for you to go and untie Giorgio now."

"But I..."

"No. Now."

The games they played. One day it would be him. One day it would be Ellis. Today was his day. Ellis nodded, kissing his throat before going to untie the stable boy. Markus pivoted, watching Ellis' hands on Giorgio's dark flesh, the sight making his prick jump.

"That's it, Ellis. Now bring him to me."

Smiling, Ellis led Giorgio back to Markus, and Markus reached up to stroked the flushed, tear-streaked cheeks.

"Such a pretty mouth," he said in his poorly accented Italian. "I want you to use it on my friend."

Those dark eyes went wide before Giorgio smiled and nodded, going to his knees before them. Ellis moaned and moved into place, his cock pushing at Giorgio's lush lips. They opened right up, taking Ellis in with a practiced ease that told Markus that Ellis had far underestimated Giorgio's experience.

He watched as Ellis' prick slid in and out of Giorgio's mouth, the loose skin at the fore sliding a little, and thought of all of the lovely combinations of skin and limbs they could create, his hand dropping to his own prick even as he did so. Oh, yes. This had great potential indeed.

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Much later they lay in bed together, Gilders having sent supper up on a tray. Giorgio had gone back to his bed above the stable, exhausted and happy, and they had returned to the villa to nap and work.

Markus insisted on keeping his own accounts, and Ellis saw patients late in the day, gaining them chickens and casks of oil and pigs.

Now, though, they could rest together and revel in the day.

"Thank you for my gift today, Ellis."

"You are welcome, my Lord. I cannot tell you how I enjoyed it."

"Really? I am certain you could if you tried." He fed Ellis a fat, juicy grape.

"Perhaps..."

"Perhaps?" He smiled, licking juice from Ellis' chin.

"Yes. Perhaps if I wrote you a letter."

"Yes." That would be perfect. Markus settled, putting an arm around Ellis and pulling him close. Ellis settled, chin resting in the crook of Markus' neck.

"Very well. If I were to write you that letter, I believe it would say something like this."

Ellis cleared his throat, fingers tracing patterns upon his skin.

*"My dear Lord M,*

*I cannot express how happy I have been since we came together that first time. I had thought never to be near enough to touch you, to speak to you. Had thought you would be forever out of my reach and that should you meet me you would call me out for daring to think the things I did, let alone write them to you in ink on vellum.*

*Instead you took me into your home and your body, and you have given me more than I could ever dream. The things we do together defy my capacity to imagine them. Just knowing that you chose to be with me, here, heats my blood.*

*I can only hope that we will have a long life together, my dear M, and that we might find many ways to pleasure one another like we did today, and alone. I hope that you never tire of me. And I am so very glad I took quill in hand to write that first letter to you.*

*Yours as always,*

*E"*

"Oh, Ellis." He bent to kiss his Ellis, lips and tongue pushing, his cock rising. "Yes."

"No."

Drawing back, he frowned, looking at Ellis askance. "What?"

"You owe me a letter, now."

"I..." Well, perhaps he did.

"Very well."

He took a moment to compose his thoughts, then took a breath and launched into his recital.

*"My darling E,"*

"Darling, hmm? I like the sound of that."

He pinched Ellis' bottom, still heated from their play. "Stop it. Let me compose."

"Oh, yes, of course."

Unrepentant, Ellis propped up and watched him closely. Markus sighed.

*"My darling E,*

*I could never have imagined in my rage over your first letter that it would set off the chain of events that has changed my life so irrevocably. If pressed, I would admit that the only thing I wanted to do with you to begin with was thrash you for daring to expose my wildest dreams and greatest fears.*

*Then I wanted to lash out at you for making me chose between my comfort and my love. Then the choice was taken from me and I realized it did not matter. The only one I could have made was you.*

*Today was the least of the reasons that I am glad you found me, and found the courage to address me. But today is also a prefect example of how well suited we are.*

*Thank you, my love, for giving me everything.*

*Your very own,*

*M"*

"My very own, hmm?"

"Yours, love. Yours."

"Come here and kiss me, my Lord."

He did just that, savoring the flavor of Ellis' mouth and the sound of his little moan. There was nothing on earth he loved more than this man, and it had settled in his soul finally, no longer making him nervous.

Markus turned to his back, his legs spreading as he pulled Ellis atop him.

"Show me, Ellis. Write me a letter with your body."

"Anything, Markus."

Ellis settled between his legs, rubbing against him, hands moving on him, tracing his collarbones and pinching his nipples until they ached. The possessive mark Ellis left upon his throat made him gasp, made him arch, his prick pressing against Ellis' belly.

Ellis prick nudged his hole, and he shifted, trying to get more. He should still be just stretched enough from the night before, but Ellis stopped him.

"Oil, Markus. I will not hurt you."

The time it took Ellis to prepare him was excruciating. The burn of it was as well, making him pant and roll. Finally, finally Ellis was inside him, slipping in like he belonged there. They moved together, his fingers digging into Ellis' back, both of them making noises that would shock Gilders should he hear them.

He rocked up, trying to pull Ellis down for a kiss. He got what he wanted and then some, Ellis echoing the motion below, tongue pushing in and out of his mouth. Their skin slapped, their sweat mingled, and Markus made a wish right there to be able to do this for the rest of his life.



When he spent it came in perfect time with Ellis, both of them shouting, their cries echoing against the vaulted ceiling.

They collapsed together, Ellis stroking his hair.

"No regrets, my Lord M?"

"None at all, my dear E.," he said, kissing Ellis' shoulder. "Not one."

End