

Year of the Cat



*Selah
March*

YEAR OF THE CAT

...Jacques stroked his fingertips down Etienne's sides till they caught on the knobs of his hips. "And for dessert?"

Etienne shivered and twisted beneath Jacques' touch, but it did not occur to him to refuse to answer. "A cherry tart."

"But, of course. And this is the finest meal you can recall in all your life?"

"*Oui, monsieur.*"

"And does your belly clench at the memory? Does your mouth run wet and your soul cry out with longing?"

Indeed, Etienne's belly clenched, his mouth ran wet and his soul cried out, but it had naught to do with the recollection of pheasant, figs or tart. He sank his teeth into his bottom lip and stared up at Jacques in pained bewilderment.

Smiling, Jacques rubbed the pad of his thumb over Etienne's mouth. "Such a picture you make, *mon petit*. One could nail you to a wall beneath the title *Innocence Debauched*."

Etienne blinked at his companion, his uncertainty growing.

"Fortunately for you, I have no interest in art." Jacques grasped Etienne at his hip and shoulder, and rolled him onto his belly in one deft move. "Unless 'tis of the culinary variety, of course. If only there were a table handy, I would spread you across it like that esteemed pheasant and lauded cherry tart. I would consume you, and make you love the feasting."

Alarmed at the implication, Etienne twisted his head

around to gaze at his companion. “*Monsieur?*”

Jacques laughed, the sound deepening to a feral sort of snarl. “Table or no, I will make a meal of you.”

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YEAR OF THE CAT

BY

SELAH MARCH

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

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YEAR OF THE CAT
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ISBN 978-1-60272-460-0
Cover Art © 2009 Trace Edward Zaber

Layout and Formatting provided by: Elemental Alchemy

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*Thanks to all the usual suspects,
and a few unusual ones—you know who you are.*

CHAPTER 1

Once, in a time long past and a land far away, there lived an elderly widower by the name of LeFevre. Heaven had blessed *Monsieur* LeFevre with moderate wealth, a parcel of land in a lovely region, and three healthy sons.

The eldest, Daubert, stood tall and broad like the ash trees growing in the deep, dark forest that surrounded his father's estate. His hands were as large as horseshoes and his head as round and hard as the side of a beer barrel, but he was a man of little kindness and much greed.

Daubert is not the hero of this story.

The second son, Jourdain, stood equally tall and twice as broad as his elder brother. His arms were as long as a horse's

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rear legs, his teeth as strong as iron. He, too, owned an excess of greed and a lack of compassion in equal proportion to Daubert. And while Jourdain often pictured himself charging about the countryside with a broadsword, relieving young maidens of their virtue and performing other feats of manliness, neither is he our hero. (In truth, the imagined broadsword was entirely compensatory for his lack of endowment in other areas...but that is a tale for another day.)

The third son, called Etienne, was neither overly tall nor terribly broad, but beautifully shaped in the manner of statues found in the vast galleries of Paris and Rome. In addition, Etienne possessed all the warm-heartedness his brothers lacked, and so grew up his father's sheltered favorite. As a result, he knew nothing of the ways of the world.

Alas, Etienne is not the hero of our story either...though he is the cause of most of the misery and all of the joy contained within its pages.

The time came when the dreaded disease of old age struck *Monsieur* LeFevre and he failed to rise from his bed. One morning shortly after the first of the year, he called his sons to his side and said, "By nightfall, I will join your sainted mother in heaven. But before I leave you, I wish to make certain you will care for one another as I have cared for you."

Daubert and Jourdain shuffled their enormous feet against the marble floor and looked uncomfortable. Etienne fell to his knees at his father's bedside and commenced to weep pretty tears born of genuine grief. Between bouts of sorrow, he promised his father to do whatever he could to help his elder

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brothers find happiness.

Daubert and Jourdain beat a hasty escape. But though the floor was hard and cold, Etienne remained on his knees by the bed, ignoring the comings and goings of the doctor and the servants and all who might distract him from his father's beloved face.

No one noticed the large silver cat perched on the windowsill outside *Monsieur* LeFevre's room. If anyone had, they would have chased it away, as such beasts were considered bad luck in the vicinity of a sickbed. As it happened, this particular cat was neither bad luck nor—strictly speaking—a beast. He was, instead, a youngish gentleman suffering under a curse laid upon him by an elderly sorceress, who, after casting her spell, promptly choked to death on a chicken wing.

As is often the way of such things, the curse could be broken only by a purely unselfish act—preferably a sacrifice made for true love. But because the hag had paused for a snack before explaining the terms of his punishment, her victim had no clue how to proceed with his search for redemption. He therefore spent the daylight hours skulking in corners, basking in puddles of sunshine, and licking himself in interesting places. At night, when he returned to human form, he begged coins from passersby...occasionally at the point of a dagger.

The gentleman had existed this way for some time, never aging, but lonely and bereft of companionship and hope. After ten years or so, he forgot the reason he'd been punished in the

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first place. After the second decade, he no longer remembered the faces of his family, or even his own name. By the time he'd lived half a century beneath the weight of the sorceress's spell, he'd grown a coarse shell over his heart and a dark thread of cruelty through his character.

Gentle reader, I give you our hero—a cursed, nameless soul with no purpose in life save the torment of unlucky songbirds and the regurgitation of the odd hairball.

As it happened, 'twas the sound of muffled sobs that drew our hero to the windowsill of the dying *Monsieur* LeFevre on this bright, cold morning. When he peered inside, his whiskers twitching with interest, he caught sight of something he'd never before encountered—an angel. And while our hero had little experience with angels, he'd heard tales of their ability to work miracles and wondered if he'd finally found a source of relief from his many years of suffering.

On closer inspection, this particular angel seemed very unhappy. But the redness of his large green eyes and the disarray of his golden curls did nothing to lessen his beauty. Our intrigued hero drew closer, slinking in through the open window and crouching in a corner near the door. From this spot, he overheard a conversation in the corridor outside.

“My patience grows thin, Jourdain. I wish to be rid of the spoiled fool. I'll not see him share in our wealth.”

The cat peeked around the corner at the hulking behemoths in the hallway. The larger of the two picked a pomegranate seed from between his front teeth, took a long swig from the bottle of wine clutched in his fist and replied, “We must wait

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till the old man is dead, Daubert. It's too dangerous to do otherwise."

"Very well. But I swear to you, *mon frère*—Etienne sleeps but one more night beneath this roof. Dead or alive, he leaves this place on the morrow."

CHAPTER 2

Etienne heard the rumble of his brothers' voices in the corridor, but he paid it no mind. All his attention was bound up in the way his father's breath hitched and whistled in his sunken chest. 'Twould not be long now. Soon his only friend and protector in the entire world would leave him, and he would be alone.

For all his innocence and naïveté, Etienne knew Daubert and Jourdain despised him—with good reason, for he was useless when it came to turning a profit. He knew they would seek to remove him from the family estate, perhaps before the old man's body grew cold in his bed. Perhaps by doing away with him altogether. Yet, in the face of his beloved father's

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imminent demise, he could not bring himself to care.

“My dear child,” *Monsieur* LeFevre rasped, squeezing Etienne’s hand with trembling fingers, “your brothers know much of the world, but you have dreamed your life away, buried in books and music. I fear you will come to a bad end.”

“Do not trouble yourself, *mon père*,” Etienne said and smiled through his tears. “I’m sure Daubert and Jourdain have great plans for me.”

The old man sighed with obvious regret. “Indeed, I’m equally certain, and the thought strikes terror in my weakening heart. Listen well, and I will offer what I can to shield you from your brothers’ greed and malice.”

And so, with his dying breath, *Monsieur* LeFevre told Etienne of an abandoned woodcutter’s cottage on the far edge of the forest, where Daubert and Jourdain never ventured.

“You will find it in great disrepair, and with the snow so deep upon the ground—”

“Hush, *mon père*. Fret no more for me. Sleep now, and give *ma mère* all my love.” Etienne bowed his head to pray as the light faded from his father’s eyes. When he lifted his face, *Monsieur* LeFevre was gone.

Sometime after noon on the day of his father’s death, Etienne packed a few necessities into an old leather satchel, strapped his precious lute to his back and started off toward the forest. As his father had mentioned, the snow was deep. Etienne’s coat and vest were made of linen and silk, and his boots of thinnest calf-skin. Though the sun remained bright overhead, an icy wind brought tears to his already swollen

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eyes. But as he tramped along, he whistled a tune and looked forward to the start of a new life.

“Perhaps I’m not as strong or clever as Daubert and Jourdain,” he said to no one in particular, “and I’ll surely struggle to make my way in the world. But I shall be content in the knowledge of my brothers’ joy at discovering they needn’t trouble themselves with murdering me.”

As he reached the ash grove that marked the entrance to the forest, he heard a sound behind him and turned to look. A large silver cat stood hip-deep in the snow and stared up at him with amber eyes.

“Hello there. Are you following me?”

The cat replied by settling into one of Etienne’s footprints, twisting about and licking beneath its right haunch. Now Etienne noticed the black markings on the cat’s rear legs that looked like nothing so much as tall leather boots.

“If I were you, I’d return to the house. It’s much warmer there, and Cook might toss you a scrap or two if you mind your manners.”

The cat meowed and appeared to shake its head.

Etienne laughed. “Very well. Hop aboard.” He patted his shoulder.

The cat leaped up and made a perfect landing, balancing itself by leaning into Etienne’s neck and nuzzling his face. When a low purr vibrated deep in the cat’s broad chest, Etienne smiled and said, “You’ll make a fine companion. I’ll call you Jacqueline.”

The cat sniffed and pivoted on Etienne’s shoulder, flashing

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its tail in Etienne's face and allowing him an excellent view of its rather prominent privates.

"Hmm," Etienne mused. "It seems Jacqueline is more of a Jacques."

The cat meowed in agreement, and they set off into the forest as the best of friends.

* * *

The woodcutter's cottage was everything *Monsieur* LeFevre had promised—tiny, dirty, and barely standing. Etienne stood before it with his feet half-frozen in his boots and wondered if he mightn't have made a better choice by allowing his brothers to slit his throat.

"But that would've meant digging a second grave in frozen ground—so inconvenient," Etienne remarked as he pushed at the sagging door of the cottage. "Though I suppose I could've done it myself and saved them the trouble."

The door fell open with a bang. The cat jumped from Etienne's shoulder and circled the empty room once, pausing for a moment to sniff at the barren fireplace. Then it squeezed between Etienne's legs and bolted through the open door, leaving him alone.

"And without even a farewell." Etienne sighed. He shook his head at his departing companion and set his lute and satchel on the floor.

The sun would soon set. He'd need to gather wood and build a fire, or face a slow, cold death before morning.

He found the woodcutter's abandoned hatchet leaning in a

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corner and went outside to see what he could do. Sadly, Etienne's hands were not fit for such work. Before he'd chopped an armload of wood, his palms were blistered and bleeding. He'd dropped the hatchet twice, nearly cleaving his foot in two, and split the skin of three fingers on the dull blade. The wind turned to knives against his skin. Still he soldiered on, long after the sun was gone from the sky and the blue dusk surrounded him like the shadows of the grave.

He thought of his father and tried not to weep.

Finally, he had enough fuel for his fire. The rising moon lit his way as he carried the armload of wood back to the cottage. When he reached the door, he heard the snap of branches and the crunch of snow behind him, as if someone lurked and watched.

"Who's there?" he called.

Only the night wind answered.

Etienne soon discovered the difficulty in building a fire with wet wood.

With the flame of his only candle—lit with a flint he'd stolen from the kitchen of his father's house—he tried again and again. Frigid wind blew through the cracks in the cottage walls. Ice crystals formed on the tips of his eyelashes. His teeth chattered. His fingers grew numb and clumsy, and he dropped the candle, extinguishing the single flicker of light in the tiny room.

Finally, he curled himself into a corner to await the end. Perhaps if he surrendered easily, 'twould be merciful and quick. He'd begun to drift away in a deadly doze when there

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came a loud knocking.

He lifted his head. "Hello?"

The door burst open, bouncing off the opposite wall and shaking the tiny cottage. The silhouette of a man appeared in the entrance. For a moment, Etienne wondered if his brothers had followed him into the forest. He felt relief. At least he would not die alone.

Then the man turned, allowing the moonlight to fall on his face, and Etienne could see he was neither Daubert nor Jourdain. To Etienne's sleepy gaze, he appeared barely a man at all, but more of a large, shaggy beast.

The stranger spoke not a word, but moved with purpose. His long strides carried him to Etienne's side, where he bent and snatched the fallen candle from the floor. Within a moment, 'twas lit again, and Etienne had his first true glimpse of his visitor.

The flame's glow showed a tall body arrayed in gray rags and high black boots. The stranger tossed his head, revealing sharp features framed by a tangle of dark hair that fell halfway down the man's back. And his eyes...the color, like two antique coins...

Etienne caught himself staring and struggled to locate his both his voice and his manners. "Welcome, *monsieur*. To what do I owe the pleasure of this timely visit?"

CHAPTER 3

This was no angel.

Not this pathetic creature. Not this silk-garbed fool, lying useless on the floor of the cottage. No heaven-sent miracle worker here—just a beautiful halfwit uttering polite nonsense with lips gone blue with cold.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of this timely visit?” he’d asked through chattering teeth—as if he hadn’t the sense to fear a rag-draped stranger who burst in upon him by dark of night, and couldn’t tell a roadside bandit from an afternoon caller in his father’s drawing room. And now he was speaking again, all dulcet tones and shy deference. “I am called Etienne LeFevre. Pray, what is your name, *monsieur*?”

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“Jacques.” ’Twas the nearest thing to the truth, though it came dressed in a snarl.

His companion blinked wide eyes and mumbled something about “coincidence.” Then he offered his hand. As it hung in the air, untouched, he said, “I am pleased to meet you, *Monsieur Jacques*. I fear I have nothing to offer you by way of refreshment—”

“If you’ll trouble yourself to move aside and hold your thrice-damned tongue, I’ll light the fire.”

So the beast-who-was-no-beast produced a handful of kindling from within his ragged coat and built a blaze for the angel-who-was-no-angel. When the flames danced a jig in the fireplace, Jacques (for by this name had he come to think of himself in so short a time...he who’d been nameless for the better part of fifty years) turned to the young man and growled, “You brought no food to this place? No tools beyond a flint and candle, no furs to warm yourself?”

Even in the dim light, he saw Etienne LeFevre’s blush of shame. “I have also a small tin cup from my babyhood, *monsieur*.”

“A tin cup?”

“*Oui, monsieur*.”

“Are you simple, then?”

Etienne nodded. “Almost certainly, *monsieur*.”

Jacques sighed. He’d made an error in supposing this creature was the solution to his problem—an error born of desperation and weariness with the half-life he’d endured for lo, these many seasons. But all was not lost. If he softened his

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manner and made a show of generosity, he might yet coax a few favors of the carnal variety from the pretty dolt.

He reached again into the deep inner pockets of his coat and brought out the skinned and gutted carcass of a forest hare.

“A gift.” Jacques forced a smile. “I present it as a token of my wish to act as your servant in all things.”

Etienne recoiled from the offering. “I don’t—” He stopped and cleared his throat. “You’re very kind, *monsieur*, but I’ve never...” The flush in his cheeks deepened. He looked away, plainly ashamed.

Through jaws clenched in irritation, Jacques said, “Fear not, *mon petit*.” With a few deft moves, he proceeded to spit the hare on an unused piece of firewood and set it to roast it over the flames.

When the animal was fit for consumption, its winter layer of fat dripping and hissing in the flames, he pulled it apart with callused fingers and offered a chunk of meat to Etienne.

But Etienne looked doubtful. “Are you certain it’s edible?”

Jacques withdrew the meat and shoved it in his own mouth, smearing himself with grease. He chewed slowly and watched his companion’s face.

Etienne licked the soft circle of his lips and swallowed audibly. After a moment, he held out his hand.

Jacques pulled another piece of meat from the hare’s carcass. He reached out to drop it into Etienne’s open palm and caught sight of the blisters and deep cuts across the pads of the other man’s fingers.

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Jacques frowned. "Lift your hands to the light."

"But, *monsieur*—"

With a huff of annoyance, Jacques set the roasted hare on the hearth, grabbed Etienne's wrists and tugged them forward. "By leaving these untended, you risk poisoning your blood."

Etienne inclined his head. "Please forgive my carelessness, *monsieur*."

Jacques dug the tip of his thumb into the only patch of unmarked flesh on Etienne's palm and said, "Give me your tin cup."

He released Etienne's wrists. Etienne reached into the leather satchel that lay on the floor next to him and produced the requested item.

Jacques took it, rose from his crouched position and stomped out into the darkness to fill the cup with snow. He re-entered the cottage a few moments later and found Etienne crouched over the fire, poking at the hare with a shard of kindling. Jacques ignored the question in his raised brows and reached for the young man's injured hands. He took his time tending the wounds.

"Give me your vest," Jacques said when the cuts and blisters were as clean as melted snow could make them.

Etienne complied, slipping off the garment and handing it over without a word of protest—which only proved it took but a firm hand to guide an idiot pup such as this.

Jacques inverted the vest and tore out the lining. He used the strips of silk to wrap Etienne's hands.

"Thank you, *monsieur*," Etienne murmured. "When my

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hands are healed, I shall endeavor to repay your kindness in some small way.”

Jacques stared into upturned face of his new acquaintance—which held all the purity of freshly laundered bed linens merely waiting to be stained with the debris of vigorous lovemaking—and pondered how best to bring Etienne to the point of utter submission. Indeed, ’twould be an exquisite bit of whimsy to bend this delectable fool to his will...to see him writhe and beg, humbling himself in exchange for the merest brush of Jacques’ fingertip. A harmless distraction in a world grown dull and empty.

He took up the hare and offered Etienne another bit of meat. When Etienne extended his hand, Jacques pulled the prize just out of his reach. “You must eat from my fingers, lest you soil your dressings.”

Etienne blushed yet again, but opened his mouth obligingly enough. At the first touch of warm, greasy flesh upon his tongue, his green eyes grew sleepy and fell shut. He chewed with vigor and parted his lips for more.

Jacques watched, torn between astonishment and dismay, as it became clear the conquest of Etienne LeFevre would offer no challenge—not for one with skills in seduction honed by years of playing the predator. ’Twould be a greater test to slaughter a nest of hibernating squirrels, and yet...

He could not turn away. Something in the unspoiled sweetness of this beautiful man-child touched him in a place long abandoned. A place too long hollow and dark, but fast filling with an ache Jacques could only despise, for he

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suspected it could be healed neither by strong drink nor the gleeful butchery of sleeping rodents.

It angered him, this icy-hot pain burning like the fires of perdition, and reminded him of all he'd lost when he'd crossed paths with the wrong old woman. The beast in him, awakened by fury, whispered the remedy—to ruin this thing that gave him such a pang...stain its purity with perversion and corrupt its generosity with greed. Yes, Jacques would do this, and he would begin tonight.

He dropped the last bit of meat onto Etienne's waiting tongue and shifted closer to the young man, all his hunting instincts at the fore—a large, lean cat crouched in the shadows, stalking innocent prey.

“Pray, tell me,” he whispered, “what do you know of passion?”

Etienne made a face like a startled deer.

Jacques pounced.

CHAPTER 4

All evidence to the contrary, Etienne was neither a halfwit nor a fool.

Impractical? Certainly.

Guileless? Without a doubt.

But in one particular subject, Etienne possessed no peer—the study of the supernatural. Indeed, his late and deeply lamented father had often expressed concern over the hours his youngest son spent poring over tales of the gruesome and fantastical. From children's fairy stories to the journals of long-dead sorcerers to grim accounts of witch-hunts and burnings, Etienne's appetite for the otherworldly was insatiable. Paradoxically, 'twas from this investigation of the

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inhuman that Etienne developed his most apt observations of humanity—for how better to learn the ways of good, decent men than to study the depravity of monsters?

Therefore, by the time he'd lingered three-quarters of an hour in the company of the man who called himself Jacques, Etienne knew his visitor to be a scoundrel, a villain...and quite possibly not a man at all.

None of this kept Etienne from accepting Jacques' apparent generosity. For 'twould take a halfwitted fool, indeed, to reject warmth on a freezing night, meat for an empty belly or a healing touch on bloody wounds.

But the blaze in the fireplace no longer seemed to burn so brightly—not when compared to the glittering amber of Jacques' eyes.

"Pray, tell me," he purred, "what do you know of passion?"

Etienne could only stare. He went on staring, even as Jacques loomed over him, caught his face between his huge paws and growled, "Tell me, *mon petit*."

Etienne struggled to find his voice. "I know nothing of passion. I am...untouched."

Jacques' lips quirked in a sinister smile. "So sweet, like spun sugar. I fear you'll rot my very teeth."

The kiss Jacques pressed upon Etienne's mouth tasted of salt and iron, and awakened in Etienne a delirious kind of hunger. He found himself clutching at Jacques' shoulders, tearing at the sleeves of his coat with his sore fingers. When Jacques pulled aside the collar of Etienne's shirt and licked at

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the line of flesh he'd revealed, Etienne stifled a moan.

"No, *mon petit*, let me hear your cries," Jacques murmured, his words setting a heated buzz against Etienne's skin. "Let me lap them from the hollow of your throat."

Etienne fought, at war with his traitorous body. "*Monsieur*, please, I do not—"

"Hush," Jacques whispered and caught Etienne's chin in his hand. The pupils of his eyes had taken on a strange, slitted appearance as he gazed into Etienne's face. "You'll only tire yourself and gain nothing for the effort."

"But you said you wished to be my servant in all things, *monsieur*. Yet you would take me without my consent?"

"I would coax your consent from its hiding place and make it sing out like the bells of Notre Dame on Christmas morning."

His words sounded like nothing less than the simple truth. Etienne stilled himself against the hard cottage floor, his body not entirely limp with submission.

"Speak to me." Jacques pulled at the fastenings of Etienne's clothing, nimble fingers working knots and clasps till Etienne's skin was laid bare to the heat of his breath. "Tell me of the finest meal you've taken at your father's table."

The strange demand made Etienne start with confusion, but the involuntary instinct for obedience forced him to reach for the memory. "'Twas the night of my twenty-first birthday, *monsieur*."

"*Oui*? And when was that?"

"Four months ago."

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“Ah, a child of the harvest. Pray, what did your father’s cook prepare to celebrate your coming-of-age?” Jacques punctuated his question with a soft, clinging kiss, then leaned back and appeared to consider the white expanse of Etienne’s skin as a butcher might contemplate the proper spot to place his first cut.

Etienne squeezed his eyes shut and swallowed thickly. “Pheasant, roasted with figs, and dressed in a sauce made of sweet red wine.”

“Delightful,” Jacques said and stroked his fingertips down Etienne’s sides till they caught on the knobs of his hips. “And for dessert?”

Etienne shivered and twisted beneath Jacques’ touch, but it did not occur to him to refuse to answer. “A cherry tart.”

“But, of course. And this is the finest meal you can recall in all your life?”

“*Oui, monsieur.*”

“And does your belly clench at the memory? Does your mouth run wet and your soul cry out with longing?”

Indeed, Etienne’s belly clenched, his mouth ran wet and his soul cried out, but it had naught to do with the recollection of pheasant, figs or tart. He sank his teeth into his bottom lip and stared up at Jacques in pained bewilderment.

Smiling, Jacques rubbed the pad of his thumb over Etienne’s mouth. “Such a picture you make, *mon petit*. One could nail you to a wall beneath the title *Innocence Debauched*.”

Etienne blinked at his companion, his uncertainty growing.

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“Fortunately for you, I have no interest in art.” Jacques grasped Etienne at his hip and shoulder, and rolled him onto his belly in one deft move. “Unless ’tis of the culinary variety, of course. If only there were a table handy, I would spread you across it like that esteemed pheasant and lauded cherry tart. I would consume you, and make you love the feasting.”

Alarmed at the implication, Etienne twisted his head around to gaze at his companion. “*Monsieur?*”

Jacques laughed, the sound deepening to a feral sort of snarl. “Table or no, I will make a meal of you.”

Etienne’s breath caught on a jagged, broken moan. He let his head drop onto his folded arms and gave himself up to the sensation of Jacques’ callused fingertips grazing over the knots of his spine. Jacques followed with the gritty swipe of his tongue—each wet, warm touch like the scrape of coarse sand—and Etienne felt his blood go thick and slow in his veins. And, though he was not ignorant of his body’s natural responses, he blushed to feel his manhood hard and heavy between his legs, and prayed Jacques would fail to notice.

Jacques moved his mouth and hands down the length of Etienne’s back till he reached Etienne’s most private cleaving and parted him there. Etienne breathed like a man in the grip of a deadly spasm as Jacques dipped the pointed tip of his tongue, curling and circling, working it inside only to pull back and begin again.

’Twas a teasing kind of pleasure, ticklish and slick, and Etienne’s languid compliance ebbed away as he tensed himself against it. Jacques hummed against his flesh and

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spread him wider, holding tight and forcing another shuddery surrender.

Etienne groaned and rutted in short thrusts against the packed earth of the cottage floor. He felt his own helplessness like a boulder upon his back...like invisible chains shackling him to the floor...like a flood of honey in which a butterfly might smother, straining in sweet agony.

“Please, *monsieur*,” he whispered, “release me before I shame myself.”

Jacques laughed again, sending a streak of sensation up Etienne’s spine. “’Tis your shame I crave. Indeed, I positively require it.”

Etienne whimpered in protest and tried to squirm away. Jacques gripped his hips, yanked him up to his knees and blew a stream of cool air against wet flesh.

So open...so exposed...with his hindquarters lifted high the air and his face still pressed into his folded arms, Etienne sobbed out his mortification.

“Hush. A passerby might hear and think I flayed the skin from your bones.”

Ever biddable, Etienne stifled his cries. When Jacques began again to use his tongue to torment that dark, secret place, Etienne bit his lip hard enough to draw blood and kept quiet. He could feel the wave building inside him—the coiling tension in his belly, the trembling weakness in his legs, the way his untouched member jerked against the sweat-scented air.

Perhaps Jacques sensed his cresting arousal as well, for he

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grasped Etienne thighs and forced them farther apart. He reached between, took a handful of Etienne's most delicate treasures and squeezed.

Then he gave Etienne's hardened, dripping manhood a long, lingering stroke and said, "No, not yet."

As if that single demand could turn the tide. As if Etienne—no matter how obedient—had the strength of will to hold out against a touch so clever and so thoroughly designed to drive him past the point of no return.

Etienne told himself his companion was jesting, for if he were serious, he'd cease to play Etienne's body as a virtuoso might play his favorite instrument, sounding all the sweetest chords over and over and—

"I am in earnest, *mon petit*. One might say to a deadly degree."

Etienne froze against the sensation of cold steel at his throat. When had Jacques produced the blade? Was it the same he'd used to skin and gut the hare?

"Be still now. Not the slightest movement. You will do that for me, *oui*?"

Etienne swallowed and felt the sharpened edge press into his skin. "*Oui, monsieur.*"

"Very good." Jacques' fingers closed again around Etienne's member.

Etienne was shocked and not a little appalled to discover he hadn't softened in his sudden terror. Had it taken so little to corrupt his flesh?

None of it mattered when Jacques gripped him lightly and

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gave a long, teasing stroke. Etienne fought the urge to buck and writhe. Fear swirled together with pleasure inside him, lurid and bright. He shut his eyes and clenched his jaw and held very, very still.

Jacques stroked him again and again, quicker now, and whispered, "Not yet...no...not yet."

Etienne bit back a cry as his muscles seized and the sharp pulse of ecstasy edged into pain. Behind his clenched eyelids, he saw jagged bursts in unnamable colors. His breath froze in his chest.

For the first time in his carefully wrought existence, he knew the difference between *want* and *need*.

"Beg me, *mon petit*," Jacques murmured, his mouth at Etienne's ear just above where the blade caressed him. "Show me your desperation. Make me taste it, and perhaps its flavor will rouse my long-sleeping mercy."

Etienne sucked in a breath and promptly choked, as if the air itself had caught on the words tangled in his throat. He tried again, but managed only a low keening.

"More effort, if you please," Jacques snarled, and pinched the tip of Etienne's manhood with cruel fingers.

"*Monsieur*, I beseech you." The words were ragged and barely audible.

"More sincerity."

"I *implore* you."

"Louder. Wake the dozing winter birds."

"Please!" Etienne's wail pierced the shadows, rising up to dissipate with the smoke from the fire.

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Jacques laughed. To Etienne's ears, it sounded dark and strange, like the rumble of a monster from a folktale. "I believe that will do."

His hand tightened and pulled at Etienne's agonized flesh. For a bottomless instant, Etienne hung from the precipice of release. Then, with a muffled cry of despair at his own weakness, he fell. The waves closed over his head and bore him against the rocks of pure sensation, and he was lost.

When he returned to himself, he felt the rough fibers of Jacques' coat and breeches rubbing at his hip. The blade was gone from his throat, but Jacques' breath was sharp in his ear—a heaving, hissing thing, alive in itself. The press of the larger man's body threatened to topple Etienne from his aching knees, but he held fast.

Jacques gave one last, hard push against him and stilled, surrendering only the slightest tremble and a whispered, "*Mon Dieu!*" to close the transaction.

A moment later, he pulled away, and Etienne fell, curling onto his side. The ancient earth felt blessedly cool against his fevered skin. He lay there, panting and boneless, loose in every fiber, as if he'd liquefied to a puddle of his basest elements.

When he opened his eyes, Jacques had already put himself to rights and was staring into the fire as if nothing of particular import had transpired. Etienne longed to speak, though he knew not what words he'd offer.

A rebuke for the degradation visited upon him? He would not dare be such a hypocrite.

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An expression of gratitude then, for teaching him the delights to be found in carnal humiliation? Etienne suspected Jacques would only laugh at him, which was no more than he deserved.

He fell asleep still pondering the question.

* * *

Jacques slept not at all, preferring to spend the shadowed hours listening to the rise and fall of Etienne's breath and watching the firelight play over smooth skin and errant golden curls.

Events had not proceeded according to plan. Far from finding satisfaction in his defiling of the pretty halfwit, Jacques discovered his yearning was not quenched by bliss but only tantalized to deeper pain.

Etienne napped on, plainly spent. Sometime before dawn, Jacques rose and left the cottage to gather more wood. When he'd rebuilt the blaze and piled the excess fuel next to the fireplace, he slipped out again to hunt. In the gray light of a nearly newborn day, he deposited on the hearth the skinned and gutted carcasses of three more hares.

As he turned to make his final exit, Etienne stirred.

"*Monsieur*, you would leave me without a word of farewell?"

Jacques could feel the change upon him, in the tightening of his skin and the thickening of the calluses on his palms. Bitter experience told him he was bare moments from abandoning human form. The knowledge was not enough to

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make him turn away from the sight of Etienne, drowsy-eyed and flushed with sleep.

“*Monsieur?*”

“Hush,” Jacques said as he knelt and gave in to the craving to savor the fool’s sweet lips one last time.

Etienne made a muffled sound of distress and broke the kiss. “Your teeth, *monsieur*...so sharp...”

Jacques stood and whirled away toward the door. “*Au revoir, mon petit.*”

He’d traveled only ten yards across the dirty, trampled snow before he found himself moving on all fours, his ragged suit of clothes and black boots transformed into the sleek layer of fur he despised with all his considerably hateful heart.

Jacques waited till the sun rose above the barren treetops before returning to run his claws against the cottage door.

CHAPTER 5

Etienne had feigned sleep as his strange benefactor stoked the fire and replenished the cottage's meager supply of food. Only when he sensed Jacques's imminent—and possibly permanent—departure did he bestir himself to request a proper leave-taking in exchange for his relinquished virtue.

The kiss Jacques bestowed upon him chased away the last of Etienne's drowsiness with an odd combination of revulsion and desire. He gasped when needle-sharp teeth pierced his lip, and recoiled when a coarse tongue swiped at the blood welling fast in the pinpricks. Then Jacques bid him good-bye, and he was left staring at the dim light spilling through the open door of the cottage.

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Hours passed. Etienne dressed himself, spitted and cooked the hares, then nibbled at the meat Jacques had left, and sat before the fire considering recent events. From his leather satchel he removed a text on curses, spells and charms and studied it with renewed interest. Satisfied with his own conclusions on the matter, he put away the book and picked up his lute.

When the scratching came at the door, Etienne was neither frightened nor surprised. He merely set aside his instrument and answered the summons. Nor was he amazed for more than the barest instant at the appearance of the cat.

“But, of course,” he murmured as the animal slipped inside and leapt to his shoulder. “Fear not, *monsieur*—we shan’t speak of it, now or ever.”

The cat nipped sharply at his chin and dropped to the floor, its tail waving high and proud as it made its way to the hearth.

Through the long, dull afternoon, they shared the warmth of the fire and another small meal of roasted hare. Etienne strummed his lute and read aloud whilst the cat dozed. When he made the error of reaching out to pet the animal, he drew back a bloodied hand for his trouble. Though affectionate by nature, he did not try a second time.

When the shadows of the trees grew long against the snow, the cat roused itself, stretched, and slinked to the door. There it sat and yowled till Etienne said, “You needn’t leave, *monsieur*. ’Twould be a simple thing to turn away and shut my eyes whilst you—”

The cat hissed a warning, baring fangs and claws.

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Etienne sighed. "As you wish." He rose from his place by the fire, opened the door and allowed the beast to exit.

The minutes crept by on lazy, stumbling feet. Etienne's eyes grew heavy as he awaited his visitor's return. By his estimation, 'twas well after midnight when the knocking commenced.

He didn't bother to rise this time, but called out over the moan of the wind, "Come in, *monsieur*, and welcome!"

Jacques threw open the door and slammed it behind him. He strode to the hearth and there deposited a loaf of bread, a pot of butter, a jug of wine, and the half-eaten remains of a winter goose.

Etienne looked upon these offerings with some consternation. "In no way would I offend your generosity, *monsieur*, but it seems this meal once belonged to another." He lifted his face to gaze into the glinting amber of Jacques' eyes. "I would not gorge myself when others go hungry."

Jacques' lip curled in a sneer. "And if I told you I pilfered it from the larder of a fat man with a fat wife and five fat, greedy brats who've never known hunger in their piggish lives?"

Etienne could not hide his answering smile. "If you told me such, I'd drink to their health and keep them in my prayers, *monsieur*, for 'tis said gluttony leads to disease and early death."

They supped. Etienne did his best to retain his manners, but grew less concerned about the lack of proper cutlery with each mouthful. When they'd finished, he wiped his lips on the

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sleeve of his fine linen shirt and turned to his visitor with the memory of the previous night's events sharp in his mind and hopeful expectation in his heart. He had made his peace with his own debauchery and wished nothing more than to repeat the experience—for how else was he to refine his skill at submission?

"I would thank you most heartily, *monsieur*, and show my gratitude in any way you might desire."

Jacques stared at him over the rim of the jug. "That coy expression will be the death of me, *mon petit*...if it doesn't slay you first."

He set the jug aside with the careful air of a man contemplating a strategic attack. This, on its own, might have been enough to put Etienne on his guard. Add to it the sudden, hungry grin that gave Jacques an aspect more feline than human, and Etienne knew he'd erred on the side of impudence. He'd only time enough to scramble backward till his shoulders struck the wall before Jacques moved upon him, stalking on all fours in the way of a lion crossing the savannah in high summer.

Jacques made short work of Etienne's garments. A seam squeaked and popped, giving way under the rough treatment and, in the space of a few moments, Etienne found himself nude and shivering on the floor. Jacques regarded him strangely, as if he'd never encountered such a being before this instant. Then his hands were on Etienne's skin, and Etienne was again reminded of the savannah he'd never seen but only read about in books written by men much bolder than

he.

He closed his eyes, and in Jacques' touch he felt the hot winds whipping the sand and tasted grit between his teeth. He arched into the sensation, baring his neck, and heard Jacques mutter a curse.

The hands left his body, and he opened his eyes to find Jacques pulling off his own boots and breeches, having already dispensed with his coat. Etienne did his best to see what he could, but the particulars of his companion's anatomy were hidden in shadow. Jacques spared Etienne one quick glance as he worked to free himself of his linens and said, "Pray, shall I give you the chance to protest?"

Etienne shook his head, feeling like a cornered gazelle with no choice but to embrace its own glorious end. "I would not waste the breath, *monsieur*."

Jacques tossed aside the last scrap of clothing and reached for the pot of butter he'd left to warm near the fire. "You are wiser than you appear, *mon petit*, for you shall need every last bit of that breath before we are through."

He pushed Etienne back so he lay flat on the floor, then grasped his thighs in his large hands and lifted till Etienne's knees bent deep and wide apart, his feet planted on the hard dirt.

"This will hurt," he said and dipped his fingertips into the pot of butter. "I expect you to keep quiet about it."

"*Oui... monsieur*," Etienne answered, his voice breaking as Jacques breached that deepest, most private place with two slick fingers. Instinctively, Etienne lifted his arms above his

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head and twisted his hands together in a mockery of shackles. He closed his eyes again and panted into the pain, struggling to still the trembling in his limbs.

Jacques loomed over him and bent to bite at his neck and chest. His fingers probed deeper, twisting and spreading wide, forcing a burning ache through Etienne's insides. Etienne sank his teeth into his lower lip and held onto the image of the lion devouring the gazelle—the lesser creature giving up his life to the nobler beast. Then Jacques crooked his fingers and pressed in hard. Etienne heaved himself upward, straining into the unexpected shock of pleasure in perfect, tortured silence, lest this new manner of delectable torment be withdrawn as punishment for disobedience.

Jacques chuckled darkly, but refrained from comment.

Before long, Etienne found himself writhing on the ends of Jacques' fingers, more a puppet than a man. Jacques' touch was unerring in its ability to set his flesh alight with a shimmering heat. Time stretched like molten, melted sugar—till the bloom of pain subsided entirely, and Etienne's voice sounded urgent and airless in his own ears.

"Please, *monsieur*..." What combination of words had he employed the previous night? What beseeching tone had moved Jacques to mercy? "*Monsieur*, please, I—"

Jacques cut off his broken keening with a hard slap to his inner thigh. "Hush. I've no patience for your mewling tonight."

He pulled his fingers free from Etienne's body, and Etienne felt bereft—empty, hollowed out, as if his insides had

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been carved away with a chef's curved knife.

Jacques reached again for the pot of butter. He eyed Etienne, a peculiar expression creasing his brow...nearly uncertain, almost hesitant. Then, as Etienne watched, it transformed into the familiar scowl.

Jacques fitted one large hand beneath Etienne's knee and lifted. In the same motion, he pushed forward, and something warm and slick nudged at Etienne's opening. He had no time to brace himself against the invasion. No instant to breathe, no moment to adjust, just the inevitable shove and thrust, and the growl of a famished beast scenting fresh meat.

Though he knew better, Etienne cried out. Jacques only smiled, slow and sly, and thrust again. He lifted Etienne's leg higher against his chest.

When he spoke, his voice was rough and rasping. "Does it pain you? Pray, tell me true."

"Oui, monsieur."

"Good. Learn to love this minor hurt, as I intend for it to be your constant companion." Jacques lowered his head and whispered, "There are not names for all the crimes I shall commit upon your person, nor for the ways you'll suffer at my hand."

Etienne started in alarm, his body tensing around his intruder. Deep inside himself where they were joined, he felt his own pulse beat at counterpoint to Jacques'. Panic overrode his senses, and he struggled.

Jacques reached up and gripped Etienne's wrists tightly in his hand, grinding the bones together. *"Oui, mon petit, fight*

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me. The better to feel how helpless you are as I hold you down and ride you at a gallop.”

Jacques’s scent and touch burrowed beneath Etienne’s skin to leave their mark. He took all Etienne had—plundered him relentlessly, each stroke delving deep and sending back a sweet shock. Soon enough, the sear of friction and distressed muscles gave way to a wrenching delight that made Etienne’s eyes water with shame. For what were they, with their grunting and arching and rocking, but a pair of beasts in rut?

Then Jacques released his wrists and slipped his hand between their entwined bodies to clasp Etienne’s stiffened member.

“Be still,” he snarled, and lowered his head to bite at the join of Etienne’s neck and shoulder.

Etienne froze, his joints locking as Jacques caressed his manhood with cruel precision. He shut his eyes and prayed for strength of will.

But when Jacques thrust again, rubbing quick and hard within him, Etienne’s prayers went unanswered. His body seized, bucking and twisting. The shadowy cottage dissolved in flashes of blue light. Etienne felt the sharp teeth of pleasure tear away a piece of his soul and deliver it up like an offering to a pagan god.

As the cataclysm ebbed, Jacques gave out with a murmured blasphemy and spent himself deep inside Etienne’s body.

“Sleep, *mon petit*,” he whispered between quick-drawn breaths.

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Etienne obeyed.

* * *

When he awoke, 'twas to the sound of Jacques piling firewood in the corner. As he struggled to sit, the twinge of pain he felt in his nether regions seemed nothing in comparison to the pang of guilt at his own laziness.

"You are too kind by half, *monsieur*," he muttered, his mouth dry and his tongue gummy and thick. "Tomorrow, I will gather fuel for the blaze."

Jacques dropped the last splintered branch and turned to face him. "You will not leave this cottage."

"But—"

"'Tis not safe, *mon petit*. I find I must insist." Jacques advanced on Etienne, a stern glower creasing his face. "Will you obey?"

"*Oui, monsieur*, of course."

Jacques' shoulders slumped with... Could it be relief? Etienne shook his head in bewilderment and reached for his linen and breeches.

"Leave them." Jacques knelt beside the fire, shrugging off his coat as he moved. In a few short moments, he'd fashioned a bed near the hearth from their various discarded garments.

Etienne fell asleep with Jacques curled against him, his hand hard and tight upon his hip.

When he woke again at sunrise, Jacques was gone. But the handprint—pink and mottled blue, as if Jacques had spent the night gripping him in some state of agitation—remained.

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* * *

Time passed.

Each day saw the pattern repeated. Etienne woke before dawn to watch Jacques take his leave with no mention of return—but return he did, without fail, bringing with him a meal to share and fuel for the blaze that was never permitted to die. Often, they shared some poor cousin of the roasted hare they'd consumed that first evening, but on occasion Jacques appeared with what could only be another man's supper.

Etienne did not leave the cottage—not even to relieve himself, for Jacques provided a chamber pot (no doubt stolen from some inattentive housewife) and emptied it with his own hands. In addition, he procured a large tin basin for the melting of snow and daily laundered both Etienne's clothing and person, as if he fancied himself a body servant in some great man's castle. When Etienne objected to such overindulgent coddling, Jacques turned cold eyes upon him till Etienne begged forgiveness for his ungrateful impertinence.

And each night, Etienne's intermingled cries of pained ecstasy shattered the darkness as he sacrificed himself to yet another lesson in the discipline of passion. Before long, it became his mission to prove himself an excellent student in every way.

One morning, eight weeks after the death of his father, Etienne rose to find the snow gone from the ground surrounding the woodcutter's cottage. Though he yearned to feel the first fresh breeze of spring on his face, he remembered Jacques' stern insistence that he remain inside, and did

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nothing beyond allowing the door to stand open so he might strum his lute in harmony with sweet birdsong.

When evening came, he did not bother to shut the door, but let the damp and whistling wind blow through and carry on itself the sound of his nightly visitor's footfall upon the dead leaves.

As he crossed the cottage floor to where Etienne sat curled in the corner, Jacques' frown told the tale of his displeasure. "Pray, enlighten me, *mon petit*. Do you seek to rouse my temper? Or are you truly so stupid you cannot fathom the danger in your brothers' discovery of your hiding place?"

Etienne started in profound amazement. "What do you know of my brothers, *monsieur*?"

Jacques' face grew ferocious. "Question me not, Etienne LeFevre, lest you find yourself at the mercy of a creature who possesses none."

Etienne ducked his head. "Forgive me, *monsieur*. 'Tis only that I've been locked away in this hovel so long..." He sighed and set aside his lute. "And should my brothers be interested in my whereabouts, surely the smoke rising day and night from this chimney is clue enough."

After a long moment of silence, Jacques reached down, grasped a handful of Etienne's curls and tugged till Etienne met his hard scowl. "You are lonely, perhaps, my petulant one?"

"No, *monsieur*," Etienne replied with perfect honesty. "You provide all the company I should ever hope to need."

"Bored, then."

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Etienne let his gaze slide away to the fire and nodded ever so slightly. "I've read all my books five times over."

"Hmm." Jacques released Etienne and stepped back, crossing his long arms over his broad chest. "You make an excellent point about the smoke."

"Thank you, *monsieur*."

Jacques pivoted on the heel of one tall boot and strode across the hard-packed floor. When he reached the door, he paused without turning and said, "Come along, *mon petit*. The sun rises in ten short hours, and our destination is many leagues away."

Etienne flailed in confusion for a moment or two, then moved quickly to pack his few belongings into his satchel and join his companion at the door.

They departed.

The night air had grown brisk in the time since Jacques' arrival at the cottage. Their breath plumed out before them in opaque clouds of steam, and the ground beneath their feet crunched with new-formed frost. Still, Etienne gloried in his freedom, dancing ahead of Jacques into the groves of trees and cutting capers beneath the glow of the moon.

Finally, Jacques called him back to his side and asked, "Do you not wish to know where we're headed?"

Etienne shrugged. "You have stated your dislike for being questioned, *monsieur*."

Jacques halted and stared at him. "I might be preparing to cut your throat and leave your body for the wolves. Truly, do you trust me so much?"

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“In all things, *monsieur*,” Etienne replied, and was surprised by the kiss Jacques placed upon his mouth, light as a soft fall of rain.

They reached the center of town just before midnight and stood in the glow of lamplight that fell from the large front window of The Rat’s Revenge—the finest inn for fifty leagues. Etienne fidgeted with the frayed cuffs of his coat and tried to brush away the stains that no amount of steaming water had been able to erase from his breeches.

Jacques glared at him. “What ails you?”

Etienne sighed and scuffed his toe in the muddy surface of the street. “’Tis but vanity, *monsieur*. My clothes are no longer fit for good company. Surely they shall set me out upon my ear for daring to enter in this disheveled state.”

Jacques’ laughter felt colder than the night’s stiffening breeze. “Fear not, *mon petit*. I have a plan. But you must continue to trust me and be agreeable to all my demands and remarks, however odd they may seem. Do you understand?”

“But of course, *monsieur*.”

This time, Jacques’ kiss had all the charm of a scorpion’s sting and twice the intoxicating poison.

CHAPTER 6

Owing to the happy turn in the weather, the inn was crowded with revelers. Jacques made his way to the back of the loud, smoky front room, where the proprietor of The Rat's Revenge—one *Monsieur* Rennard—sat near the fire, holding court among his guests. The knot of folk surrounding the innkeeper parted at the sound of Jacques' voice.

“Good sir, I bid you a fine evening and beg a moment of your time for private conversation.”

Jacques made his deepest, most obsequious bow, more keenly aware of his bedraggled appearance than he'd been in many a season. And why should that be? Perhaps because 'twas not just his own comfort that hung on the success of his

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scheme? Jacques pushed the thought aside and arranged his expression into something pleasant and unthreatening.

Rennard—a long, narrow man with a long, narrow face that bespoke an equally pinched nature—did not bother to hide his sneer of contempt. “I’m to stir myself for an interview with the likes of you? Pray, to what end?”

Jacques paused to gather at the fraying threads of his temper. With a disinterested flick at a speck of dirt on the sleeve of his dust-gray coat, he said, “I assure you, *monsieur*, ’twill be worth the inconvenience.”

Rennard’s sneer devolved into a scowl, but he rose from his chair and beckoned Jacques to the far corner of the hearth, ten feet or more from the nearest drunken soul. Jacques followed, his boots making no sound on the floor as he moved.

“Well, what of it?” Rennard demanded, hostility at war with curiosity in his gruff tone.

Jacques smiled. Now he had the innkeeper backed tightly between the wall and the hearth and he could afford to abandon his servile pose. “Pray, do you see the young man standing by the door? The very beautiful one, with eyes like the green sea and curls like a fistful of new-minted coins?”

As he’d expected, Rennard’s gaunt, greedy face lit from within at the mention of gold, and he squinted past Jacques to search for Etienne, who waited with his satchel and lute clutched in his hands and his head ducked low.

“*Oui*, I see him.”

“Excellent,” Jacques replied. “That young man is the Marquis de Carabas, lately of Avignon, and I am his

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manservant. We wish accommodations for the indefinite future. Your best rooms, of course."

Rennard's sneer made its triumphant return. "That?" he said, with a snickering laugh. "That is no marquis. That is, at best, the youngest son of a country gentleman fallen on difficult times."

Jacques started in mild shock at the unexpected accuracy of Rennard's assessment. His temper flared once more, for what right had this glorified barkeep to contradict him?

He glanced back at Etienne, who, at that moment, gave another nervous fidget and looked about himself with an uncertain frown. The pretty fool appeared ready to bolt. Then he lifted his face to meet Jacques' gaze, and his expression softened into something warm and yielding.

Jacques' anger eased. He turned again to Rennard. "How astute you are, *monsieur*. In fact, my master is traveling in disguise and will depend upon you to keep his secret."

"His secret?"

"*Oui*," Jacques replied. "The marquis is the rightful heir to his family's fortune, but his brothers—big, murderous brutes, both of them—have made attempts upon his life. Thus, the marquis has donned the aspect of a troubadour as he journeys to the king's court in search of justice."

Rennard appeared to consider his tale. "Bring him to me," he said finally, "and we shall discuss the matter."

Jacques beckoned. He ignored the slight tingle of warmth it incited in his limbs when the gesture brought Etienne to his side instantly and bent to bring his lips to the young man's ear.

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“You are the Marquis de Carabas, traveling in the guise of a troubadour,” he murmured as he took hold of Etienne’s wrist in an inflexible grip. “Do not fail me, *mon petit*.”

Etienne stared at him, bewilderment writ large upon his face. “I...you...” he stammered, glancing at Rennard and back again at Jacques.

Rennard lifted a skeptical brow. “’Tis a pleasure to make your acquaintance, my lord. Pray, how did you find the road from Avignon?”

Etienne blinked rapidly. When Jacques applied more pressure to his wrist, he coughed and stammered, “I...found them...uh....wet, *monsieur*. Very wet.”

Rennard’s eyes narrowed. “Your servant tells me you wish my best rooms. I assume a gentleman of your rank has sufficient funds for such lodgings?”

Etienne stepped back, plainly deferring to Jacques.

“We would beg your indulgence on the matter of payment, *monsieur*,” Jacques said, doing his best to hide his frustration behind another false smile. “If you could wait but a few days—”

“One day.”

“Pardon?”

“I will wait one day for payment,” Rennard said, “and you and your marquis will spend the night in the unused room behind the pantry till I see some proof of your story—some hard, cold proof that jingles in my pocket.”

Jacques lifted his chin, prepared to spit in Rennard’s face and follow that with as many blows as he could land before

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the man fell. But next to him, Etienne stifled a yawn, bringing Jacques' attention to the lateness of the hour and the nearness of dawn. And what would become of Etienne then, once Jacques had taken his daylight form? The poor halfwit would be alone and hungry, at the mercy of strangers, vulnerable to any and all who might...who might...

"You are too generous, *Monsieur* Rennard," Jacques said, forcing himself to ape a meek tone. "May the good Lord bless your kind heart."

Rennard snorted and waved them in the direction of the kitchen.

Jacques pulled Etienne away, waiting till they were well out of sight of the innkeeper to grab the young man by the scruff of the neck and give him a rough shake.

Jacques latched the door behind them and turned to survey their accommodations for the remainder of the night.

A barren fireplace in the corner, topped by a mantle, upon which stood a single tallow candle in a tarnished pewter stick. A three-legged stool still covered in bark. A rough-hewn bed-frame, softened only by a thin straw pallet. A washstand, graced by a cracked basin made of earthenware. A matching chamber pot on the splintered floor.

And still, for all its meager comforts, the room behind the pantry at The Rat's Revenge far outstripped the woodcutter's cottage for luxury.

Jacques crossed the room to light the candle. He turned to find Etienne's gaze upon him. The young man's eyes were wide and wet, and his pulse beat in his throat with the speed of

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a frightened hare's.

"I fear I've displeased you, *monsieur*."

Jacques held perfectly still, lest his fury get the better of him. The Marquis de Carabas must not appear bruised or bloodied come morning. And yet the lesson must be taught, for the pathetic dolt had no sense of self-preservation. Did he truly fail to comprehend how near they'd come to ruin this night?

"Such a wit you are, *mon petit*," Jacques drawled. "Such a bright spark of insight and understanding. I'm astounded you're not known far and wide as the finest mind in Christendom."

"I am sorry, *monsieur*."

Jacques felt his hands close into fists at his sides. "You may keep your apologies. I gave you but one task—"

"An impossible task, *monsieur*."

Jacques crossed the floor to loom over his companion. Rage bubbled in the back of his throat like acid in a cauldron. "Impossible, you say? Perhaps, instead of a marquis, you'd prefer to play another part? Something more suited to your special skills?"

Rather than reply, Etienne hung his head.

Jacques laid a heavy hand on Etienne's shoulder and dug his fingertips into the soft meat at the juncture. "I'll purchase a cheap wig and some whore's castoff gown in a shade of green to match your eyes and install you in an alley off the town square to hawk your wares. I'll charge five *centimes* for every quarter-hour you spend with some citizen's prod up your

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backside, and be a rich man in no time.”

“Please, *monsieur*—”

“Or perhaps ’twould be better to put you on your knees and set you to sucking. Heaven knows you’ve the mouth for it.”

Jacques moved his grip from Etienne’s shoulder to the curls at the crown of his head and pulled hard. Etienne’s neck curved backward in the way of Michelangelo’s rebellious slave, though his eyes harbored no spark of defiance. The light from the single candle glowed warm against his skin, washing it in golden shimmers and gilding the damp spikes of his eyelashes.

“Forgive me, *monsieur*,” he said. “I will endeavor to do better.”

The humble resignation in Etienne’s voice awoke the throbbing hollow in the center of Jacques’ chest. He fought to close himself against the sudden, painful flood of tenderness, but found himself engulfed.

In his mind’s eye, he saw his own hands drag along the smooth length of Etienne’s unclothed torso, and heard Etienne’s gasp as the his thumbs lodged in the soft, molten hollows at his hips. He watched himself manhandle Etienne’s body till the young man was sprawled facedown across Jacques’ lap.

Jacques saw his own hand rise and fall, felt the dewy skin beneath his palm grow hot, and watched as a flush spread across Etienne’s pale, smooth backside like the first blossom of the summer rose.

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Abruptly, he shoved Etienne away. "You will do more than that, *mon petit*. You will do penance."

CHAPTER 7

The sharp sound of tearing cloth was loud in the small, dim room. Etienne held perfectly still and allowed Jacques' his way, even as the other man shredded his only garments, right down to the stockings on his feet.

Etienne recognized the change in Jacques' manner, from irritation at his blunder with the innkeeper to the coiled, tight-sprung fury that always led to suffering of the most exquisite sort. Anticipation made Etienne's manhood grow long and thick between his trembling thighs. Given his state of undress, Jacques could not fail to notice.

"And what might this be?" Jacques bared his teeth in a feral sneer and curled his hand about Etienne's rising member

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with enough force to bring tears to Etienne's eyes. "Did you think to distract me from your transgression and lure me into bedsport?"

"No, *monsieur*, but I cannot..." Etienne looked away, the taste of shame sour in his throat. "I cannot help it."

Jacques seemed to pause at this admission. His touch gentled. "'Tis good of you to tell me that, *mon petit*," Jacques murmured, and pressed a kiss to Etienne's temple, "but 'twill not save your hide."

He dragged Etienne to the bed. Then he sat and pulled Etienne down till he was sprawled over Jacques' lap, his legs flung awkwardly this way and that, and his head pillowed on his own arms at the edge of the mattress. Jacques ran his callused palm over the curve of Etienne's backside, trailing his fingertips down the cleft as if contemplating his next move. The sensation was enough to soothe Etienne, though he knew better...he knew better than to—

Crack!

The first blow was more sound than sensation, and still Etienne cried out at the impact.

"Hush," Jacques whispered. "I've no patience with your mewling."

The second strike came with as little warning as the first. This time, Etienne felt the sting, but managed to muffle his response. Between his spread legs, his arousal beat a painful, urgent rhythm.

"Better," Jacques said and gripped Etienne's cheeks with both hands, opening him to the cool air and the sudden, harsh

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touch of rough fingertips. "We shall have some conversation, you and I, in the mellow tones and modulated volume of a well-bred gentleman and his well-trained servant. Are we understood?"

"*Oui, monsieur.*"

"Most excellent."

Jacques took his time. He landed blow after blow, choosing his targets with careful accuracy, switching between the well-padded swell and the unguarded juncture of buttock and thigh. Between each smack of palm to hot, reddened flesh, he posed a query.

"What is your name, good sir?"

"I am Etienne, Marquis de Carabas."

"From where do you hail?"

"The region of Avignon."

"And are you very wealthy?"

"Indeed, but—" Etienne broke off with a gasp. "Forgive me, *monsieur*. I cannot seem to catch my b-breath."

Jacques remained silent, but his fingers busied themselves dancing over Etienne's tortured bottom, stopping here and there to pinch and prod. Cascades of shivers assaulted Etienne as he fought to calm himself. His arousal remained an unforgettable burden, like a rod of new-forged iron dragging low and heavy between his legs.

"Tell me of your wealth, Marquis." Jacques struck the hardest blow thus far, rocking Etienne forward and forcing his manhood against the coarse fabric of Jacques' breeches. Even as pain blossomed across his backside, Etienne moaned in

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gutter-filthy delight.

"I am a man of great wealth, *monsieur*, but—"

"But?" Jacques shifted his thigh, pressing hard where it did Etienne the most good.

"But my brothers wish to steal my birthright and see me in my grave," Etienne said around a swallowed whimper. "This is why I travel in disguise, relying on kind-hearted strangers and the exceptional abilities of my...of my..."

Jacques gripped Etienne's cheeks a second time and squeezed. Etienne gurgled deep in his throat, beyond all self-control. He uncrossed his arms and grabbed at Jacques' leg, digging his fingertips into the soft leather of his boot.

"Release me, *mon petit*," Jacques whispered, not unkindly.

Etienne felt a cool stream of air against the cleft of his bottom—against that tight, twitching muscle, so desperate for a firmer touch—and pictured the purse of Jacques' lips as he blew. He let go of Jacques' boot and curled his hands into helpless fists.

Jacques rewarded him with a hard slap that again drove him forward. Etienne rolled his hips into the friction and bit his lip deeply enough to draw blood. When he spoke again, his voice trembled like the clapper of a bell. "I rely upon kind-hearted strangers and the exceptional abilities of my m-manservant, Jacques."

"Well done," Jacques murmured and rained down a storm of blows, each harder than the last.

Instinctively, Etienne spread his legs wide and took the brunt of the punishment on the tender flesh of his inner thighs.

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The pain seemed to writhe like a living thing beneath his skin, forcing his hips to cant upward into each well-aimed smack and then downward against the solid buttress of Jacques' leg.

Blackness engulfed him, inside and out. He felt as if he'd been crafted from pure sensation—nothing but crack of palm and the jolt of sensitized skin against rough wool. But he listened for what he knew would come—Jacques' command, his whispered words, slipping between the blaze that lit Etienne's nerves and the noisy din in his head, 'twould come.

"Now, *mon petit*."

Etienne's last conscious impulse was to stuff his own fingers into his mouth to stifle his scream. Then the agony-laced rush of release washed over him, stealing his breath and twisting his muscles into shapes unintended by their maker.

When he came back to his right mind, Etienne found himself humping Jacques' leg like a dog after a bitch in heat.

Jacques waited with an unusual sort of patience till Etienne's body gave up its final shudder.

"Most instructive," he remarked in a cryptic fashion, and lifted Etienne's limp weight onto the bed, bouncing him hard on his belly.

Etienne responded with the flutter of an eyelid, far too undone to move or speak, or even twitch. As if from far away, he heard the rustle of garments being loosened. A few moments later—remarkably few, in fact—there came a quiet curse, and Etienne felt the splash of something hot and wet against his freshly beaten backside. He had time to wonder if his flesh shone red in the candlelight, and whether Jacques'

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spent seed looked like pearls scattered across crimson velvet.

Then exhaustion overcame him, and he wondered no more.

He woke some time later when Jacques covered his splayed legs with the ratty, stained sheet, stopping just short of stretching it over his sore bottom. The room was still lit by the guttering candle. In the walls, Etienne could hear the scurrying and squeaking of vermin going about their nightly business.

"Monsieur?" he whispered. "It must be some three hours till dawn. Can you not rest?"

"No, indeed," Jacques replied, "as I must go and secure better lodgings for the Marquis de Carabas."

* * *

Etienne never discovered precisely where Jacques obtained the price of Rennard's best rooms, but at noon on the following day, the innkeeper presented himself and offered to escort Etienne to an upper floor.

"Everything has been made ready, my lord," Rennard said, very plainly keeping his gaze focused away from the spectacle of the naked young man tangled facedown in stained sheets, his reddened backside exposed to the chilly air. "The royal suite awaits your occupation...at your convenience, of course...and the midday meal will be served in the dining room shortly."

Too exhausted and sore to feel much shame over his appearance, Etienne thanked the man, but declined the offer of food with a pained sigh. The notion of subjecting his abused bottom to the seat of an unforgiving chair did not appeal to

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him. Nor, in truth, did any movement from his current position unless at Jacques' bidding or in Jacques' company—and Jacques would be gone for another six hours, at least.

"My lord, if you please," Rennard said, his simpering manner so very different from his contemptuous attitude of the previous night, "I could not help but notice how coarse and unseemly is your manservant...the one called Jacques?"

Etienne stiffened against the rough, sticky sheets.

Rennard cleared his throat and continued. "If you desire, I could ask about the town for a more likely candidate. After all, a man such as yourself—a marquis, no matter how reduced his circumstances—should be attended by a servant of greater breeding and delicacy, don't you agree?"

When Etienne refused to answer, Rennard stepped farther into the room and bent over the bed to whisper, "Are you in some distress, my lord? This Jacques fellow seems a brutal sort. If he's threatened you or abused your kindness in some way—"

"No." Etienne lifted his head from the pillow and glared at the innkeeper. "Thank you, *Monsieur* Rennard, for your concern, but 'tis unnecessary. I find Jacques' service exceedingly satisfying...er..." Etienne faltered and felt a flush of heat engulf his face. "Satisfactory. Now, if you will kindly allow me to take my rest?"

Rennard recoiled, backing away from the bed and out of the room. "I apologize if I've offended you, sir. Good day to you."

Etienne lay still and listened to the innkeeper's fading

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footsteps, wondering at his own instinct to defend man who'd so brutalized him only a few hours before.

True enough, his carnal encounters with Jacques were most satisfying, and had awakened in Etienne a hunger for further exploration of his physical nature and needs. But surely there were other paths to pleasure less fraught with discomfort and humiliation. He had only to seek them, for he was no prisoner and—for all his pretensions to cruelty—Jacques was no jailer.

Why did he stay? Was it only because Jacques had rescued him from his own lack of practical skills, saving him from becoming a frozen treat for starving wolves? Or was it something more...something greater even than the stubborn loyalty Etienne had always counted among his own chief attributes? Something large and lasting enough to be worth the price of ravished pride and a bruised backside?

For a long while, he lay upon the ratty mattress in Rennard's back room and thought on the subject. In the end, as the sun slid down to meet the horizon, he decided logic had no place in the matter. 'Twas clear he and Jacques fit together somehow, like the pieces of his late father's favorite puzzle box. Etienne need only wait—all the while learning to relish the twisted nature of Jacques' whims—for Jacques to reach the same conclusion.

Wearied by all this pondering of motives and means, Etienne buried his head in the musty linens. As sleep chased him down into the dark, narrow space between reality and dreams, he had time to wonder if the mouse might ever best

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the cat at its own game.

* * *

He awoke again to find Jacques kneeling by the bed, peering at him with his handsome features fixed in an odd expression—concern, perhaps? Etienne barely had time to blink away the last remnants of sleep before the other man's face smoothed itself into a portrait of bland disinterest.

"I do hope you're not ill," Jacques' said, sounding not in the least hopeful. "'Twould be a wretched inconvenience after all the trouble I've gone to in securing our position here."

"No, *monsieur*," Etienne replied, and winced as he rolled over and sat on the hard, scratchy edge of the thin mattress. "I am well. And you?"

"I am always well." Jacques turned away to stare through the dirty-paned window toward the last streaks of twilight glowing blue in the west. From the pen beneath the window rose the grunts and squeals of hogs enjoying their evening repast. "Rennard tells me you declined both food and better lodgings, even after he informed you he'd been paid. Why should this be, pray tell?"

"I wished to wait for you, *monsieur*."

"Again I ask...why?"

"I thought perhaps you would prefer it," Etienne answered honestly, "and I knew I would prefer your company at any meal or in any fine suite of rooms."

Jacques turned, his amber eyes flashing. "Do not play the love-struck calf with me, Etienne LeFevre. 'Tis a deeper game

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than your meager wit can hope to win.”

Etienne recoiled at his harsh tone, and silence reigned between them for a long moment. Then Jacques cleared his throat. “There is a revelry in the town square this evening—some pagan celebration of the equinox, I believe. Would you care to attend?”

Etienne shook his head and gestured at the pile of shredded garments lying in the corner. “I have nothing fit to wear.”

Jacques’s smile was crooked as a fishhook and twice as sharp, but he said nothing and only pointed at the large parcel resting on the three-legged stool.

“For me, *monsieur*?”

“No, *mon petit*, for some other criminally dense bit of tail I was foolish enough to collect in my travels.”

Etienne blushed and opened his mouth to apologize, but a knock at the door interrupted him. Jacques answered the summons and returned with a basin filled with steaming water, a chunk of coarse yellow soap, and a clean washrag slung over his arm. He set the basin on the floor next to the fireplace and turned to look at Etienne with that same evil smile.

Etienne glanced from Jacques’ face to the rough rag on his arm and back again, fully able to imagine the vigor with which his companion intended to apply the soap and hot water to all his various parts—including his tenderized bottom.

“Please, *monsieur*, I—”

“Hush. ’Tis time to see if we cannot make you presentable, my dear Marquis de Carabas.”

“But—”

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“Come here, *mon petit*. Now.”

Etienne complied without further comment, and if a scullery maid passing through the pantry on her way to the kitchen happened to catch the sound of a young man’s helpless whimpers through the cheaply-made door, she said nothing of it to anyone who mattered.

CHAPTER 8

The square teemed with folk of every persuasion—peasants and landowners, tradesmen with their petty wives and indifferently scrubbed children, apothecaries and bankers and whores and meddling priests.

Jacques walked two steps behind Etienne, in the manner of any well-trained manservant.

“Head up, shoulders back,” he murmured, keeping an eye out for pickpockets as they moved through the throng. “The Marquis de Carabas is worth ten of any man here.”

In response to these instructions, Etienne moved with a grace and confidence Jacques had not seen before, showing himself to best advantage in his silk breeches and coat of

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charcoal gray. The buckles on his shoes glinted in the torchlight, and his linens and hose looked fresh as new fallen snow. Beneath his black velvet hat with its dancing plume, his curls shone bright. The crowd parted before him as they made their way across the square. Women curtsied and simpered at the sight of him, and more than one man stared.

All of this should have been Jacques' triumph. He'd again managed to dupe the ignorant masses—a pastime nearly as enjoyable as the decimation of baby bluebirds—and yet he could not help but want to scratch out the eyes of every passerby who let his gaze linger too long upon Etienne's angelic face.

This would not do. He must remove himself from the source of his consternation, if only for a few moments. He escorted Etienne to the marble fountain in the center of the square. Nearby, a juggler in greasepaint entertained a gaggle of raggedy tots.

"Remain here, *mon petit*," Jacques whispered to Etienne, "and I will search out some treat to fill your empty belly."

Jacques moved briskly away, ignoring the sudden rush of anxiety at leaving Etienne to his own devices. For after all, what could go amiss? Who would dare accost the new-minted Marquis de Carabas, so plainly aristocratic in his fine suit of clothes?

He found a vendor of meat pies and bargained the man down to a *centime* for a pork-filled pastry with a half-burnt crust. As he nibbled on the blackened bit—saving the best for Etienne without so much as a second thought—he turned to

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gaze in the direction of the fountain.

Though the juggler had moved on, Etienne remained where Jacques had left him. As Jacques crossed the square to deliver Etienne's supper, a young woman arrayed in the swirling skirts of the Romany approached the fountain. In her hands she held a basket filled to the brim with some dark fruit, which she offered Etienne, along with a brilliant smile.

Now some thirty feet away, Jacques could see she held a ripened fig in her outstretched hand. Etienne returned her smile and—cutting his eyes at Jacques as if he'd been aware all along of his keen attention—sucked the fruit from her fingertips. Then he leaned back against the rim of the fountain, no longer standing so much as posing in a way that drew attention to the solid bulge behind the placket of his fine breeches. With a final glance in Jacques' direction, he let his eyes fall shut as if overcome by ecstasy. His mouth worked slowly, and when he'd swallowed the fig, he licked his lips clean with his soft, pink tongue.

Jacques stood frozen to a spot, his blood simmering in his veins. So distracted was he by lust that he almost missed the approach of another stranger—not the gypsy girl nor any of her kin, but a man dressed in garb nearly as well-tailored as Etienne's.

The man stood barely to the height of Etienne's shoulder. His face possessed all the least attractive features of a pig, and the three red rolls of flesh beneath his chin overhung the edge of his collar in a grotesque fashion. He spoke to Etienne in tones too low for even Jacques' preternaturally acute hearing,

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and when Etienne frowned and turned from him, the man touched his...

Jacques blinked, disinclined to believe what his eyes had shown him, and yet the scene remained unchanged. The stranger plucked at Etienne's sleeve, his sausage-like fingers tugging and prodding by turns in an attempt to encourage the young man away from the fountain and in the direction of the nearest alley.

The hilt of the dagger felt hot against Jacques' palm. With no memory of moving the last few yards across the square, he held the weapon perfectly poised, the deadly point threatening to create space where none existed between one of the stranger's ribs and the next...always assuming one could find his target beneath the layers of excess flesh. In Jacques' other hand, he held the man's wrist in a crushing grip.

Over the stranger's shoulder, Jacques saw how panic had made Etienne's eyes go wide and blank.

"Here now, good fellow, I meant no harm," said the stranger, his bravado belied by the terrified quiver in his voice. "I offered a good price to your boy, and I'm willing to double it if you'll only unhand me and—"

"Have a care, dog, lest I puncture your bloated carcass for the joy of seeing your fine shoes fill up and overrun with blood." Jacques struggled to shape the words around the growl rising in his chest.

The man sucked in a breath as if to protest, and Jacques pressed the point of the dagger deeper, feeling the fabric give way as the blade pierced the man's coat.

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“Jacques, please,” Etienne whispered, and the rare sound of his name on the young man’s lips made him pause. ’Twas time enough for the stranger to gather his wits and wrench his arm from Jacques’ grasp. Jacques watched as he scurried away, his short, plump legs moving with enough speed to churn butter. When he’d fled from sight, Jacques turned his attention to Etienne, who’d gone pale as a winter dawn.

Without a word, he handed Etienne the only slightly smashed pie.

Once more Etienne’s eyes widened to almost comical proportions. “Surely, you don’t expect me to eat this now?”

Jacques merely looked at him, schooling his features into a stillness as unforgiving as stone. After a moment, Etienne sighed and tore into the pastry.

For all his protestation, he made short work of the meal. When he’d finished, he looked at Jacques with a question plain on his face. Again Jacques said nothing, but pivoted upon the heel of his boot and strode into the alley beyond the fountain. He did not glance back to see if Etienne followed.

The dark, narrow space smelled of rotting food and furtive acts. Jacques waited till he heard the strike of Etienne’s shoes upon the cobblestones. Then he turned and pinned the younger man to the filthy wall. “Pray, whatever shall I do with you, *mon petit*?”

Etienne quailed beneath him. “You...I—”

“You and I, indeed,” Jacques bit out, his head filled with Etienne’s scent and his mouth watering at the sight of the pretty dolt’s pulse beating a rapid rhythm inside the pale,

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smooth column of his throat. "You, who would taunt me, and I, who will not be taunted."

"Please, *monsieur*, I—"

Jacques silenced him by pressing one hand across Etienne's mouth and the other against the bulge at the front of his breeches. "Perhaps you think your fine new clothes give you license to act the preening dandy? You think to show me how others want you? To give me cause for a possessive fit—as if I could be brought to the point of jealousy over the likes of you?"

Etienne stared at him with pleading eyes, which fell closed as Jacques ground the heel of his hand against the rising swell of his arousal. Jacques felt his own cock lift and fill at the show of submission.

"Look at you," he whispered into the soft, damp hollow beneath Etienne's left ear, "in all your grand array, believing yourself a fine specimen of a man. Shall I bring you low once more, *mon petit*? Shall I show you to whom you belong?"

He leaned into Etienne and stroked his hardened shaft through his breeches with short, merciless tugs. Beyond the mouth of the alley, the din rose to a frantic pitch as the revelers grew drunk on wine and their own bawdy laughter.

"Do you hear the folk making merry?" Jacques whispered. "I spy two ladies of the town—fine, respectable housewives, both—not twenty feet from where we stand. If they were to turn and look...if they were to see you...how eager, nay, how *desperate* you are for my touch."

Etienne whined against Jacques' palm, sending a high,

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sweet vibration up the length of his arm. His shallow panting heated the skin of Jacques' hand, and his body trembled with tension, as if strung taut between two poles and left to be buffeted by a high wind.

"Shall I call to them, *mon petit*? Shall I let them see you in all your vanquished disgrace?" Jacques leaned in close once more. "Careful now. You daren't make a sound, lest they hear."

He slid his thigh between Etienne's spread legs and shoved upward with bruising force. At the same moment, he bit down hard on the tender shell of Etienne's ear and felt the fragile skin break.

Behind Jacques' hand, Etienne made a muffled noise like a wounded animal and fell forward, his hips jerking in spasm. Jacques felt the pulse and twitch of Etienne's cock against his palm where 'twas trapped between their bodies. He rolled a drop of blood upon his tongue to better know the flavor of his prey.

"And now, as if your silly antics weren't troublesome enough, you've soiled your new garments." He slid his hand from Etienne's mouth and felt the rasp of a few stray whiskers, invisible in the dim light of the alley. "I ask again, whatever shall I do with you?"

Etienne drew a long, hitching breath and lifted his head to gaze into Jacques' face. "Whatever brings you joy, *monsieur*."

In his voice Jacques heard resignation, but in the fathomless depths of his sea-green eyes, Jacques saw something more...something like true devotion offered from a

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pure heart. He shoved Etienne back till his head connected solidly with the wall. When Jacques spoke again, he directed his words to the beetle scuttling in circles on the pitted, blackened bricks.

“Proceed at your own peril, Etienne LeFevre. I will happily lead this charade to the very ends of the earth, but you may find yourself weary of the journey ere long.”

At the sight of Etienne’s deepening expression of bewilderment, Jacques gave an irritated sigh. He’d offered the poor fool every chance for escape—every opportunity to flee, every warning of what lay ahead if he chose to share this path with Jacques. Perhaps ’twas time for more extreme measures.

Perhaps, in fact, ’twas time for a dose of bitter truth.

He let his gaze play over the lines of Etienne’s body, all the while savoring the ripe taste of blood between his teeth.

“Come along,” he said and clamped a hand ’round Etienne’s arm. “You’ve shaved yourself carelessly. Let us return to our rooms and see about correcting your lazy habits, shall we?”

* * *

“Must I carry you over the threshold like a captured bride, *mon petit*?”

Etienne stood in the doorway of the suite, his mouth agape, unable to take another step, no matter how Jacques prodded and poked at him. Rennard’s best rooms were more than Etienne had expected in every possible way—larger, better furnished, and sweeter-smelling than chambers in a public

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accommodation had any right to be. Indeed, they rivaled the most comfortable rooms in his father's house, and the inevitable comparison brought a hard lump of regret to Etienne's throat.

Jacques' question had sounded more amused than annoyed, but Etienne took notice of the tart flavor of his tone and stepped aside. From his new vantage point, he could see past the table that groaned beneath the weight of a recently delivered meal and through the archway to the high-mounded, four-poster bed in the next room.

"Will you eat?" Jacques asked.

Etienne tore his gaze from the bed. "I have no appetite at the moment, *monsieur*."

Jacques shrugged. "As you wish. Strip down to your linens whilst I call for basin of hot water and a strop."

Etienne's fingers trembled as he complied, slowing his movements. By the time he'd finished undressing, Jacques had dragged a heavy, high-backed chair to the blazing hearth and was using the aforementioned leather strop to hone the blade of his dagger.

"Sit," he said, not taking his eyes from the silver glinting in the firelight.

Etienne obeyed. He clutched the ornately carved arms of the chair to still the anxious quivering that had spread through the length of his body. He trusted Jacques—trusted the steadiness of his hand—and knew he'd draw no blood by mischance. Therefore, it could only be dread of the intentionally inflicted wound that set Etienne's limbs to

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quaking—or, perhaps, some dark-edged species of anticipation.

In the end, he was nearly disappointed. Jacques' touch felt businesslike in the extreme, tilting his head to the left and right in the glow of fire. The kiss of the blade as it scraped along his jaw held no promise of violence, and Jacques did not speak as he worked. The combination of gentle handling and easy silence lulled Etienne till he found himself slouching boneless in the chair.

'Twas then Jacques chose to break the spell. "You allowed another's hands upon your person, *mon petit*."

The words, dropped into the well of quiet with no more inflection than a comment on the weather, served to make Etienne flinch. The point of the dagger caught in the soft flesh just beneath his jaw. He felt the sting, followed by the slow, slick roll of liquid down his throat and the inevitable tightening in his groin that still brought a heated flush of shame to his face.

Jacques continued as if nothing were amiss, but now Etienne heard the undercurrent of anger in his voice. "I might have killed that man, you know. Think of it—his body lying on the cobblestones, his family bereft, and all because you allowed his hand to fall upon the sleeve of your coat and his whisper into your ear."

"But—"

"Hush." Jacques leaned down and let his hot, fragrant breath play over Etienne's face. "You sought my attention through a public show of your of attributes, is that not so?"

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Dazzled by the way Jacques' eyes flashed amber in the firelight, Etienne could only nod.

"But your display garnered naught but the notice of a man who sought a common whore and believed my property to be nothing more than a bit of tail for lease by the quarter-hour."

"Your...your p-property, *monsieur*?" Etienne's teeth chattered around the question, though he did his best to keep still, pinned to the chair by Jacques' glower and the point of the dagger still pressed beneath his jaw.

"Indeed, *mon petit*. And as my property, 'tis your duty to remember and keep your place."

Etienne drew a deep breath and swallowed, feeling the blade dig into the wound on his throat. "And what is my place, *monsieur*? Where, exactly, do I fit?"

Jacques appeared to pause. When he spoke, his words came slowly, as if he weighed each one before allowing it freedom. "Your place, *mon petit*, is beneath me, ever in my shadow, where I may keep you sheltered and safe from harm." He blinked his amber eyes in his lazy, feline way and said, "The world is no more than a pit of rank corruption. I would shield you from all its vicious ugliness, but in exchange, you will pay the price of being owned by a monster."

Etienne jerked in surprise and felt the dagger cut deeper. "No," he gasped, "not a monster."

Jacques gifted him with a smile, its edge honed with the promise of exquisite pain in the immediate future. "Oh, indeed. And since you doubt my word, I am forced to prove it."

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He leaned in close and replaced the dagger with his lips against Etienne's throat. His tongue flickered hot as any flame against the wound, and when he pulled away, Etienne saw the vivid crimson of his own blood smeared across Jacques' lips.

The next moment found Etienne dragged from the chair and then the room, and tossed on the bed like a child's poppet. Jacques climbed atop him, caging him against the down-filled cushions, and proceeded to employ his blade upon Etienne's linen shirt and drawers till he lay all but nude upon the green velvet coverlet.

Then Jacques used the garters meant to fasten Etienne's new hose to tie his hands to the posts of the bed. Etienne allowed it all without so much as a sigh.

Jacques settled between Etienne's spread legs and appeared to survey him with some satisfaction. "Pray, why do you not speak, *mon petit*? Do you fear I'll cut out your tongue at a wrong word?"

Etienne merely eyed his conqueror and waited, keenly aware of the dagger in Jacques' hand.

Jacques shrugged. "Let us see how long you can maintain your silence, shall we?"

He reached up to run the tip of the dagger down the length of Etienne's arm.

Etienne turned his head and watched the blade's progress, slow and careful as it explored the soft flesh of his inner arm. He caught the glint of silver in the low light from the single bedside lamp and shut his eyes, willing enough to have his blood shed at Jacques' hand, but not eager to watch it drip and

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run and pool.

But Jacques did not press the blade deeply enough to break the skin...not till Etienne had relaxed into the deep-piled cushions. And even then, he only scraped the dagger's edge over one of Etienne's teats, back and forth and back again, sending arrows of bright sensation that further thickened Etienne's manhood and inspired him to twist his torso and pull against his restraints.

'Twas, of course, this reckless writhing that caused the blade to nick him. The sharp bite of pain made him still beneath Jacques' hands. He stared up at his captor, his shallow panting loud in his own ears.

Without a word, Jacques bent and took the injured teat into his mouth to suck away the blood. Etienne arched into the sensation, choking back a moan at the rough rasp of Jacques' tongue over the fresh wound.

Jacques pulled back with another version of his many wicked grins. "You taste of fear, *mon petit*."

Etienne wondered how Jacques could identify the flavor in his prey's blood, but thought it bad form to ask. Just as well, as Jacques had already advanced to tracing invisible, arcane patterns over Etienne's abdomen with the edge of the blade. He avoided the twitching swell of Etienne's erection with each pass, but seem especially keen on dipping the point of the dagger into Etienne's naval.

"How like a little cup it is," he murmured. "I could lap from it like a tiny goblet."

Etienne struggled to hold back a shudder at the image

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Jacques' words conjured. Jacques shifted backward on the bed and brought the dagger to press just above Etienne's knee. He traced it upward, barely touching in a way that brought every nerve to twitching life and made Etienne strain to hold himself still. And still his arousal did not flag, but only increased its fevered pulsing, as if feeding on his anxious struggle.

"As you are learning," Jacques said in a quiet, even voice, "torment need not involve pain, but merely the threat of it, and the knowledge of its inevitable arrival. You know I will cut you. But you do not know where or when."

Jacques lifted the blade and repositioned it so the point made a small dimple in the thin skin where Etienne's thigh met his torso. Etienne closed his eyes and saw how the crease there might run scarlet with his blood. He tried not to whimper.

"If I were to cut you here with any force or depth," Jacques said, in the same steady, reasonable tone, "you would lose your life's blood in a very few minutes, but not more than 'twould take for me to wash the gore from my hands and leave The Rat's Revenge through the front door for all to see. Come morning, the servants would find your body, and all the town would search for the man who murdered the Marquis de Carabas. But, of course, I am not a man."

Etienne blinked up at him and nodded in full agreement.

"Now you begin to understand, *mon petit*." Jacques moved the dagger again, this time caressing the underside of Etienne's erect member with the warm, smooth flat of the blade. He dragged it downward, turning the weapon in his

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hand till Etienne felt the keen edge against his testicles. "If I were to cut you here—nothing life-threatening, just a scratch—I suspect the pain would overcome your temporary vow of silence."

Etienne began to tremble once more, his mind seized with something beyond fear, more intense than arousal—some heady, overwhelming combination of the two that shook him from his soul outward and made hot tears flood up and overflow. He squeezed shut his eyes in defense against Jacques' hard stare.

He felt Jacques move the dagger once again. Then came the sudden sting upon his inner thigh. The jolt raced up the length of his body and back down again to pool like hearth-warmed syrup in his lower body. Only when Jacques' callused fingertip replaced the blade and dug into the wound did Etienne cry out.

He opened his eyes to find triumph in every line of Jacques' viciously handsome face.

"Pray, *mon petit*, have I proved my point?"

"*Oui, monsieur*, you've succeeded in forcing sound from my throat," Etienne replied, barely recognizing the hard edge in his own tone, "and so you are due all honor and congratulations."

Jacques' victorious smile appeared not to dissolve so much as to curdle. "Your ill-timed wit does you no credit, Etienne LeFevre," he said. "Or is yet another misguided attempt at provoking my ire?"

"No, *monsieur*, I—"

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Jacques reached out and lay his finger against Etienne's lips. Then he lifted the dagger and pressed the tip into the dripping slit at the peak of Etienne's erection. Fire raced along the nerve endings from that single point of contact throughout Etienne's body, eating up the breath in his lungs and setting his thoughts ablaze. His spine arched slowly...ever so slowly...as he teetered on the slender beam between cataclysmic delight and catastrophe.

"What shall it be, *mon petit*?" Jacques whispered. "Must I maim you before you'll admit the truth?"

Etienne pulled hard on the restraints at his wrists, waiting in agony for the stroke of the blade.

"Will you not say it? Will you force me to ruin you forever?" Jacques' voice took on another note of desperation with each question he posed. "Will you not tell me what I am?"

He pressed the point of the dagger deeper—deep enough to abrade the delicate tissue—and Etienne made a gurgling noise at the back of his throat.

"What am I? Say it!"

Etienne gave way with an involuntary, full-body quiver. Quick as a cat, Jacques pulled the blade away and lunged forward to press it at his throat. "Say it, *mon petit*! Say it!"

"Monster," Etienne moaned. "You're a monster."

"Again!"

Etienne drew a long breath and, in tones as clear and unwavering as any cathedral chime in Christendom, said, "I am the property of a monster."

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There was a moment of stillness in which Jacques' amber eyes narrowed and his mouth worked without issuing sound. Then the pressure of the blade at Etienne's throat disappeared, and Jacques shifted backward onto his knees.

Etienne shut his eyes and listened. He heard the muffled cursing as Jacques fumbled with the fastenings of his own breeches and knew when Jacques had finally freed his manhood by the way he lifted Etienne's legs and forced them back, bending him nearly in two.

Etienne opened his eyes and saw Jacques looming over him, the dagger clutched between his bared teeth like a buccaneer from a picture book. Had he not seen the warning glower in Jacques' eyes, he might've smiled at the odd image.

Then came the first brutal thrust. Jacques had never before taken him without considerable preparation and a generous dab of butter or tallow to ease the way, and yet Etienne found the discomfort no great hardship. He merely grabbed his restraints to gain leverage and canted his hips into the barrage. Soon enough, the pain melted beneath the pounding need Jacques' carnal assaults always awoke in him, and he found himself once more writhing beneath a blade forged of white-hot pleasure.

Jacques allowed one of Etienne's legs to fall aside and reached between their bodies to thumb the tip of Etienne's manhood, where the tiny wound still throbbed. Like a thorn tearing at all his most vulnerable places, the sensation forced a sob from Etienne's lips. Jacques' grin around the shape of the dagger was both beautiful and terrible to behold, and he

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caressed the wound again with a tender kind of cruelty.

This time Etienne screamed, lost in a delight sharp enough slice through skin, muscle and bone and leave him lying in tattered pieces. He felt Jacques' rhythm falter and heard the usual blasphemies that signaled his release. Etienne let himself sink as dark tendrils of peace worked their way through his soul, like drops of indigo ink in a pool of still water.

He would not remember the single, chaste kiss Jacques pressed to his forehead, or the vows of eternal protection Jacques whispered against his throat. But his sleep was dreamless, and the heat of Jacques' embrace lingered long after daylight came and stole his lover away.

CHAPTER 9

Spring ripened into summer, and Jacques watched with satisfaction as Etienne grew into the role of the Marquis de Carabas. A proud, aloof carriage became second nature to the young man, and though Etienne never did learn to embrace the scornful air of a true aristocrat, his beauty and exquisite style of dress made up for his lack of disdain.

In the evenings, Jacques allowed Etienne the run of the town—so long as he did not stray too far from sight, or engaged in anything beyond the most cursory conversation with another living soul. During the day, Jacques moved about in his alternate form secure in the knowledge that Etienne remained safely sequestered in the third-floor suite of The

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Rat's Revenge.

Jacques frequently made his twilight appearance bearing gifts—sheet music for Etienne's lute, copies of the latest plays performed in Paris and occasionally, implements and playthings intended to enrich their more intimate encounters. These treasures included a large, *faux* phallus crafted of pink-veined marble, a very soft and flexible flogger made of doeskin, which Jacques applied with industrious creativity to Etienne's backside, and a cruel leather strap that kept Etienne from reaching release when buckled tightly about the base of his cock. This last was good for several hours' worth of diversion, as Etienne was inevitably reduced to crawling upon the floor and begging in a most appealing manner.

All seemed well. Jacques anticipated no change in their circumstances, but as the warm, dry months darkened into the wet days of autumn, too often he found Etienne curled upon the sumptuously appointed bed, his lute discarded and his brow marred by a discontented frown.

"What is it, *mon petit*? Pray, tell me, before I lose patience with your everlasting sulk."

Etienne sighed in a mournful fashion and directed his forlorn gaze out the window facing the town square. "I hate to complain, *monsieur*, but the hours between first light and dusk are so long and quiet, and I'm left with so little to occupy myself."

"Indeed," Jacques said, considering him through narrowed eyes. "I suppose I've been remiss in not arranging for daily entertainment. Perhaps the great playwright, Molière, would

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consent to sit by your bedside and read to you from his most recent works, or will a troupe of pantomimes imported from Italy suffice?"

Etienne flinched at his caustic tone. "Forgive me, *monsieur*, I meant only—"

Jacques held up a hand to cut him off. "I see I've erred in not using you to the point of exhaustion and leaving you to sleep away the day." Jacques glanced about the room till his gaze fell upon the basket in which he stored the various tools and toys he'd collected over the months. When he looked again at Etienne, the younger man's eyes widened, and he bit his full lower lip in obvious apprehension.

"Well might you tremble, *mon petit*, for 'tis an error I shan't repeat."

Long hours later, Jacques slipped into an empty alley just ahead of the sunrise. He'd left Etienne sprawled across the bed, his voice broken with pleading and his sore, sweat-drenched body lost in a swoon that would likely last the day.

Jacques squinted up at the brightening sky and pursed his lips with vexation. Why was he not satisfied by the night's accomplishments? Was not his aim to keep Etienne within his power in all ways? And had he not triumphed in this regard, wringing from the pretty fool a vow of perfect, serene obedience, unsullied by complaints of loneliness or boredom?

What, then, was this discomfiting emotion fretting at Jacques' nerves?

He shook his head in wonderment. In the next instant, the change was upon him, and if his last human impulse was one

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of regret—or even guilt—there was nothing to be done about it between that moment and setting of the sun.

* * *

Jacques returned to the inn a full two hours past his usual time, clutching in his hand a gift procured with considerable difficulty—a beautifully-wrought copy of sonnets penned by that long-dead English proficient, William Shakespeare. The book had cost him all he'd managed to steal, cheat and finagle in three days' time, but he thought the price worth Etienne's expected smile of gratitude.

"Good evening," said Rennard, greeting him with his usual half-sneering, half-fawning air, as if the innkeeper couldn't be sure whether to hold Jacques' in contempt or as object of dread. "You will find the marquis entertaining his guests in one of the public parlors on the second floor."

Every instinct in Jacques' considerably attuned nature leaped to attention. "His guests?"

"Indeed," Rennard replied. "Two rather large sojourners, with the manners and dress of country-bred gentlemen, called not an hour ago upon the marquis and requested a private audience. The use of the parlor will be added to the weekly bill, of course."

"Of course," Jacques murmured, brushing past Rennard on his way to the stairs.

The visitors could only be Daubert and Jourdain LeFevre, for no other large, country-bred gentlemen would call to request any sort of audience with either Etienne or the

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Marquis de Carabas. Jacques reached the door of the parlor and paused to listen. Through the polished wood came the sounds of men's voices.

"Come with us, Etienne. You've dallied long enough in town, playing charades for your own amusement. The estate is in need of your industry."

"*Oui*, Etienne, it's very selfish of you to abandon us. The servants ask after you every day, and our parents' graves remain untended. Come with us now."

Jacques smiled in grim acknowledgment of the brothers' obvious scheme. They would not assault Etienne here, within the walls of The Rat's Revenge, where the young man was thought to be an individual of some standing. They would wait till they had him on the road between town and the LeFevre estate, and do away with him where they could easily dispose of his corpse.

The ever-present fury infusing Jacques' soul crystallized to a single column, like a poison-tipped shard of ice honed to deadly perfection. He counted to three and burst into the room.

What transpired next proved, once again, that superior numbers have little to recommend them against a man's drive to protect what he holds beloved. And if the man in question is both less-than-human and more? Flailing fists and a great deal of ineffectual shouting are but the buzzing of gnats in a lion's ear.

Rennard pounded on the parlor door, but did not enter...showing his intelligence to be equal to his greed.

Jacques stared over the hilt of his dagger to where Daubert

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and Jourdain kneeled at his feet, bloodied and bruised, and in abject terror. He said nothing, leaving Etienne to break the sudden silence.

“*Monsieur?*” Etienne whispered, hurrying to stand at Jacques’ side. “I am unharmed. They merely sought me out to—”

“To murder you, *mon petit*,” Jacques snarled, tracing figures in the air with the point of the dagger—drawing invisible images of bloody revenge for crimes yet uncommitted. “And so they will pay the price. Say farewell to your kin, Etienne LeFevre. You will see them no more.”

“No!” Etienne cried and tugged at Jacques’ arm. “I beg you, *monsieur*, do not do this thing you contemplate.”

Jacques smiled without taking his eyes from the objects of his ire. “They would spill your entrails to feed some roadside mongrel, *mon petit*, and all for greed.”

“*Oui*, perhaps,” Etienne replied. “But if you kill them now, giving them no chance to redeem themselves, you damn their souls to perdition forever. I would not have such a thing upon my conscience, *monsieur*—nor yours. Let them go, I beg of you.”

Now Jacques shifted his astonished gaze to Etienne. “You would visit no retribution upon them? You would allow them to escape and return again some bright day to slaughter you in our bed?”

Etienne shrugged. “What evil can befall me when I live under your protection, *monsieur?*”

Jacques blinked at him, stunned to silence. What evil,

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indeed? Only every villain who walked the daylight hours on two legs. A flood of helpless frustration overtook him, nearly causing him to stagger.

The hand that gripped the dagger began to tremble. Jacques lowered it slowly. Daubert and Jourdain LeFevre stared up at him, hope plain on their ugly, brutal faces.

“Go,” Jacques grunted. “Pray I do not chance to look upon your faces yet again, for my meager store of mercy is quite thoroughly exhausted.”

Jacques stalked across the room to stare out the window into the night. Daubert and Jourdain made haste to depart. When the door of the parlor had slammed behind them, and Rennard’s muffled obscenities had faded from the air, Jacques turned once more to look upon his companion.

Etienne met his gaze and seemed to read Jacques’ intention there, for he dropped to his knees in a move so graceful it stole Jacques’ breath—but not so much he could not stride toward the younger man, unfastening his breeches to release his hardening cock as he went.

Etienne parted his lips, his jaw falling open as his eyes fell shut. Jacques gripped the curls at the top of his head and thrust himself forward into the thick, wet heat of Etienne’s mouth. The younger man twisted his hands behind his own back as he’d been taught and angled his throat for the onslaught.

Jacques sniffed the air, his nostrils flaring, searching beneath the musk of his own arousal for the fragrance of Etienne’s submission. There...there it was...sweet and light and sharp as a bough of honeysuckle bathed in ray of sunlight.

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And what of that honeysuckle? With no careful hand to shield it, its fate was to be plundered by birds and insects, ravaged by the very rays it adored, and finally blighted by frost. Like Etienne—so tender, so vulnerable to the cruel whims of nature's most base creations.

Even as these dark thoughts invaded, Jacques felt tendrils of pleasure coil about his spine and shoot outward. At the first rush, he pushed Etienne away and painted the younger man's upturned face with the product of his release. Tiny, silvery pearls clung to Etienne's lashes and nestled in the corners of the smile he offered up like a gift. Jacques shut his eyes as the aching hollow in the well of his soul contracted in pain and fear.

In another moment, he'd dragged Etienne to his feet. He spun the younger man around to press Etienne's back against his chest and hold the dagger at the soft flesh just beneath his ear. "Pray, do you ever wonder why it is I expect so much of you and so little of myself? Why your conduct must be, in all things, irreproachable, while mine is barely tolerable at best?"

Etienne's throat worked beneath the kiss of the blade, but he said nothing.

"Wonder no more, *mon petit*, for I shall enlighten you. 'Tis simply this—you are too good." Jacques felt his hand tremble again around the hilt of the dagger and took a moment to steady himself. "Did you know, the first time I saw you, I thought I beheld a heavenly being?"

"No, *monsieur*," Etienne whispered.

Jacques caressed Etienne's chest, running his free hand up

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and down at a leisurely pace, as if they lay together before the fire sharing the gossip of the town. "What punishment befits the crime of corrupting an angel, do you suppose?"

"*Monsieur—*"

"You are kind where I am cruel, sweet where I am bitter, generous where I am miserly. You are the embodiment of light, when I am cursed to walk in shadow."

"Please, *monsieur—*"

"And the worst of it is I am charged, by the mysterious compulsions of my own heart, to keep and protect you from all harm."

"But you do, *monsieur*, you *do*." The throb of emotion in Etienne's voice was unmistakable. "You have saved me from my own stupidity a thousand times over."

"No," Jacques said, shaking his head. "Your very nature defeats me, and will defeat me again. You trust too well, and too easily, and see friendship where only peril lurks."

"*Oui*. I am a fool, and once again I beg your forgiveness."

"No," Jacques repeated, "you are only good, and if I were not cursed to be apart from you half of every day, perhaps I could better shield you from..." He sighed. Where was the sense in all this gibbering? The hag's spell had proven irreversible, had it not? Decades of suffering hadn't erased it. There was little point in wishing it away now.

"Shall I take your life, *mon petit*?" He laid his lips against Etienne's ear and murmured, "Before another's hand can pluck the bloom and trample it in the mud, shall I end this misery? Shall I grant us both the peace only you deserve?"

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“If it give you comfort, *monsieur*.” The quiver in Etienne’s words belied his terror, but he lifted his chin, baring his throat to Jacques’ blade.

And with that gesture, vanquished all Jacques’ determination.

Jacques closed his eyes and drew a long breath, drinking deep of Etienne’s scent. He pressed his hand over Etienne’s heart one last time. Then he removed the dagger from the young man’s throat and hurled it across the room. The blade struck the wooden mantle over the hearth and embedded itself there, quivering.

Without a word, he released Etienne from his grasp and pivoted on the heel of his boot. His hand was on the knob of the door when he heard the muffled thud of Etienne’s knees striking the floor once more.

Jacques quit the parlor and the inn without a backward glance.

CHAPTER 10

As the late autumn dawn struggled to overcome the heavy clouds blotting the horizon, Etienne rose from the place on the parlor floor where he'd lay curled all night.

Jacques had not returned. Now Etienne would be forced to while away the hours till twilight with only his own regrets for company. Why had he agreed to meet with Daubert and Jourdain? When Rennard had knocked upon the door of the suite with news of visitors, why had he let his loneliness overwhelm his good sense?

It hardly mattered now. Jacques was gone, and gone he might very well stay. Etienne deserved no less than abandonment in return for his folly.

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As he left the parlor on his way to the suite, he spied something lying in the shadows of the hall—something small and square, with a cover made of oxblood leather: *The Collected Sonnets of Wm. Shakespeare*.

He opened the book, and on the first page he found his own name scrawled in nearly illegible letters, the ink smeared by the inscriber's haste. A gift, no doubt. And how had he repaid Jacques' generosity? With a final act of stupidity that had driven his lover away.

Clutching the book, he climbed the stairs to the suite, where he spent the better part of the day wallowing in his despair.

But an hour before sunset, his hopeful nature reasserted itself. He rose from his chair by the fire to bathe and shave and otherwise make himself presentable for the return of the man he considered, in all ways, his master.

Before reaching for the newly laundered linens the maid had left on the bed, Etienne considered his naked form in the tall looking glass. What embellishment might he add? What might best divert Jacques from his black mood, or even coax forth a rare smile of approval?

His gaze strayed to the basket in the corner. Of all the carnal tools and playthings Jacques had introduced into their lovemaking, Etienne despised the small leather strap with the biting buckle most of all. Naturally, Jacques seemed enchanted by this toy beyond any other—or perhaps by Etienne's reaction to its cruel restraint.

As he stroked himself to hardness and fastened to strap

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around the base of his manhood, trapping the blood and transforming his arousal to an aching burden, Etienne wondered again how he'd come to this place where pleasure arrived on the wings of pain, and love was merely another name for a delightful kind of suffering.

With a final glance at his reflection, he lay down upon the bed to wait.

* * *

“Rouse yourself, *mon petit*. We have much to discuss.”

Etienne blinked into the sudden glare of a candle's flame. When Jacques' face replaced the light, he fell back against the pillow in relief.

“I am pleased to see you, *monsieur*.”

Jacques features twisted themselves into an expression both strange and fleeting. “Come now, leave off this shammed devotion and—”

His hand grazed Etienne's erection where it raised the bedclothes. He paused, his scrutiny hard on Etienne's face, and pulled aside the sheet. In the dim light from the candle, Etienne's manhood glowed a deep rose against the constraint of the black leather strap.

The muscles in Jacques' jaw clenched and released. “What trickery is this? Do you seek to distract me from my plans?”

“I know nothing of your plans, *monsieur*, but I'll admit to seeking a distraction. You seemed so distressed when last we were together—”

“And you thought a bit of bed-play would be enough to

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divert me? How little you know me, *mon petit*.”

Etienne’s face flushed with heat, but he did not lower his eyes in the usual way. Instead he reached down to press his hand against the hardened bulge behind the placket of Jacques’ breeches. “Perhaps better than you perceive, *monsieur*.”

The amber of Jacques’ eyes flashed as bright as the candle’s flame. He smiled his familiar, vicious smile and pressed a gentle forefinger to Etienne’s lips. “We may debate the acuity of my perception another time. I have birthed a scheme to keep us both safe and comfortable for many days to come, but I will need your full and unfettered cooperation.”

Etienne, mindful of the finger still pressed against his lips, nodded.

“Excellent.” Jacques moved that same finger to trace a teasing line up the length of Etienne’s trapped erection. “Pray, tell me, how long can you hold your breath?”

Struggling to hold himself still beneath the maddening stimulation of Jacques’ touch, Etienne shrugged.

“Let us see, shall we?”

Etienne braced himself, but nearly a year’s experience could not prepare him for the next three hours beneath Jacques’ hands and teeth and wicked, torturous tongue.

* * *

“Please, *monsieur*, the strap...it hurts,” Etienne moaned as Jacques again—for the hundredth time in half as many minutes—shifted the well-lubricated marble phallus inside

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Etienne's body and slowly...ever so slowly...withdrew it, only to plunge it deeper on the next thrust. At the same time, Jacques clenched his fist around Etienne's trapped arousal and held it tight, forcing it to pulse against his palm in agonized jerks.

"Hush, *mon petit*. Your suffering is for the best of causes," he whispered, pausing between each word to nibble at the nape of Etienne's neck. "I must know if you can perform the required task under extreme circumstances."

"Task?" Etienne pressed his forehead into the mattress and did his best not to weep. "What... Oh...what task?"

Jacques growled, sending shudders down Etienne's spine to combine with the rolling licks of pleasure radiating from his backside. "It does not bode well that you cannot keep such a simple request in your brain for more than a few moments."

"Forgive me, *monsieur*."

"Always, my most dear Marquis de Carabas." With a final, hard twist, Jacques pulled the marble phallus free of Etienne's body. Before Etienne could respond with more than a whimper and a lifting of his hips as if to follow the dislodged item and beg its immediate return, Jacques propelled his own manhood forward and impaled Etienne in one quick thrust. Against the curve of his ear Jacques whispered, "You will recall I mentioned holding your breath?"

"*Oui, monsieur*."

"Now we shall see if you're up to the challenge. Draw deep, and keep it till I say otherwise."

Etienne did as he was bid. As he pulled in the final sip of

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air, Jacques thrust once more against that sweet place inside Etienne's body with the precision of one intent upon causing the most distress in the shortest period of time. Simultaneously, he caressed Etienne's erect member with slow, steady curls of his fist.

Etienne squirmed, his need for release reaching dire proportions. The excruciating ache in his bound loins grew worse with each clench of Jacques' hand. Behind his squeezed-shut eyes, he saw bursts of fire. As his lungs depleted the air he'd sucked in, his ears began to ring.

"Stay with me, *mon petit*. No falling asleep, you lazy darling," Jacques murmured, his voice thick with a warm affection so foreign to Etienne's ears that he nearly melted into unconsciousness at the sound of it. He was brought back to awareness by Jacques' tickling his arousal with cruel, quick fingers.

The sensation was like the rough side of an iron file rubbed against nerves already raw with over-stimulation, feeding a need that had nowhere to go and nothing to do but spiral deeper into the muscles of his belly and back. Etienne keened and lost air.

Instantly, Jacques' huge hand was at his throat. "None of that. We agreed, did we not? Till I say otherwise...if I ever say otherwise."

Etienne heard the threat implicit in the abbreviated comment and knew his very life was at stake yet again—though for what breach of conduct he was not sure. An infinitesimal spark of rebellion lit up the recesses of his mind.

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He twisted against Jacques' hold on him, struggling to breathe or break free, whichever he might accomplish first.

Jacques snorted. "Now you choose to fight me, *mon petit*? Of all times?"

If Etienne had been able to speak, he would have explained his certainty that *Monsieur* Jacques would regret killing him come sunrise, but now blackness came creeping along the edges of his vision, beckoning him into the abyss. He found himself eager to fall.

Jacques nipped at the edge of his ear, bringing him back yet again. "Breathe," he whispered and loosened his grip on Etienne's throat.

Etienne made a harsh, grating noise as he gulped down air. Then Jacques' hand returned, cutting off his relief. The single, lonely breath Etienne had managed to capture burned in his chest like a coal on the hearth. Dizziness swept over him. His head dropped forward onto the mattress, as if in defeat.

He felt Jacques fumble with the buckle on the strap that bound his manhood and then a rush of sensation so profound he could not find a name for it anywhere in his addled brain. Jacques stroked him, stripping his erection with fierce jerks of his wrist. At the same time, his hand tightened on Etienne's throat.

Bliss shot through Etienne's body, stiffening every muscle to the point of strain. His silent sobs shook the bed, even as his release soaked the linens beneath him. And still Jacques allowed him no breath.

Dimly, as if a thousand leagues removed from his own

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body, Etienne felt Jacques still behind and within him, and knew he'd reached his peak as well. Only then did Jacques relent and let his hand slide from Etienne's throat.

Utterly undone, Etienne slumped to the bed.

A few moments later, Jacques nudged him. "Well? Have I managed to kill you at last?"

"No, *monsieur*." Etienne's voice came out as a croak through his bruised throat.

On the other side of the room, the clock struck half-past nine.

"Sleep now, *mon petit*. I will have use for you later."

* * *

"Later" arrived far too soon by Etienne's reckoning.

"On your feet, my dear Marquis. 'Tis time to work our scheme."

Etienne opened one eye in alarm. "Work? But 'tis nearly midnight."

"Indeed." Jacques voice sounded as cold as a winter wind. "Dress yourself in all your best and be at the front door of the inn in ten minutes without fail."

He swept from the suite, his face fixed in a ferocious glower.

Etienne obeyed his directive, being careful to slip the volume of Shakespeare's sonnets into his coat pocket. As he did, he wondered why Jacques had seemed to find it difficult to meet his eye.

And what of the glint of wetness on his cheek? *Not a tear,*

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surely. For what force in this world or the next could ever hope to move such a man to weeping?

Burdened with a sick sense of foreboding, Etienne finished dressing and left the suite.

CHAPTER 11

Jacques looked east and west along the shadowed road, listening for the sound of an oncoming carriage. Fog lay over the valley in tendrils, like bony fingers reaching from the grave. The air had the wet snap of deep autumn, and the moon played chasing games with the clouds across the still mirror of the lake's surface. 'Twas far too cool a night for his plan—Etienne would surely take a chill.

Jacques' thoughts raced. There was yet time to abandon this scheme. Yet time to return to the suite at The Rat's Revenge and lie curled about Etienne till sunrise forced him away.

"Monsieur?" Etienne whispered from between chattering

teeth. "You spoke of a plan?"

Jacques banished his own befuddled musings with a clench of his jaw and a nod of his head, and turned to address Etienne. "I have it on good authority the king's brother, the Duke d'Orleans, travels this road tonight on his way to the Château de Saint-Cloud."

Etienne looked doubtful. "What manner of fool journeys at night, when highwaymen and cutthroats are thick as flies upon a dung heap, *monsieur*?"

"One who rides with seven armed men and all the might of Louis XIV at his back, *mon petit*. One who fears nothing, for no scoundrel would dare to touch what's his."

"And what business have we with such a man?"

Jacques looked at him, where he stood shivering in the glow of an unforgiving moon. He was as beautiful as anything Jacques had ever seen in all his many lifetimes as man and beast. Surely the duke—a man known for his love of winsome young men—would find him worthy of his companionship and protection.

"Disrobe, *mon petit*."

"*Monsieur*?"

"Do as I say. There's no time." Jacques turned away to hide the tremor in his voice. "No time...you must hurry."

After a pause of a few moments' duration, he heard the rustle of fabric, and the more pronounced chatter of Etienne's teeth. When he turned again, he found the young man standing only in his drawers, holding the rest of his garments in his outstretched hands.

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Jacques took the offered clothing and paused to listen. *There...surely less than a league away and closing fast.* “Into the water with you, Etienne LeFevre. Duck your head under and count to sixty. Slowly, *mon petit*. Try not to splash.”

“The water? Have you gone mad, *monsieur*?”

Jacques checked the impulse to laugh. “Quite possibly, but it makes no difference now. Into the water you go, on your own or with my assistance.”

Jacques curled his lip in a feigned snarl. Etienne backed away, his wide eyes locked on Jacques’ face, as if he could barely believe what transpired. His bare feet slid on the muddy embankment and he stumbled. Before he lost his footing entirely, he turned and waded into the cold, dark water. Jacques watched with his hands fisted at his sides in a state of acute, frustrated helplessness.

Hoof beats sounded on the road. Jacques tossed Etienne’s garments aside and bounded into the path of the oncoming carriage, his arms upraised.

“Stop! Stop! In the name of his lordship, the Marquis de Carabas!”

The horses—a matched foursome of white mares—shied from him, rearing and tossing their heads. Their driver cursed and pulled hard at the reins. Jacques ducked away, moving quickly to the door of the carriage. A guard dressed in gilded livery sprang forward to halt Jacques’ progress at the point of a sword.

“Fall back, cur! You’ve chosen the wrong victim this night!”

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“Please,” Jacques said, his hands lifted before him in a show of harmless supplication, “I am no brigand. I beg your help for my master. I fear he’s drowned.”

Jacques gestured toward the lake and saw bubbles rising to its slimy surface where Etienne was submerged.

“Drowned, you say?”

“*Oui*. Please, if I could but have your assistance in fishing him out—”

“What’s the delay?” a voice called from within the carriage. Then door was flung open and a man who could be none other than the Duke d’Orleans descended.

Jacques caught the scent of the duke’s potent cologne at ten paces. The jeweled rings on each of his fingers glimmered in the moonlight, and the lace at his throat and cuffs seemed nothing less than cascades of tatted snowflakes, so delicate and carefully wrought was it. But none of this artifice could distract from the duke’s elaborately painted face—his powered cheek, his kohl-blackened eye, his lips rouged in the shape of blood-red heart.

Forgoing a bow, Jacques fell to his knees on the muddy road, a lie ready on his tongue. “I most humbly beg your pardon, Your Grace, but my master—”

Etienne chose to make his reappearance at that moment, breaching the surface of the lake with a gurgling cry of distress.

Jacques turned and pointed. “He lives! He is not drowned!”

The duke squinted at Etienne’s struggle to keep his head

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above water. Then His Grace turned to the guard and, with a vague wave of his hand, and said, "Fetch him."

Within another five minutes, the torturous business of dragging the young man from the lake was accomplished, and soon enough Etienne was delivered—shivering, dripping, glassy-eyed and blue-lipped—to the duke. His Grace was silent as he considered the bedraggled and nearly naked form before him.

Jacques clutched Etienne's discarded garments in one hand and slid an arm around Etienne to support him. The icy slickness of the skin beneath his palm made him cringe. Etienne's head lolled on Jacques' shoulder in a swoon.

"As Your Grace can see, my master is ailing. Might we prevail upon your legendary kindness and beg a ride to the nearest town?"

Without looking away from Etienne, the duke asked, "How did he come to be in the lake at this hour?"

"He fancied a moonlit swim, Your Grace."

"A moonlit swim? At this time of year?"

Jacques shrugged, which dislodged Etienne's head and sent it forward in a droop. "His lordship is eccentric in proportion to his beauty, Your Grace."

"And who is your master? From where does he hale?"

"He is the Marquis de Carabas, beloved son of an aristocratic family in Avignon." Jacques shifted Etienne's weight and felt the young man's shivers multiply. The time had come to play the end game of this great charade. He leaned forward, as if to take the duke into his confidence. "He

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is a lovely specimen of a young buck, is he not, Your Grace? If he were to go missing, there would be a great tumult, for he is a favorite with both the ladies and the gentlemen of his acquaintance.”

The duke lifted an imperious brow, appearing to take Jacques’ measure. “Missing, eh?” he said slowly, as if he were thinking deep, difficult thoughts. “And if you let it be known your master was kidnapped by rogues? What then?”

Jacques struggled against a sly smile. “The family would mount a search, naturally.”

“And if they found nothing?”

Jacques shrugged. “They would mourn him and spend his inheritance in an effort to ease their grief.”

The duke’s mouth twisted into a cynical knot. He reached out, grasped Etienne’s chin and lifted the young man’s face to the moonlight. Even with his curls sopping in brackish water and his great green eyes half-closed, Etienne looked radiant, like sleeping angel fished from the floor of the sea.

His Grace appeared transfixed for a long moment. Then he turned to Jacques and asked, “And how much would your service in this matter cost me?”

Jacques promptly named a sum five times what he’d paid for Rennard’s best suite, the finest food in the entire town, and Etienne’s lovely garments all together. The duke did not blink at the amount.

In another few moments, they’d completed the transaction. At the duke’s order, Etienne was wrapped in a blanket and bundled into the carriage, along with his muddied clothes, and

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Jacques held in his hand a leather purse bulging with coins. But before the duke could follow Etienne into the velvet-cushioned depths of luxury, Jacques made bold to tug at the hem of his cape.

“Your Grace?”

“*Oui*, what is it? Have you raised your price?” The duke glared at him, his face a mask of supercilious contempt. “’Twould be a simple enough thing to leave you in the bottom of yonder lake—you and your master, too, if together you prove too much trouble.”

“Please, Your Grace,” Jacques said, struggling to keep his tone humble, “I merely wish to beg that you care for my master as I have done, lo these many years.”

The duke’s lip curled with disdain. “One may see the depth of your caring in the way you sell him to the first bidder. Off with you, before I have you clapped in chains for daring to question my intentions.”

Instinctively, Jacques reached beneath his coat for his dagger. His hand gripped only shadows, and he recalled hurling the weapon away in a fit of grief and rage. Then the moment for attack had passed, and the duke was gone inside his carriage.

Jacques stepped back, out of the road. As the carriage began to move, he caught a glimpse of a white hand pulling aside the silk curtain. He closed his eyes and turned his head.

The long trudge back to town gave him ample time to consider what he’d lost—no...given away. Soon enough, he found himself standing before The Rat’s Revenge. As he

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prepared to enter, a blind beggar woman spoke to him from where she squatted beside the front door of the inn.

“Please, *monsieur*, can you spare a *sou*?” She gave him a sightless, toothless grin, her face a portrait of misfortune. For some reason, her smile made him think of Etienne and the young fool’s insistence on wasting their money with the indiscriminate granting of alms.

Jacques felt the weight of the purse in his hand. Without a moment’s thought, he opened it and showered gold upon the woman, leaving only a scant handful of coins for himself.

“Much good may it do you,” he snarled and tossed the empty purse into the mud. Then he entered The Rat’s Revenge with no aim other than to drink himself to death.

* * *

“Such a pretty fellow.”

Etienne flinched away from the duke’s questing hands and pulled the blanket closer. Even after long minutes inside the carriage, he was still so very cold. And where was Jacques? Why was he not with them, too? And—most importantly—when would Etienne see him again?

“Come now, my sweet Marquis,” the duke murmured. He reached into the inner folds of his great cape and passed Etienne a silver flask. “Drink this. You’ll feel better and then we can get to know one another. For surely you understand I must have compensation for the gold I’ve spent in rescuing you from that ruffian.”

“Ruffian?” Etienne’s teeth had finally ceased to chatter,

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and sensation had begun to return to his fingers and toes. He took the proffered flask and drank deeply of the brandy it contained, feeling only relief at the burn it left behind.

The inside of the carriage was both warm and comfortable, and soon enough he found it difficult to keep his eyes open. Yet he must know what had become of Jacques. "Your Grace, I most heartily beg your pardon, but where is my manservant?"

"Manservant? You mean that rogue who all but allowed you to drown?"

"Allowed me to? No, Your Grace, he—" Etienne cut himself off abruptly. Perhaps this was part of Jacques' plan. His lover would not thank him for fouling another scheme. Etienne took another long swallow of brandy and allowed the swaying of the carriage to soothe him. His eyes drooped shut, and he sighed.

Jacques would come for him. Jacques had never failed him. There was no cause to doubt his loyalty now.

"That's it," the duke whispered. "Rest now, and when we arrive at Saint-Cloud, I shall see you are bathed and dressed and fed. And then, my sweet Marquis...and then..."

Unless it involved his immediate reunion with Jacques, Etienne did not particularly wish to hear what would happen then. Luckily, he slipped into unconsciousness before the duke could further enlighten him.

CHAPTER 12

Etienne's luck did not hold. For although the duke did not molest him as he dozed inside the jolting carriage, neither did he forgive—or forget—Etienne's debt.

They arrived at the Château de Saint-Cloud just before sunrise. Etienne found himself lifted from the carriage and hurried through a side entrance with little ceremony, held aloft between two strong footmen and barely aware of his surroundings. Another hour saw him ensconced in a suite twice as grand as Rennard's best rooms had any hope of being. As the duke had promised, he was bathed, dressed in new clothes of ornately wrought silk and velvet, and offered an alarmingly extravagant breakfast.

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A servant bedecked in a pink brocade coat and breeches the color of daffodils waited upon him. Etienne recognized him as being part of the duke's cadre from the previous night. When Etienne asked, he gave his name as Pierre.

"When you've finished breaking your fast, His Grace wishes your presence in the south wing, my lord."

"*Oui*, of course." Etienne rose from the table to face the servant—who was both cold and imposing in manner—and fidgeted with the pleated cravat at his throat. "Pray, Pierre, where are my clothes?"

Pierre clasped his slender, white hands behind his back and looked down his equally slender, white nose. "Is there some difficulty with the garments His Grace has provided? They are the finest I could procure on such short notice. If they do not suit you, I am certain His Grace would send for his tailor—"

"No," Etienne interjected, feeling like a schoolboy chastised by his tutor for greedy, inconsiderate behavior. "'Tis merely that I wish to retrieve a certain volume of sonnets I left in the pocket of my coat." Etienne shuffled his feet and lifted his eyes to Pierre's face.

The servant's frown had not softened, but his tone was less imperious when he said, "I will see what can be done, my lord. In the meantime, His Grace awaits."

"*Oui*," Etienne replied and made for the door of the chamber. "The south wing, you said? Any particular room, or should I expect to encounter His Grace loitering in a corridor?"

The expression of appalled distress on Pierre's face was

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almost enough to make Etienne smile.

“Certainly not, my lord. I shall accompany you to the grand drawing room and announce you, naturally.”

“Naturally.” Etienne inclined his head. “Shall we?”

Twelve hundred and seventy-two steps later by Etienne’s careful count, Pierre knocked on the door of the south wing’s grand drawing room and received the command to enter.

“Your Grace, may I present His Lordship, the Marquis de Carabas?”

With a motion of his ring-laden hand, the duke waved Etienne into the vast and crowded chamber. All around the duke’s decidedly throne-like chair lounged other young man—all of them handsome and elegantly dressed, none of them employed at anything more strenuous than the paring of an apple or the strumming of a lute.

Etienne swept into a deep bow.

The duke beckoned him closer. “Welcome, my dear Marquis. I trust you found your rooms to your liking?”

“Indeed, Your Grace.”

“And are you well-rested and well-fed?”

“*Oui*, Your Grace. Bathed and dressed, too.”

“So I see. And so would you care to join us?” He indicated a velvet-cushioned stool at his immediate right, obviously saved specially for Etienne.

Etienne used the stool gladly enough, as he was still quite exhausted from the previous night’s adventures and worn out from waiting for Jacques to make his appearance. But no sooner had he taken his seat than the duke began sifting his

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fingers through his hair and caressing the skin at his neck.

"He's even more beautiful in the daylight—don't you agree, Pierre?"

"*Oui*, Your Grace," Pierre replied. "His lordship is lovely to behold."

Somewhere nearby, one of the duke's young companions snorted. "He may be pretty, but the tale will be told in the bedding. Will it not, Your Grace?"

The duke smiled and nodded. "Indeed. And how fortunate I am to have time in my schedule for a mid-morning nap, *n'est-ce pas*?"

Etienne sat motionless, struck dumb and horrified by the knowledge he was expected to serve as a bedmate to the duke. Surely Jacques had never intended this. Surely there had been some mistake.

His Grace's hand rested heavily on Etienne's shoulder. "What say you, my sweet Marquis? Up for a romp?"

He leered at Etienne, his eyebrows wagging independently of one another and his red lips parted around the tip of his tongue. Etienne felt his breakfast threaten to make a sudden reappearance.

"Your Grace is very...k-kind, I'm sure," he stammered, "and I am honored to be considered for such a p-privilege, but I fear I have no skills at...at romping and so must humbly decline your generous invitation."

"Ah, so we're to be treated to another stanza of the virgin's lament," said another of the duke's companions, his voice bathed in amused contempt. "How boring. I say tie him up and

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have a go at him, Your Grace. He'll learn to like it soon enough."

But the duke's smile had evaporated like so much morning mist. "I am unaccustomed to being denied my due by young men who should be nothing less than ecstatically grateful for my attentions. Take him away, Pierre."

The servant stepped up and asked, "Take him where, Your Grace?"

"His rooms. Lock him in. Make certain his needs are met, but he is to receive no company, no comfort and no conversation till he learns better manners."

At Pierre's signal, two heretofore-unnoticed footmen came forward to grasp Etienne beneath his arms and escort him from the drawing room. Etienne did not fight, for he could not believe 'twas was a bad thing to be removed from the company of His Grace, who—for all his pretensions to elegance—seemed a brute and a tyrant in way Jacques had never been.

As he was dragged away, Etienne heard the laughter of the young gentlemen surrounding His Grace and thought their merriment sounded forced and entirely counterfeit. He wondered how it was to spend one's life dancing attendance on the whims of such a man as the duke, and felt a pang of pity for their poor, corrupted souls.

CHAPTER 13

“Get up, you lazy cur,” Rennard said, prodding Jacques with the toe of his boot. “You cannot sleep here.”

Jacques opened one eye and considered the innkeeper—considered leaping to his feet and snapping the man’s neck, if truth be told. For Jacques was heartily weary of being called dog when it should’ve been clear to anyone with an average portion of intelligence that the beastly part of his nature was entirely feline.

But, of course, not even that was strictly true...not since the night several weeks previous when he’d sold Etienne to the Duke d’Orleans and discovered upon the next sunrise the sorceress’s curse was broken. Jacques had spent a goodly part

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of that day staring into the looking glass in the suite he'd shared with Etienne, fascinated by the way the pupils of his eyes refused to contract to slits in the glare of sunlight through the window—the only outward sign he was now a man complete.

“Pray, what has wrought this miracle?” he asked his own reflection. Was it trading Etienne to one who could better protect him? Surrendering the gold he'd received in exchange? Some twisted combination of the two acts—one committed out of desperate fear and the other out of a guilt he couldn't bear? The man in the mirror had no answer.

It hardly mattered now. Such irony—to wait so long for release from bondage to a spiteful hag's spell, only to find oneself captive to one's own memories, unable to find joy or even peace in his triumph without his pretty fool at his side.

Finally, after many hours of wallowing in his plight, Jacques had gone down to the public rooms, bought three jugs of Rennard's cheapest wine and proceeded to make good on his intention to indulge himself into an early grave. Every day since had seen the sun rise and set upon his drunken stupor. He'd long since given up the suite, and now shared his time between the public rooms and the squalid little hole behind the pantry where he and Etienne had spent their first night in town.

Rennard had taken the few remaining coins in Jacques' purse in compensation for the room and the wine and the occasional crust of stale bread or scrap of rubbery cheese. Jacques had nothing left, save Etienne's lute, with which he

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refused to part. Soon enough, the innkeeper would throw him out into the street, and Jacques would find himself in no better straits than the blind beggar woman upon whom he'd showered all his ill-gotten gold.

Soon enough, but not this night.

"You can't sleep here, I tell you," Rennard repeated, and prodded him again.

Jacques grunted and struggled to pull himself from beneath the table where he'd been lying for too many hours. He stumbled from the public room to his bed, reeking of sour wine and sweat, and hoping only to find dreamless sleep.

He found misery instead.

Far from dreamless, his slumber was haunted by the specter of Etienne...but Etienne as Jacques had never beheld him—in the light of day.

This dream-lover opened sleepy green eyes, smiled at Jacques, and held out his arms for his embrace. He allowed Jacques to kiss him awake with all the gentleness Jacques had never shown the real Etienne, lest he betray the weakness of his desire, and opened to Jacques' intimate touch like a rose to the sun. This Etienne—made of entirely of shadows and regret—showed no fear or apprehension as he drowsed at the close of lovemaking, his hand lying open upon Jacques' chest as if it offered the gift of his heart.

'Twas night when Jacques woke again. He dashed the tears from his eyes and reached for his jug.

* * *

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Weeks passed, and Etienne remained a captive in the most luxurious prison in all the land. Each day he watched the sun rise and set from a window overlooking the cold, windswept gardens of the *château* and waited for Jacques to rescue him. Each night he dreamed of Jacques' hands upon his body and Jacques' whispered *mon petit* in his ears.

He saw only Pierre, who silently delivered his meals, the hot water for his bath and an endless supply of clean linen. On a morning in the middle of the second week of his confinement, Etienne begged Pierre to speak to him.

"You don't know the pain of it, Pierre, trapped here like this. If I don't hear the sound of another voice soon, I fear I shall run mad."

Pierre merely bowed and backed out of the room, locking the door behind him. But later that day, Etienne found his volume of sonnets tucked into the napkin on the tray with his luncheon. And the day after that, when Etienne made bold to thank him, Pierre smiled, lifted a finger to his lips in the age-old signal for silence and winked at Etienne before leaving the suite once again.

By the end of the following week, Etienne had charmed Pierre into visiting once a day with gossip from the household and sometimes the region beyond. He brought tales of intrigue in the servants' hall, and profane stories of the strange sounds emitted from His Grace's bedchamber.

"A goat, Pierre? Surely you jest."

"Upon my mother's eyes, my lord—a goat! Or perhaps a sheep. And it took the laundress three scrubblings to get rid of

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the stink!”

They chuckled together like old friends, but as soon as Pierre departed, Etienne again fell into despair and wallowed deep in his own misery for the remainder of each day. He’d never known such unhappiness—not even upon his father’s death. Too many times, Pierre’s visits surprised him, and he dashed away tears, ashamed of his own weakness. In his heart, Etienne believed this separation from Jacques might be his undoing.

Finally there came a day when Pierre announced the duke’s impending return to Versailles for the yuletide holiday. “All the household is to accompany him, my lord.”

“All the household?”

“All but a few servants, myself among them.”

“So I am to lose you as well.” Etienne turned and crossed to the windows overlooking the gardens. “And am I to be a prisoner at Versailles, too?”

“I expect His Grace will be too occupied with matters of court to pay you much mind, my lord. But...”

“But?”

“But perhaps you should resign yourself to the inevitable,” Pierre said in a tone of pure kindness and sympathy. “You must see this cannot go on. If you would only give in to His Grace’s demands—”

“Truly, Pierre, I’d rather lie with the goat.”

Pierre smiled. “’Twould only be for a little while, my lord. His Grace is a fickle lover and loses interest in his conquests with astounding speed. You’d be replaced in a month or two at

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the most, and have a comfortable home with His Grace for the remainder of your life.”

Etienne closed his eyes and tried to imagine what it might be like to give himself to the duke—or, indeed, any man who was not Jacques. He felt his insides twist, and the cold clamminess of sweat breaking out all over his body. When he opened his eyes, Pierre was gaping at him in obvious distress.

“What ails you, my lord?”

“I...” Etienne swallowed and swiped the back of his hand over his mouth. “Tell me, Pierre, do you know what became of my friend?”

“Your friend, my lord?”

“My...servant. The man called Jacques.”

Pierre shrugged, clearly puzzled. “His Grace paid him the sum he required, and he took his leave.”

“The sum he required? You’re suggesting—”

“I’m saying outright your servant sold you to His Grace for a goodly amount of gold.”

“But...” Etienne sat down hard on the nearest chair. “But that cannot be.”

“And yet ’tis fact. I witnessed the transaction myself.”

Etienne gripped the arms of the chair. The room began to swim about him, dissolving into shimmery waves of color and light, and from there into darkness. Then Pierre was beside him, slapping him none-too-gently on both cheeks. When Etienne opened his eyes, Pierre shoved his head down between his knees and held it there as he spoke.

“Take hold of yourself, my lord. Surely this cannot be such

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a great blow.”

“Not a blow? To discover I’ve been betrayed into near slavery? To be thus abandoned by my...my own manservant?” Etienne’s exclamations were muffled by his undignified posture, but his outrage was as real as any emotion he’d ever experienced.

Jacques had sold him to the duke. Sold him—like chattel. Like a horse that didn’t suit and must therefore be replaced.

He’d displeased his lover, and his lover had left him all alone.

Soon enough, outrage gave way to grief beyond tears and a renewed despair so profound Etienne could not express it beyond a vacant stare.

Pierre grew alarmed. “My lord, His Grace will surely provide you with another manservant upon your arrival at Versailles—”

“I do not require a new manservant, Pierre. I require my friend, Jacques.”

Pierre frowned. “But this Jacques fellow is the very scoundrel to whom you owe your current predicament. In addition, he is a coarse, hard type of man, with no refinement of manner. Your lordship deserves someone of breeding and character to meet his daily needs.”

“You don’t understand, Pierre,” Etienne whispered, barely able to force the words from between his dry lips. “I love him.”

Pierre shook his head, his frown deepening to a scowl. “You are not in your right mind, my lord. The evil fellow

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holds you in some manner of thrall. Perhaps you are bespelled.”

’Twas the irony of this statement that finally overwhelmed Etienne’s composure. He broke down, and in a fit of somewhat soggy honesty, recounted everything—his father’s death, his brothers’ murderous plans, the woodcutter’s cottage, his rescue from cold and starvation by the beastly stranger, and their subsequent months together in the forest and the town. He left out nothing save Jacques’ curse, which he felt was not his tale to tell.

Yet Pierre’s eyes too often grew wide with shock at the details he shared. But Etienne had little shame to spare. He felt as if his nonessential parts had been pared away, and all that was left was the need for Jacques—only this and the pain of knowing he’d likely never see him again.

“I failed him, Pierre. In some unknown way I gave my only friend and one true love cause to abandon me.”

Etienne was amazed when Pierre reached out and delivered a hard pinch to the back of his hand.

“Nonsense.” The servant sniffed. “It sounds to me as if this Jacques fellow has some trouble of his own. You say your brothers came to call upon you whilst your lover was away?”

Etienne nodded. “And like a fool, I met them unarmed and unprotected.” He shivered, recalling Jacques’ cold fury.

“And the very next night, he sold you to His Grace.”

“*Oui.*”

Pierre sniffed again. “Someone in this tale of woe has failed in his duty, but I do not believe ’tis you, my lord.”

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Etienne shook his head. "You needn't call me that, you know. I'm no more a marquis than you."

Pierre shrugged. "'Tis not only birth makes a man noble, Etienne LeFevre. Pray, what shall you do?"

"Do?"

"Indeed. You say you love this man Jacques, and therefore you must do something."

"I cannot tell you what I might do, Pierre," Etienne said with a forlorn sigh. "Die, I suppose, as I should've done in that woodcutter's cottage all those months ago."

This time, Pierre's pinch was vicious enough to leave a bruise. "You are a sad thing to see, Etienne LeFevre, and if your lover has left you, 'tis likely for this pathetic, mewling streak of cowardice in your nature."

Pierre's disgust was plain on his face, and Etienne blanched to see it. He opened his eyes wide in a calculated expression of contrition. "Forgive me, Pierre, you are right. I am not the noble man you thought me. I deserve no better than your abuse, and I humbly beg your pardon."

He lowered his head and peeked up through the fall of curls across his forehead to see if his apology had softened Pierre's wrath. He found the servant smirking at him, with no sign of sympathy on his face.

"Very pretty, my lord. But 'tis high time you stopped relying on your lovely face and form, and learned to use the brain heaven gave you. I ask again—what will you do?"

Etienne blinked, fidgeted with cuffs of his coat, and glanced about the room as if the answer to Pierre's question

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were written in the tapestries that hung against the walls. "I...I believe I need more information?"

"Are you asking me or telling me, my lord?"

Etienne straightened his spine and clasped his hands behind his back. "I need to know where Jacques is now. Can you help me?"

He asked in earnest, with no wheedling or whining tone. Pierre smiled at him as if he'd recited the whole of the New Testament from memory. "I will see what I can do, my lord. The household is in disarray with the coming move to Versailles, so it should be but a matter of slipping away for a day or two to play the spy."

Etienne spread his empty hands before him. "I have no coin to trade for your service in this matter." He looked down at his shoes and up again at Pierre's face. "I would not give myself to His Grace for all the luxuries his vast fortune could afford, but for this..." He shuffled his feet and sighed. "If you would do me this kindness, I would be willing...that is, Jacques always said I have a very pleasing way with my mouth."

He glanced pointedly at the front placket of Pierre's breeches and then again at the servant's face. Pierre's smirk had disappeared, and his cheeks had gone rosy as the velvet draperies on the windows in the south wing's grand drawing room.

"Your offer is tempting, my lord," he said, "and I will surely regret my nobility of purpose on the morrow, but I will decline your generosity and instead ask only that you consider

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me your equal and your friend from this day forward.”

Etienne started in surprise. “But, Pierre, I have always considered you thus, since the very moment we met.”

The color in Pierre’s face deepened, but he smiled and made a curt bow. “Just so, my lord. I will return as soon as I am able with the information you require.”

* * *

Etienne waited three days for Pierre’s return. And though the news the servant brought made Etienne wild with fear for his lover, ’twas worth the long hours in silent isolation.

“You say he sleeps in a room behind the pantry?”

“*Oui*, my lord, for now. The town gossip says he returned to The Rat’s Revenge with a fistful of gold, which he promptly gave to the nearest beggar. They say he’s nearly destitute now, and Rennard will surely turn him out in another day or two.”

“And he’s drunk?” This part amazed Etienne most of all, as he’d never once beheld Jacques in a state of inebriation.

“Constantly, my lord. Day and night, he is never without his jug. He prefers it to food or sleep, or so they say.”

“Day and night? He’s been seen in the daylight?”

Pierre looked at Etienne oddly. “But, of course, my lord.”

This could only mean Jacques had somehow managed to break his curse. *But how?*

It mattered not, for it meant as well that Jacques was now human, with all the frailties associated with that state of being. If Etienne hoped to find him alive, he must be decisive in his

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next course of action, and show the courage he'd heretofore lacked.

"How am I to escape this plumed and powered and perfumed prison, Pierre? It must be today—tomorrow at the very latest."

Pierre nodded. "We depart for Versailles at dawn, my lord. I've already procured a horse for your use. When the caravan pauses for its midday meal, you must steal away and ride for town as if the devil himself were on your heels."

"I will need money to continue my charade as the Marquis de Carabas."

"*Oui*, my lord," Pierre replied and handed him a small purse that clinked with gold. "Enough to keep you in good stead for some weeks, if you are frugal."

"Shall I ask where you came by this abundance of coinage?"

"You may ask, my lord, but I'll be damned if I'll answer. A man must be allowed to keep his secrets—even a mere servant such as I."

"I fear I am forever in your debt with no hope of making amends, Pierre." Etienne sighed and shook his head. "And what of you? Are we never to meet again?"

"Be not distressed on that account, my lord. I will hold you in my prayers from this day forward, and hope you shall do the same for me."

Etienne came forward and clasped Pierre's hands in his. "'Tis a bargain, my dear friend." He slipped his hand into his pocket and came out with the volume of sonnets he'd long

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since memorized from cover to cover. “I beg you take this as a token of my great esteem and affection.”

Pierre received the proffered book in silence, his grief at parting from Etienne plain on his face. Then he took himself away, and Etienne did not see him again.

CHAPTER 14

Etienne accomplished his escape from the duke's caravan with little trouble, and though he was less than a skilled rider, he made excellent time on the road to town and arrived at the stables next door to the inn with the sun hanging just above the horizon. In due time, he housed his horse, dusted off his coat and breeches, and presented himself to the keeper of The Rat's Revenge.

"How now, *Monsieur* Rennard? I hear dire tales of my manservant and his drunken escapades."

Rennard bowed low, nearly swiping the floor with his hat. "How good to see you again, my lord. 'Tis true, your man Jacques is in a sad state—but I anticipated your return, and so

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I haven't thrown him into the street, though heaven knows he gives sufficient trouble to try the patience of a thousand saints."

"Indeed. And where may I find him this evening? In our accustomed suite, I presume?"

"Er...no." Rennard slid a long, narrow finger beneath his collar and looked away. "I felt it necessary...that is, I was not absolutely certain of your return, and so—"

"Where is my manservant, *Monsieur* Rennard?" Slightly amazed at his own boldness, Etienne found no difficulty whatsoever in making his tone both severe and imperious.

Without a word, Rennard pointed toward the pantry.

Etienne found Jacques wallowing in squalor, his person a home for pestilence and all manner of filth and vile odors. His long, beautiful curls were matted to his head, his fingernails dark with dirt, and his body wasted to skin and bone. Though the sun had not yet set, he was unconscious with overindulgence in cheap wine.

His condition was much worse than Pierre had suggested. Horrified and frightened to the core, Etienne could only wonder what had driven Jacques to this point. Could it be his lover had missed him and regretted selling him to the duke?

No matter now. Etienne's first order of business was to get Jacques clean and fed, and into a warm, comfortable bed near a blazing fire. He reeled from the room behind the pantry, a handkerchief pressed to his face in mock revulsion, and accosted Rennard in a very real rage.

"This is how you care for my manservant in my absence?"

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For shame, *monsieur*."

Rennard hung his head in a sham of contrition. Etienne sniffed at his stammered apologies and pressed several coins into his grasping hand. "Move him to your best rooms. Have a bath brought up, and later serve us bread and broth. And send for a physician. If he dies—"

"He won't," Rennard replied, pocketing the coins. "And even if he did, men of his sort are easily replaced, my lord."

Etienne stiffened, cold fury roiling his gut. "You are a fool, and if he dies, you will wish you had gone in his place."

Whatever he saw in Etienne's face made the innkeeper lift his hands and back away in obvious fear. "Just as you say, my lord. I will do all I can to save him."

* * *

All through the month of December, Etienne kept a vigil at Jacques' side. In the first week, he said little, drifting in and out of consciousness, seemingly unaware of Etienne's presence. Jacques took only broth, and remained thin and weak, occasionally trembling for hours at a time and calling out for his jug when the demon of drink rode him hard.

At those times, Etienne crawled into bed with Jacques and stroked his head. He murmured soothing promises, and Jacques often fell asleep with a smile on his lips.

On the first day of the second week, Jacques opened his eyes and saw clearly.

"You?" he croaked. "But I left you with the duke."

"Indeed, *monsieur*," Etienne replied. "In point of fact, you

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sold me to His Grace for a purse filled with gold. I suppose I should be grateful 'twasn't a handful of silver."

Jacques scowled. "You are impertinent."

"*Oui*. You should grow accustomed to it, *monsieur*."

Jacques did not speak to Etienne again for five days. On the afternoon of the sixth day, he sat in a chair by the window, dressed in the softest linens and finest dressing gown Etienne could afford, and stared out at the falling snow.

Without looking at Etienne, he said, "I did it to keep you safe."

Etienne crossed to stand beside the chair. "I've had ample time to reach that conclusion, *monsieur*. But I do not accept it."

Now Jacques turned his head to glower at him. "How dare you question my actions?"

"I dare because I've done my duty, *monsieur*, and you have failed in yours."

Jacques' face contorted with rage. He heaved himself from the chair, stumbled to the bed and threw himself face down upon the coverlet. "Leave me," he muttered. "And don't come back."

"No," Etienne said, simply and with no pretence of caring about the consequences of his refusal. "I will not leave you till we speak of these matters between us. 'Tis my due, *monsieur*. I deserve—"

"You deserve to go to the devil."

"Perhaps, but first I will have my answers." Etienne moved to stand beside the bed. "Pray, *monsieur*, how did I fail you?"

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What did I do or leave undone that gave you cause to abandon me?"

Jacques glared at him. "I've explained all this."

"You meant to keep me safe, *oui*. But that was not our bargain, *monsieur*."

With a grunt of effort, Jacques flipped himself upon his back and struggled to sit. Etienne placed a firm hand on his chest and pressed him back into the bedclothes. Then he took a breath to steady his voice and said, "Did I not do my duty? Did I not keep my place, and do so with a willing heart? Is that not what you required of me?"

Jacques turned his head, refusing again to look at him.

"Yet you left it to another to keep me sheltered, fed and safe. I repeat, *monsieur*—that was not our bargain."

Still, Jacques remained silent.

"You will not answer these charges? Very well. I will force you to reply."

Knowing Jacques as well as he did, Etienne had prepared for this juncture in their reunion, and so 'twas the work of a moment to grasp Jacques' hands and tie them to the posts of the bed. His companion—perhaps overcome with shock at Etienne's newly bold manner—barely fought him, and only began to curse and struggle when Etienne secured his ankles in the same fashion.

"Hush," Etienne said with a nostalgic smile, as images of their first encounter on a snowy night in a woodcutter's cottage flooded his memory. "You'll only tire yourself and gain nothing for the effort."

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When Jacques stilled instantly, Etienne knew he'd conjured the same recollections and leaned over him to place a gentle kiss upon his mouth. "Fear not, *monsieur*. I am a kinder lover than you deserve."

Jacques went limp at the words, relaxing into the mattress. As Etienne stripped away his linens, his eyes fell closed. "You lie, *mon petit*. 'Tis a cruel man who ravishes an invalid without his consent."

Though Etienne's heart soared at the sound of the beloved endearment, he kept his voice steady and even as he used Jacques' own words against him once more. "I would coax the invalid's consent from its hiding place and make it sing out like the bells of Notre Dame on Christmas morning."

Jacques sighed and opened one eye to regard him. "Have you no original tools of seduction? Pray, get on with it before the maid arrives with my supper and finds me trussed like a calf for the slaughterhouse."

Etienne laughed. "You misunderstand, *monsieur*. If I wish to take a moment to enjoy the sight of you, then I shall stand and stare as long as I like, your supper be damned." He considered his lover, sprawled out like a feast upon the bed, and knew the sweet flavor of anticipation. Jacques' body remained a thing of beauty, even wasted as it was. "But perhaps you are correct and we should begin."

He ran a single fingertip from the point of Jacques' chin to his navel, touching him with care, as one might fondle thin-spun glass. Then he leaned down and brushed his lips against the skin of Jacques' chest and belly, tasting clean, salty sweat

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and something darker.

Jacques writhed beneath him, as if Etienne's caresses were the most brutal of tortures. When he spoke, his voice was strained, though it retained its usual note of command. "Stop, *mon petit*. I insist."

"You may insist all you like if it gives you joy, but I will not stop till I've had my fill."

Jacques' chest hitched, as if Etienne's words pained him—as if they were barbed with thorns that caught at his flesh. His hands flexed in their bonds, never ceasing to move, and his body twitched and jerked. But still Etienne continued, employing his tongue and teeth now, though still excruciatingly gentle in every way.

Jacques' manhood had filled and stiffened, and so Etienne could be sure at least his body enjoyed this lingering style lovemaking, despite the protests offered up from the tangled depths of his soul.

"Why do you fight this, *monsieur*? Why must you reject my offers of tenderness?"

Jacques did not answer, but turned into the pillow to hide his face.

Etienne kissed and caressed wherever he could reach—the cut of Jacques' hip, the crease of his elbow, the arch of his foot—and Jacques lay still for it. But when Etienne finally opened his mouth and enveloped the red, wet head of Jacques' manhood, Jacques chose to fight him again. He bucked and twisted, cursing with a creativity that only made Etienne smile. Jacques was but human now—and a weakened human,

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at that—and so he could not dislodge Etienne or break his restraints, though Etienne found some measure of entertainment in watching him try.

Part of Etienne wanted to see to what extremes he could push this new advantage. He wanted to mark Jacques—to brand his name upon him, body, heart and soul. He wanted Jacques broken and helpless at his touch so he might climb inside and never be abandoned again.

Instead, he reached for the crock of butter he'd pilfered from their breakfast tray and prepared himself for the next step in claiming his lover. Jacques stilled and watched Etienne breach himself with greasy fingers, and Etienne let him see the delight he took in making his body ready for Jacques' intrusion.

"You see how it can be, *monsieur*? You needn't take charge of every moment in every day. You might lie back now and again and let another take the lead."

With those words of hard-won wisdom, Etienne rose up to straddle Jacques and forced himself down, groaning at his impalement on Jacques' ever-impressive erection.

Jacques arched beneath him, and pleasure painted itself across his face. "*Mon petit*," he murmured, "my only love. You came back to me."

Etienne's shiver at these words shook him down to the marrow of his bones. He began to move, bracing himself with his hands on Jacques' chest and rocking his hips. "Always, *monsieur*. Never doubt it."

Jacques lifted his body to meet Etienne's and panted, "I am

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a man complete now. The curse is broken.”

Etienne grinned. “Did you think I had not noticed?”

“Be not cheeky with me, *mon petit*. I mention it because it means I cannot protect you as once I did. My senses are entirely human now.”

“But you are a man in the light as well as the dark, which more than compensates for the loss.”

Jacques quirked a skeptical brow, but did not contradict Etienne. He pulled at the lengths of linen that confined his wrists and grunted in frustration. “Your pace is too slow.”

“You should grow accustomed to that as well, *monsieur*.”

And so it went—an endless negotiation to the last, till Jacques arched beneath Etienne a final time and cried out his release, and Etienne disengaged from his limp body and cut the ties at his wrists and ankles. Then Etienne reached for his own manhood, intending to finish himself off so they both might rest.

“Wait,” Jacques whispered and hauled himself around on the bed with more energy than Etienne had supposed he could muster. “Allow me, my lord,” Jacques said with a smile neither cruel nor sly, nor anything other than simply happy, before taking Etienne’s arousal between his lips for the first time since that night in the woodcutter’s cottage when he threatened to make a meal of his “*mon petit*.”

Etienne cried out, amazed and enraptured, and spilled into Jacques’ hot mouth with shameful speed. When he tried to apologize, Jacques merely smiled again and said, “I’ll take it as the compliment I’m certain ’twas intended to be.”

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They lay together and dozed till the maid brought supper, and then spent the remainder of the night in each other's arms.

* * *

The coming of the new year found Etienne embroiled in yet another negotiation, this time with the tradesmen of the town. He used the coins left over from Pierre's purse plus the money he earned selling the duke's horse to dicker for simple provisions—flour and salted meat, a warm woolen blanket big enough for two, a small musket for hunting and defense, and a donkey with which to haul their goods back into the snowy forest.

When he returned to the suite, he found Jacques looking glum.

"What ails you, *monsieur*?"

Jacques shrugged. "I am useless."

"Not true, so long as you have lips to kiss me and a cock to fuck me."

Jacques leapt to his feet and strode across the room to catch Etienne up in one large hand, proving once and for all his strength was returning. "Coarse language is for common men," he snarled into Etienne's ear. "I'll not have it from you. Are we understood?"

Instinctively, Etienne bared his throat to his master. "*Oui, monsieur*. Forgive me?"

"Always, *mon petit*. Never doubt it."

* * *

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A week later, Jacques woke on the floor of the woodcutter's cottage a short while before dawn and stared at Etienne's dozing form, fascinated by the play of gray light and deep shadow across his features—the sweep of his eyelashes resting on his cheek, the cut of his jaw, the curve of his lips. Jacques pressed his mouth against Etienne's bared chest, counting his heartbeats and drinking them down, one by one.

Too many times he'd seen his lover abased—crawling on the floor, begging for no greater treasure than a smile. He'd seen him pulled taut and driven to desperation, suffused with pleasure conjured by pain. And now, in this new time since Etienne's return from the duke's household, Jacques had seen him confident, even prideful, and sometimes angry and possessive, as if he were the protector and Jacques the valued, much-loved prize.

Etienne had grown to be his match in every way, and Jacques could only marvel at how his lover continued to submit to his demands—and even his whims—with a grace seemingly born of perfect peace. It puzzled Jacques, yet he would not change it for the world.

Beneath his questing hands, Etienne stirred, his body curving off the hard, cold floor—an invitation Jacques could not refuse.

Later, when they were spent and damp and panting, Jacques moved to withdraw himself from Etienne and roll away to rebuild the fire, but his lover held him fast with tight-clenched hands and legs that curled about Jacques' hips.

“More,” he whispered. “Again.”

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Jacques obeyed, gladly.

And so the anniversary of *Monsieur* LeFevre's death found his youngest son lying naked against the chest of a man who was only a man—and perhaps a hero after all. As the sun peeped 'round the window ledge like a curious kitten, Etienne murmured a remembered sonnet from the volume of Shakespeare he'd left in Pierre's care.

*“Being your slave, what should I do but tend,
Upon the hours and times of your desire?
I have no precious time at all to spend,
Nor services to do, till you require.
Nor dare I chide the world-without-end hour
Whilst I, my sovereign, watch the clock for you,
Nor think the bitterness of absence sour
When you have bid your servant once adieu;
Nor dare I question with my jealous thought
Where you may be, or your affairs suppose,
But, like a sad slave, stay and think of naught
Save, where you are how happy you make those.
So true a fool is love that in your will,
Though you do any thing, he thinks no ill.”*

They lived together many long and happy years, this hero and his companion, and learned to love one another better with each passing season. What's more, they lived unmolested, either by murderous brothers or spiteful hags.

Jacques kept a lookout for trouble, as was his way. But

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Etienne only smiled and said they'd meet any challenge like the gift it was. After all, if it hadn't been for the hag's curse and his brothers' greed, they would never have found one another.

"Is that not so, *monsieur*?" Etienne asked, his smile coy.

"Indeed, *mon petit*, 'tis so," Jacques replied, and left off his sentry duties for the night in favor of tickling Etienne's ribs till his lover shrieked and begged for mercy.

And so, Gentle Reader, the truth is revealed: In a world where a servant may rise to mastery, and a master live to serve, what chance has greed or spite but to be a blessing in disguise?

SELAH MARCH

A wife and mother, Selah resides in the northeastern United States. She holds a B.A. in English Literature, and is published in short fiction and nonfiction in local and regional magazines and newspapers. She enjoys solitude, long walks after nightfall, and the bracing rigors of a six-month-long winter.

For more information on Selah, visit her website:

<http://www.SelahMarch.com>

* * *

**Don't miss *Seven Year Ache* by Selah March,
available at AmberAllure.com!**

Rafe McCaffrey, washed-up one-hit country music wonder, is coming home to northwestern Montana and the only man he's ever loved—his best friend Jamie Crosby. But the years they've spent apart have been kind to neither man. Jamie, owner of the Lazy C guest ranch, has turned hard and bitter, just like his father before him. He can't forgive Rafe for leaving him when he needed his friend the most. Hiring Rafe to work the ranch can only end in trouble...so why does Jamie do it?

Ranch cook Lilah Montclair wants nothing more than to forget the mistakes in her past and make a fresh start somewhere else, far away from the Montana valley where she was born and raised. But she's grown attached to the Lazy C and its owner, and doesn't know how to leave them. And this new guy, Rafe McCaffrey? He's got charm and looks to spare. She sees how Jamie and Rafe look at each other, and wishes she could share in the heat between them.

Can Jamie forgive Rafe? Can Rafe forgive himself? Can they give Lilah what she needs to heal her broken spirit and find a way to soothe their own seven year ache?

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