

Ink and Paper

The shop was blissfully quiet.

It had been a busy day, even more so than usual, and the current state of the shop showed that.

Nor was it quite closing time, though it was close enough that his stepfather had permitted him to begin cleaning the place up. A half hour more and he would finally be completely alone. Every now and then he could hear the rumble of voices, as his stepfather and stepbrothers discussed the day's business, profits and losses, the various customers.

The smell of food wafted out, making his stomach growl, but he knew better than to ask if he might share a bite. Once they left, and the store was clean, he would slip out to find some food of his own.

Until then, he cleaned.

First the inks – bottle after bottle, in a variety of colors and types. As he rearranged them, he jotted down notes as to what would have to be pulled from the backroom stock later. He dare not do it now; his stepfather detested being interrupted in any way when he was doing the counting – and seeing his bothersome stepson counted as an interruption.

He hummed softly while he worked, moving from inks to papers, then on to the quill and penknives, to writing cases and all the other miscellany which filled the little shop his mother had bought years and years ago – and which now belonged to his stepfather, something which still hurt.

At least his stepfather had not simply kicked him out, as he had feared would be the case. The shop would never be his now, as he had always hoped and thought, but he still worked there.

If only as a shop boy, and not a proper clerk...

Sighing, he pushed his morose thoughts aside and went back to dusting and polishing, and slowly the humming returned, bringing a soft smile to his face.

A dark auburn curl slipped free of the bit of leather he'd used to bind it back, and he pushed it impatiently away as he carefully cleaned the glass cases which held the finest of the shop's offerings.

Outside it was a quiet night, in complete contrast to the bustling day. The street lamps had been lit only a little while ago, and one stood almost right in front of the shop, casting a warm orange-yellow glow through the large front window.

Finished with the outside of the glass cases, he carefully opened up the first and began to clean the inside, pulling out a soft cloth to tend the ornate penknives that all cost more than he would

earn in even five years.

The faint tinkling of the bell drew his attention, immediately making him equal parts anxious and excited.

Anxious because he was not a clerk, and his stepfather had forbidden him to tend customers. He was not, according to his stepfather, of a suitable nature for such important and vital work.

Excited because his mother had let him take up clerk duties, and he had loved it dearly.

Though, even he would concede he was not at his best at the moment. He was only in his shirtsleeves, and those rolled up past his elbows, the shirt and his breeches, stockings, and shoes all old, faded, worn – perfectly suitable for fetching stock and running unglamorous errands, but not for being a clerk in such a classy and reputable shop.

Never mind his hair and the fact he was probably covered in ink stains.

"You're out late," he said, smiling a warm welcome. "Is there something with which I can help you?"

The man smiled a bit sheepishly. "I suppose I am out a bit late for buying paper."

"Not at all. You actually picked the perfect time, my lord." He did not know the man was nobility, but he had that air about him – and the expense. Though unassuming and simple, his clothes were clearly expensive – fine fabrics, exquisite tailoring. The evening jacket was a deep peacock blue, set off all the more by the black breeches, and hair the color of shop's costliest blue-black inks. It was unfashionably short, but looked good that way. Just long enough to comb fingers through, take hold of.

He caught the direction of his thoughts and shook himself sternly. "It's only recently quieted down; if you had come any sooner, you would have been packed in here like a sardine. What did you need, that brought you out at so late an hour?"

"Ink," the man replied, gazing over the wall of inks on offer, mouth quirking in amusement. "I was told this was the best possible place to come, and I can already see that the advice was sound."

He flushed with pleasure, for the inks had always been his favorite, and his specialty, and he always kept up with the newest types, colors, brands. Even his stepfather did not take away that duty. "We do our best to please, my lord."

"Rem," the man said, smiling. "My name is Rem, please. You are...?"

"Oh, uh. Enitan, my lord. Rem, I mean."

"Enitan," Rem said. "I'm looking for a fine set of colored inks. They must be able to hold up to

extensive travel, for they are for letters I intend to send to friends across the sea."

"Of course," Enitan replied, and closed the glass case he realized he still had open. Picking up his cleaning cloths, he moved behind the counters and tucked them away, then looped around the room to the side which held all the inks.

Bustling about with familiar ease, he began to pull down several bottles. "Did you have a cost limit?"

"No," Rem replied. "Cost is inconsequential."

Definitely a lord, then. Not even a wealthy merchant ever dismissed cost as 'inconsequential.' The request to use his name had thrown Enitan briefly, for nobility was never so casual, but the money removed all doubt.

Which just made it stranger, for normally a noble simply sent a servant or such to do the shopping.

Well, it made no difference, in the end.

He finished setting out a wide assortment, and as Rem drew close, began to explain all of them, the various plusses and minuses of each.

Rem nodded and asked several questions, arguing congenially, and slowly they whittled the selections down.

They seemed close settling on a few when movement caught the corner of his eye, and he drifted off in sudden horror as he realized he had forgotten entirely about his stepfather – who, sure enough, had a dangerous glint in his eye.

His voice, when he spoke, was seemingly friendly but Enitan could hear the warning in it. "You did not tell me we had a customer. I believe the stockroom is still awaiting your attention."

Enitan flushed in humiliation, because his stepfather had no reason but a mean streak to reprimand him and put him down in front of Rem. "Yes, sir," he said quietly, not able to bring himself to look at Rem as he turned away.

A hand over his stopped him.

"We are nearly finished," Rem said congenially, but even Enitan's stepfather drew up short at the underlying steel in his voice. "Please, you look as though you were about to depart for the evening. You do not need to stay on my account. Enitan is wonderfully helpful."

"Yes, my lord." Though he was obviously furious, Enitan's stepfather only nodded to Rem, shot Enitan a look that promised there would be suffering come the morning, and returned to the backrooms of the shop.

Enitan looked at the hand still covering his own, then at the ink bottles still on the counter. "I apologize, my lord."

The hand over his pressed gently, then slid slowly away. "Not at all," Rem said smoothly. "Now, I believe we were about settled on this set." He indicated the cluster of inks between them. "There is only one more I would like to discuss..."

"Which is that?" Enitan asked, confused. They had debated every color on the counter, unless he was mistaken, and he knew he was not.

Rem smiled and reached across the counter to gently cup Enitan's face, rubbing a thumb over his cheek. "This lovely shade here."

Enitan flushed and jerked away. So he had managed to smudge ink on himself. "I'm afraid there is never any telling which ones I wind up wearing," he finally said, staring hard at the counter.

"An excellent black ink, I should think. Deep hints of blue and violet." He gave a mock pout that was still remarkably pretty and devastating. "Do you not have a mirror? I should like to have it."

Sensing he was being mocked, crushed because Rem had seen nicer than that, he moved around the counters to where he knew Clement kept a small pocket mirror. Taking it up, he examined the smudge on his cheek.

Recalling all he had cleaned and sorted, it took only a moment's thought to determine which it was, and a couple of minutes later he presented a bottle of ink made from deep violet glass. "One of our very best," he said, not able to meet Rem's eyes. "You have excellent taste."

A hand cupped his face again, forcing him to look up into eyes that were, he realized suddenly, nearly the same shade as Rem's jacket. How had he not noticed them before? "I like to think so," he replied. "Are you here every day?"

"Yes," Enitan replied, licking his lips nervously. "I...I'm usually in the back, however."

Rem smiled, and slowly let his hand fall away. "So long as you are here."

Nodding, Enitan began to box and bag the inks, finally sliding them across the counter. "Thank you, my lord. I hope you are pleased with your purchases."

He reached into his pocket and Enitan heard the chink of coins as he set them on the glass countertop. "I believe I shall be in need of a penknife tomorrow," he said. "That should cover the inks; the rest is for your time, my dear Enitan. I will see you tomorrow."

Enitan watched him go, not quite certain how to feel or what to think. It had almost seemed as though Rem were flirting...but why would a wealthy lord flirt with a lowly clerk? And he was not even that, he was merely in charge of stocking and cleaning.

He glanced down at the money Rem had left – and choked.

Rem had left double the price of the ink, and they had none of them been cheap.

It was far more money than he would ever see on the pittance paid to him by his stepfather. Picking up the coins, he tucked his own half into one rolled up sleeve, carrying the rest to the back, which was blessedly empty.

He had feared his stepfather would linger to punish him tonight, but it would seem he had decided to wait until the morning after all.

Stowing the money, leaving a note for his stepfather to find in the morning so it could be properly counted with the rest of the day's earnings, he darted upstairs to his little room above the shop and quickly hid the money away in his little hiding place.

What he was saving for, he still was not quite certain. 'Escape', was the vague idea, but he had no solid plans. His whole life had been this shop, this city. Leaving the shop that he had always believed would be his was hard...but he knew to stay under his stepfather's thumb was worse. He only wished he knew why his mother had broken her promise to leave him the shop.

Going back downstairs, he finished going through his chores, making certain the shop gleamed and shone, working hard to ensure that his stepfather would have as little as possible over which to punish him come morning.

Chores finally done, he returned to the back rooms to retrieve his faded green jacket and the pence that were his end of week pay. Neatening his hair, he locked up the shop and vanished into the dark streets to go find supper.

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He was in the back taking inventory when Steven, the younger of his two stepbrothers, coughed noisily to get his attention.

"Yes?" Enitan asked, wondering bleakly what he'd done now. The bruise on his cheek still throbbed, and his back was fairing no better. At least the day was nearly done; in two hours his family would be gone, and in four hours he would be abed.

"Your customer is demanding your presence," Steven replied flatly.

Enitan almost dropped his quill. "What? Surely stepfather is assisting him?"

"He refuses to deal with anyone but you," Steven said. "Father is displeased, but the man is threatening to spread unfavorable opinions of the store if his preferred clerk does not come and assist. So do hurry up, stock boy."

Biting back a reply that would only get him a bruise for the right cheek to match the one on his left, Enitan removed his apron and attempted to smooth back his errant curls, wishing he had bothered to tie them back. He had thought he would not be permitted up front until well after close, however, and so had not bothered.

Sighing, he rolled down his sleeves and shrugged into his jacket.

He lingered over the bruise on his cheek, but there was nothing to be done about it. Sighing softly, he pushed through the curtain that separated the back rooms from the front.

The store was empty, save for the tall, dark-haired figure standing in front of the ink counter, leaning upon the glass with a scowl upon his handsome face.

All displeasure vanished the very moment he saw Enitan – then filled with fury as his eyes landed upon the bruised cheek.

He said nothing, however, merely smoothed anger away into a smile as Enitan reached him. "Good evening, Enitan."

"Good evening, my lord," Enitan replied. "I believe you said you were after a penknife, tonight?" He tried to remain serious and composed, but the absurdity of it was hard to resist, and he smiled.

Rem smiled back. "Yes. I am quite good at losing mine. My cat, I think, runs off with most of them."

Enitan laughed. "A cat that steals penknives?"

"I have not caught her at it, yet, but there are always suspicious amounts of fur about the desk," Rem said with a nod.

"We shall have to try to find your lordship a penknife that does not appeal to cats, then," Enitan replied, and moved along the counters to the set of cases that held their better penknives. "Were you looking for anything in particular?"

Rem smiled at him in a way that made Enitan's heart begin to pound something fierce. "Something with red and gold, I think."

"Um," Enitan swallowed, and gave himself a mental slap. "Yes...gold and rubies would be the obvious answer there, I believe. We have several."

The situation was not helped in the slightest by the way he could feel his stepfather's anger the same as he could feel the bruise upon his cheek.

Rem glanced down into the case, pointing idly to several to be drawn out.

They continued in such a fashion for at least an hour, though Enitan did not keep watch of the time. It was rare he spoke with the customers, and even when his mother was alive, none had ever demanded his specific assistance. Whenever Rem ceased to come, he doubted his stepfather would even permit him in the store unless it was closed.

Bent over the case, conversation having wandered from penknives to writing to tea to brandy, he did not realize just how much time had, in fact, passed, until he was jarred by the fact the clock struck midnight.

Rem laughed softly as he jumped.

"Oh, my," Enitan said. "I cannot believe I have kept you here so long." Stepfather would kill him. "I'm sorry, you must have far more important things to be doing."

"I'd much rather be here, I promise you," Rem said. He reached up to brush the knuckles of his left hand across Enitan's uninjured cheek. "Though, I confess, there are things I would rather be doing."

Enitan flushed, but did not pull away from the touch, or the hot, peacock blue eyes.

Nor did he draw back, despite the fact he thought he probably should, when Rem leaned forward and kissed him softly.

He drew a sharp breath, and for a moment considered doing the wise thing and finally pulling back, but the lips just barely touching his were warm, and sweet, and he could not remember the last time anyone had shown him any manner of affection – even a tryst would be a pleasant and welcome change from his bleak existence.

So instead of pulling away, he leaned in closer himself, opening his mouth easily when Rem pressed, welcoming the deeper kiss that—

Was cut off by a deep, annoyed cough.

Jerking away, cheeks turning hot, he rose to his full height and glanced to the door.

A stern looking but handsome man, dressed head to foot in severe black, stood in the doorway glaring angrily at Rem.

Rem pushed away from the counter. "Yes?" he asked coldly.

"Your father is less than pleased with you, and says if you do not get back home immediately—"

"I can imagine," Rem interrupted. "You might remind my father that I am a grown man, and may do as I like, whatever he might think about the matter."

The man merely stood silent.

Rem heaved a long, aggravated sigh. "Fine," he said. "I am coming." He turned back to Enitan, braced both hands on the counter, and leaned forward to plant a quick, firm kiss on his lips. I will see you, soon, my pretty clerk. Sweet dreams."

Before Enitan could get figure out what to say or do in response, Rem was gone.

He sighed softly when he was alone, and went to grab his keys and lock up before returning to his cleaning and inventory.

If he paused every now and then to touch his lips and linger over the tryst that might have happened, well...he was alone as usual. Who was to know?

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He did not see Rem again.

Enitan tried not to feel disappointed. He had known the man a grand total of seven hours. The kiss – he wondered what sort of impression that had made, and tried not to cringe. He had been flirted with before, certainly, but had never felt inclined to act so bold so quickly.

A week had passed since that interrupted tryst, and he was torn between relief and disappointment. Relief because it had probably been a stupid thing to do...but mostly disappointment, because it had not felt stupid at the time, and now his loneliness seemed worse than ever.

Sighing and shaking his head at himself, Enitan resumed working on inventory, counting all the stock and making notes in his inventory ledger. From the front room came the chiming of the clock, signaling the tenth hour.

It was only as the last chime faded away that he heard another noise – someone knocking upon the front door.

Frowning, he set his ledger down and strode into the shop proper, shaking his head. "We're closed!" he called out – then stopped. Blinked. Then he strode to the door and unlocked it. "Can I help you?" he asked the man in the livery of a city messenger. Probably a message for his stepfather, but surely the sender would know to send it to the house, not the shop, at this hour?

"Message for Enitan Fitzgerald," the messenger said. "You fit the description I was given. Are you he?"

"I am," Enitan replied, startled. He accepted the message and fumbled in his pocket for coin, but the messenger shook his head.

"I'm to wait for a reply."

Enitan's brows went up at that, but he nodded and opened the door a bit wider, indicating the messenger should step inside.

Moving to the window, he used the light of the street lamp to see by, examining the envelope in puzzlement. It was made of expensive vellum; the sort they did not take out unless the customer requested and proved he had the necessary coin.

It was sealed with a crest he did not recognize – a delicate owl perched inside a triangle, pressed into blue sealing wax.

Breaking the seal, he pulled out the letter. Except it wasn't a letter.

It was an invitation.

Even he, who never went anywhere or did anything, knew that invitation at a glance. The paper, the colors, the lettering...he did not need to read the beautiful scrip to know it was an invitation to the Royal Carnivale.

The Carnivale was beginning in another two weeks. All the city was vibrating with excitement. His stepbrothers spoke of nothing else unless made. It would last a full five days, beginning at five o'clock every day and going all night. The bare minimum of work would be done over those five days, as much time as possible given over to the Carnivale itself. Those businesses which would open at all – theirs being one of them – would open late and close early.

But the Royal Carnivale...three days of festivities held at the royal palace, and no one got in without an invitation. They were highly coveted, for even position and wealth were not enough to guarantee receiving one.

He knew only one person who might have been able to send him one, and he wondered just who in the world Rem was that he could – and would – do such a thing for a lowly stock boy.

"Your reply, sir?" the messenger asked politely.

"What?" Enitan blinked. "Oh. Um. Yes, I suppose." Though, he didn't know what the devil he was going to wear. "Yes, I accept. I will be there."

The messenger smiled and bowed. "Yes, sir. Then I bid you goodnight." He strode to the door and let himself out, and was gone as suddenly as he had come.

Enitan found a stool, and sat down hard, staring at the beautiful, ornate invitation in complete shock.

The Royal Carnivale. He had just agreed to go to the Royal Carnivale.

Feeling frantic and excited and numb all at once, he looked over the invitation one last time, touching it lightly to reassure himself it was real, then tucked it away in his shirt and returned

slowly to his work.

Three days later the same messenger knocked again at ten o'clock.

This time he bore a box, and left right after delivering it, smiling rather as though he found something vastly amusing.

Enitan wondered if he was missing some joke, but the thought slid away as he saw the contents of the box.

Clothing. A costume, to be more accurate. The breeches and jacket were of a deep amber, made of superfine and velvet, respectively. The waistcoat and stockings were in a harlequin pattern of amber, cream and brown. Touches of gold and cream lace accented everything, including gold buckles on a handsome pair of brown leather shoes.

He pulled the jacket out to better gawk, and a small black velvet bag tumbled to the floor. Setting the jacket aside, he stooped to retrieve the bag, pulling the drawstring out – and nearly dropped the contents as they tipped into his hand.

Jewels. Amber for his ears, where he currently had only plain silver studs. A matching cravat pin, and three matching rings – one set with amber, one set with a yellow diamond, and the last set with a shockingly bright ruby.

He set the jewels down upon the glass, completely and utterly aghast. Why would a noble go to so much trouble for him? What was the true reason for all of this? He was not that skilled a kisser, as much as he might wish.

The last object in the box was wrapped in paper, and he knew what it was before unwrapping it – his mask. It was as beautiful as the rest of the ensemble, an owl's mask made of brown, cream, and gold feathers, with ruby teardrops in the corner of each eye.

Incredible. Frightening, really. If it was Rem, and he could not see who else it might be, why all this?

Of course, he would have to figure out how to get past his stepfather.

Hopefully it would prove a moot point. If he was lucky, his stepfather would be too preoccupied with Carnivale to pay him any mind past the usual orders to clean the store and stay out of the way.

Slowly he returned everything to the box, hands not quite steady, and it was only as he was replacing the lid of the dark green box that he noticed the small note which had been tucked inside. *Day One ~R*

If he'd had any doubts, that small letter dispelled it. Rem, for whatever reason, wanted him at the Royale Carnivale.

The second box arrived three nights later, sumptuous clothing in deep russet and brown, with touches of gold, with still more jewelry to match. This time, the mask was that of a wolf, made from genuine fur to which the clothes had been matched perfectly.

Three nights later arrived the last box, and the messenger by this point seemed far more amused than Enitan rather thought he should.

It was even more beautiful than the other two, and he did not need the mask to know the costume was that of some underwater creature – air, land, and sea, he realized suddenly, and smiled. His final set of clothes were made of deep blue breeches and a jacket that seemed green one moment, blue the next, ever shifting and changing with the slightest movement, decorated with pearl buttons, smaller pearls sewn at the cuffs and throat. The waistcoat matched the breeches, with simple white stockings, and mother of pearl inlaid in the gold buckles. Pearls, sapphires, and opals comprised the jewelry, and more of the same were spread across a mask that really did look as though it were made of fish scales, so skillful was the work.

Anxiety roiled in his stomach, but there was nothing to be done about it – he dreaded going, but he dreaded not going even more.

Returning everything to the box – this one the same dark green as the previous two – he made certain the store was clean and ready for the next day, then finally went up to his room. Though his stepfather never lowered himself to visit Enitan's room, Enitan was fearful he would someday change his mind.

Especially since he had 'stolen' a wealthy customer, and made his stepfather 'look like a fool'.

So far, however, nothing appeared to have been messed with, and he had taken great care to hide the boxes where his stepfather would not look – in the roof. His room was old, poorly cared for, and the floorboards and those that made up the ceiling were all loose. Removing a few, shoving the boxes out of sight, and then replacing the boards was an easy enough matter.

Putting the last box with the other two, he then moved about his little room getting ready for bed. Twice a week he permitted himself the luxury of a full bath; otherwise, the best he could do after a long day was heat enough water on his small stove to sponge and scrub himself as clean as possible.

That done, he pulled on a night robe and pulled out the bits of lunch he had kept back so he would not have to go out in the rainy weather to find dinner.

His room was composed of his bed, the stove, a rickety table, a chest, and a cupboard. Lacking a proper chair, he simply kept the table near the bed most of the time. He set his dinner out, not much more than bread and cheese and one of the three apples the fruit vendor had given him in exchange for writing a letter.

Reaching under his pillow, he pulled out the book lent him by the bookshop clerk across the

street – another exchange, this time for a bit of accounting assistance.

When he realized he'd been reading the same page for nearly half an hour, he gave up and put the book away again. Finishing his last bites of dinner, he stripped out of his night robe and blew out the lamp, tugging up his thin blankets as he settled into bed.

He lay down in the dark, listening to the sounds of the city – a shouting match down the street, drunks singing as they stumbled from pub to pub, cats and rodents, people returning late, or departing for those jobs which began at the oddest of hours. Weak light filtered in through the battered shutters covering his one window, falling across his bed.

Though he didn't feel particularly tired, too anxious about the day that was now just over a week away, the familiar, comforting noises of the city eventually lulled him into sleep.

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The crowd of Carnivale was nothing like the ordinary crowds of the city. Ostensibly, it was the same group, same people, same throng of visitors...but it was not the same at all.

He moved through the crush as swiftly as was possible, grateful for the cloak that was his only respectable bit of clothing – large, and fit for whatever manner of weather might fall upon the city.

Every now and then he reached up to press against his velvet amber jacket, feeling the press of the invitation. What if it was a joke? What if he was laughed at upon his arrival?

This was a mistake, and everything in him screamed to turn around, go back to his safe little room. Whatever he was involved in, it was a game far out of his league.

But that interrupted kiss still burned on his lips, in his mind, driving his feet inexorably onward toward the palace.

He ignored the rows upon rows of carriages, ignoring the looks he could feel following him, no doubt wondering what sort of idiot walked to such an affair.

The receiving line stretched all the way to the door, but it seemed to move quickly enough once he was in it.

As he finally reached the front, he found himself approached by a man in the ornate formal livery of the royal servants, black with touches of gold and silver, severe and sharp. He took in Enitan's cloak and seemed amused by something, but as Enitan pushed back the hood to better display the mask he wore, the amusement faded into one of surprise. "May I take your cloak, my lord?" he

finally asked.

Enitan nodded, barely biting back a laugh at being addressed as 'my lord', and allowed the servant to help him out of his cloak.

Then he was at the reception table and presenting his invitation – and nearly fell over in relief when the gargoyle behind the table nodded and held out a silver ring. "Wear this the length of the Royal Carnivale. Do not remove it, do not give it to another. Welcome, my lord, to the Royal Carnivale."

"Thank you," Enitan murmured, and then he was suddenly part of the throng headed into the grand ballroom itself, a place of dazzling lights and colors and personages the likes of which he had only ever heard about.

Though, tonight it was impossible to tell who might be in attendance. Behind the masks, there was no telling the reality. Anyone could be a lord, a fruit vendor, a prince, or a simple stock boy.

He wondered where Rem might be, but was too enthralled by the splendor surrounding him to focus on any one thing long enough to try to find Rem. Crystal dripped from the ceiling, colored glass here and there casting rainbows across the white marble floor. All manner of lush flowers added further splashes of color, their scents battling with those of food and cologne and people for dominance. The number of costumes was impossible to count, enough jewels flashing in the light to purchase a small country, he suspected.

That he was part of it all...the thought was beyond his comprehension.

A hand fell suddenly at the small of his back, making him jump, and he jerked around – and drew up short.

"You made it," Rem said with a smile, and despite the peacock blue of his eyes, it was the curve of those pretty lips that Enitan recognized first. "I knew you would look lovely in those colors, but I admit you outshine even my most...ardent...imaginings."

Enitan flushed behind his mask. "M-my, lord—"

"Mm, none of that," Rem replied, grin all mischief beneath the edge of his mask – an owl, precisely like Enitan's, but the feathers were white, black, and gray, with brilliant blue sapphire teardrops at the outer corners. "I have told you before to call me Rem, pretty Enitan. You are my guest for three nights; do not insult me by being formal."

Enitan nodded, grateful for the mask which hid his hot cheeks. "Yes, Rem."

"That is much better," Rem said with another smile, and took Enitan's gloved hand, kissing the back of it. The gesture put them in an intimate position, for Rem's other hand was still at the small of his back, forcing Enitan to turn into him, pulled closer still when Rem kissed his hand.

This close, those peacock eyes were impossible to stop gazing into.

"I am glad you came," Rem said softly.

Enitan nodded. "Me too."

Rem smiled in satisfaction, and finally stepped away, giving Enitan a chance to breathe again. He didn't let go of Enitan's hand, however, merely used it to tug him closer, tucking Enitan's hand into his arm. "Come, refreshment first, I think. Then perhaps we can dance?"

"I don't know how to dance," Enitan said, lowering his head in embarrassment, not quite able to resist turning his head just enough to peek at the dancers on the floor below. They moved as though born to it – and in a way, they were, for only nobles learned such dancing as below.

"Then I'll teach you," Rem said. "Carnivale is a good time to learn – everyone is too drunk to care if it's being properly done." He looked toward the dancers Enitan had been furtively watching. "Case in point – I don't think a single one of them has managed to complete all the steps, never mind complete them properly."

Enitan looked at the dancers again, but could not figure out what in the world Rem was talking about. They were beautiful.

"Hopeless," Rem said cheerfully. "You'll dance much better."

Not certain how to reply to that, Enitan did not bother, merely let himself be tugged along to a massive table where Rem immediately commanded two flutes of champagne.

The first sip was the most wonderful thing he had ever tasted, better even than the one bottle of decent wine he had scraped for to celebrate his birthday. Several sips later, he was willing to attempt those dancing lessons – but instead of the dance floor, Rem dragged him outside.

Crowds filled even the garden, but in smaller pockets, tucked into shadows, and to judge from the groans and giggles and grunts, dances of an entirely different nature were already underway.

He flushed and took another sip of champagne as he saw they had found a shadowy nook of their own.

"I really am happy you came," Rem said softly. "I wanted to ask you properly, but...well, that is neither here nor there. I hope you have a good time...and do not think me too forward."

Enitan smiled faintly, licking champagne from his lips. "Of course I think you forward, my lord – Rem – but I would say that I was just as forward, several nights ago...and I did come."

"Good," Rem said, and tore off his own mask, then pushed Enitan's away and immediately kissed him.

Surprised, Enitan dropped his champagne – but only so he could grab hold of the broad shoulders he had been surreptitiously admiring since seeing Rem that evening. He had liked the champagne before...but he liked it a thousand times more combined with Rem.

It seemed ages later that they finally broke apart, though it could not have been more than a moment or two.

Rem licked his lips. "I definitely want more of those later, my dear, but I did promise you dancing – and I want very much to dance with you. Shall we?"

Enitan pulled himself together through sheer force of will, and placed his hand in Rem's. "Dancing, yes. I fear I will be terrible at it."

"Nonsense."

Nearly an hour later, it seemed as though Rem had the right of it after all.

Or perhaps that was merely three glasses of champagne.

He went easily as Rem tugged him close, as they stepped and turned in time to a slow, easy rhythm.

"I told you so," Rem said with a grin. "You take to dancing as though made for it – indeed, you take to the Royal Carnivale as though born to it."

Enitan laughed. "Hardly. I was born to order ink and paper, not dance and drink champagne and wear clothes that cost more than my shop." He shook his head. "I do not even know why I'm here, not when I can see hundreds far more beautiful than I..."

Rem snorted and dared to brush a feather light kiss to his jaw as the dance brought them into close contact. "You are far more than a simple clerk."

"You sound certain."

"I am," Rem replied, and risked another soft kiss.

Not that it was much of a risk, really – a quick glance showed that many were taking far greater liberties.

He smiled and turned, pulling them close again. "I disagree, but I am happy you think so."

"Mm," Rem said, and abruptly stopped, tugging him from the dance floor.

Far away in the distance, a clock began to chime, and it was only as it kept chiming, and chiming, that Enitan realized it was midnight.

"Would you care to take our dancing to a more private dance floor?" Rem inquired, the words the definition of polite, but the curve of his mouth wicked.

Enitan nodded, and went eagerly as he was taken away from the crowd and a long, wide hallway which turned onto a somewhat smaller one. Their hands were tangled together, and they stumbled as much as they walked, stopping more than once to exchange heady kisses in dark corners.

The sound of voices made him jerk away from one particularly enthusiastic kiss, and he glanced down the hallway to where two men stood at the point where three hallways intersected.

"Shh," Rem murmured in his ear. "We don't want to be caught by that one." He nodded at the man on the right, a tall, old man with an indefinable air of authority.

"Who is he?" Enitan asked. "He looks sort of familiar."

Which he did, though Enitan could not say why. His hair was short, the color impossible to tell in the dark, but probably gray or mostly gray. Something about his features...but he could not quite put his thumb on it, and shook his head in defeat.

"The Grand Duke," Rem replied, voice still little more than a murmur in his ear. "Sharp as a blade, and wily as a fox, though he is only a shadow of what he was before his son died years

ago."

Enitan nodded, but said nothing, and they waited in silence until the Grand Duke and his companion finally moved on.

Then the heated kisses resumed, and the stumbling along, until at last they reached a room that was dark save for a single lamp on a small table beside a lavish bed.

Their clothes took some effort, and more than a bit of graceless fumbling, but it was worth the struggle to see the beautiful body laid out beneath him. Rem might be a lord, but he sported none of the softness that Enitan associated with that group.

He reached out to stroke and touch at random, faltering as Rem snuck in some touching of his own, and Rem was the bolder by far. If Enitan were not already hard, the talent in that hand would have done the job.

Slowing down proved impossible, and while there was much he wanted to do with his beautiful, generous, and mysterious lord, for he now he was content to get lost in touching and stroking, rubbing and writhing.

They collapsed in a sweaty pile only a moment later, sticky but sated – for the moment.

If his answering grin was anything like the one Rem gave him, the night was only beginning.

"I promised you another night of Carnivale," Rem said, lazily kissing his chest, "but I confess I am sorely tempted to keep you here all night."

Enitan snickered. "I can think of worse ways to spend Carnivale." He stretched out on Rem's bed, and turned his head to glance at the window. The heavier drapes had been drawn back, but the pale blue sheers were still covering the windows. At Rem's request, he had come the very moment his store closed and he'd been able to sneak away.

Though he had worried he would stand out like a weed amongst roses, arriving well before dark, he had wound up only lost in a throng of people entirely too drunk for the early hour. It made him laugh, and shake his head, and then Rem had appeared and carried him off – to the palace gardens, through the royal galleries, and finally to his bedroom.

The palace clock had chimed the eighth hour a little while ago, and he could hear the revelries already reaching a fever pitch. He wondered just how wild the palace would be by the last night. The lavish parties of the Royal Carnivale took place on the first, third, and fifth nights.

He doubted the palace would survive if the fetes went the full five. Days two and four were days of needed respite, though Rem had told him that nearly everyone simply went down and played peasant on those nights.

Beyond the sheer curtains, it should have been complete dark – but shreds of rainbow light slipped through as easily as the racket, infinitely more colorful than even the noise which lulled him to sleep every night in the city.

"What are you thinking about, my pretty clerk?" Rem asked, wrapping his arms around Enitan from behind, nuzzling the space between his shoulders. "Paper? Ink? If you are, I have not been putting forth my best, though if I try any harder I may well break something."

Enitan laughed. "Only enjoying the noise. Every now and then the city falls silent, and I can never sleep those nights. I was noticing that here, the noise is similar, and yet completely different."

"Pretension and arrogance are always loud," Rem said with a snort. "They also sound like nothing else." He kissed the space he had been nuzzling. "I think you should give them lessons in being sweet and charming and modest." He threw one leg over Rem's, continuing to nuzzle and kiss. "Then again, if you acted like that, they would all want to try and seduce you, and I will not tolerate that."

"I think you worry overmuch," Enitan said with an amused snort. "Sweet and charming and modest? I see you are a bit mad, as well."

Rem nipped his shoulder. "I am perfectly serious. You are far too wonderful to be a simple shop clerk, though you do that beautifully." He licked the spot he had just bit. "How did you wind up with such a pretty shop? I confess I had only been looking for inks that night, but had nearly forgotten them for flirting with you."

Though he should be well past blushing, Enitan could feel his cheeks grow warm at the memory. "My mother bought the shop when I was a babe barely able to walk. We made it what it is today...though my stepfather did much for it, I concede, when he married my mother five years ago." She had died almost two years ago now, and thinking of her caused an ache in his chest.

"You do not own the store?"

"No," Enitan said, the warm glow of being with Rem, cozy in the fine bed as though he were some lording himself, fading beneath the pain caused by the reading of his mother's will. "She was old-fashioned enough, I guess, to feel her husband should take it over entirely."

Rem kissed the space beneath his ear, the touch somehow soothing. "Your father left no provisions for his wife and child?"

Enitan shrugged. "I don't know anything about him; mother never spoke of him. I suppose he left

the money with which she purchased the shop, but I do not know for certain." He turned in Rem's arms, brows furrowed. "Why all the questions?"

"I'm just curious," Rem said with a smile, and kissed his nose. "According to my mother, it's simply crass nosiness, but as she's no better..." He winked and then gave Enitan a proper kiss. "Now, as delicious as you look, I did promise you another night of Carnivale and I thought we could try a few of the games tonight."

"Games?" Enitan asked. He had not played any of the Carnivale games since he was a boy. Did he even remember any of them? "Are they different here in the palace?"

Rem laughed as he threw back the blankets and clambered from bed, moving to where they had carefully discarded their clothes earlier – and only because they knew they would have to put them back on. "They involve more money, and also more alcohol. Likely more cheating, as well. Have you any favorites?"

Enitan shook his head and slowly climbed from bed to begin donning his own clothes. It was a slow process, each of them hindering the other more than helping. "I loved the piñata as much as any boy, when I was very young. As I got older, I of course got into the usual drinking games...after that, I became too busy with the shop, and mother getting sick..." He shrugged. "I have not thought about games in a long time."

"Well, we shall certainly fix that," Rem declared, and tugged his mask into place before handing over Enitan's.

He had not thought it possible, but Rem looked even better as a wolf than he had as an owl. An exact duplicate of his own costume, but like the owl, the colors were black and white and gray.

"Those colors bring out the fire in your eyes," Rem murmured, stroking Enitan's jaw. "The most perfect amber, your eyes."

Enitan drew away, but with a smile. "Idiot. What game are we going to play first?"

Rem yanked him back and nipped his jaw. "Do not protest my compliments. I was thinking perhaps a treasure hunt?"

"Treasure hunt?"

"Mmm, yes, it will have been set up by now in the east garden."

"How can you see anything?" Enitan asked, going along easily when Rem took his hand and led him from the room, through the mazelike hallways until at last they spilled out into the south end of the palace and the impressive collection of gardens that stretched out seemingly forever.

They had looked briefly at the maze, before, and Rem had assured him someday they would get lost in it and have a fine time.

The east gardens, however, were the flowering bushes and small trees.

"Fairy lights," Rem explained, and as they drew closer Enitan could see he was right – small candles set into balls of colored glass, turning the lush garden into an otherworldly place.

He could hear more than see other people, laughing and giggling, beckoning and friendly taunts. Shadows moved here and there, the fairy lights occasionally glinting on metal or jewels.

"The goal," Rem murmured in his ear, "is to find all the fires, and snatch out a token from each. The more you find in a given span of time, the better the prize you get at the end."

Enitan laughed. "Let us go treasure hunting, then."

Now that Rem had mentioned fires, he could see one or two – they looked much like the flames he associated with snapdragon, a game he and his mother had always played during the winter festivities.

A few minutes later they were on their way, given half an hour to find their way through the enormous east garden hunting snapdragon bowls.

They found the first one almost immediately, tucked low in the center of a circle of rosebushes. "You or I, my love?" Rem asked.

Enitan jumped at the endearment, then shook it off as Rem being Rem. "You."

Rem nodded and thrust his hand through the snapping flames, brandishing a small gold token as he drew it out again. He grinned, mostly shadow in the fairy light garden. "Onward."

Laughing, stealing a quick kiss, Enitan led the way from the roses and further into the garden, wandering frequently off the stone path to investigate nooks and crannies and spaces from which he saw other shadows slink.

When they finished, as breathless from hasty kisses as the hunt itself, they had a total of seventeen tokens.

He presented the tokens to the attendant with a smile. "Sir."

"Well done, my lords," the man said, smiling at them. "The second highest number I have seen all night." He reached into the shelves of the booth in which he sat, and then presented two dark, square velvet boxes. "Enjoy the rest of the Royal Carnivale."

Accepting the boxes, Rem nodded and set down a few silver coins. "Thank you, we will. The very same to you, good sir."

Turning away, he handed Enitan one velvet box and took his hand, leading the way back inside.

Where he promptly snatched two flutes of champagne from a passing tray.

Enitan flipped open his box, and nearly bit his tongue. He almost asked if some mistake had been made, but did not want to appear foolish.

Inside was an elaborate cravat pin – a rose made from ruby chips nestled in emerald chip leaves, set in silver and resting against pearls of white, rose, and blue. A rose against fairy lights. "It's beautiful."

"Mm," Rem said in absent agreement, and thrust the champagne at him. "Carnivale prizes are always a lark. What shall we try next?"

Enitan shrugged. "Surprise me?"

Rem leaned close and kissed him hard. "Gladly. This way."

Laughing, Enitan let himself be dragged along – and crashed hard into Rem, who had drawn to a sudden stop.

He frowned at the champagne which had splashed over the rug, then dragged his eyes up – and nearly choked.

"Majesty," Rem said, voice shockingly steady, and swept into a deep bow.

Enitan mimicked him, wondering if the floor might be good enough to swallow him whole.

The King nodded. "Revelers," he said, looking vastly amused. "Are you enjoying yourselves?"

"Yes," Rem replied. "We thank your Majesty for your immeasurable generosity."

"Indeed," the King said. "Well, carry on, then. The night is yet young, for Carnivale."

Rem grinned, and Enitan was eternally grateful that he was so bold and willing to speak – his own tongue had turned to stone.

He did not breathe again until the King was well out of sight.

"Shall we, then?" Rem asked, and took his hand again to lead the way to another game.

Enitan simply shook his head, and was content to be dragged along.

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"I seem to recall that two nights ago someone vowed he could not dance," Rem said cheerfully as they dropped their hands, switched directions, and pressed opposite hands together, stepping

perfectly in time as they moved in a circle, moving apart to match up briefly with different people, before the music brought them together. "You dance as though you have done it your whole life."

Enitan rolled his eyes. "That is because I am remarkably sober compared to the rest of the floor."

Rem laughed. "True enough." The music came to a close, and they clapped with the rest of the dancers, moving together again when the next dance began. "Still, you will dance better than I by the close of Carnivale."

Something twisted hard in Enitan's gut at the mention of Carnivale close. Did it have to end, he thought miserably. What would become of him when the bell told that last hour, and the rising of the sun brought reality with it?

Would Rem still want to see him? Had all this just been a Carnivale tryst, a place to play where Rem would not be dragged away by... whoever had come after him all those days ago.

He wanted to ask, but how did one pose such a question? Even he knew those things were tacitly understood, not explicit, and if he did not know how the matter fell – that was his breeding, or lack thereof, showing through.

Really, that answered the question.

Except he didn't want to hear the answer, and so he turned all his attention back to dancing, to returning the smile that curved beneath a mask of glistening blue-black scales.

As their dance came to an end, Rem drew him closer than was strictly proper. The idea of protesting never entered Enitan's head; instead, he leaned in to steal a quick kiss.

"Keep that up," Rem murmured, "and we will not remain here long enough for the formal unmasking."

Enitan laughed. "I think, my dear, that there is little point in a formal unmasking for you and me. Unless there is some bit of you I have not yet managed to see." He flicked his tongue out to just barely lap at Rem's lips. "Or touch."

Rem shivered against him, peacock eyes hot and bright. "Then, unless you want to dance more, I say we end the Carnivale in true carnal fashion."

"I think that sounds most agreeable," Enitan replied, and stole a bit of champagne on their way out, savoring it as best he could before setting the flute aside to savor the infinitely finer flavors of his Carnivale lover.

Minutes and forever later, he was gasping and thrusting in time with Rem's fierce pounding, gripping the broad shoulders he so loved, taking a hungry kiss before he tore away to scream his release.

Rem grunted several minutes later, and finally moved off him, cuddling close, leg and arm thrown possessively over Enitan. He nuzzled at the hollow of Enitan's throat.

The after, the cuddling and nuzzling and lazing about – that was the hardest part, and long after Carnivale, it would be what he most remembered. It more than anything made him feel as though he were not alone, would never be alone.

Dawn was only a few hours away, and this time tomorrow night, in all likelihood he would be sleeping alone. There was nothing to be done about it, save to accept it, and Enitan did not think he would be able to do that easily.

He would not have a choice, of course, for a lord as wonderful as Rem must surely have people clamoring for his attention – people far more important than a lowly stock boy.

Still, he had a few hours left. He would not spend them moping. Instead, he settled back against the body which seemed to fit so perfectly with his, content to doze for a few minutes. Then they would move to round two.

A soft mewing coaxed his eyes open, and he smiled at the soft thump of something small landing on the bed. Then came the firm press of delicate feet as Rem's small, white cat made her way gingerly up their bodies.

He heard Rem sputter as he got a mouthful of fur, and laughed, sitting up as Rem pulled away – and shoved the cat away as it tried to settle into his lap. "No claws while I'm naked, cat," he said, and settled her on a pillow instead.

Typical to cat nature, she decided that was inadequate, and jumped back off the bed to go settle in the window seat for a good sulk.

Enitan laughed - -then yelped as he was yanked back down.

"Are you laughing at me?" Rem demanded.

"Maybe," Enitan said.

Rem grinned. "That's not very nice."

"Going to punish me?"

"I think so," Rem said with a growling sound, and pushed him down into the bedding, rising up to straddle his hips, teasing lightly over Enitan's hardening cock.

Enitan started to speak, but a series of sharp knocks at the door forced him into a startled silence.

Rem frowned and moved off of him, yanking up the bedclothes and throwing them over Enitan.

Just as he drew breath to call for the knocker to enter, the door flew open to admit a liveried servant. "Highness, your father requires your presence for an urgent matter."

The world went still around Enitan as that one word crashed through him. *Highness*

"I'm coming," Rem snapped. "The next time you are sent to summon me, do not enter without my express permission."

"Yes, Highness," the servant said, eyes wide with fear and dismay. He did not linger, but turned and bolted.

Throwing aside the bedclothes, Rem slid from the bed and began to yank on his clothes.

Enitan opened his mouth, then closed it again. Tried again.

Just as he started to try a third time, Rem surged toward him and kissed him hard. "I'm sorry," he said. "I have my reasons. Stay here, I'll be back." He stroked Enitan's cheek, then kissed him again, more softly.

Then he was gone.

Enitan stared blindly at the bed clothes, as a million little things that should have clued him in came together, making him feel incredibly stupid.

The crown prince. The only and much loved son of the king.

Swallowing, he climbed shakily from bed – the bed of the crown prince, he was going to scream or cry or something – and began to dress with short, jerky motions.

Stay, Rem – oh, god, his name wasn't Rem, it was Prince Remiel why the *hell* hadn't he made the connection – had said.

He couldn't stay. What was the point? He was a shop clerk, a stupid stock boy.

Finished dressing, Enitan located his cloak where it had wound up under the bed, then considered his options.

Rem – his Highness – had shown him the palace well, however, and it took only a moment to locate the gardens, and slip out a servant's gate at the farthest edge of the property.

It took him just over an hour to get home, and his room looked so plain and pathetic next to the splendor in which he had indulged over the past week.

Pathetic...yes, that's what he was. What other word was there for a peasant stupid enough to fall in love with the crown prince?

In the end, he had opted to leave without a word to anyone. What would he say to his stepfather? His stepbrothers? They would not even care, except that someone else would have to do the cleaning and inventory.

Packing his belongings had taken so little time, it was laughable – or would be, if his ability to laugh had not seemed to have vanished.

Three days of hard travel, on a rented horse which had taken a fair bit of his meager savings, saw him in a little town just outside the city. Finding a job was not hard, though it had taken him another two days.

A full week had passed now, and he hated it.

The little town was too quiet, too settled. Why he should miss the sounds of drunks and high-volume arguing, he did not know, but he did.

He missed the sounds of the city, but he positively ached to feel a certain body curled around his. There was no reason for it, except that a single week was apparently all he needed to fall hard and fast for someone he simply could not have – not the way he wanted, and probably not at all.

Still, sleeping alone had never been so difficult a thing to do.

What would have happened, he wondered, if he had remained?

It did not bear thinking upon.

Sighing, he turned in bed and dragged his pillow over his head, smelling the mustiness of a bed long disused, the strangeness of it. Well, he would grow used to it...eventually...maybe...

Probably never, but he had no choice.

When it became obvious that sleep would not be forthcoming, a state of affairs with which he was becoming all too familiar, he threw back his blankets and pulled on his clothes.

Downstairs, he quietly fixed a cup of tea in the kitchen and fetched a ledger to continue the work he had left off before going to bed. Though his new place of employment and home was nothing like his own shop, it was quaint and well-stocked and the people of the town were friendly, his employers generous.

The owner's wife clucked her tongue in disapproval when she appeared a couple of hours later to begin the day's baking. "You aren't sleeping enough."

Enitan shrugged. "I know. On the bright side, the bookkeeping will not need tending for a good century."

She laughed, and began to bustle about the kitchen, setting breakfast in front of him in good order.

An hour later he was in the shop, smiling and conversing with a gentle, soft-spoken old man dressed in his Sunday best who had come into town to have a letter written to his granddaughter several hours away. When the bell over the shop door rang, he did not look up, concentrating on the old man's barely audible words, neatly writing out the rough draft of the letter.

He noted absently that the shop had gotten quiet, though he could hear the owner conversing in low tones with the customers. "Anything else, sir?" he asked politely.

The old man shook his head. "No, that is all."

Enitan smiled at him. "Then if you will return in an hour, I will have the final copy written up and you will be able to send it out this very day."

"Thank you very much," the old man said, and bowed, then ambled slowly from the shop.

Smiling, for writing happy letters was one of his favorite parts of being a stationary clerk, he drew out a fresh piece of paper and read over the rough draft to familiarize himself with it, to lessen the chance of mistakes on the final.

He had written out two paragraphs when something fell upon the paper.

Enitan froze, and suddenly found it hard to breathe.

His Carnivale cravat pin. He'd been crushed to realize he had left it in the palace – he had wanted that one stupid little token to remember the best three nights of his life, even if they were also the worst. Setting his quill aside, he reached out to pick up the pin.

Then he slowly forced his gaze up.

Rem glared angrily at him, perfect blue eyes bright with the depths of his rage.

Enitan stared back, not certain what to say.

He was still as beautiful as ever, though this time there was nothing lordly about his dress -- it was entirely royal, right down to the various pins and rings he wore, making it impossible this time not to realize his true identity. Like the first night they had met, he wore a coat that almost perfectly matched the breathtaking color of his eyes. Enitan wondered miserably how in the hell had he never made the connection.

"I told you to stay," Rem said quietly.

"You're the prince," Enitan replied. "How could I?"

Rem's lips tightened with anger. "We are going," he said, and grabbed hold of Enitan's arm, yanking him and dragging him to the door. "Find his things, see they are packed," he barked at a guard standing near the door. "We are not to be bothered once during the journey home."

Before Enitan could express his opinion on the manhandling, he was all but thrown into a black and green carriage.

The sound of the door closing seemed ominous, somehow.

"You could have stayed!" Rem burst out after a long stretch of silence. "Was that too much to ask?"

"You could have told me you were the bloody prince!" Enitan snarled, hands fisting in his lap. "What the hell was I supposed to do?"

"Stay," Rem snapped. "I said I would be back, I would have explained—"

"That you're the crown prince?" Enitan cut in. "I may be just a naive, gullible, foolish shop clerk, but I'm not so stupid that I don't know what is what."

"You could have stayed instead of slinking off and running away like a bloody coward," Rem replied. "Was I not good to you the whole of Carnivale? What did I do so wrong that you could not wait a few moments to hear me out, to listen to me? After all we did, you could have given me a chance to explain."

Enitan wanted to hit him. "You could have told me the truth," he snapped. "Why did you deceive me?"

"Because I'm the prince!" Rem bellowed. "I feared that if you knew, you would have nothing to do with me -- a fear you have proven to be warranted!"

"That doesn't excuse it," Enitan said quietly. "I knew you were important, and I guess I'm just more stupid than I thought for not figuring it out when it seems so obvious now...but you should have told me. Lo--dallying with a lord is completely different from dallying with a prince."

Rem's voice was quiet and solemn when he replied. "I devoutly hope that little slip of the tongue was what I think, for if I am the only one who thought our time more a great deal more than a *dalliance*, then I will be heartbroken."

Enitan swallowed, and looked down at his white-knuckled hands, forcing them to unclench. "You're the prince," he said miserably. "I'm a shop clerk. How I feel doesn't really matter."

"It matters," Rem said, voice ragged. He reached out and took one of Enitan's hands in his own. "Please, Enitan. I'm sorry. I never meant for you to find out that way. I thought...I thought it would be easier if it was just the two of us - Rem and Enitan -- for the Carnivale. I was going to tell you the truth at the hour of unmasking. By then, I thought it would not matter as much to you."

Nodding, Enitan held tightly to Rem's hand. "I'm sorry I ran. It was...too much. It still is, really. Why would the crown prince want me?"

"That is a long list, my love," Rem replied with his familiar grin. "We shall go over it in intimate detail, but later, because there is something else that you need to know, and which I was also going to tell you that night."

Enitan frowned at him. "What else could you possibly have to tell me? That you're married? You have a secret brother?"

"No," Rem said, but his smile was a weak attempt. "Not about me...about you..."

Enitan laughed. "What? Am I prince too? Prince of the stockroom, maybe."

Rem winced. "Do you know anything about your father?"

"No..." Enitan replied, frowning. "You have brought him up before. Why?"

Taking a deep breath, Rem let it out slowly, and only then finally replied, "Enitan...you are very

nearly the spitting image of the late Marquis Lakeside."

"Who is that?" Enitan asked, feeling a headache coming on. "What are you trying to tell me?"

Rem smiled, and lifted his hand to kiss the back of it. "The Marquis Lakeside is the title given to the man who will inherit the title of Grand Duke. The Grand Duke is your grandfather. He has been searching for you for a very long time."

"You're lying," Enitan replied, feeling dizzy from disbelief and lack of sleep and the rush of seeing Rem again. "That's impossible."

"I assure you it is not," Rem said gently. He reached into his jacket and drew out a small, gold portrait case.

Enitan took it with trembling hands, fumbling a bit before he finally managed to get it open.

Tears spilled down his cheeks as he saw the portrait inside.

He had never seen his father -- had not even realized, until that moment, how much he resembled his father, though he had always wondered and hoped. Two men were in the portrait; they might have been young and old versions of the same man -- the Marquis Lakeside and the Grand Duke. His father and grandfather. There was no denying it when he looked so much like them.

The portrait case tumbled to the floor of the carriage as his trembling hands lost control of it. "I--" he swallowed and gave up speaking, not trusting that he could form actual words.

Rem moved from his own seat opposite to sit next to Enitan. "Truly, I am sorry. I meant to inform you as gently as possible, but I have botched the affair from beginning to end."

Enitan made a sound that was somewhere between a laugh and a sob. "Your execution does rather need some work."

Snorting, Rem pulled him into a loose embrace.

"So why did you come to the store that night?" Enitan asked, thoroughly confused now. "To fetch me? But how would you have known?"

"I came only for ink," Rem said. "That much is true. Every time I ordered someone else to find what I wanted, they brought back inks that were not up to my standards. So I decided to do it myself. I saw you and thought two things -- one, you belonged to me, and two, your grandfather

would fight me for you."

Enitan laughed again; shakily, but the sobs were gone. "You're an idiot."

Rem kissed his brow. "I will not argue you that point. I promise I did not mean for things to go this way. I saw you, realized who you were...and then realized you had no idea, not even the slightest hint. The Carnivale, I thought, would be a good way to acclimate you. By the end of it, I thought you might be a bit more comfortable with my identity and your own." He sighed.

Echoing the sigh, Enitan said, "I cannot think I'll be anything but abysmal at this...I am not fit to be a Marquis or anything else." God, the Grand Duke was his grandfather. The idea was too hard to think about. It couldn't be real.

"He has been looking for his grandson for a long time," Rem said softly. "He did not even know of your existence until his son's will was read and everything was left to his 'wife and child,' but your mother, I guess, ran away. I do not know how we never found you right here in the city." Rem blew out a frustrated breath. "Nevertheless, he knows all about you, now, and eagerly awaits your arrival."

Enitan nodded, and did not protest when Rem tugged him even closer. "I'm not a noble. I know nothing about being one."

"You far surpass them all," Rem said firmly "Anyway, you have me and the Grand Duke and my father. It will work out, I promise." He brushed a soft kiss across Enitan's mouth. "If you want no part of it, then do not do it. Shop clerk or Marquis, you are mine."

"Anything else you need to tell me?" Enitan asked, trying to sound amused but sensing he sounded more fearful.

Rem turned Enitan's head up, and kissed him softly. "Only that I love you, and I'm sorry for this mess."

Enitan swallowed, those simple words more shattering than even the revelation of his birth. Shattering, but somehow steadying, especially in light of the fact that Rem had come after him. "That's all right, it was obviously all a mess before you came along." He swallowed again and curled back into Rem's arms, suddenly tired. His eyes closed of their own volition as he settled against Rem, who kissed his brow again. "I love you, too," he whispered, and decided that the rest could take care of itself, as he fell asleep surrounded by the warmth and scent and feel of his lover.