

## Regency

Perfume, masques, swords, letters, secrets, scandals...passion and romance.

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### Deceived

"So you've finally seen fit to join the living, have you?"

Benedict rolled his eyes. "Rae, I believe I've told you before not to speak to me until I give you leave."

"Which would be never if you had your way, which is why I ignore you every time you say it."

"You're in fine form this morning," Benedict replied, matching his assistant's acidic tone. "What, did you get turned down again? I suppose even money will only go so far."

Rae slowly set down the sheaf of papers in his hand. "You are late, Highness. We were supposed to begin going over these lists at eight o'clock. It is now a quarter past nine." His carefully polite tone abruptly dropped. "Have a hard time kicking the strumpets out of your bed?"

"No strumpets this time," Benedict said with a yawn. "I was reading an excellent book, actually."

Sneering contemptuously, Rae ignored him in favor of helping himself to the contents of a lavish tea tray that had been quietly brought in once the servants realized Prince Benedict was finally awake. The sugar tongs clicked faintly as he dropped two sugar cubes into his tea. "Find a book of explicit pictures in the library?"

Benedict laughed. "I wish - my father would have apoplexy. No. It was a history book, actually." He smirked. "Too difficult for you, I'm sure. Lots of big words, no pictures."

Instead of replying, Rae merely retrieved his papers and all but threw them across the table. "If you managed to read a history book, which I highly doubt, then you should have no trouble going over that list as your mother requested a month ago and ensuring you have no problems with the names therein." Grimacing as Benedict yawned, Rae stood up and strode over the desk.

Quick as anything, Benedict leaned over the table, snatched up three more sugar cubes and dropped them into Rae's pale blue china teacup.

Sitting back, he idly poured cream into his own cup as Rae stalked back toward him. He made a show of reading over the first of what must be nearly fifty pages of names. "Why am I looking over this again?"

"Because," Rae said, pushing his spectacles up his nose - a gesture that said he was rapidly losing patience. "Your mother wants to ensure that all her sons are pleased with the guests."

"Bloody hell, what does it matter?" Benedict said in disgust. "It's the Masque. I'll be as likely to take a maid or footman to the gardens as a lady or lord."

Rae pushed up his glasses again - twice in as many minutes. Good, the bastard needed to lose his temper more often. "Be that as it may, Highness, your mother would like you to go over the list and tell her if there are any she should be certain you avoid or encounter. She could have

avoided or ensured inviting them, but as per usual you are a month too late for that."

"Oh, do be quiet. You're insufferable."

"Then by all means dismiss me, Highness."

Benedict snorted and lifted his teacup, breathing in the scent of the fragrant tea - specially blended by the monks of the temple several hours north. He'd visited there as a boy and had fallen absolutely in love with their blends. He refused to drink any other. Black tea with hints of cherry and currant, the faintest touch of vanilla. Divine.

His momentary peace was shattered by Rae's sharp, cutting voice. "If you could please focus, Highness. I know it's difficult for you, but do try - we're already over an hour behind on your work for the day."

"Then I suppose there's no reason to rush about trying to catch up. Is there anyone on this list I would especially approve or disapprove of?"

Rae picked up his own tea and took several sips, furious, dark-brown eyes never leaving Benedict's face. "Try reading it and see for yourself, Highness. Though at a glance, I think it safe to assume that only half the list has slept with you."

"Then by all means make certain that half is kept from my presence - and that the other half is pressed upon me." Benedict grinned and reached for a scone, slathering it with thick cream and biting into it with a hum of pleasure.

"Why must I be stuck with you?" Rae demanded, a complaint voiced at least once a day - often more.

Rae was strict, bossy, severe, and wholly lacking in respect for his betters. That his employer was none other than the second son of the King and Queen never seemed to strike him - he had called Benedict a perfect waste of a human being two hours into his employment.

Benedict should have dismissed him on the spot. More than once Rae had seemed close to simply walking out.

Neither of them, however, was going to be the one to lose to the other. Benedict would rather become a monk than dismiss Rae and therefore indirectly admit that the bastard was right about his being a hopeless, moral-less, lazy, good for nothing spoiled brat of a prince.

Or something along those lines. Usually he just ignored the bloody bastard.

No, he was bound and determined to see Rae offer his resignation. On his knees, begging to be set free.

Yes, that would do nicely.

"Highness!"

Benedict shook off his thoughts and glared at his mortal enemy. "What?"

It was a pity, really, that Rae was so obnoxious and unbearable. If he'd let go of that wretched stuffiness - and the awful vaguely pine cologne he insisted on wearing, Benedict knew he did it for spite - he would be rather appealing.

Rae had the long, slender build that was so fashionable in men these days; he was nearly too skinny - no doubt he used up all his energy nagging people to death. His hair had potential, but

rather than let it fall around his face and soften his sharp features, he kept the light brown strands rigorously combed back - Benedict wondered sometimes if he somehow pasted it down.

Pale skin, no doubt from all the time he spent in the dungeons casting evil curses or whatever condescending, snotty assistants did to amuse themselves at night, since the pleasures enjoyed by mere mortals was obviously beneath him.

He realized he'd completely missed what Rae had just said - and the glint in his dark brown eyes said Rae knew it. "I'm sorry, I was noticing your pallor. Did you not drink enough blood last night, my dear assistant? I told you to be generous; I wouldn't want you starving to death."

Rae pushed his glasses up his nose. "Highness," he said in a carefully level tone, "I know it's difficult for you to do anything but sleep, eat, and rut, but you are one of the highest peers of the realm. Do try to act like it from time to time."

"Then who would you harass and insult to death? I must give you something to do, since apparently you cannot even read a list of names without my assistance."

"Damn it, Highness!" Rae slammed his hands down on the table, making the dishes rattle and his tea splash over the side of the delicate cup and onto the fine white linen table cloth. "I am an assistant, not a nursemaid. If you are going to be useless and insufferable, then take yourself off back to your bed and whores!"

Benedict let his own temper loose, knowing his green eyes held a fury to match any Rae could summon. "I did not start this, you rude, obnoxious, insufferable servant! I was all set to bid you good morning and I am instead greeted with more of your bitter insults! If you are tired of playing the role of my assistant you are more than welcome to take yourself elsewhere!"

"Are you dismissing me, then?" Rae asked, leaning over the table, their faces just short of touching, anger all but sparking in the air between them.

"Oh, no, my dearest mortal enemy, if you leave it will be because you choose." Benedict smiled, baring his teeth.

Rae matched the expression. "I, unlike some, do my duty no matter what. Until your Highness sees fit to dismiss me from your worthless presence, I will remain your devoted, hard working assistant."

"Rude, pompous upstart you mean?"

"Just because I actually work is no reason to be bitter with me, Highness. If you'd spend half the time working that you do fornicating with anything that moves-"

"Oh, not anything," Benedict said, the last remnants of his control snapping. "I would sooner take an oath of chastity than so much as kiss you."

Rae sneered. "Highness, I would sooner die than even think of such a thing. I am not so desperate to be thought well of that I would leap into bed-"

"Good heavens, you two are starting early today," a voice interrupted.

Benedict made a face as he turned to greet his brother. "Damn it all, Edwin, what do you want?"

Edwin sniggered. "I was coming to see if you wanted to join me for a ride this morning, distract some of the clingers...but I can see you are already enthusiastically engaged in other matters."

"Enthusiastic?" Benedict grimaced. "I would sooner be strung up naked in the courtyard than stay

in this room another moment." Not that he particularly wanted to go with his brother either, but he hardly had a choice in the matter.

"I'm certain that can be arranged, Highness," Rae snapped.

Benedict turned and stalked away. "Review those lists, assistant, and send them off to my mother." He threw a taunting, sneering smile as he reached the doorway, ignoring the way his brother laughed in the hallway. "Have it done by noon, for then we must go over the reports."

He smirked as he heard porcelain shatter against the door as he closed it.

Damn the man! The arrogant, lazy, good-for-nothing prick!

Rae picked up the sugar bowl and sent it after Prince Benedict's teacup.

"Bastard!" he swore, and sat down heavily in his seat, glaring at the seat vacated by the prince.

The sorry excuse for royalty had certainly wasted no time in running away - no doubt to carry Lord Q or Lady K off into the woods.

Disgusted, furious that his mood was already completely soured, Rae shoved away from the table and made to move toward the desk - but at the last veered toward the massive bay window instead.

Outside he could see the crowd milling about as the horses were brought out. It was impossible to miss Prince Edwin and his worthless younger brother.

Both brothers were tall, slender though Benedict was a bit toward the broad side. Wheat-gold curls and eyes like leaves in spring. Every bit of the arrogant, lazy whore of a prince made it clear why he had no trouble keeping his bed warm.

Obviously he never talked to any of his victims, as they'd immediately dismiss him for the insufferable, selfish bastard he really was.

Snarling, Rae jerked away from the window and snatched up the papers Benedict had left on the table, then strode to the door and yanked it open.

"You!" He barked at the first footman he saw - and the lad must be new, so pale like that. The old ones were used to him. "Take this to her Majesty, tell her that what she requires is on the last page...and send a maid to clean up the mess in here." His boots crunched on broken porcelain as he stalked to the desk.

Selfish, stupid bastard. If the bloody fool spent half as much time working as he did being worthless-

Rae buried his hands in his hair and grit his teeth, struggling valiantly to calm his temper, knowing it was a lost cause. Benedict had completely ruined his morning, probably his day.

He just wanted Benedict to tend his duties for a few hours - he'd even held off breakfast until Benedict deigned to arrive. He'd already gone over the lists, and the reports had only to be signed before he sent them off.

All for nothing. Benedict had not even wasted an hour before running off to rut in the forest while

leaving him do all the work without so much as a mocking thank you. Just taunt after infuriating taunt because the prince couldn't stand that someone in his life actually thought Benedict should tend to his duties.

He'd been to school, endured countless tutors until he knew the rules of etiquette, the politics, everything. He was the equal of anyone in knowledge. Instead of shining as the assistant he should be, however, he got to spend his days locked up in Benedict's study, doing all the work while the stupid, spoiled, worthless, lazy prince engaged in stupid pranks with sugar cubes before running off to see how quickly he could divest someone of his or her clothing.

From the very first day - and he'd been so excited, to be hired by the King to attend his second son - Benedict had proven worthless. He'd been so determined, despite everything, to be a good assistant, to help the prince, to see Benedict shine...

Well, he'd quickly grown out of that illusion. By the end of that first week he'd realized nothing but shouting and sniping accomplished anything. Benedict was a lost cause. Rae wished bitterly he could just leave, go where his skills would be appreciated.

That, however, would be giving up. He wasn't going anywhere until Benedict finally lost all that dignity and arrogance and threw him out. Their shouting matches were not nearly enough to force him to resign - even when he lost his temper, Benedict still had that confounded air about him. No, Rae wanted to see him lose it completely.

He wanted to see Benedict lose everything. Dignity, arrogance, all of it - someone should make the bratty prince suffer for once in his life. Humble him.

Rae let his head fall back against his seat as he closed his eyes, thoughts of seeing Benedict put in his place for once in his life soothing.

Insufferable wretch.

He wanted to see Benedict suffer what he made others suffer. To be the one left angry and miserable.

No, if he were honest with himself - he didn't want to see Benedict suffer. He wanted to be the one who caused that suffering.

There just wasn't anyway to do it.

What would affect Benedict like nothing else?

There was no besting him in their sparring matches - often Benedict won those, as much as Rae hated to admit it. The closest he generally came was drawing even. No, that wasn't the way to go about it.

Humiliating him in front of everyone? Unlikely. A prince had nothing to fear from the assistant everyone knew he hated. Rae knew for a fact his temper tantrums were often a source of amusement for the court.

Truly the only thing that might possibly affect Benedict would be some scandal or incident involving one of his lovers...former lovers, rather. No one had yet managed to capture Benedict's interest for more than a few days. The record was Lady T, who had lasted two whole weeks.

Rae grimaced as the answer came to him. It was rather obvious, really.

I would sooner take an oath of chastity than so much as kiss you.

That was it. Nothing would humiliate and infuriate Benedict more than to realize that he'd been seduced by the person he most hated. Seduced and then immediately discarded. Yes, that had a nice ring to it.

Rae's eyes gleamed as plans began to take shape. Benedict would never expect such a thing of him, and the Masque was so perfect an opportunity that it almost seemed he was meant to do this.

The Masque was the climax of the autumn festivities, when harvesting was finished, everything in readiness for winter, and everyone across the kingdom celebrated with banquets and fairs before the snow descended and trapped them indoors. In the city, the royal Masque was the greatest of these celebrations. The celebration lasted for three days and included all manner of festivities and entertainments - but the ultimate of these was the Masque itself. For each of the three nights, a masquerade ball was held. All manner of competitions and guessing games would be held - from the finest costume to the strangest mask. All the while the masks remained on, identities not revealed until the stroke of midnight on the last day.

It was simply too perfect.

He knew Benedict's weaknesses like no other; what would capture his attention, hold it...enslave it.

The very thought was the sweetest of balms - except of course for the part where he actually had to seduce him. How did one seduce a man he hated? Well, he knew what Benedict would find appealing; the rest he would simply figure out.

Humming softly, Rae bent eagerly over his desk, writing out a note to his sister, a long list of what exactly he would require from her - for she would be the source of the most crucial piece, the one thing he needed to draw the prince to him rather than all the others.

Drying and sealing the letter, he strode out of the study and snagged a footman, barking out instructions on where to take it. Then he turned sharply around to see to the rest of his plan.

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He hated the yearly Masques as much as he loved them.

Everyone was so dreadfully predictable.

Lord H's costume was most intriguing. To anyone else his identity was probably a mystery - except behind the feathers and silk he still wore that awful dark, spicy cologne that did not suit him at all.

Lady M was equally lovely, nearly mysterious, behind her black mask and glittering emeralds, but he would know the cinnamon and clove blend she favored anywhere.

At least Lady Q had foregone her usual scents. Unfortunate that she'd chosen a vanilla and strawberry blend that was predictable and boring.

Identifying every person he knew was too easy a feat, and none of those unknown to him held the slightest appeal. The combination of cloying perfume, thick cologne, sweat, alcohol, flowers and exotic foods was starting to sicken him. Even the three glasses of wine in which he'd indulged were not sufficient to dull his senses enough to endure the ball a moment longer. He needed some fresh air.

Benedict let out a soft sigh of relief as he stepped onto the balcony, doubly relieved to find it deserted. For a few minutes, hopefully, he could have some peace and quiet.

Thankfully he knew how to wear a costume - unlike the rest of these fools. He'd even had new colognes blended specifically for the Masque, one for each of the three nights. His men knew better than to reveal his costume or scents to another. No one knew who he was tonight, nor would they for the next two balls. He intended to relish every moment.

"Leather, lavender...amber and a hint of lemon," a thoughtful, husky voice said from behind him. "A seductive scent. Are you hoping to be seduced?"

Benedict started, not having heard anyone come up behind him. He barely kept his eyes from widening, so completely surprised was he by the man standing before him. His nostrils flared as the wind shifted, carrying the most enthralling scents to him.

The man's accent was the long, rough syllables of the coast - that might explain why he was definitely a stranger to Benedict. His hair was dark, either deep brown or black, he could not tell which, and the light spilling from inside caught on flecks of something in his hair, making it shimmer. Golden skin, but it held a shine - Benedict realized that part of the alluring scent was the oil the man had rubbed into his skin to give it that gleam.

That scent...Benedict wanted to strip the man of his dark clothing and find out how deep that wonderful smell went, if it was sunk all the way into his skin - for he could tell immediately this man wasn't stupid. He'd obtained cologne that blended with him, matched him.

It was addictive...he took an unconscious step forward, breathing the man in. "If I am hoping to be seduced...you are clearly hoping to be a seducer, dark stranger." Benedict took another step forward, obsessed and enthralled. "Musk...red rose...apple, vanilla...and teak." Oblivious to whether he was being too forward or not, Benedict dipped his head to bury it in the man's throat, breathing the smell in, absorbing it. "Intoxicating."

"Impressive," the man murmured, and the leather of his glove was warm and smooth as his hand curled around the back of Benedict's neck, slid into his hair and gently tugged him up. "Not many would have picked all those out."

"Not many would think to combine them all," Benedict said, and finally realized just how forward and improper he was being - not that he particularly cared or wanted to stop, but throwing himself at someone was not his style. But that scent...so utterly perfect against the salt-sweet of his gleaming skin. Benedict wanted to taste, but forced himself to finally pull well away. "Did you create the blend yourself?"

The man nodded, his hair glittering as the light caught it. Strange, that, but rather than being silly it only intrigued Benedict further. "Yes, specifically for the Masque." He once more reached up to wrap his hand around the back of Benedict's neck, leather warm, supple. Gently he tugged Benedict close again, voice a murmur when he spoke. "I liked you better here, pretty bird."

"Then here I shall remain," Benedict replied, dipping his head into the hollow of the man's neck, breathing in the smell of him, this time daring to taste, tongue flicking out, teeth grazing lightly when that won him a soft gasp. "Might I have some sort of name to put to you, my intoxicating stranger? What did I do to capture your attention?"

His head was tugged up and he found himself staring into the stranger's dark eyes, wishing he could see their true color. The man's lips curved in a faint smile. "You've been captivating many an eye tonight, pretty bird. I merely managed to be the first to see if I might stroke your feathers. I'm nothing but a hunter seeking his prey."

"Hunter, then," Benedict said with a smile of his own, and pulled away again. "You are close,

Hunter, quite close - but I do not think I'll let you stroke my feathers quite yet."

Hunter chuckled, sounding genuinely amused. "Is that so, pretty bird? I was not aware the hunter needed permission from his prey."

Benedict flashed a grin and moved away, leaning against the balcony railing. "Are you saying, Hunter, that I am ordinary prey? Offending me will not get you closer to my feathers..." He laughed, surprised to find he was enjoying himself. Seldom did he get to play such silly, simple games. All his other games were calculated, precise, and played on specific orders. This...this was actually fun.

"You are far from ordinary, pretty bird." Hunter drew close, but stopped just short of actually touching. "So what would win me a touch, hmm?"

"What makes you a far from ordinary Hunter?"

Hunter smirked and moved a bit closer, tilting his head up. "You are still speaking with me; you've not run off back to the lesser birds. I know you are intrigued, pretty bird...you have been fluttering about bored and restless all night."

"I will concede you are not boring, Hunter," Benedict conceded. "What else about you is not boring?"

"Let me show you." Hunter closed the remaining space between them and reached up to take Benedict's mouth.

Those dark, tempting lips were all they had promised to be, and Benedict moaned softly into Hunter's mouth at the heat, the taste, sharp and immediately addictive - he'd never had another kiss like it.

Loud, raucous laughter broke the silence, and surprised by the sudden noise Benedict broke away. He glared witheringly at the three women who had come out onto the balcony, ignoring their not-so soft exclamations of 'oh, my' behind their lace-and-feather fans.

He took Hunter's leather-clad hand in his own satin-covered hand and led him down the nearby stairs, away from the palace and into the gardens below.

Lamps were scattered about, flames flickering behind colored glass, offering just enough light to avoid tripping without giving away the air of mystery of the Masque. Here and there he could see movement in the shadows, the kind that would normally be found in a garden - but at the Masque, rules were meant to be broken.

He bypassed them all, determined to just get away, tired of everyone - except his Hunter.

At the last moment, upon a whim, he cut abruptly left and dragged them into the entrance to the maze - then let go of Hunter's hand and with a laugh vanished around the first turn.

"It's to be a game, is it?" Hunter called after him, and Benedict quicken his pace, suddenly annoyed that the wine he'd drunk was slowing his thoughts enough he had to pause before remembering which way to turn.

He drew to a halt as his memories proved false and he found himself at a dead end - one occupied by a bench and a couple making full and creative use of it. Hiding his mirth, relieved they'd not noticed him, Benedict retracted his steps and took the leftmost path, then continued on his way toward the center.

Of course, his game relied heavily on Hunter being able to find the center of the maze. Though a



dead end with a convenient bench would suffice if that was where they found each other.

Benedict grinned as he passed from the maze and into its center - where several of the colored lamps had been scattered about, making the massive fountain and garden seem like something from a child's story.

A hand closed over his wrist and Benedict found himself yanked up against a hard, warm body. "Pretty bird, am I going to have to lock you in a cage?"

"Am I not already in one?" Benedict asked, the words slipping out before he thought.

Hands tightened briefly on his arms in surprise.

Benedict forestalled any questions or remarks by bending to kiss Hunter, surprised to find that it was even better than he had dared to remember. He'd thought perhaps it was the wine, his own wishful thinking, but Hunter's kiss was more addictive than ever. Like the most potent drug, more captivating than even the perfumes he adored.

Despite his panting, however, and the obvious pleasure he took in the kiss, Hunter still seemed determined to press him on the curious remark. "The pretty bird does not like his home?"

"A cage is a cage, be it plain as dirt or gilded fine enough for a king." Or a prince, but that was knowledge he need not share. Let Hunter think him some spoiled noble. "Enough of this idiotic talk, Hunter."

Hunter reached up with one gloved hand to bury his fingers in the hair at the nape of Benedict's neck, tugging his head gently back so that Hunter could reach up to avail himself of Benedict's throat, biting sharply and then soothing the mark with his tongue. "I have captured you, pretty bird, so you will sing the songs I say."

"I don't recall giving the impression that I was an obedient songbird," Benedict retorted, grinning as the hand in his hair tightened.

"That is true," Hunter murmured, and this time angled Benedict's head down to take a hard kiss. "Yet it is the cage that has made you such a pretty bird."

Benedict sighed. "You are harping on boring things, Hunter. This songbird does not wish to sing sad tunes. My cage would be less wearisome if I had someone to share it. Now come, Hunter, I would rather sing a happier tune." He twisted away and moved toward the fountain, boots clacking on the cold marble tiles that lined most of the center of the maze. "Do not say you're going to demand a petulant tune from me."

He stopped just in front of the fountain, impatient but still as Hunter approached him. The colored lamps caught on the diamonds that traced the rightmost edge of Hunter's mask. His costume was simple but effective - black from head to foot, nothing but diamonds and the shimmer in his hair to offset the stark coloring. He reached out to lightly trace the edge of Hunter's mask before closing the space between them, once more dipping his head to Hunter's throat to inhale the scent of him, taste the salt-sweet of his skin, trace his way up with soft kisses before finally claiming those dark lips again.

No one had ever been like this. For once in his life, Benedict had no negotiations to keep in mind, no bargains with his family to be pushing, no argument from which to distract his paramour...there was nothing here but a man he did not know, who did not know him, which meant there was nothing at stake, nothing to lose - no family or kingdom to upset if he failed to seduce the man in his arms.

He was, for once - for these brief three nights - free to do only what he wanted. "I bet you have

many a songbird in your cage, my Hunter."

"Ah, and here I was going to say you must have many seeking to stroke your feathers."

Benedict barely kept back his grimace as he bent to reclaim the damp, swollen lips before him. "Perhaps...but few do it with my permission." He cut off any reply with a kiss that left them both gasping for breath.

Somewhere a bell tolled, striking ten times before once more fading away, leaving only the revelry of the party and the occasional sound of pleasure to break the quiet of the night.

"Tempting as you are, pretty bird, the Masque is no fun if the prize is claimed the first night."

"So you sought me out merely to tease, Hunter? To leave me aching and alone in the garden?"

Gloved fingers ran lightly down his chest, butterfly soft across the hard heat trapped within his breeches. "Now what would be the fun if I got the prize on the first night? I will claim it fairly on the last." Hunter leaned in and lapped at his throat, bit down just hard enough to sting. "Your scent mingles nicely with mine, pretty bird. I'll revel in it when I'm alone in bed tonight. Will you do the same?" Then suddenly Hunter was gone, so quick and silent it took a moment for Benedict to register that he was alone.

"Bastard," he swore softly to the dark, questions ringing in his head, body hot and aching, and even the chill breeze that sprang up could not erase the intoxicating scent of Hunter.

Rae filled his glass and drank the brandy down in two gulps, needing the resulting burn to try and chase away the taste of the prince that lingered.

Hopefully drown his stupidity. He filled the glass half-full and immediately downed it - then hurtled the decanter across the room to shatter in the fireplace, the brandy making the flames flare wildly.

"Idiot!" he said aloud, furious and angry. He tore off his mask and dropped it to the floor as if burned. The diamonds along the right edge, the only decoration on his mask, sparkled in the light of the flames.

His clothes were next, and he hated that even free of them he still seemed to be surrounded not only by his own damnable cologne but also that of the prince.

The plan had proven to be as effective as he'd intended. Everyone knew Benedict was obsessed with the way things smelled. Nothing could make him love or hate a person more than their scent. Rae wore his own dreadful pine cologne simply because he knew Benedict hated it.

His sister had outdone herself in meeting his requests. The apple had been her idea, the perfect final touch to what he'd had in mind. The second and third were equally fine, and if tonight was anything to judge by they would be just as intriguing to the prince.

The plan had gone perfectly. Except that he was not supposed to be the one left wanting - his plan was to seduce Benedict, make him suffer. No where in his plans did it mention he would enjoy anything but the suffering.

Bloody hell, those kisses. Rae reached for his brandy to try again to erase the memory of them,

the taste and feel of Benedict. Kissing him hadn't even been in the plan - he had planned on teasing and tormenting, not actually touching, certainly not kissing. He grimaced as he remembered he'd thrown the decanter into the fire. Damn it all.

Rae groaned as the memories refused to leave him in peace, instead reminding him how surprisingly good the prince had looked in his dark gold costume, trimmed in feathers, the mask glinting with amber - a delicate songbird, simple and understated. Few, if any, would ever have thought the songbird to be Prince Benedict. No, he'd heard the murmurings even as he watched. Benedict should be grateful - if it were possible for him to feel such a thing - that his costume was so effective. Lady Q should not be allowed to say such things in public, even with a mask to hide behind.

He'd known immediately, and wondered that none of Benedict's lovers could identify him - more than Lady Q had been trying. Behind the mask he could tell when the nose wrinkled with distaste. He knew the slow way Benedict moved, the way he only drank brandy or red wine, how impatient he became as the evening wore on.

What had surprised him was that Benedict remained alone the entire night. Not once did he flirt, dance. He barely spoke to anyone. He had looked quite lost, like a man going through the motions while looking for somewhere else to be.

Rae hadn't expected that. He'd been certain he would have to work hard to get Benedict away from his chosen amusement for the evening.

Ruthlessly he shoved aside the other thoughts that wanted to nag him.

So he hadn't planned on desiring Benedict; on actually enjoying the damnable prince's kisses. That didn't mean things had suddenly changed, just that it wouldn't be quite as awful or difficult to seduce Benedict. He'd already put the plan in motion, he wouldn't stop now. He'd determined to teach Benedict a lesson and he was going to do it.

Decided, Rae strode toward the fireplace and the bath waiting for him there. From a box he'd set out earlier he pulled a bar of rough, dark soap - what he would need to scrub off the oil he'd rubbed into his skin and hair to make them darker.

His hair sparkled in the light before he dunked beneath the water to begin washing out both the oil and the shining dust he'd obtained to compliment the diamonds on his mask, add a touch of uniqueness that he knew Benedict would be unable to resist.

Damn it all, he hadn't expected Benedict to be that immediately enthralled, to draw so close so quickly - to be so intoxicating himself. The moment he'd pressed his face to Rae's throat, though, Rae had been equally overcome.

He hadn't expected...any of it. Not for Benedict to be so pleasant. Fun to flirt with and chase through the maze.

Warm. Bloody hell the man was warm, and that heat only enhanced the cologne he wore. Holding him hadn't felt awkward at all...which wasn't a thought he liked. It made no sense. Rae dismissed it impatiently.

Perhaps it was all because the masked prince had acted nothing like the Benedict he knew. There had been nothing of the lazy, insufferable prince in the man standing alone and unhappy on the balcony. Nothing of the arrogant, smug rake in the man who'd dragged him into the maze and made him dizzy with a few hungry kisses.

That didn't fit with what he knew at all.

Rae groaned and resumed scrubbing himself clean, determined to banish all traces of Benedict from mind and body.

Perhaps he should reconsider, give the scheme up. There were other ways to make the prince suffer. When he did not appear tomorrow, Benedict would sigh at an amusement lost and move on. The matter would end.

Yet even as he thought it, nodded at the wisdom of it, Rae knew he would be going back.

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"Amber again; do I sense a partiality? Combined with...vanilla and rosewood and...juniper. You have exquisite taste."

Benedict turned from the table where he was helping himself to another glass of champagne - his third, and until he'd heard that voice he'd had no plans of stopping until he could no longer hold the champagne flutes.

"Hunter," he said with a smile. "The hour is late; I feared your interest had strayed." That worry was, in fact, the reason he was on his third glass of champagne. Though he wasn't quite certain why, he was just honest enough to admit that was the reason.

"I was watching you dance. You did not do so last night, I wondered why you did so tonight."

"Perhaps I wanted to show off my feathers," Benedict said, taking a sip of pale champagne and then leaning down to breathe in the scent of his Hunter, blocking out the choking scents around them. "Narcissus and orange blossom, lovely." Perfect with his new mask - identical to the first, except that it was red, trimmed in rubies.

Benedict had chosen bird costumes for all three nights of the Masque - simple, understated, nothing like what people thought Prince Benedict would and should wear. Yesterday had been browns and creams and golds...tonight he was all dark blues and grays. The black and red of his Hunter was stark and bright by comparison. Dark eyes gleamed behind the red half mask.

"Are you tired, pretty bird? Weary of showing off your feathers?"

"My toes are weary of being trod upon, and I am sick of attempts to unmask me, but otherwise no - though the champagne is perhaps making me sleepy." Benedict smiled ruefully and held the champagne flute to his lips.

Before he could take a sip, however, Hunter snatched it neatly from him and drank it himself. Benedict watched him, more interested in the way Hunter drank the champagne than he thought he probably should be.

Finishing the champagne, Hunter set the glass down on the table and held out his hand. "Come dance with me, pretty bird, and I'll show you off properly. Let them all be jealous at how beautifully you dance with me."

The line should have made him laugh, but instead Benedict only smiled and placed his hand in Hunter's, allowing himself to be escorted to the dance floor. A rarity, for usually he was the one leading others. It was nothing short of bizarre that he was content to let his Hunter take charge.

He barely noticed the people around them as the music started up, the strains of a dance that had started up north but was quickly spreading south. "So how is it that you have watched me all night yet I've seen not a sign of you?"

"I would be a poor hunter indeed if I allowed my prey to see me before I chose," Hunter answered with a chuckle, then led them into the first turn and the next set of steps. "You are a pleasure to watch, songbird, but far finer to dance with."

"Oh?" Benedict asked, pausing to turn again before they came together again to start the set over. "Have we never danced before?"

"Perhaps, perhaps not," Hunter replied, flashing a brief smile. "Are you trying to guess my identity?"

Benedict chuckled. "Perhaps, perhaps not. I do not believe we have though; I like to think I would remember you."

"If you did, my disguise would be a poor one, and we cannot have that at the Masque." Hunter spun him into another turn, and brought him close enough to steal a quick, soft kiss as they moved into the next step.

"That is true," Benedict replied once he remembered what they'd been talking about.

He glanced briefly at the people around them as he took another turn, glancing over Hunter's shoulders as they started the last round of the dance.

"Are they watching?" Hunter asked, clearly amused.

"Yes..." Benedict said with a frown, suddenly worrying that something about their behavior had given him away.

"Jealous, no doubt, that the songbird is clearly mine."

Benedict laughed. "I do not recall admitting that you've caught me quite yet, Hunter. You've captured the bird's fancy, but you've not obtained a permanent hold." He spun into the turn and was then neatly pulled back, and the kiss Hunter stole this time was far from soft and quick - yet still they didn't lose the beat of the dance. "Now they are certainly staring..."

Hunter chuckled. "Jealous." He gave a short bow as the dance ended, which Benedict returned, and stole another kiss before they left the dance floor. "Another dance, pretty bird, or would you like to rest your wings?"

"I'd like to retreat to the garden," Benedict replied, "though not necessarily to rest."

"I suppose we can see what amusements might find us," Hunter said, keeping a grip on his hand and snagging a glass of champagne on their way out. He took a sip as they stepped outside.

Benedict stopped them as he lowered the glass and leaned in to steal a kiss, champagne mingling with a lingering taste of something spicy in Hunter's mouth. Fingers sank into his hair, holding him in place as Hunter took control of the kiss.

"I thought you wanted to go to the garden," Hunter said when he finally broke the kiss.

Snagging the champagne, Benedict twisted away and vanished down the steps into the garden.

He didn't get far before his wrist was snagged as he was dragged close. "Trying to fly away?"

"Trying to find a place to rest," Benedict answered. He took another sip of champagne and then let Hunter steal the flute away. "I would say the maze, but Lord V said I could find him there if I got bored."

The hand on his arm tightened, then Hunter reached up to kiss him hard. "Not the maze then, and I hope you have never been that bored, pretty bird."

Benedict's mouth twisted beneath the half mask. "I kept him company for a night, once, to smooth over a particular negotiation." Benedict stifled a sigh at the memory.

A brief pause, and Benedict wondered if he'd disgusted Hunter. "Is that why he sold his portion of the Great Forest?"

"Yes."

"You should be more careful...Highness."

Benedict stiffened, then swore softly. He pulled free of Hunter's grasp. "It seems I've ended the game before it truly began." The realization was more painful than he thought it should be. How stupid and careless of him. "Good night, Hunter, and I guess farewell."

He made it two steps before he was grabbed and all but thrown against the trunk of a tree, the breath knocked out of him.

"I do not recall giving you permission to leave, pretty bird." Arms latched onto Benedict, and he saw the champagne flute lying in the grass just behind them.

Benedict grimaced. "The games are over, Hunter. I erred, and I do not feel like being here when you begin to see what you can get from me beyond sex."

"What makes you think I need anything more from you, pretty bird? That's all you are to me, after all - a bird to be chased and caught."

"That is how it will start," Benedict said bitterly. "It will change, eventually. Let me go."

The hands on his upper arms tightened hard enough Benedict half-wondered if he'd find bruises later. "I'll let you go, songbird, when I feel like it."

"You will let me go now!" Benedict snapped. "The game is over, Hunter, and I am in no mood for a new one."

In reply, Hunter freed one arm only to latch onto the back of his neck, forcing his head down to take a kiss that Benedict wanted to resist, tried to resist, but even as he wanted to flee he wanted to stay and pretend he had not ruined everything.

He didn't want to stay and see simple pleasure slide into speculation as Hunter began to wonder what a pleased prince might give to his paramour...nor did he want to see, at midnight tomorrow, the face of someone he had seduced on his family's order or might someday be told to seduce.

Why couldn't he have kept his mouth shut? Benedict tore away from the kiss and glared at Hunter. "Let me go, Hunter."

"The prey does not give orders, songbird." Hunter only tightened his hold and leaned in to give a sharp nip to his throat. "What makes you think I want anything but what I've said so far?"

"I've bedded enough people to know they always want something more in the end."

From the top of the palace the bells began to ring, tolling eleven times.

Hunter brushed a soft kiss across Benedict's lips. "I do not want anything from you, songbird. If saying farewell will convince you...then farewell I shall say." The grip on Benedict's arms eased,

and Hunter vanished as quickly as he had the night before.

"Damn it!" Benedict swore, slamming his fist into the tree trunk, barely noticing the pain. A moment later he strode from the garden, chased by the scent of spilled champagne and narcissus and orange blossom.

"Bloody hell," Rae said as he collapsed in a chair beside the fireplace. He tore off his mask and dropped it to the floor, then buried his face in his hands. "What's wrong with me?"

He knew what was wrong though - the masked prince he was stalking was not the man he had thrown an inkwell at that morning. How could the two be so different? The arrogant, insufferable prince he wanted to throttle was completely unlike the man in the garden who had sounded so bitter and hurt.

Rae couldn't bear it.

His plan had been to seduce Benedict, bewitch him, and then throw it in his face that he had been ensnared by someone he hated. Just that morning they'd tried their best to kill each other again - and as usual Benedict had run off to go hunting rather than stay and work. True to form, he'd ordered Rae to do it all, laughing as he left.

He'd been furious. Now he wondered about Benedict's running off to seduce some lord or lady...had he been telling the truth? Benedict made it sound like...like the King and Queen...

Rae cut the thought off, unable to bear it. That they would make Benedict seduce those they wanted to cooperate, to win something from...Rae stumbled to his feet and fetched the decanter of brandy he'd ordered earlier in the day. Two gulps erased the lingering taste of champagne from his mouth, but he sensed the entire decanter would not be enough to erase Benedict. Several decanters would not erase his memories of the masked prince.

What would life be like if the Benedict in the garden was the one he always saw?

He didn't want to think about it, but summoning up memories of their fight earlier that morning to drown out those of the garden failed abysmally.

Rae tried to fight the next inevitable question, but his head - conscience - would grant him no peace.

What if he simply hadn't been seeing what was right in front of him?

That still didn't excuse Benedict's insufferable laziness...except he was nearly always dragged away by his brother. The rest of the time he simply lost his temper and stormed out. Rae realized he never really knew what it was Benedict did all day though he never failed to remark that Benedict was running off to play in the bushes.

It obviously made Benedict unhappy, if the prince was to be believed. Why didn't Benedict simply tell them no? Rae rolled his eyes. Of course he couldn't. Even Benedict would be hard pressed to defy his family.

Bloody hell!! Why was he acting like he cared? Rae set his glass down before he gave in to the urge to pitch it into the fire, not in the mood to listen to the tsking of the maids in the morning.

He glared at the fireplace for several minutes, trying in vain to gather his thoughts.

They refused to gather. Every effort to rekindle his hatred of Benedict was put out by memories of the sad and bitter prince who'd tried to run the moment he'd realized he'd slipped up and revealed himself.

Sighing softly, Rae finally stripped out of his clothes, strode over to the bathtub, and slid into the water. He leaned his head back against the rim and closed his eyes, letting the water and fire warm and sooth him as best they could.

Slowly opening his eyes several minutes later, Rae turned his head to look at his bureau.

Propped against the mirror was a mask that in shape and style were the like of the two he'd already worn - but this one was green, trimmed with tear-drop amber. He had chosen it to match both Benedict's eyes and the element common to all his scents, but he had a sneaking suspicion that he would match the prince's final costume. The three most common songbirds in the palace were dark gold, bright blue, and deep green. Every fashionable lady had at least one songbird in a gold or silver cage in her room.

He wondered why Benedict had chosen such a series of costumes.

No. He refused to think about it. Rae swore softly.

He glanced again at the bureau, where three small ornate glass bottles sat in front of the green mask. The colognes his sister had made for him, one for each night of the masque.

After this was over, he was throwing the damnable things in the fire.

Never had he expected to revel in the way Benedict was drawn to him, to relish how effectively he got to the prince, to thrive on affecting him, on the kisses and touches that resulted.

His whole life had been devoted to his work, to being the best at what he did. He hated Benedict for being lazy, uncaring, for not appreciating what he had.

Now he was being torn apart wondering how badly deceived he'd been this whole time.

It didn't matter. He'd told the prince farewell. Their games had ended; he didn't need to go again tomorrow night, and after that he could go back to his normal, antagonistic relationship with the prince.

Why was the thought of doing so an ache in his chest?

Rae ignored it as best he could while he scrubbed the darkening oil from his skin and hair.

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Benedict finished off his wine - red, dark, and potent - and refilled his glass, both pleased and disappointed that he was still sober enough he didn't spill a drop.

He finished half the glass in one gulp and cringed - wine should never be drunk quickly.

One empty bottle lay on the ground beneath him, and as he heard a horse-like laugh from somewhere within the maze, he cringed and finished the rest of his wine.

This time he spilled a bit as he refilled his glass. He laughed bitterly as the obnoxious horse laugh again shattered the relatively silent night. This far from the palace, buried in a small nook



beyond the maze that no one but he seemed aware of, the revelry was a distant sound. Only that damnable laugh - and now a shriller one joined it.

At least everyone else seemed to be having a good time.

The bells began to ring, tolling eleven times before finally falling silent.

Benedict laughed again, but he stopped before it became something pathetic. Eleven o'clock. He wondered if Hunter was looking for him...not that it mattered. He'd ensured he couldn't do something stupid by secluding himself in his little hideaway. Nor would he leave it except when excessive drinking demanded or well after the stroke of midnight.

His family was going to flay him alive in the morning, but damn it all! The Masque was his one break, his only chance to be something other than the pretty face that did all the bedroom finessing.

They weren't supposed to demand he work during the Masque - that was all he'd ever asked!

Yet now they'd broken that rule, demanding - though they always put on a show of leading and asking - that he charm Lord F tonight, an effort that would climax when F realized the bird seducing him was none other than Prince Benedict.

When his family realized that Lord F was buried in the maze, laughing in his horse-like fashion, with someone else entirely...Benedict felt tired thinking about it. Didn't he do enough every other day? Could they not leave him alone these brief three?

If he were honest, however, his family was only a small part of the reason he was out here. It was to avoid the hope that Hunter might reappear that he'd run away.

They'd both said farewell. He shouldn't be this depressed. This pathetic.

It was so much easier to seduce and be seduced when you didn't actually care - which brought up a question he didn't feel like facing.

No, the question he should be facing was - had he brought a third bottle? Because the second was woefully empty. Reaching down, he fumbled briefly in the dark before his fingers landed on a bottle that was heavy, full.

Splendid.

He struggled to get it open, and it belatedly occurred to him that perhaps he should have opened them all before he started drinking.

Warm fingers slid over his and neatly took the bottle away.

Benedict blinked at looked up, willing his eyes to see in the weak light of a few colored lanterns. He drew a sharp breath.

"It seems to me, pretty bird, that you've had more than enough." Chuckling softly, Hunter let the bottle slide from his fingers to fall to the grass, then stepped close and tugged Benedict's head to rest against his stomach, gloved hand sinking into his hair. "Why are you hiding and drinking, pretty bird?"

Benedict nuzzled into the soft velvet of Hunter's jacket, relishing the warmth emanating from him, and even through the alcohol he could smell every essence of his cologne. "Patchouli, anise, leather, and amber. As intoxicating as ever, Hunter."

"As talented as ever, pretty bird. You smell of dark musk, roses, and amber."

Wishing devoutly that his head had not picked now to start spinning, Benedict settled for laughing and wrapping his arms around Hunter as best he could. "You said farewell, Hunter. I did not expect to see you again."

"My impression was that you did not want to see me again," Hunter replied, voice quiet, soothing, as his fingers continued to stroke through Benedict's hair. "It took some time to find you, songbird. I was not aware this part of the garden existed...hiding away in your little nest?" He gently tugged Benedict's head back, forcing him to look up.

"Hardly a nest," Benedict said, chuckling. "If I went there, they'd find me." And force him out to show his feathers to Lord F.

The world spun dizzily for a moment and then Benedict realized they were both now seated on the bench, his head on Hunter's shoulder. "Why did you come back?"

"I meant to stay away," Hunter replied with a sigh. "I guess you're too fine a songbird for me to let go." He laughed briefly. "Though it looks as though I am losing you to the wine. You are not usually so undignified, pretty bird."

"Hmm...." Benedict closed his eyes and just enjoyed the feel, the sound, the scent of the man holding him. Who was Hunter? Why had they never met before? Would they ever meet without the masks? "I generally only do so in my nest...at this rate you will have me thinking I truly am a bird."

Hunter laughed hard enough to shake them both.

Benedict breathed in the smell of him, moving so that he could nip the bared throat, take a taste. He heard Hunter hiss in surprise and bit harder. "I wonder who you are, Hunter, that I've never noticed you before. Surely I would notice the only person in the palace who seems to share my interest in colognes..."

"My identity does not matter, pretty bird. Besides, it is not yet midnight."

Slowly, immediately regretting it, Benedict sat up. He frowned at Hunter, but before he could say anything the quiet was shattered yet again by Lord F and his horse laugh. Benedict grimaced in the general direction of the maze. No matter how hard he tried, it would seem he'd not be allowed to forget what he should be doing.

"Who is that?" Hunter asked. "I heard that hideous laugh the entire time I searched for you, and I very nearly stopped to hunt him down and bid him be silent or else."

Benedict threw his head back and laughed, the dizziness the motion caused more than worth the image of Lord F being ordered 'to be silent or else'. "That would be Lord F," he said at last. He meant to stop there, but as he'd learned bitterly and painfully yesterday, something about Hunter made him want to say things he barely was able to say in his own head most days. "Currently I should be the one making him laugh...though if after two hours in the maze all his companion can get from him is laughter, I am not certain which of them I feel more sorry for."

"The pretty bird chose to fly away instead?" Hunter asked, reaching out to cup his chin in one gloved hand, dragging Benedict close to kiss him softly.

Benedict stared at him, seeing little more than dark eyes and glinting jewels, wishing with everything he had that he knew who his Hunter was, and why he'd never met him before. "The bird does not perform during the Masque, except as he so chooses."

Hunter flashed a pleased grin. "I like being what you chose, songbird."

"Yes," Benedict replied, not exactly sure what he meant but beyond caring as Hunter again took his mouth, the kiss possessive, hungry, nothing like the previous gentle touch.

In the distance, Lord F's laughter could once again be heard - but even that was drowned out as the bells began to toll.

Benedict felt Hunter stiffen in his arms, but when he would have pulled away, Benedict clung tight and continued to kiss him, gasping in relief when Hunter stayed.

Finally the need to breathe forced them apart, but as Hunter pulled away Benedict reached up and yanked hard at his mask.

"Damn it!"

His world spun, turned upside down, as Hunter shoved him hard, sending Benedict tumbling off the bench, spilling onto the grass. He heard Hunter swear again, then rustling grass turned into boots clicking on tile before he was once more completely alone in the garden.

Benedict slowly pulled himself back up, laughing low and bitterly. He stared at the mask in his hands - green, trimmed with teardrop-shaped amber. It still carried the traces of Hunter's cologne, a faint hint of his sweat.

"Bastard," Benedict said softly to the air. "Who are you? Why would you run from me?" He sighed softly and wished he had the energy to resume drinking. "I'll find you, Hunter." He held the mask close and breathed in the lingering scents. "I will most definitely find you."

Rae slammed his door behind him and locked it, then slid down the door to collapse on the floor, burying his face in his hands.

Several minutes later he finally stood. Stripping off his gloves, he threw them down on the small side table beside his chair and immediately poured a brandy. But the smell of alcohol reminded him of the drunken, miserable prince, and swearing loudly he hurtled the full glass into the fireplace.

Let the maids complain. He was beyond caring.

He raked a hand through his hair and then sat to pull off his boots, carefully setting them aside before he gave in to the urge to throw everything into the fire. Except his mask, of course, because he'd been stupid enough to let Benedict take it off. He should have known - a brat, even drunk and miserable, was still a brat.

He hadn't meant to go back to the prince. He'd only gone to watch Benedict, to see him find someone else when 'Hunter' didn't appear. To assure himself that he was easily forgotten by the prince.

Except Benedict had never made an appearance, and any fool could see that his poorly disguised parents were becoming increasingly annoyed by something.

Unable to help himself, he'd finally begun to hunt down Benedict. Not once, despite the way he'd seen the prince drink the first two nights, had he expected to see him curled up in some forgotten

corner of the garden smelling like a vineyard.

Was Benedict that unhappy all the time? The idea didn't fit with the daylight prince he knew.

Not that it mattered. The Masque was over. Tomorrow everything would well and truly return to normal. He could already sense that he'd be pitching something at Benedict's foolish head, as a hung over prince was even more aggravating than he was normally.

Damn and blast. The next time he came up with a clever plan he was going to throw himself in a fire. The pain of burning alive would be, by comparison, an amusing tickle.

Rae stood and began to strip off his clothes - but the glint of glass catching the firelight stopped him and he looked toward his bureau. Three bottles sat there, almost as if mocking him. Snarling, Rae stalked across the room and snatched up the first one - then set it back down and propped his elbows on the bureau to bury his face in his hands.

What was he going to do? He couldn't just go back to acting like everything was normal - yet what choice did he have? Benedict would only hate him more than ever.

He'd have to resign, there was no choice...but the thought of leaving was nearly a physical pain.

Rae tried to recall the last time in his life he'd felt this torn and confused. He realized he never had. "Benedict, you bloody bastard," he said softly, wearily, as he turned back to his bath, "why couldn't you stay despicable?"

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"Confound it, man," Benedict attempted to glare at Rae. "Would you take your insufferable self off somewhere? I am in no mood to endure your presence this morning."

Rae glared and set his teacup down with a hard clack, tea sloshing up the sides and only just barely avoiding spilling over. "If you are not 'in the mood to endure me,' Highness, then take yourself elsewhere. Unlike certain over-indulgent fools, I intend to see to my duties - that means I require this office. As you never use it, it would make more sense if you leave."

"Shut up," Benedict said with a grimace, holding his head a moment longer before finally forcing himself to move. He poured cream into his tea and lifted the delicate cup, but even the strong, revitalizing aroma of his favorite tea could not banish the effects of too much wine.

He supposed it served him right. The next time he decided to drown his pathetic sorrows, he would have to make sure he did not wake until he'd slept the after effects off. "Is it really only eight thirty?" he asked, setting his tea down after only a sip.

"Yes," Rae said acidly. "I was certain the world was ending when I saw you awake so early. For a moment I had thought it meant you'd decided to start working."

Benedict rolled his eyes. "For my part, I foolishly thought the pleasures of the Masque would have a calming effect on you. Get left alone in the maze, dear mortal enemy?"

This time Rae slammed his teacup down hard enough Benedict wondered that it didn't shatter. Tea splashed over the rim, covering the saucer and dark cream tablecloth. "Go away, Highness. I am in no mood for you today!"

"I'm certain you'll correct me if I'm wrong, but I do believe this is my office and that you are my assistant and if I tell you to leave then you are to obey me and leave this instant!"

Rae sneered. "Of course, Highness, if that is your wish. However, do not try to reprimand me when your reports lie uncompleted and your correspondence goes unanswered. I do think the Duke will be most vexed when you fail to respond to his missive."

Benedict rubbed his head. "Must you be the bane of my existence, assistant?"

"Must you be the bane of mine?"

"I do believe you started it, mortal enemy."

"No, Highness, that was you. Obnoxious right from the start, not even a polite greeting before you ordered me to work and wandered off to waste your day!" Rae stood up fast enough he nearly knocked his chair over.

"Perhaps I'd be politer if you did not do your best to be as odious as possible! I have never encountered a man as intolerable as you!"

"Clearly you do not know yourself then!" Rae snarled, all but throwing things across the room as he poured over the desk looking for who knew what.

Benedict made a face at his back. He shouldn't be as annoyed with Rae as he was - neither of them was any different today than they were every other day. He knew it was only his aching head and the fact that he'd lost his Hunter.

He should never have tried to take the mask. Benedict pressed fingers against his chest, his dark gold-brown waistcoat, feeling the mask tucked away inside it. Truly he felt like the greatest of fools. No doubt 'Hunter' was somewhere having a grand laugh at the foolish Prince Benedict. The thought made him cringe. Stupid, that's exactly what he was.

Still, he hadn't given up hope entirely. Whether or not Hunter wanted to be found was beside the point - Benedict would find him. Already he'd put his plan in to motion, in a few days something should come to light.

Until then, he'd just take his frustrations out on Rae - who seemed more hostile than ever, though that could be his headache talking. He glared at his assistant.

"I'm not leaving," Rae said mutinously. "I have work to do. If you cannot bear my presence because of your stupid overindulgence in wine, that is your problem. I will not let my work fall behind because of your stupidity."

Benedict frowned, something about Rae's words nagging, but he could not figure out what. Drat it all, he was not in the mood for this today. "Do you ever wake up in a good mood?"

"Why should I?" Rae snapped, slamming down the ledger he'd been perusing. He swiped a stray hair from his face, and it struck Benedict that Rae's hair was not quite as neat as usual. He hoped that meant the bastard's night had been a particularly wretched one. "Every morning I wake knowing I have to face you - certainly that does not bring a smile to my face."

"Then you are welcome to leave!" Benedict snapped, and he swore he could feel his temper shatter. He had enough to deal with - he did not also need someone who so clearly hated him. "Certainly neither one of us wants you here. Take yourself off, then. I'm tired of looking at you, and it's clear you've never enjoyed my presence. Get out and don't come back."

He drew a sharp breath at the pain that flickered for the barest moment across Rae's face - it was almost immediately replaced by a carefully blank expression. "Fine." Without another word, Rae moved around the desk and stalked toward the door and out of the office. He did not slam

the door as Benedict had expected - Rae was nothing if not volatile, part of the reason he loved riling the man - but merely closed it behind him.

Benedict frowned, somehow not feeling as pleased as he thought he should. Both he and Rae would be happier with the damnable man gone. Why did he merely feel more depressed than ever?

Confound it, why did it have to be morning? He wanted a drink; anything that would drown his misery.

He drank his tea without enthusiasm as he pondered whether or not he could sneak back to his room and just hide there for awhile.

A knock on the door rendered the point moot. "Enter," Benedict snapped. He started as he saw who entered - the royal perfumer, a wizened old gentleman with a nose even sharper than his own. "Matthews," he said, summoning up what remained of his manners. "I did not expect to see you this soon. Dare I hope you have good news for me?"

"Very good," Matthews replied. He turned and beckoned to someone still outside, and Benedict stood as a young woman entered - pale blonde hair, pale blue eyes, neat and tidy, obviously middle-class but with quiet pride and confidence in her bearing. "I did not expect to find an answer so quickly, Highness, but a note came almost immediately to my queries. This young woman is Anna Cantrell, and she is an apprentice perfumer in a little shop at the edge of the city. I've never heard of it, and I am beginning to think that is a serious failing on my part. Child, tell the prince what you've told me."

Anna nodded hesitantly but stepped forward and bobbed a curtsy. "Highness."

"You know who created the colognes I am asking after?"

Her lips twitched, amusement sparking in those blue eyes. "I created them, Highness. My brother wrote me a most insistent letter the day before the Masque, requesting I create three blends that he'd contrived. I made a few modifications to them and sent them to him. My brother is quite knowledgeable of the craft, but he lacks the patience for the actual creating." She laughed softly at some private memory. "I am humbled your Highness asks after them."

"Who is your brother, sweet?"

Anna hesitated. "Highness, please, he asked me not to tell. Said it was important - neither of us thought I would even be discovered. It is only because of my husband...he dislikes secrets, you see..." She frowned unhappily at the floor.

"It is vitally important you tell me, pet. Please? I do not want to have to make it an order."

"Yes, Highness," Anna said quietly. "My brother is Rae Burroughs."

Benedict distantly noted she was still speaking, but did not hear the words, his entire head ringing.

Rae.

Impossible...Rae? Assistant Rae? Was Hunter?

He could not wrap his mind around it.

Standing abruptly, his tea spilling as he knocked against the table in his haste, Benedict motioned absently at Anna. "Pay her. See she's brought here. That sort of talent should not be

wasted on a shop at the edge of the city. Do whatever is necessary." Storming from the room, ignoring the responses called after him, Benedict stormed through the hallways.

He latched onto the first high-ranking servant he saw. "Where is Master Burroughs bedroom?" When the man stuttered and fumbled, Benedict grabbed him by the collar and yanked him close. "I will ask you once more - where is Master Burroughs's bedroom?"

"East wing, third hallway, second to last on the left, Highness."

"Thank you," Benedict said curtly. He strode through the hallways of the palace, ignoring everyone that called to him, snarling at those who tried to stop him. Mercifully, the number of people dwindled as he continued, and when he finally reached Rae's room there was no one to bother him.

The door was unlocked and he threw it open - but his word died on his lips as he realized the room was empty. Rae was not here.

Benedict started to leave, but fury and curiosity drove him inside.

It was absurd. There was no way his Hunter could be his insufferable assistant. He tried to overlap the two, see where they met...and drew a sharp breath as he realized it wasn't as inconceivable as he thought.

They were the same height - just shorter than he. The hair and skin could easily be darkened. Matching builds. Even the personalities...confidence, arrogance, a determination to do precisely what he wanted....

Benedict wandered the room. It was simply decorated - dark leathers, deep red rugs, and a few landscape paintings. He paused in front of the bureau, his attention immediately captured by three perfume bottles. They were made of dark red glass, trimmed in gold, each one with a different gold mark to differentiate the scents.

He picked up the first one and pulled the stopper. Immediately the scent of from the first night washed over him - musk, red rose, apple, vanilla, and teak. His hands trembled as he replaced the stopper and carefully put the bottle back down. He felt dizzy, lost.

Rae was Hunter. The assistant he loathed was the man he'd wanted never to let go. Pain lanced through him as he wondered why Rae had done such a thing. Had he known the entire time that the 'pretty bird' he'd chased was Benedict?

Where the devil was he? He'd finally dismissed the bastard, why wasn't he here packing his belongings? Benedict frowned in thought - his head jerked up as an idea came to him. Surely not...

Striding back the way he'd come, glaring everyone down so they did not even attempt communication this time, he blazed through the halls and into the gardens, weaving his way through the winding paths, cutting off sharply to the right as he moved beyond the maze and-

-There he was. Benedict realized he was holding his breath. His chest was heavy, aching.

Rae sat on the bench where they'd both been last night; his face buried in his hands, spectacles neatly tucked away in his jacket. His hair was completely mussed, as though he'd run his hands through it at least a dozen times. He looked every bit as miserable as Benedict felt.

Except he was supposed to be angry. Yes, angry. Focus on that. "Rae."

Rae's head jerked up, and Benedict tried to take pleasure in the way his face went stark white.

"Highness," he said roughly, then cleared his throat. It was startling to see Rae stripped of his composure and rage. "Highness. Did you need me to sign off on my dismissal?"

"I would rather know how you came to be here...Hunter."

He hadn't thought it possible for Rae to get any paler, but he did. Benedict wondered if he'd pass out. "Why did you do it, Rae? Was it some sort of game?"

Rae looked at him briefly, then his eyes skittered away to focus on the grass. "It started that way. Then everything changed."

"Changed," Benedict repeated, voice dripping disbelief.

"Yes, damn you!" That temper he knew so well finally sparked. "I wanted to humiliate you - but then you didn't act like you were supposed to. I half-thought I had the wrong person that first night. Why couldn't you remain an obnoxious prick? Damn you to hell!"

Benedict frowned, rather more at a loss for words than he liked. He could not reconcile Rae with Hunter, despite the fact that they were clearly the same man.

He could see what Rae had been intending. Furious with him, and given to vindictiveness, he could see exactly how Rae would have planned the entire thing. That first night, looking back, he could see that Rae had indeed played him perfectly. It made him feel sick to think how easily he'd fallen right into Rae's hands.

A thought distracted him. "Since when do you know anything about perfume?"

Rae laughed bitterly. "My family owns a perfumery along the coast. It's not extremely well known, but it does well for itself. I have my father's talent but not the patience." He glared at Benedict. "When I was assigned to this post, Highness, part of the reason your father chose me was our common interest in such things. You, of course, never gave me a chance to say that. Too busy being lazy and insufferable!"

Benedict opened his mouth, then closed it with a snap. "So why do you wear that obnoxious pine stuff?" He knew the answer though - Rae wore it to annoy him. "I found you out through your perfume, you know. Matthews ferreted out your sister."

"Leave Anna alone!" Rae snarled. He swore softly. "Confound that girl; she was not supposed to go blathering about it."

"I gave her very little choice," Benedict said. "So far as leaving her alone - too late. She's already been hired to work here. I'm not wasting talent like that on some forgotten shop at the edge of the city."

Rae snorted. "The shop owned by her husband?"

Benedict shrugged. "I told Matthews to handle matters." He shook his head, realizing they'd wandered completely off topic. "That doesn't explain you, Rae! I can't believe-" It twisted his stomach. He'd actually thought that maybe, just a bit, Hunter had cared. He'd had no reason to return that last night, so Benedict had hoped...

"Wine," he said suddenly. "That's what nagged me before in the office." He stepped closer, but stopped just short of being close enough to touch. "You knew I'd drunk too much wine. No one saw me last night - you could have guessed, but most often I drink brandy, which you also well know."

Rae recoiled.



"So were you just toying with me Rae? Was that all it was?"

"The first night, yes. Not the second...definitely not the third." Rae stared at the ground, looking tired and worn. "I wasn't supposed to go back the third."

"Then why did you?" Benedict asked bitterly.

"Confound it, I don't know!" Rae stormed to his feet, eyes blazing as he met Benedict's stare. "We hate each other! The whole palace knows it. The servants - and no doubt the court - have been placing bets for months on whether I would leave or be dismissed. A few have declared blood would be drawn at some point. I planned to seduce you to throw it in your face, I admit it. But the man in the mask was nothing like the prince I regularly want to throttle. This entire mess is your fault!"

"My fault? I'm not the cad who decided it was all right to toy with a man for something as petty as revenge! I should wring your neck."

Rae laughed in that snotty way that drove Benedict crazy. "So it's all right for your family to set you to do the hunting, but it's not all right to be hunted in your turn?"

Silence fell between them, and Benedict wasn't certain which of them was more horrified by Rae's words. "Do not speak of that," Benedict hissed. Bloody hell, why hadn't he kept his mouth shut? He knew why though - he'd always wanted someone to understand him, and he'd stupidly let himself think Hunter might be that someone.

Rae's face clouded. "I might be a bastard, Highness, but I'm not going to spill your secrets. Anyway, to whom would I tell them? I've been dismissed." He hesitated a moment, then straightened his shoulders and made to move past Benedict.

"Was it really all a farce?" Benedict asked as Rae drew even with him. He kept his eyes on the bench, unable to look at Rae. "How can you be such two different people?"

"I could ask the same of you, Highness," Rae said cautiously. "The bastard I set out to humiliate was hardly the man I encountered."

Benedict laughed. "It seems we excel at deceiving each other, dearest mortal enemy."

Rae grunted. "When we are not attempting to kill one another."

"Why do we hate each other?" Benedict asked.

"You can never be bothered to tend your duties or even thank those who tend them for you. You're constantly late, resort to stupid, childish pranks - or did you think I never noticed the extra sugar cubes? - and enjoy making me do all your work."

Benedict rolled his eyes. "You're uptight and unbending and have no sense of humor. I don't think you do anything but work, and instead of greeting me or asking how I am, you immediately start in with accusations." His lips twitched. "You also wear that wretched pine stuff." He stopped suddenly, and finally turned to face Rae, who was studiously examining a tree. "You're not wearing it today."

"It's truly wretched," Rae said, and turned his head to return Benedict's wary look. "I was in no mood to deal with it today."

He moved before he thought, dipping his head to Rae's throat, smelling silk and linen, and beneath it all a salt-sweet scent he would never forget. "It really is you," Benedict breathed,

doubting he'd ever really be able to believe it.

Fingers sank into his hair, the gesture painfully familiar. "Highness, cease. We hate each other. It would take us mere hours to kill each other." Despite his words, Rae's grip did not ease.

"Hours?" Benedict laughed. "It usually only takes us minutes on a good day, mere seconds on most." He gave in to the impulse to taste that skin, still not quite believing that Hunter was Rae.

Rae started at the sharp nip, fingers gripping Benedict's hair painfully tight. "Highness," he said, voice strained. "This is foolish...and I do not think your family will permit it - because I do not share."

That they were even considering the idea made Benedict dizzy. If someone had told him four days ago that his damnable assistant would become his lover, Benedict would have laughed and ordered the speaker from his presence.

Nor would he have ever thought Rae would be the reason he started defying his family.

Fingers once more tightened in his hair, tugging his head up, and then Rae was kissing him and Benedict was really and truly convinced, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Rae was his Hunter.

"Where did someone as uptight as you learn to kiss like that?" he asked when Rae finally let him go.

Rae rolled his eyes. "I haven't spent my entire life trapped in offices by insufferable princes."

"The way you behave, I'm certain much of it was spent in cells," Benedict goaded, unable to resist.

Dark eyes flashed at him in warning, and Benedict was dumbfounded he'd not recognized them for three whole nights - but it had been dark. Surely that was a large part of the reason he'd been so stupidly oblivious. "I am beginning to learn, Highness, that the trick to keeping you bearable is keeping that mouth from speaking."

"I could say the same of you, assistant."

"You dismissed me."

"Did I? I don't recall doing so." Benedict smirked, and ducked his head to cut off Rae's scathing reply with a kiss. It was a bit disconcerting how easy kissing Rae was becoming.

Rae quickly took control of the kiss, and broke it only when the need to breathe took precedence. "You are insufferable."

"You are unbearable."

"So long as we're agreed, Highness, that this is a bad idea."

Benedict nodded. "We're definitely going to kill each other - especially if you're still calling me 'Highness' after all this. You're stuffy to a fault."

Rae glared at the insult, but then his lips curved in a familiar smirk. "If you insist, pretty bird."

Shivers ran down Benedict's spine, to so blatantly see Hunter in Rae. He wrapped his arms tightly around Rae's waist, pulling the man flush against him, loving the way Rae's hands sank possessively into his hair and pulled his head down for another kiss.

Scandalous

"Highness, you're up early."

Prince Benedict smiled and took his usual seat at the large, oval breakfast table. The barest shreds of sunlight spilled through gauzy green curtains behind him. "Rae and I are making a visit to a perfumery. What on earth has you up at such a hideous hour, Gideon?"

The fact that Benedict was up early to visit a perfumery almost made him drop his tea. Just a year ago, the notorious royal rake would have been fast asleep in the bed of some lord or lady - now he was up with sunrise to spend the day with a volatile lover. Gideon set his teacup down carefully. "I must be off home. My brother has scared off yet another tutor, and I must go to interview the one my secretary managed to dredge up."

Benedict laughed. "I cannot wait until your brother is of age. He will take this tired court by storm."

"I very much doubt even my brother could match your secretary for storms," Gideon said dryly.

"That is true," Benedict murmured over the rim of his teacup. His eyes flicked toward the door as it opened, and Gideon could not miss the way they lit up.

Gideon turned in his seat and nodded politely to Rae Burroughs. Secretary to his royal Highness Prince Benedict - and now his lover. Their affair was as notorious as their mutual hatred had once been. Bets were currently running on when they would finally break up. Gideon thought they were all idiots; anyone who really bothered to look could see the sparks that ever flew around them were the result of a deep and steady flame.

Obviously he needed to find a new bed warmer of his own, if he was acting like this. Even in the privacy of his own head the thoughts were atrocious. Thank the heavens he was going home for a time, even if it was to coerce yet another tutor into putting up with his bloody difficult brother.

Grimacing, Gideon finished his tea and stood. "If you will both pardon my hasty departure, home is a long way off and I would like to be there as soon as possible. I hope your trip to the perfumery goes well. Highness. Master Burroughs." Sketching a bow to each man, for in his book at least Burroughs had earned it, Gideon turned and departed.

His carriage awaited him before the palace, the lanterns upon it lit, casting weak, orange light across the still-dark courtyard. Gideon stifled a yawn and climbed inside, settling back into the seat and propping his feet on the one opposite. Draping an ermine blanket over his legs to block out the late-winter chill, he rested his head against the side and dozed as well as he could.

He woke to a particularly nasty jarring, tumbling hard, knocking his head against the side. Swearing, Gideon untangled himself and stumbled out of the oddly tilted carriage. He grimaced. "What the bloody hell happened?"

"Sorry, milord. The weather's been most foul since we left the city; I guess it did a turn on the roads. The wheel snapped like it was kindling." The coachman touched fingers apologetically to his hat, bowing.

Gideon waved the apology aside. "Not your fault; I know you're an able driver. How long 'til it's fixed?"

"Oh, it'll be a couple of days, milord." He nodded past Gideon to where the footman stood waiting. "Rob will mind the coach, I'll see repairs are made. You'd best take a horse and get on your way, milord." He took a bag that Rob had taken from the broken carriage and strode over to a dark gray mare waiting restlessly nearby. Quickly he saddled her and arranged the bag. "That's your overnight bag. Should be fine until you reach Foxwood manor."

"Right," Gideon said, glaring at the broken carriage wheel. He went to his horse, a fine mare he'd brought along to test in the country. He'd intended to ride her when the carriage became too confining. "Take care, gentlemen. If the carriage proves too great a problem then leave it and arrange to have it sent on once repaired."

The coachmen nodded. "Aye, milord."

Sighing, Gideon mounted his mare and nodded farewell, then took off down the road.

He rode for hours. Well away from the city, the population thinned to almost nothing. He passed a cottage here and there, but nothing even remotely close to a town. As the day grew later, the weather grew steadily worse - it would seem whatever had ruined the road was returning.

The rain finally broke just as he reached town. By the time he found the inn and got his horse stable, he was soaked.

Muttering curses, Gideon dispensed with enough silver to ensure his every comfort was quickly attended to. Two hours later, he was clean, warm, and well fed. He raked a hand through his damp hair. The deep-red curls were in need of a trim, but Gideon was rather fond of the unfashionable length. He'd cut it once it reached his shoulders.

Sighing softly, Gideon settled back in his chair and closed his eyes, relishing the warmth of the fire. He hoped his men had found the same; one bloody carriage was not worth enduring this weather.

The sound of movement, of someone settling into the other chair before the fire in the small parlor, stirred him from the light doze into which he'd been falling.

Mercy. He hoped he wasn't staring.

The stranger was fine indeed. His hair was dark spun gold in the light of the lamps and flickering flames, tied back neatly in a dark ribbon, falling over one shoulder. Spectacles were perched on a delicate nose, setting off rather than ruining fine, handsome...no, if he were honest, the man was very much pretty. Not at all feminine, though. Gideon had always preferred his men be unmistakably men.

He was dressed simply, but well, in cream superfine pants and a blue waistcoat. The stranger looked up, and Gideon wished there was enough light to see his eyes clearly. Would they be pale like his own gray? Darker? Brighter? "Good evening."

Oh, my. Better and better. That voice burned finer than his best cognac. "Good evening, sir. Were you caught in the weather as well?"

The man flashed a smile that made Gideon want to stare in an unseemly fashion. Truly, the man was the definition of temptation. He'd always prided himself on his control. This man was rapidly weakening it. "Very nearly, sir. Luckily I came in just before it. I think I traveled in the brief few hours these rains stopped plaguing the region."

"It was certainly much fairer in the city," Gideon replied. "Would you care for a bit of brandy, sir?"

A look of surprise flickered across the man's face, then it turned into a smile. "I would indeed, sir. Thank you."

Gideon waved the words aside and handed over his flask. He nodded to the side table, where the innkeeper had set out a decanter and glasses for any visiting the private parlor. "My stuff is far better than that."

"Far better indeed," the stranger agreed, murmuring appreciatively as he took a second sip of brandy before returning the flask.

Was it just his imagination, or did those shadow-dark eyes regard him a moment too long? Did those long, slender fingers brush his accidentally, or with a purpose? Gideon decided to see, even as he knew it was the height of stupidity to give in. He'd avoided such risks all his life, not wanting to be like his parents...but this stranger was making it so very difficult to resist. "You may keep it a moment longer," he said, holding the flask lightly, not quite letting the stranger hand it back, "If you'll give me a name instead. I will even offer mine - it is Gideon."

"My name?" the man asked with a soft smile. "A small price to pay. Tem, sir, is what most call me."

Gideon slowly let his fingers fall away from the flask, dusting across Tem's. He leaned forward slightly in his seat. "Perhaps I should have demanded more."

Tem took another sip of brandy, and as he lowered the flask his tongue flicked out to lick traces from his lips. Gideon wanted to be the one licking those full lips. "Well, a mere name hardly seems fair for such excellent brandy. It would be perfectly fair to demand more."

Heat poured through him, as though the fire were in his veins and not the hearth. Gideon knew he should not do this, but he could not more resist than stop breathing. "It is indeed an excellent brandy. I want to taste it on your lips."

"A fair price," Tem said and immediately rose, setting the flask down on the table before standing in front of Gideon, bracing his hands on the armrests of his chair and leaning down to cover Gideon's mouth with his own.

The effect was immediate, hot and consuming. Gideon felt drugged by the kiss, moaning at the taste of brandy combined with something unmistakably male. Tem was not hesitant in the slightest, taking possession of his mouth, making it hard for Gideon to think, never mind breathe. When the need for air finally forced them apart, Gideon resented it wholly. He stared up at Tem, noting immediately that the man's eyes were a rich, gold-touched brown. Beautiful. With a sound that was somewhere between a sigh and a moan, he reached up to take another kiss. Tem offered no protest, merely succeeded again in rendering thought and breathing impossible.

When they broke apart a second time, Gideon realized his hands had moved to Tem's shoulders. He watched as though from a distance as his hands slid from Tem's shoulders down his chest, unfastening the dark blue velvet coat and slipping inside to stroke the skin beneath warmed lawn. Questing fingers brushed across hardened nipples, and Tem's head dipped as he moaned.

Gideon had never heard a finer sound, and he wanted to hear it again. When had he last been this taken by anyone? The most talented boys in the city did not affect him so. He reached up again to plant a hard, hungry kiss on Tem's mouth, biting down on that edible lower lip, locking eyes as he pulled away. "Come upstairs with me."

Tem's eyes flared, desire plain on his face. He flashed one of those deadly smiles and shifted so that his weight was on his knees, braced on the seat on either side of Gideon's legs. Hands free, he mimicked what Gideon had done to him just moments ago, dipping his head to nip lightly at a

bared bit of throat, tracing soft kisses along his jaw line before taking a quick, searing kiss.

Growling low, Gideon wrapped his arms tightly around Tem's waist and yanked him close, kissing him as though Tem were a feast to ease his hunger. Arms wrapped around his neck, fingers tangled in his hair, Tem returning the devouring kiss full measure.

"Upstairs," Gideon repeated hoarsely, unable to resist the bit of throat right before his eyes.

Tem groaned low at the knowing touch of tongue and teeth to his skin, shivering in Gideon's arms. "Yes. Please."

"Yes," Gideon repeated, and with a last kiss forced them up out of the chair, taking up his flask before leading the way up to his room.

He woke with a groan, feeling every pleasant ache and pain from the night before, and stretched out an arm to see if the waking would be as pleasant.

Instead of warm flesh he encountered only cool sheets. Frowning, Gideon sat up and looked about the room.

Tem was gone.

Only the proof of their passion remained as evidence that he'd not spent the night alone.

A piece of paper on the table caught his eye, and Gideon threw off the blankets and strode across the room to snatch it up.

Sir,

I wish I could have remained to wake you. Alas, I woke late and have somewhere I must be. I would convey my thanks and hopes to see you again someday, but I fear that would sound like sentimental drivel. Still, you are the only impulse into which I've ever given. Perhaps we shall cross paths again someday.

Regards,  
Tem

Gideon sighed and stowed the note. Yes, they had places to be. Still, he would never be happier for a broken carriage wheel. Just thinking of last night...never had he had such a lover. If only he'd woken sooner...

Ah, well. Best not to linger on such distracting thoughts. He had duties and responsibilities which needed tending. Gideon called for a bath and quickly set about getting ready for his day.

Two hours later he was back on the road, heading quickly toward the home that was not far off now. Giving the mare her head, he allowed his thoughts to linger over the previous night.

The most skilled boys in the city had not affected him so deeply. Tem had met his boldness head on, met every challenge and begged for more. Gideon shifted uncomfortably and forced his mind to thoughts less torturous. He would never see Tem again, at least not until he figured out how to track a man down by appearance and a partial name.

Damn it all, he should have made certain he could see the man again before falling asleep. He

could only blame it on how completely and utterly Tem had captivated him. Why were the best things in life so fleeting?

Rolling his eyes at himself, Gideon forced his mind to his brother. Damn the boy, could he not behave himself? Gideon was out of ideas as to how to handle him. Sometimes he truly hated his parents for preferring to run around the world than tend the children they'd born...and he did hate them for dying and forcing everything upon him.

The old bitterness would get him nowhere. He made the best of things, or tried...if only Pierce would stop driving away all his damnable tutors. Gideon rubbed his forehead, willing away the headache trying to take hold. He knew nothing about children, why had they done this to him?

Sighing, Gideon turned his mind to matters of business and finance for the rest of the journey, both grateful and miserable when his home came into view. Servants tumbled out to assist him, and barely had he walked in the door when his secretary greeted him.

"My lord, we were beginning to fear for you."

Gideon quickly explained the reason for his delay. "I am going to freshen up. Is my interview arranged?"

"Yes, sir. He arrived bright and early this morning and was most cordial. I gave him a preliminary interview and he seems most suited to the task before him."

"The trials before him," Gideon said dryly. "Very well, tell him I will be with him in about twenty minutes, and have tea brought. I am positively famished."

The secretary bowed and murmured acknowledgements of the orders.

Gideon swiftly climbed the stairs to his bedchamber, where he wasted no time in freshening up, replacing his travel clothes with appropriate afternoon attire, offering prayers to whatever gods might possibly be bored enough to care that this tutor would last, would instill something resembling discipline in his brother.

Smoothing down his dark blue-gray afternoon coat, Gideon adjusted his cravat and finally made his way back downstairs to his study. A maid was just leaving the room, and bobbed a curtsy when she saw him. "Just brought the tea, milord."

"Thank you," Gideon murmured, then opened the door and strode into the study, struggling to remember the potential tutor's name. Arthur? No...Audrey? No, it was more interesting than that...Art...Artemis! That had been it. Artemis Clark. "Mr. Clark, I appreciate your patience in..." Gideon drifted off and stared as Clark stood up and faced him, just noticing through his shock the ashen pallor that overtook the other man's face. Tem's face.

\*~\*~\*

Only habit and sheer force of will permitted Tem to keep his misery contained.

It figured. It so bloody figured to the point he couldn't stand it.

One bloody impulse he'd given into, one bloody chance he'd decided to take, and the greatest night of his life was going to cost him his last chance at employment. At freedom. Thank goodness his new clothes and the cost of travel had made buying food impossible, for if he'd had anything to eat it would be all over the floor and Gideon's fine carpet.

No, not Gideon. Lord Fairfax, the Earl of Foxwood. The most fascinating man he'd ever encountered, the most passionate lover he'd ever had...and Tem didn't know what to do now.

Well, he did. He just didn't want to do it.

How the bloody hell had he not known Gideon was a peer of the realm? The man had acted as though he were about Tem's station, if slightly better off financially. Not once had the damnable man given any indication he was nobility.

Swallowing around the lump in his throat, forcing air past the despair making his chest heavy, Tem managed to make himself move, speak. He sketched a bow. "Your lordship, I will take my leave. I do apologize for wasting your time. Thank you for considering me as a fitting tutor for your brother. I bid you good day."

Not quite able to bring himself to look at Gideon, ignoring the rumbling in his stomach as the heavenly scent of food tormented him, Tem straightened his shoulders and held his head high as he made for the door.

"I did not dismiss you," Gideon said, voice calm, almost deceptively relaxed. "You may sit."

Tem turned back around, brow furrowing in confusion. "My lord?" What was going on? He'd all but thrown himself at the man last night; in the eyes of any noble that made him glaringly unfit to act as tutor - to act in any capacity in a proper home.

Gideon motioned him back to his seat. "My secretary said you seemed most fit to serve as tutor. Have you experience in such things? I am afraid I did not read all the information I was sent." He smiled briefly, sheepishly, and all Tem could remember was how fine that mouth tasted.

He reprimanded himself sharply to focus on his chance for employment, not how badly he wanted to strip his potential employer and taste all that fine skin anew. "Some, my lord." The honorific would not settle on his tongue, stiff and awkward after gasping and moaning and crying Gideon's name all night. "I assisted my own teacher in giving lessons to the children in my village, and often tutored many of them in the evenings. The schools which I attended were listed in the papers I posted to your secretary, though I can list them all now for you if you care."

"I can look over it later. You are skilled in all the requisite subjects?"

"Yes, my lord, in addition to all the higher ones. I am quite capable of bringing your brother through the remainder of his preliminary lessons and well into his advanced studies."

Gideon nodded, pale gray eyes regarding him thoughtfully, so exotic looking against the dark red of his curly hair. "You will also be expected to tend and watch over him. He needs constant guidance and supervision..." Gideon sighed. "I will not lie, Mr. Clark. My brother is a handful, and I've gone through more tutors than I feel like admitting. Tending him is no easy task. Do you feel you will be up to it? I would like him tamed before I introduce him to the court in three more years."

Tem almost laughed. A wild child. He could handle those...far better than his brother had handled him... His back burned with the memories of his brother's efforts to 'tame' him. "I know well the sort of things such boys get into, my lord. I am most certainly up the task."

"Very well, then. You will be here conditionally for six months, after which we will reevaluate your place. Salary will be one hundred silver a month, and you get two days a month entirely to yourself, as well as the usual holidays."

Tem bowed his head. "Thank you, my lord."

Gideon stood and strode to pull on the bell cord, and when a servant appeared waved Tem off. "Show Mr. Clark to Pierce's rooms, see that he's comfortably settled in his own rooms."



Obediently Tem followed the servant out, but he barely noticed the walk through the massive manor, his thoughts solely for Gideon.

Who, after that initial moment of shock, had ceased to give any indication that he knew Tem. 'Mr. Clark' sounded as wretched as 'my lord' did...but what had he expected? For Gideon to break protocol and kiss him dizzy, grateful that he had not vanished? Tem almost laughed bitterly at himself.

Protocol and propriety were the way of the world. No one broke the rules except in the dark of night where they could not be seen doing it. By daylight, all must obey or have obedience beaten into them.

His back throbbed, reminding him just how true those words were.

Reminding him just how stupid it had been to give in to an impulse after so many years of reining in his behavior. He was lucky to have a job.

100 silver. All his problems would go away with such a generous salary. Best of all, he could write James that he had succeeded, he would not be returning home, and his brother could go to bloody hell.

Just thinking of finally obtaining his freedom...it very nearly took his breath away.

"Right this way, Master Clark," the servant said politely, opening a door into a suite of rooms clearly belonging to a young boy. Blues and greens, pictures portraying great hunts, knights and dragons... "Master Pierce!"

No one replied to the servant's call, and Tem could see annoyance flicker across the servant's face. Well, that wouldn't do to make a favorable impression. "You may go, I will find the boy. Best to begin as I will be going on, yes?"

"Quite so, sir," the servant muttered, and gladly made his departure.

Tem moved to the window seat and picked up the book that had been abandoned there. He tilted his head as he read the title. The Brookfield History of Fencing. Intriguing. Not the usual choice for a twelve-year old boy. He skimmed the marked page, from the chapter elaborating on the weapons themselves.

The book was well-used, but cared for. It showed every sign of having been read at least a hundred times, if not more.

A rustling sound made him smile faintly. "Under the bed, are we? I was going to try the wardrobe, so I guess that means you are one up on me, young Master Pierce."

More rustling, and Tem barely kept himself from staring at the miniature Gideon that stood before him. The red hair was brighter, no doubt it would darken with age, and the boy's eyes were green rather than gray, but Tem did not doubt for a moment that Gideon had looked exactly like this as a boy. He would use the word adorable if he didn't suspect the brothers would suffer apoplexy from hearing it. "An honor and pleasure to meet you, Master Pierce. My name is Artemis Clark. As we will be spending a great deal in one another's company, you may call me Artemis."

The boy regarded him suspiciously.

"Come now," Tem teased gently. "Surely you know the proper responses?"

"You're not going to punish me for hiding under the bed?" Pierce asked, expression stating that

he would not believe a denial.

Tem filed that remark away to ask Gideon about later. "For hiding under the bed? Hardly. Now, if you'd been hiding on the roof I might have been a bit sore with you, and then only because that is dangerous and stupid."

Pierce's eyes widened. "The roof?"

"Yes," Tem said dryly. "Do not be trying it. I assure you that falling off the roof is not a pleasant thing, especially when one's brother finds out and administers the discipline himself."

Pain filled the young face briefly, quickly replaced by a forced indifference. "Gideon wouldn't care."

"That is not true," Tem said firmly. He knew very much what it was like when a brother did not care. He pushed on before the boy could reply, knowing it was the wrong time for such an argument - and it was not his place to interfere anyway, though it was obvious there were unspoken problems between the brothers. "You were reading about fencing?"

Pierce suddenly paled, clearly haven forgotten about the book. He bolted forward and snatched it away. "It's none of your business," he said, then turned and fled the bedroom.

Lifting a brow at that, Tem followed him. "What is wrong?" he asked, seeing Pierce shove the book not on but behind the bookcase. The boy jumped and spun around, guilt plain on his face.

"Don't tell Gideon."

Stranger and stranger. "Will you tell me why you are hiding that book? I must have good reason to keep secrets from my employer." Tem knelt so that he was at eye-level with Pierce, looking directly into the boy's shadowed green eyes. "It's only a book. Why would Gideon be mad?"

Pierce stared at him, obviously wanting to believe him, but if the boy had scared off as many tutors as Gideon indicated, trust was not something the boy gave easily.

Tem should not care so much. He'd known this boy all of ten minutes now...but he knew the emotions that put the shadows in those eyes too well. Knew how precious certain secrets were...and it was obvious that Pierce did not hate his brother, though he thought Gideon hated him. "I have a brother, you know. He does not like me. When we were young, he was quite mean to me. He took my pets and lost them in the woods, and when my parents died he oversaw my education and discipline. He used to beat me quite often for being 'rebellious.' Do you know that word?"

"It means you didn't listen," Pierce said, frowning suspiciously at him. "Why were you like that?"

"Rebellious? I thought my brother was too boring; he thought I was too loud. He was older, so he beat me. I used to get revenge by putting cod liver oil in his tea." That was putting rather a playful spin on matters, but Pierce didn't need to hear the bloody details.

"Gideon isn't like that," Pierce said, clearly offended, confirming what Tem had already suspected - that Pierce very much loved his older brother.

What in the world was going on here? He was supposed to be a tutor, not a mystery solver...but he could not bear to see anyone come even close to enduring what he once had.

"So why do you hide the book, Master Pierce?"

"I don't like Master," Pierce said instead. "Gideon doesn't either."

Tem smiled. "I never cared much for titles myself." He set aside the book mystery, for obviously that would take awhile to crack. "So how about we discuss our arrangement, hmm?" He moved to sit at the table obviously meant for studies and motioned for Pierce to do the same. "I would very much like not to be run off, and you are very much in need of lessons if you're going to be as strong and smart as your brother someday."

"I could never be like Gideon," Pierce said with the knowing wisdom of a twelve-year old.

"You could be if you stopped running off tutors," Tem said calmly.

Pierce's expression turned dark. "I'm not very good at numbers."

Tem lifted one brow. "Then we will devote extra time to them."

"Can we study outside?"

"Provided it's not cold," Tem said with a smile. "I detest the cold."

Pierce narrowed his eyes. "I like drinking chocolate for breakfast."

What the devil was up with all the strange comments and questions? Tem wondered what precisely all his former tutors had done to the boy. "I prefer tea myself."

"Could we go swimming sometimes?"

Tem smiled. "That goes along with studying outdoors, I should think. I firmly believe in exercising body and mind. As before, so long as it is not cold, I foresee no problem with that."

"What about punishment?" Pierce asked, staring at him defiantly.

"I prefer you just behave, but if you require discipline then I will discuss such matters with your brother first. I do not lay my hand to a student unless I am told I must. Your brother gave no such order, nor do I think he will." Someone who touched the way Gideon did...he could not see Gideon being in favor of beatings.

Pierce nodded slowly. "You don't seem to be a bloody arse like all the rest."

Tem fought not to laugh. "Well, here is your first reprimand. A gentleman does not say 'bloody arse' unless there is grave call to do so. However, I do admire your direct nature. Let us keep to that, hmm? Now, ring for tea and we shall see where you stand with your lessons."

Pierce looked at him, frowning, obviously confused...then slowly nodded and did as he was told.

When the tea came, Tem thanked the servant and gently prodded Pierce to do the same, nodding in approval.

"Now, what were you learning when you scared off the last one?"

Pierce wolfed down a bite of scone as he stood up and crossed to the bookcase, pulling down several and setting them down with a thump on the desk. "These. I'm halfway through the lessons, except for numbers which I'm only on the third lesson."

"You are making fine progress, then, all things considered. I will tell Gideon, he will be happy to know you're doing well."

For reply, Pierce only frowned and went back to his scone. Tem shifted the conversation to idle

chatter, asking questions about the manor and grounds, quietly searching out and storing information he could use to instruct and guide Pierce. The boy was not the devil he had assumed...it was clear too many of his tutors had favored a heavy hand, when it was obvious the boy needed no such thing.

Silence fell at last, as he left the boy to his own thoughts. He'd just picked up the book of history lessons when Pierce broke the lull, his voice faint and hesitant, eyes locked on his teacup. "He threw the book out, Gideon I mean." Tem knew immediately he meant the hidden book on fencing. "When they died. It makes him sad and angry. It's my fault."

Tem nodded, firmly keeping back the myriad questions he burned to ask. "Thank you for telling me," he said solemnly. "I will not tell him you have it."

Though he would find out what the bloody hell was going on.

The sound of someone trying very hard not to be heard brought his head up, and Tem set aside his book and stood. His room connected to the school room, with Pierce's room on the other side of it.

Pierce was up to something.

Tem crossed his room and stepped soundlessly out into the hallway, lifting a brow as he caught sight of the small figure padding quietly down the hallway, his long night robe just brushing the floor. Swiftly, silently, he caught the boy up, clapping his hand over Pierce's mouth.

"Now, now, Pierce, I do believe you are getting into mischief. Will you be quiet if I let you go?" The way the boy had jumped, the nasty shock would serve as better discipline than shouting and beating ever could. Setting him down, Tem tilted his face up and frowned. "What are you doing, Pierce?"

He was taken aback when the boy suddenly looked ready to cry. "I just wanted to watch him. I always do. I never do anything wrong. Honest. I just want to watch him."

Tem frowned, thoroughly confused. "Watch who do what?"

Pierce sniffled, obviously still scared by being caught, and anxious about whatever he'd been about. "I-I'm sorry."

Kneeling, Tem stroked his hair. How on earth could anyone consider this boy a terror? "You shouldn't be sneaking about, Pierce. If you do something to get hurt, someone might not hear you. That would upset your brother."

"But I go to watch him..."

Tem blinked. "Watch...Gideon? Do what?"

An expression that was unmistakably hero-worship lit up Pierce's face, and it was impossible to tell that just a second ago the boy had been about to cry. He grasped Tem's hand and tugged him along. "You can come see, too. He's in the ballroom; I know how to get onto the balcony. Come on!" Beaming now, he held fast to Tem's hand and half-walked, half-ran through the hallways.

When they reached the balcony and Tem got a look at what was below, only the fact that the boy didn't need to see such things kept him from throwing himself off the balcony to have his wicked

way with the man below.

Gideon was fencing, dueling his shadow across the candlelit ballroom, thrusting, dodging, parrying. He made it look like dancing, as natural as breathing. Tem thought the only thing more beautiful and sensual was Gideon braced above him, lost in the throes of passion. He swallowed, grateful he still wore his night robe and that it was voluminous enough to hide his reaction to the sight of Gideon sparring.

He shifted his attention to Pierce, who still wore that look of hero-worship. Tem thought the entire house could come crashing down about them and the boy would not notice unless Gideon stopped fencing.

They watched in silence until the distant chiming of a clock informed them it was one in the morning. Tem was devastated to see that Gideon was stopping, but once the ballroom was empty he was forcibly reminded of his duties. He touched Pierce's shoulder and led the way back to the boy's bedroom.

"You watch him fence? Why keep it secret?"

"It's my fault he only does it late at night," Pierce said, as though stating a sad fact. "I heard everyone say so." His eyes were intent, far too adult for twelve. "If not for me, he could still be famous. Are you going to beat me for sneaking out?"

Tem blinked. "Beat you? No. However, you will have extra math lessons tomorrow and I forbid you to sneak around without me, all right? Do you watch him every night?"

"Uh-huh."

"Then we will both go," Tem said firmly. He wished looking after his charges could always involve such exquisite torture. "Now, off to bed with you. Lessons begin straight after breakfast."

Pierce nodded and climbed into bed. Once he was settled, Tem snuffed the light and quietly made his way back to his own room. Putting out the light, he stripped off his robe and settled into bed to further torture himself with images of Gideon fencing back and forth across the ballroom floor.

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Gideon thanked the stable hand and mounted his horse, guiding her away from the manor and out over the fields, urging her to a faster pace and enjoying the brisk breeze. For the first time in far too long, his headache and strain started to ease.

Some of the strain anyway, and it all came rushing back as he crested a hill and looked down into the small valley below.

What had he done to make the gods hate him so?

It was bad enough he couldn't get that one night with Tem out of his mind. Now he had to watch the bastard charm his little brother, charm the servants, fit perfectly into life at Foxwood...and couldn't touch. There was enough scandal in his family's past, he couldn't make it worse. Someday Pierce would take his own place in the world, and Gideon could not, would not, make it more difficult than it had to be.

Of course, his good intentions were crumbling swiftly beneath the sight of Tem splashing and playing with Pierce in the swimming hole. Gods above, that man looked good wet. Growling, Gideon turned his mare in the opposite direction - but just as he was about to ride off, he caught

the sound of someone shouting his name.

Well, shouting 'Lord Fairfax' and bloody hell did he hate to hear Tem call him that. Groaning, Gideon turned back around and rode down to the swimming hole. Dismounting, he handed the horse off to the footman who had accompanied the two to the swimming hole and drew close.

He looked at Pierce, as lost as always about what to say to his little brother. He'd only been eighteen when their parents had died. What the hell did an eighteen year old know about raising a child? It didn't help that he sensed Pierce somehow held him responsible. How did you explain to a young boy that his parents were selfish, stupid fools? They'd only cared about Gideon because he'd been well on his way to becoming a first-class fencer.

Shoving the gloomy, tired thoughts aside, Gideon struggled for something to say. "Pierce. You look as though you're having fun."

"Yes, sir," Pierce said solemnly.

Gideon stifled a sigh.

Tem snorted and ruffled Pierce's hair. "I hardly think you need call your own brother 'sir', Pierce."

"Yes, I do!" Pierce protested, flicking Gideon a quick, anxious look. "Everyone said so."

Gideon blinked, a suspicion growing... "I did not say so," he said slowly, watching the face that looked so much like him at that age. "You're my little brother; if anyone should call me Gideon, it should be you."

Pierce's eyes went so wide Gideon half-feared they'd fall right out of his head, face turning red. "Y-yes, Gideon."

"That's better," Gideon said, smiling faintly. "Is this a lesson? Or a break?"

Tem chuckled. "It started out a lesson, but I fear it devolved rather quickly into a break."

Gideon finally looked at him, and promptly wished he hadn't. He wanted nothing as badly as he wanted to lick away the beads of water clinging to that skin...except perhaps to drag the man to his bed and make real every last torturous fantasy of the past two months. He looked away before Tem could see what he was thinking. "Did you bring lunch along with you?"

"N-no," Pierce replied, cheeks still red as he stared at his brother. "We only were supposed to come study by the water for a little bit. N-numbers."

"Ah, yes. My worst subject. Perhaps if my tutors had let me study by the swimming hole, I would have enjoyed the lessons more." He glanced briefly at Tem, then winked at his brother. "Obviously this one is smarter than the others. I am glad. If you've no lunch, then you should come and join me at the house."

Gideon shifted his glance to the footman. "Take my horse back, have cook prepare a light luncheon for three."

"Yes, my lord," the footman said, quickly gathering up their things and riding off back to the house.

The three of them fell into step, walking slowly back toward the house. Gideon focused on his brother, both desperate to avoid staring at Tem and pleased that his brother was actually speaking to him. "So what is Te-Mr. Clark doing that you have not scared him away, Pierce?" He winked to emphasize the words were a tease.

Pierce flushed dark and did not reply, dropping his head to stare hard at the grass.

Gideon frowned and ran a hand through his hair.

"Your brother is spirited, my lord," Tem said, gold-brown eyes watching Pierce with obvious fondness. "Nothing more."

"Spirited, eh?" Gideon laughed softly and reached out to lightly ruffle his brother's hair. "I think they merely called me rebellious."

Pierce looked up, eyes brightening, an eager look overtaking his face. "That's what Artemis was called too! He said everyone just gave him more lessons. I told him that's why dad gave you fencing lessons!"

Gideon stumbled to a halt, breath catching in his chest. "What?"

His brother's face went white, and his eyes filled with tears a second before he suddenly bolted for the house. "Pierce! Stop!" He stared after his little brother in shock. "What...what the bloody hell..."

"He worships the ground you walk upon, you know," Tem said quietly, staring calmly as Gideon whipped around to face him. "You're his favorite thing to talk about, especially your fencing skills. Did you know he watches you every night in the ballroom?"

Even as confused and stunned as he was by Pierce bolting, Gideon did not miss the heat that flared for a moment in Tem's eyes. Brother first. "Worships me? Pierce can barely stand to be around me. This is the first time he's ever smiled, let alone talked, in my presence."

Tem smiled in fond amusement. "He thinks you do not like him, my lord. Is quite convinced, no matter what I say, that he is to blame for your giving up fencing. Apparently he overheard unkind comments to that effect not long after your parents died."

Gideon didn't have to think hard about who would have been obnoxious enough to say such things within a child's hearing...Pierce had only been about six, nearly seven, at the time.

What sort of older brother needed a stranger to come along and point such things out to him? Gideon felt more inadequate than ever. He rubbed his forehead tiredly. "It is not his fault. My parents were fools who got themselves killed on one of their grand adventures. They left a financial mess and scandal in their wake. It is hardly Pierce's fault cleaning up the mess was left to me."

"Perhaps you should tell him that, my lord." Tem's gaze flicked toward the house. "He really does adore you." He hesitated. "There is a book...a history of fencing, that he hides in the schoolroom. He says it belonged to you."

Gideon started in surprise. "Brookfield's? I threw that book out ages ago..." He shook his head, helpless as old pains surfaced. All he'd wanted from the moment his father threw him into fencing lessons was to be the best at it. He'd been well on his way to that goal...then his parents had died, leaving him with a burden he wasn't sure he could bear. Apparently, he hadn't been bearing it. "I threw it away to make forgetting it all easier."

"To judge by your midnight sessions, my lord, I do not think you have managed to forget."

"I suspect you're being impertinent," Gideon replied lightly, fingers twitching to drag the man close, lose his worries and anxieties in the taste of his mouth, the feel of his skin. What about this man could he not forget and let go? That one night would haunt him until he breathed his

last. "One does not forget the things he loves, I suppose." His breath hitched as he said the words, but he refused to linger over why.

As they reached the house, the two men paused in the hallway. "I suppose lunch is off now?" Gideon asked tiredly.

"I doubt he will leave his room the rest of the week," Tem said with a faint smile. "Perhaps you might think of something to draw him out." He hesitated. "He was quite happy to see you though, my lord..." Tem turned away and made his way up the stairs.

Gideon watched him go, then went into his study. He needed to think.

He was halfway to his desk before a realization finally struck him.

Bloody hell, Pierce and Tem watched him every night? Gideon collapsed into his chair and buried his face in his hands. Showed how stupidly oblivious he was he'd never noticed.

Pulling his hands from his face, he drummed his fingers on the desk, thoughts racing. He was a lousy older brother, that much was obvious. It was time to fix that.

Then he'd figure out what to do about Tem.

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"Good, now after the War of Iskas..."

A sharp rap at the door interrupted, and Tem glared. He'd given strict orders that lessons were not to be interrupted unless it was an emergency, and if it were an emergency he knew they would not waste time knocking. "Enter," he said sharply.

The footman who entered bowed low in apology. "Begging pardon, Master Clark. His lordship has returned and begs an audience with the young master. He extends his apologies for interfering with lessons, but says he is too impatient to wait."

Tem quirked a brow at that, almost smiling, wondering what Gideon was up to. He'd been gone for nearly three weeks, called away on business. It had happened before, and he'd never demanded to see Pierce before.

Pierce looked torn between being excited or violently ill.

"Well, go get cleaned up, Pierce," Tem urged. "If he's that excited to see you, best not to keep him waiting."

Requiring no further encouragement, Pierce bolted into his room to tidy up.

The footman chuckled softly. "His lordship added your presence would be most welcome. He is waiting for you both in the library."

"Oh?" Tem said. Curious. Still, far be it for him to refuse any opportunity to spend time in Gideon's company. He was pathetic, he knew it, for Gideon had obviously let go of that night quite easily. That didn't stop him, though. He'd long ago resigned himself to being pathetic. What he had was far more than he could have hoped. "We will be there once Master Pierce stops fretting about which coat to wear."

Chuckling again, the footman departed.

"Pierce," Tem called, "The hunter green will be fine. Put the dark plum away and hurry."



"Yes, Artemis," Pierce said sheepishly, cheeks red as he came out dressed in a hunter green coat.

Tem smiled. "A few more years and I will be hard pressed to tell the two of you apart." He refused to think about the fact that by the time Pierce was old enough to bear a stronger resemblance to Gideon, Tem's time here would be over.

The depths to which he would miss this place astounded him, but he accepted it. His...confused feelings aside, he liked Foxwood and all who lived there. It felt warm in a way his own home never had. No, the rage of that place still burned on his back.

"Ready?" he asked, smiling at the quick nod Pierce gave him. "You needn't look so nervous. It sounds as though he is quite eager to see you." Tem led the way from the room, down the stairs and to the library. At the door, he gently pushed Pierce forward. "Go. Knock, then enter."

Gulping audibly, Pierce obeyed the firm tone in his tutor's voice, knocking quietly and then hesitantly pushing the door open.

Gideon stood before a wide table in the center of the room. Currently it was piled with several books and a long, wide, shallow box.

Tem wondered if the desire to spring upon the man and devour him whole would ever fade. Somehow he doubted it. Even more than that, however, he wanted to be allowed to brush the stray curls from his cheeks and kiss him in greeting as though it were perfectly normal and natural.

He couldn't. He never would. One night should not have resulted in this prolonged misery and longing.

"Pierce," Gideon said with a smile. "You are looking well. Lessons not killing you quite yet?"

"N-no, sir. Gideon."

"I confess I often snuck off for naps when the weather began to cool. My favorite bed was the green room."

Pierce gaped.

Gideon chuckled and stepped away from the table, motioning toward the box taking up most of it. "I was in the city, and visited the townhouse for the first time in ages. These were still in storage. I thought, if you were interested, that I might teach you what to do with them." His eyes gleamed with amusement - and no small bit of nervousness, but Tem doubted Pierce noticed.

Tem pushed Pierce forward gently when he only stared in confusion between the table and his brother. "Open the box."

Giving them both uncertain looks, Pierce approached the table and fumbled awkwardly with the box. The lid banged loudly against the table as he stood gawking at the contents. He stared with wide, tear-bright eyes at Gideon. "But-you-"

"You seemed so interested," Gideon said slowly, "I thought you might like fencing lessons of your own. I am a bit rusty, but I thought I could give you the lessons myself."

Pierce burst into tears. "But it's my fault you're not a champion! I remember, she said 'if not for the b-b-brat.'"

Gideon strode forward and stooped to catch his brother up in a tight embrace. "I did not know you felt so, Pierce. Listen to me. My stopping fencing had nothing to do with you. Nothing. It's not your fault. I chose to stop."

"But she said!"

"I don't know who 'she' is but she's a nasty, evil liar," Gideon said fervently, pulling back and putting his hands on Pierce's shoulders. "It is not your fault. Now, do you want to learn to fence?"

Pierce nodded and wiped futilely at the tears on his cheeks. "Uh-huh. You were the b-best. I used to watch you duel, even when nurse said I wasn't allowed."

"Well, it's much more fun to do than watch," Gideon said with a smile. He gave his brother another quick hug. "Run along now, I need to speak with your tutor about adjusting your schedule to fit in fencing lessons, hmm?"

Bobbing an eager nod, Pierce shyly gave his brother a hug back, then bolted from the room.

Tem smiled softly as the door closed behind him. "I confess I am jealous. My big brother never hugged me, not even at the funeral of our parents." No, his brother had ignored him utterly. When he wasn't beating him. As a child, he would have given anything to be Pierce for one day.

Though at this moment, his feelings towards Gideon were anything but brotherly.

"My parents were nothing but scandal," Gideon said quietly, closing the box holding a set of fencing swords and leaning against the table. "One thing after another; I do not even want to think about how many bastard children there may be that would explain why Pierce and I are twelve years apart in age. That I am not snubbed by all of society..." He shook his head. "It's mostly dumb luck, in that I happened to make powerful friends while I was still pursuing my fencing career." He sighed and moved to the window, fingers tangling in the curtains. "I have worked very hard not to add further scandal to the family history. Pierce will have enough to endure when he joins society properly. I did not want him to have to endure gossip about his brother on top of everything else."

He let go of the curtain and turned to face Tem. "Your note that night said you'd never given in to such impulse before..."

Tem forced himself to breathe. To stand calmly in place. "I hadn't. I learned the hard way to behave or be bloody discreet about misbehaving. You..." Made thinking straight impossible.

"I generally pay for my pleasure," Gideon replied. "I had never before broken my rule about avoiding all risk of scandal before that night. You were temptation incarnate." He stalked toward Tem. "You are still temptation incarnate. Having you here but not being able to touch has been sheer hell." He stared into Tem's eyes. "I am hoping valiantly that I am not the only one to feel so."

"No," Tem said, staring into those mist-fine gray eyes. "...you seemed to have left it all behind. I had resigned myself to it being one-sided."

Gideon groaned and suddenly Tem was pressed right up against him, surrounded by heat, the intoxicating scent of the man who'd stalked his every thought. He ceased to do anything but feel as Gideon's mouth crashed down over his, as hot and consuming as it had been all those months ago. He moaned and opened completely to the assault, fingers wandering through hair, over those fine broad shoulders, tangling in the fabric of his afternoon coat.

The world shifted, shook, then steadied abruptly as Tem found himself pressed up against a wall, Gideon flush against him, greedy hands searching beneath his clothes for skin. He stiffened as

those hands explored his back, and sought to distract Gideon. His greatest shame...he did not want to see the horror and disgust in Gideon's eyes upon seeing those horrible scars.

In his agony over not having, he'd let that old fear fall to the wayside. Now it came back full force. Tem sucked on Gideon's bottom lip as he let his hands roam to explore the splendid chest he had not forgotten in the slightest. Through the fine lawn of Gideon's shirt he rubbed and pinched the hardened nipples, then let one hand drop to tease across that fine, flat stomach before dipping further to explore a hard heat he remembered with perfect clarity. He moaned into Gideon's mouth. "My lord..."

"Please stop calling me that," Gideon said, dipping his head to trail sharp, biting kisses along Tem's throat. "I swear I am sick of calling you Clark...please..."

Tem dragged his head up for a proper kiss, wishing the world would stop so he could do this forever, wondering how he'd gone so long without tasting, without touching. He moaned low as knowing fingers touched and tormented while that hot mouth continued to devour his. "Gideon..."

"Tem." Gideon said his name like it was something precious. "You make me want to do scandalous things."

"Do them," Tem said against his mouth, licking his lips.

Gideon chuckled, breaking apart far enough to shove Tem's jacket and shirt from his shoulders, tossing them aside. "How did I resist you for so long, Tem?"

"I am trying to figure out how I behaved myself," Tem gasped as teeth fastened around one nipple, Gideon biting hard before soothing the sting with his tongue. "What changed your mind? I was resigned..." He shuddered as the eager, passionate assault continued.

"You. Pierce. I am tired of punishing myself for their behavior. You are worth a scandal, so long as you are willing." Gideon opened the placket of his trousers and pushed his hand inside, and Tem bucked, muffling his shout against Gideon's shoulder.

"I think...you know precisely how...willing I am."

Gideon kissed him hard, and Tem was left bereft as Gideon let him go - but then he was gently grabbed and guided toward the wide, leather couch on the far side of the room.

Just as suddenly he was halted, and a horrified gasp brought him up short, made his blood run cold.

"Tem..." Gentle fingers traced the scars covering his back.

"I'm sorry. Usually I'm not so careless." Which said exactly just how much trouble he was in, as if he didn't already know. Tem looked around for his shirt and coat, dismayed that they were so far away. He curled his arms around himself, feeling the scars, the pain that had created them, the shame of having them. "They're unseemly. That's why I didn't let you see them before." He pulled away and went to retrieve his clothes, shame making him feel both hot and cold. "I can go."

Gideon growled low and shoved him toward and onto the deep leather sofa. The kiss he gave Tem was slow, sweet and soothing. "Why would you go?"

"They're ugly. Shameful. No one likes them. Why would they?"

Giving a soft, derisive snort, Gideon turned Tem over and pressed soft, tender kisses to the tangle of scars. "Tem, you're not going anywhere. Ever. Except perhaps to my bed. I'd only let

you leave that for Pierce's lessons if I had my way."

Tem laughed softly, hands attempting to find a grip and able only to slide across smooth, warm leather. He groaned as a warm tongue bathed his skin, his scars. "Gideon..."

Gideon turned him back over. "Who did that to you, Tem? Who?"

"It doesn't matter. He won't ever again. I'm employed, have my own income. He no longer has a hold on me."

"Who?" Gideon demanded. "I want to make certain I am never accidentally polite to the bastard in public should I encounter him."

Tem smiled sadly and stroked Gideon's cheek. "My brother. I was wild as a boy, he tried to break me. I learned to hide. It doesn't matter anymore. I don't want to talk about him. I would prefer you remember how willing I am and take full advantage."

Growling, Gideon pressed him deeper into the couch and took his mouth in another dizzying kiss, making the rest of the world vanish. Hands slid between his back and the couch, rougher than the leather and a thousand times warmer.

Moaning into the kiss, Tem lifted his own hands in search of skin, wanting badly to see the fine muscles he'd dreamed about for so long, the memory of how Gideon looked dueling his own shadow across the ballroom making him ache more than ever. He tugged impatiently at the cloth that was in his way, nipping sharply at Gideon's throat when the man only laughed at him.

A moment later, though, the impediments were gone and Tem was able to lavish attention upon the skin and hard muscle beneath that he'd ached to touch and taste again. Greedy for all that he could get, Tem shoved hard, reversing their position, straddling Gideon on the wide couch, and ducked his head to enjoy the feast before him.

The sound of the door opening struck him a moment too late, and he looked up in time to see a maid drop the tea tray she held, the crashing of silver and shattering of porcelain jarring. Face bright red, the maid let out a squeak and bolted from the room, slamming the door behind her.

Tem stared after her, completely frozen.

Gideon's soft chuckles finally brought him back to his senses. "I guess that settles that. We are well on our way to causing a scandal now."

Tem stared down at him, and after a moment shared Gideon's grin. "All the fuss people make of scandalous behavior, I did not think it would be quite so pleasant."

"Pleasant? Gideon repeated. He narrowed his eyes at Tem. "If all you feel is pleasant, then I clearly am not being scandalous enough."

Laughing, Tem leaned down until there was barely a breath of space between them. "Then I suggest you try harder to scandalize me, sir."

"Oh, I intend to," Gideon replied, and closed the remaining space between them.

From Afar

"You did it!"

Pierce ooffed as he caught the bundle of silk and ribbon that flew into his arms, laughing. "Of course I did it, goose. You're being unseemly again, Cress."

"Pish posh," Cressida replied, slowly releasing him, ignoring or oblivious to the way the enthusiastic embrace had crushed the various bows and frills of her afternoon dress. "You're my best friend and you've just won the most prestigious duel in the country." She reached up to kiss his cheek.

"Cress!"

She grimaced and rolled her eyes, then turned to greet her father, who continued to berate his only daughter while Pierce found himself attacked by all his fans and friends.

He fought his way through the crowd, accepting compliments, chatting briefly here and there, knowing he should be loving the attention but really wanting nothing more than to find his room and a bit of quiet.

And maybe a letter, of course, but...

"Pierce."

He looked up and broke into a genuine smile, not hesitating to embrace his older brother and then Artemis. "You made it."

"Of course we made it," Artemis said. "The carriage suffered a broken wheel, but we had spare horses for just such an occurrence and rode the rest of the way. I think Gideon was ready to simply run all the way here but thankfully we weren't forced to resort to such matters."

Gideon snorted and shook his head, regarding his lover with amused exasperation. "Stop trying to humiliate me."

Artemis merely smirked and continued speaking with Pierce. "I would imagine you'd like to rest a bit before the ball tonight, hmm? The girls will insist on dancing your shoes to pieces."

Pierce groaned. "Can't the Champion beg off?"

"No," Gideon said with a grin. "I'm afraid you had best resign yourself to your fate." His gaze shifted to just past Pierce's shoulder. "Miss Cressida," he said, sketching a bow. "I see you are as much an Original as ever."

Cressida flashed a grin. "Thank you, my lord. Master Artemis, it is good to see you again."

"My Lady," Artemis replied, accepting her hand and bowing over it. "Has your father not packed you off yet?"

"He can never catch me long enough to do it," Cressida said breezily. "At that, Pierce, let me escape with you."

Pierce shook his head, laughing. "If you want help, go pester your brother. That's what brothers are for."

"Oh, he'll just take Daddy's side," Cressida said, wrinkling her nose. "Honestly, I wish he were more like you. It's just rules, rules, study, study with him. Let's talk about something else."

"Yes, Princess," Pierce replied tolerantly. "Come along, we shall make our escape. Gideon, will I see you before you go home - beyond the ball anyway?"

"Of course," Gideon said. "I didn't come all this way just to laugh at you being danced to death."

Pierce made a face. "So kind of you, big brother. Very well, I will see you tonight and we can work out further arrangements. Come along, poppet."

Cressida smacked his arm, then slipped her own through it. "Do not call me that."

He only laughed in reply, but the amusement tapered off into one of their comfortable silences as they continued through the halls.

A soft sigh broke it, Cressida's fingers tightening slightly where she held to his arm. "Daddy is beginning to make more and more noise about marriage," she said, expression tight. "He made a brief comment hinting that he would like to hear an offer from your direction."

Pierce grimaced. "I told you that would happen if you insisted upon using me for your mischief."

"Well I could hardly count on Silver's help," Cressida said bitterly. "I told you, he would just take Daddy's side. Anyway, it will all be over shortly...won't it?"

He smiled. "I hope so, and if you are angling to hear if I've received another letter for you, the answer is yes. I will bring it to the ball this evening."

Cressida's eyes lit up. "Really? I was beginning to fret. He said in his last one that he will be returning soon. Very soon." She worried her lip, blue eyes dark with worry as she looked up at him. "He sent me a ring, too. I dare not wear it until he comes..."

Pierce laughed. "Seymour finally sent the ring, eh?" He winked. "He has been saving for it for quite some time, poppet. I am happy for you."

"We could not have done it without you, Pierce. I wish I could do something to repay you. I do hope Daddy and Mama do not prove too stubborn when he returns..." She bit her lip again. "I would hate to estrange myself, but Seymour..."

He stopped and drew her close for a brief embrace, planting a chaste kiss on her cheek. "You will have me, poppet. That does not count for much, but you have been my friend for a long time."

Cressida laughed. "Ever since the War of the Creek! Oh, I think Mama is still upset about what I did to that frock."

"You are rather rough on your clothes; I will give your mama that." Pierce halted as they reached the hallway in which her rooms were located. "Far thee well, poppet. I will see you tonight. I may even be willing to dance with you."

Lifting her chin, Cressida stared down her nose at him and intoned, "You will most certainly dance with me, rake. We will make of thee a proper gentleman yet."

Pierce laughed and swept a deep bow. "As my lady commands." He turned away and headed for his own rooms, leaving her laughing in the hallway.

His own amusement faded as he walked, and he replied to the compliments and congratulations cast his way only from habit. The Royal Fencing Championship was something he'd been trying to win for years; ever since he had taken up fencing at the age of twelve.

Even now he still felt that first burst of happiness, that not only did his adored big brother not hate him but wanted to teach him fencing. Now he had won the Championship in which Gideon had never had the chance to even participate.

He should be running through the halls in ecstasy and behaving with unbearable, grating delight. Oh, he was delighted and would likely get carried away with drinking once he had endured the ball and could sneak off to carouse with his friends elsewhere...

Right now, however, he wanted to see what his secret admirer had to say.

His heart beat rapidly despite his orders for it to remain calm. Unfortunately, the letters had flustered him right from the first. It had come mere days after his arrival in the palace, invited to stay as long as he liked by Prince Benedict himself.

The first one had been rather decorous, if obvious in the less than casual emotions driving it. The second and third had also been...contained. The fourth had forced him to lock his door halfway through it, and after that he had learned to lock the door before even opening them.

Reaching his room, he opened the door and immediately looked down at the floor.

A hot rush thrummed through him, satisfaction and anticipation, lust and longing. Stepping inside, he closed the door and locked it, then bent to retrieve the letter.

Thick, cream-colored vellum. High quality, but no way to tell from which maker it came. He'd tried. Plain, unremarkable sealing wax closed it, stamped with a simple star.

He was hot and sweaty from the dueling, for it had gone on for most of the morning and well into the afternoon, but his discomfort faded entirely as he broke the seal and opened the letter.

The first paragraph and even most of the second were mild enough, but by the end of the third his pants had grown uncomfortably tight. He stroked himself through the fabric of his pants, eyes fastened to the carefully written words, addicted to them, to this admirer who was so heated yet dared not reveal himself.

Finishing the letter, he dropped it to the floor and fell back on his bed with a long groan, fumbling to get his pants open and take himself in hand, recalling everything his admirer had ever said, calling up a thousand images that failed to satisfy because his admirer could be anyone at all.

All the heated words and wicked promises flooded his mind as he continued to stroke himself, and he closed his eyes to focus, burning to know, needing to know, so deadly addicted to his admirer.

He came with a hoarse cry, spilling into his hand, cheeks flushed as he slowly regained control of his breathing. After a few minutes he sat up and moved to strip and clean himself up at the wash basin in his changing room. He'd have to call for a bath soon, but could stall for a bit longer.

Returning to his bed, he retrieved the letter from the floor and looked over it again, carefully avoiding the content, focusing only on the signature. It had never changed, but was the same now as it had been with the first letter.

Watching From Afar,  
A pale and distant Star

\*~\*~\*

"So does it still feel good to be Champion?" Cressida asked, taking a sip of champagne as she regarded him with amusement.

She really was beautiful, Pierce could well understand why so many of his friends were confused

as to why he hadn't asked for her hand in marriage. Platinum hair, blue eyes, a figure that nearly every other woman in the room envied, resplendent in her white and silver dress, diamonds in her hair and at her throat...

...And her heart long ago given to a poor boy who had run away to make his fortune that he could ask for her hand in marriage and be given it.

"Lady St. Rose," interjected his friend Tobin. "I don't suppose you would honor me with a dance this evening?"

Cressida smiled at him and gave him her hand to be bowed over. "Of course I will dance with you, my good Marquis. First, however, I must claim a dance with our champion of the evening before I throw him to unmarried wolves in the crowd."

The men all chuckled, one accepting her glass of champagne as she presented her hand to Pierce.

Rolling his eyes, he took the offered hand and led her out to the dance floor. "How fare you, poppet?"

Cressida rolled her eyes as they began to dance. "Well enough. Daddy is getting much worse about this whole marriage thing. I wish Seymour would hurry and return."

Pierce sighed and shook his head. "As do I. Hopefully nothing will delay him, and we can finally bring this all to a close - albeit likely a very dramatic close."

"Let us hope not," Cressida said with a grimace. "I would like to be a happily married woman without having to kill people in the process. Killing is vulgar, and I try hard not to be vulgar."

"Merely improper," Pierce replied.

Cressida nodded. "Precisely."

Laughing, shaking his head, Pierce fell silent and simply danced. It was nice to dance with someone who was not after him or eager to hear all about his scandalous brother or long-dead scandalous parents.

He and Cress had been friends since he was thirteen and she eleven, when they had met at a creek that divided their family lands. Cautious conversation had turned into romping around the creek, ending eventually in a battle over who would rule it - Gideon had laughed hysterically to see him covered head to foot in mud, all the harder to hear he had drawn even with a girl.

They had been teased before at being fond of each other in a romantic sense, but they never had been - because the second day of their friendship they had been joined by Seymour, the son of a poor minor baron with a sour reputation bad enough even Gideon would not tolerate the man.

So the mischief had begun, all those years ago.

The dance ended and he bowed low over Cressida's hand as she curtsied. Into her hand he pressed the folded up letter he had received on her behalf the day before. "Where shall I take you, my lady, now you've had your dance?"

"Better take me back to my parents," Cressida said with a sigh, adjusting her skirts to discreetly tuck the letter away. "I should nip this in the bud before they start asking after your intentions." She looked up at him. "What are your intentions, Pierce? We always talk about me, me, me. What about you? Any lord or lady catching your eye? Did no one give you a...personal



congratulation on your victory?"

Pierce rolled his eyes. "You are a lady, unwed at that, and should not be asking such base questions."

"Pish posh," Cressida retorted. "Tell me or I shall harass you relentlessly."

"Don't I know it," Pierce muttered. "Fine, I shall tell you. Later." He bowed again as they reached her parents - and a third party, one Pierce was surprised to see.

He nodded in greeting. "Silver."

"Pierce." Silver St. Rose was Pierce's age, and they likely would have grown up together if not for the drama surrounding the death of Pierce's parents, the way he had seldom left the grounds of Foxwood.

That and they were as different as night and day.

Pierce's life was fencing, and that he interspersed with all manner of other athletics. Shortly he would be leaving for the coast to spend the majority of his summer on his yacht. Silver was most likely off to yet another academy or university or what all to further his studies - which were great and varied. The man was to learning what Pierce was to fencing.

He was as handsome as the rest of the family; the St. Roses had always outshined the other jewels about them. Silver had the same platinum blonde hair and blue eyes as his sister, but the fine hair was cropped close and nonsensical, the eyes cool and reserved.

Yet another reason for their distance was the monocle Silver wore over his right eye - the result of a childhood accident that had weakened his vision in that eye. Pierce wasn't certain Silver had ever really forgiven him for the mishap.

He watched Silver a moment more, looking for some cue, some indication, some clue as to what to say, if he should say anything at all...but Silver was nothing like Cressida, whom he understood so easily. He was a mystery Pierce could not solve; he sensed Silver had no desire to be solved.

Stifling a sigh, because he always felt vaguely guilty and more than a little confused that he could befriend the sister but not the brother, he turned back to Cressida and her parents, making polite chit chat for a few minutes before finally extracting himself.

Looking out over the crowded room, he gave a brief thought to the writer of his letters, wondering if he - because it was definitely a he, that much was certain - was here, maybe watching him. Oh, that thought heated his blood.

He reminded himself to behave as he approached a girl who had been sneaking him hopeful looks. So the night went, dancing with various girls, occasionally snatching a chance to talk to Gideon and Artemis - once even getting into a prolonged conversation that included Prince Benedict and his lover.

At last everything began to wind down enough he could make his escape, waving a farewell to his brother, saying his final thanks where necessary, before slipping away with his friends to carouse their way through the bars and hells and a pleasure house or two.

It was a mere hour or two before dawn when he finally dragged himself back to his room, exhausted, wrung out, but quite sated and pleased with the night.

Pushing open his door, he paused to look at the floor only from sheer habit - and was astonished

to see a familiar looking envelope lying on the floor.

The lingering haze from a trifle too much drink abruptly dulled, and he knelt to retrieve the letter. He fumbled getting it open, nearly tripping as he focused more on the letter than on where his feet were.

Landing awkwardly on his bed, he swore softly and righted himself, sitting with his back against the headboard. Casting the letter aside momentarily, he struggled to get his boots off, stripping down to his linen shirt while he was at it. At last comfortable, or relatively anyway, he retrieved the letter and broke the seal.

He was silent as he finished it, frowning in thought.

Throughout all the letters, he had been troubled most by the underlying sadness in them. It was more obvious in some than others, but always invariably there...this one definitely held more of it than usual.

Oh, it was full of those things he always expressed...but more of that terrible sadness was apparent than usual.

He couldn't understand it. He wasn't stand offish or strict or anything. Hell, look at Gideon and Artemis. More than a few had been scandalized that an Earl would take up with his brother's tutor. Never mind all the stories Gideon had told him over the years about their parents...

Who wrote these letters that he felt he couldn't approach? Pierce read it again, happiness of the evening leeches away by the tangle of emotions stirred by his strange admirer. He'd tried before to deduce the man's identity, because surely someone who did something like this wanted on some level to be found out? Damn it, he didn't care who the man was - high class, middle class, low class... though he was inclined to think high class, there was something about the penmanship, the manner of speech, and the costly vellum itself...

It was stupid to fall in love with a man who hid behind amorous letters, but Pierce feared that was exactly what he'd done. The writer seemed to know him so well; more than once his letters had been filled with exactly what Pierce needed to hear. Kind words, stern words, thoughtful, intimate...

He lacked only a face and name to put to them, and he feared he would never solve the riddle.

The oddest part was that melancholy; that the writer literally seemed to fear ever revealing himself. Pierce could not fathom why. Was he so unapproachable? Certainly no one tonight had seemed wary or cautious around him.

So why did his admirer insist upon remaining pale and distant?

\*~\*~\*

"Oh, they are insufferable!" Cressida kicked petulantly at a nearby tree, glaring at it when that only resulted in sore toes.

Pierce sighed and buried his face in his hands. "They are truly serious about this marriage thing?"

"Yes," Cressida said with a grimace, finally moving to sit next to him on the garden bench. "They think I am dallying and flitting about and taking nothing seriously. I am twenty one, getting on in years, and must think seriously of settling down." She propped her chin in her hand and gave a long sigh. "I very nearly told them I am already betrothed."

"You came to your senses in time?"

Cressida nodded. "I made myself take several sips of tea, and by the time I finished I had recovered myself." She sat up and stared at her hands, indecently bare but they two had long ago progressed past such things. They were as brother and sister, and only the rest of the world seemed not to get that.

Vexing.

Pierce took her hand and squeezed it affectionately. "They will come to their senses, poppet. I still say perhaps all this subterfuge is not entirely necessary. In the end, they want only your happiness."

"Yes, I know," Cressida replied with a sigh. "I wish we could have done without all this nonsense, but I do not want to cause an upheaval until he is here."

He squeezed her hand once more and then released it, reaching into his morning coat and pulling out a letter. "Here, perhaps this contains some good news."

"Oh!" Cressida brightened as she took the letter, tearing it open and reading the contents voraciously. "He's on his way home!" She looked up Pierce, eyes tearing. "As of this writing, he's getting on a ship. He'll be home in about a month."

"To judge from the date of the letter," Pierce said, taking it from her and skimming the contents, "it will be more like three weeks. Hopefully nothing delays him." He handed it back. "Good. In three weeks you can wear that ring of yours." He tugged at one of her platinum curls. "I will keep an eye on all incoming ships, and let you know the moment his arrives."

Cressida smiled and tucked the letter away in her dress, then folded her hands primly on her lap. "That is that, then. Now, Pierce. You have put off your own affairs long enough."

Pierce groaned. "I'm not telling you anything."

"Oh, that's means there's something to tell."

"I hate you."

Cressida beamed. "Tell."

"Oh, for-what does it matter? I'd say it's pretty obvious I have nothing resembling a love life."

Cressida pursed her lips. "Which is odd, really. I know for a fact that every available girl flitting about this Season would gladly accept any offer you made. I've noticed you prefer men in the general run of things, however."

Pierce sputtered. "How do you know that?"

"Honestly," Cressida replied, motioning impatiently. "Men think girls notice nothing. We notice everything. That aside, we are best friends. Tell me why a famous fencer, the most eligible and popular bachelor around, is alone. Are you pining?" She winked. "Have you a lover as secret as mine?" The teasing smile turned into a playful pout. "Why have you not told me?"

With a long suffering sigh, Pierce gave up. He had been longing to tell someone anyway, and he'd known this would come up after they talked about Seymour. Slowly he explained the letters he had been receiving for the past couple of years.

"Did you bring one with you?" she asked when he had finished. "You must have known I would

pester you."

"Oh, I knew, poppet." He pulled out the letter he had received after the ball two weeks ago, because he would not show her the more ardent ones even under pain of death. "I'm not showing you all of them..."

Cressida snickered. "Boys and their propriety, honestly." She read the letter, brow furrowing, a pensive frown on her face as she finished. "Watching from afar, a pale and distant star? Pretty..."

"What's wrong?" Pierce asked cautiously, not liking the expression. "You'd better not be about to say something that will dash my hopes." He tucked the letter away.

"Not a bit," Cressida said with a smile. "That phrase just sounds familiar, is all."

Pierce froze, breath catching. "What? Familiar? How do you mean familiar? How do you know it?"

Cressida shrugged, looking away, that pensive frown still on her face. "I can't recall just yet." She turned back and smiled at him, reaching up to pat his cheek. "It'll come to me."

"I hope so," Pierce said, frowning. "I would really like to know who he is."

"Mmm," Cressida murmured.

Sighing, disliking the feeling that he wasn't being told something - especially after all he had finally broken down and told her, Pierce stood up. "I must be off, poppet. There are three gentlemen waiting to taste bitter defeat at the tip of my rapier."

"Go, then, and I hope your day is a good one. Will I see you at the Waterston ball tonight?"

Pierce grimaced. "Very likely. Gideon says I am not allowed to avoid all this frippery."

"Frippery provides good stories to gossip about over tea the next morning, and if you are a young miss in need of a husband, frippery is a battlefield." She clapped her hands together and gave rather an evil looking grin. "There is a rumor going round that Marquis Asbury will be proposing to Celeste Caruthers tonight. My money is that he will propose to Jane McArthur instead."

"Girls scare me," Pierce replied, then turned and fled the garden, chased out by Cressida's taunting cackles.

He fled back to the palace and changed quickly into his fencing garb, taking his sword down to the dueling areas and throwing himself enthusiastically into it.

Hours later a halt was finally called, and he exchanged pleasantries and accepted compliments for the next hour or so. When the men at last all took their leave, he gathered his things and headed back toward his room.

Rather than the main hallways, he cut right just outside the dueling area and headed instead in the direction of the library, intending to take the stairs just beyond it. The route was quieter, less used, and this time of day he was not likely to see anyone.

But as he passed by the library itself, someone called his name.

It wasn't a voice he heard often, but the cool, precise, clipped tone was familiar all the same. He turned slowly around and sketched a brief bow. "Silver."

"Pierce," Silver replied, returning his bow. "I wonder if I might have a word with you, regarding my sister."

Brows going up, stifling a groan at where this might possibly lead, Pierce nevertheless nodded. "Of course. If you will give me a moment to freshen up, I will return to speak with you."

"Of course. I apologize for delaying you, but I wanted to catch you before someone else did."

"I'll be back in a moment," Pierce replied, and continued on his way, frowning. He cleaned and changed quickly, worry only growing. Damn it, what did Silver want? He had never inquired into his and Cressida's relationship before. Silver was the very definition of cool and remote; he seemed made of ice at times.

Perhaps it was only his own guilt coloring his perception; he had thought so before. It was his fault Silver's vision was half-ruined, after all, and everyone had considered it strange that Pierce got along so well with the younger sister but not the brother who was his own age.

Bah. Perhaps this conversation would result in some positive change. He doubted it, but anything was possible.

Smoothing down his velvet afternoon jacket, a simple understated deep brown, he pulled on his boots and combed through his hair one last time before finally returning to the library.

Silver sat in a small alcove on the second level, a wide balcony area where people often gathered to quietly converse over tea. Pierce had seldom come here himself; books required sitting still and that wasn't something he did even remotely well. Only Artemis had ever been able to make him study with any sort of focus.

Silver really was handsome, but as always he reminded Pierce more of marble statues or an austere painting. Nothing like his bright, vibrant sister.

"Silver," he greeted, taking the seat clearly meant for him.

Closing the book he'd been reading, something Pierce noticed was in a foreign language, Silver looked up at him. "Pierce. Thank you for being agreeable enough to speak with me. I apologize if I am interfering in any plans."

"Not at all," Pierce said, helping himself to the tea tray, wishing he could have a more substantial meal. He took a sip as he sat back and motioned for Silver to continue speaking - and paused, briefly startled. He'd been expecting the standard tea blend most commonly drunk around the palace. It was good, but he much preferred a stronger blend himself. He'd know the taste and aroma of his favorite Rutherford & Stone blend anywhere.

Odd. He'd no idea Silver favored it as well.

"I am nipping a potential problem in the bud, if you will," Silver said, regarding him with that unreadable expression Pierce found so frustrating. He read people easily; it was part of the reason he got along so well in society. Silver he could not figure out, and that only made it all the more awkward to be around him. "My parents seemed determined to think that you and my sister are an ideal match. While I certainly see their logic, I do not agree."

Pierce's brows went up at that. "I should think by this point it is quite clear that your sister and I are friends only. She is a sister to me, Silver, surely you know that."

"I know nothing except that my sister has not been happy of late, and my every inquiry into the reason for her discontent is met with harsh rebuff. She is being pressured by my parents to

select a beau and settle down. They seem confident that you are merely being slow in putting forth your own offer. As I said, though I see their logic, there are flaws in it."

"Oh?" Pierce asked. "I have already stated I have no amorous intentions toward your sister, but do tell me these flaws."

Silver regarded him coolly, the eye behind the monocle slightly darker than the other. It was a barrier all its own, that monocle, somehow only adding to the frustrating mystery that was Silver. A man who by all rights should be his friend and instead the man only vexed him.

"There is no reason for you to have delayed this long had you any interest in her," Silver replied calmly. "At least half the court has you two already married in their minds. You are quite well off, your family is good friends with the royal family, and despite the scandal in your family's past - and present - you are highly respected and well-liked. That you have recently won the Championship is only an added feather in your cap. My sister has a generous dowry and my parents more than capable of giving her a grand wedding. She is of suitable age, would make a perfect wife. There is not one single reason that you two should not already be engaged were that your intention. So I can only conclude that neither of you is so inclined."

"As you say," Pierce replied, sipping his tea. "You are obviously decided upon the matter, so to what purpose did you request this talk?"

Silver looked down at his book, expression still unreadable but his anxiety betrayed, Pierce realized, by the way he briefly but restlessly stroked the spine of his book. "Do you know the source of my sister's unhappiness?" He held up a hand before Pierce could reply. "I am not asking you to tell me; the two of you share a confidence that is none of my business. I am not prying. I merely wondered if you knew it, and perhaps could resolve it. She thinks me her enemy but she is mistaken. Everyone deserves to be happy."

Something in his eyes flickered, but too briefly for Pierce to figure out what it was or why it had been there.

Anyway, the words were plenty distracting on their own. He never would have expected to hear such a thing from someone so icy.

He shrugged. "It's hard to say; in a few weeks she may be right as rain or abjectly miserable. The outcome is reliant upon others, not merely she."

Silver frowned. "I see," he said slowly. "That sounds...very much like Cress being up to something." He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. It was the plainest gesture Pierce had ever seen from him. Astounding. "Do give me some warning before the event crops up, and I will attempt to ensure our parents do not overreact."

"Ah-" Pierce blinked. "Certainly, if that is your wish. I'm sure your sister would appreciate it."

"I'm sure my sister does not care what I do or do not do," Silver replied. "That, however, is neither here nor there. I thank you for indulging me in this discussion, Pierce."

"My pleasure; I'm glad someone at least believes that I have no designs upon your sister."

"I'm sure I should be displeased you are not enamored of her," Silver said, and Pierce almost gawked to see the slight smile that curved his pale lips. "However, I grew up with her."

Silver was...making a jest? Pierce had to set his teacup down. "I'm grateful I could return to Foxwood Manor at the end of the day, that is for certain."

Silver smiled again, and Pierce returned, pleased that they two had somehow managed to share

a jest - and wouldn't it annoy Cress to no end that they had been making it at her expense.

The moment faded, leaving them in a stark silence, and Pierce realized he did not want to dismiss himself though he could and probably should. Silver was probably most anxious to get back to his precious studies. Still... "Where are you going to study this summer, Silver? Is there a monument to learning you have not yet had your wicked way with?"

The look he got was briefly startled, and almost...disbelieving, though he could not fathom why. "I was considering visiting the eastern shore; the archives there are highly regarded and it would help a paper I am hoping to present next year."

"Oh?" Pierce asked, surprised. "Well, if you ever feel like escaping your dusty tomes for a day or two, you're welcome to join me on my yacht."

Again that disbelieving look, before Silver recovered his cool remoteness. "I will certainly consider the offer, and likely take you up on it. I thank you."

"I will depend upon your visit," Pierce replied, wondering at himself. What the devil would he do with Silver upon his yacht? To the best of his knowledge they had nothing in common. Granted his knowledge of Silver was thin...

Oh, bugger it. He had made the invitation on impulse but he would not retract it, and if Silver actually took him up on it he would figure out the rest then. Surely the man had a life beyond his books.

Silence fell again, and Pierce was damned if he knew how to restart the lapsed conversation. He realized suddenly just how thin his knowledge of Cressida's brother was.

"I never did offer my own congratulations on your victory," Silver said, startling him from his thoughts. Blue eyes locked with his, and Pierce could see the books behind him just barely reflected in Silver's monocle. "Your performance was most impressive, especially at the last. Gifford prides himself on his skills, but he has never learned to curb his impulsive nature."

Pierce blinked and struggled hard not to gawk. "Thank you," he finally managed. "I did not note your presence amongst the spectators."

Silver gave a slight shrug. "I was there only briefly, to pass the time before a meeting at the Academy."

Oh. Well, that certainly made more sense than Silver wanting to watch him. "I hope I helped pass the time sufficiently."

"Indeed," Silver said, reaching up to adjust his monocle.

A nervous gesture, Pierce realized abruptly. He wondered why Silver was anxious. Blue eyes met his, then Silver dropped his gaze. They lifted again, and he saw Silver was about to speak. "Pier-"

Below them the main doors to the library opened, the noise enough Pierce shifted his gaze reflexively to the source. Nothing of import. He turned back to Silver - and realized that whatever he'd been about to say, he was no longer going to say it.

"I am sorry to have kept you so long," Silver said. "I'm certain you've far more interesting things to be doing. Thank you again for indulging me. If you will forgive me, I have delayed in my day's work long enough."

"Of course," Pierce said, and stood up, sketching a brief bow before turning and taking his leave.

He left the library to go in search of food, but even when he ran into a group of friends and was coerced into going down into the city, he could not leave behind that lost moment. It irked him that he could not forget it, but he sensed it had been important.

What had Silver been about to say?

\*~\*~\*

Pierce stormed into the sitting room ready to strangle her. Of all the things to do, and just barely two hours away from the start of her ball - he was going to kill her. "Cress!" He snapped. "Just what do you think?"

He stopped abruptly as he took in her ashen face. "Poppet, what's wrong?"

She bolted to him, tangling her hands in the black velvet of his formal evening jacket. "I know I shouldn't be here," she stammered, "but Pierce - Silver has found out!"

Pierce frowned and covered her hands in his own, dismayed to feel how cold they were. "I do not think that is cause for alarm, poppet. Your brother is not your enemy."

Cressida blinked rapidly, willing away tears. "But we were arguing-everything got out of control-I told him-" Her hands tightened in his jacket. "Then he stole my latest letter and stormed off and I think he has gone to confront Seymour. I wanted to go stop them myself, but-"

"No, that is the very last thing you should have done, idiot. Coming to see me was only slightly better. Get back to your parents at once, poppet. I will take care of Silver, all right? Do not get so upset. After waiting so long, Seymour should see you smiling, hmm?"

She looked at him, then nodded and let go of his jacket. Another blink and she was her usual self. He didn't know how she managed it. "Thank you, Pierce. I am sorry to add yet more drama to this affair."

"My family has a history of drama, so I'm used to it. Never fear, poppet. I will bring your beau to you one way or the other." Though he really didn't think Silver was anything to worry about. He'd seemed sincere about wanting only for his sister to be happy, and Pierce knew that Seymour would make her happy.

Though who knew. He'd not seen Silver once since their single meeting, except in brief glimpses. His few attempts to speak with Silver always ended in failure. It should not bother him, for they'd never really crossed paths overmuch beyond the time he spent with Cressida...but that unspoken sentence vexed him to the point of distraction. No reason for it, but there it was all the same.

Perhaps he could use this near-debacle to his own advantage once the matter of Seymour was secured.

He leaned down to kiss her cheek. "Off with you before anyone notices you missing, poppet. We will be back in due course."

"Yes," Cressida replied. "Thank you again."

"No thanks necessary - but you might have a bit more faith in your brother. He only wants your happiness, Cress."

She gave sharp laugh, the sound wholly unlike her. "Oh, the fine mess we've all made of things. Go, Pierce. I will see all three of you shortly, and in good temper. Understand?"



"Yes. Now go."

Cressida departed, and Pierce wasted no time returning to his own chambers to call for a horse and finish dressing. Mere minutes later he was riding through the streets, making his way to the Castlethwaite Hotel where Seymour was residing until he could obtain a permanent residence.

The ride was only fifteen minutes, but it seemed interminable.

What had Seymour been thinking in sending a letter directly to Cressida? Could he not have waited a mere few hours more? He would beat the man senseless if Silver had not already done the job.

Reaching the hotel, he handed off his horse to a waiting groom and strode inside, ignoring the attendants to go straight to Seymour's room.

He pounded upon the door, and could hear voices inside which abruptly stopped with the noise.

The door flew open to reveal a face he both knew and didn't - the last time he had seen it, Seymour had been a boy of eighteen, pale and scared but determined. Seymour had always been stubborn above all else. He was handsome enough - black hair and brown eyes, skin unfashionably dark but he suspected Cress would like that.

"Seymour," he greeted.

"Pierce," Seymour said dryly. "Have you come to join the party, then?"

"So it would seem," Pierce replied, entering the room as Seymour beckoned him inside, eyes seeking and immediately finding Silver standing by the sofa in the small front room of Seymour's suite.

Silver who always looked his iciest in formal attire. Stark black and white, a diamond glittering in the lace at his throat, more at his cuffs, accenting the hard shine of his monocle and the frosty paleness of his hair.

Yet his expression was not as aloof as usual. "Pierce."

"Your sister came to me in a tizzy," Pierce said in response to the unasked question.

"Serves her right," Silver replied. "The next time she comes to me to pick a fight, perhaps she'll remember to guard her tongue more carefully."

Wait. Cress had started the argument? That was an interesting detail to have left out. "What in the world were the two of you having a row about?"

"Happiness," Silver said, and the depths of the bitterness in his voice drew Pierce up short. He turned to Seymour. "So far, I am having trouble finding any fault in you minus your behavior in this entire affair, but I think I will blame that upon my sister. I am inclined this evening to blame everything on that idiot."

Pierce quirked a brow at that. "She was firmly of the belief that you were coming here to suggest pistols at dawn."

Silver merely gave him a withering look. "I might be good for giving a discourse on pistols, Pierce, but that is all. Such idiotic displays of drama are not worth my time. I came to see for myself that the boy who once played with the two of you in that damnable creek had grown up suitable enough to court my sister." He returned his attention once more to Seymour. "I am

satisfied with this initial interview, but you still have my father to contend with and my mother after him. If I were you, I would not be alone with my mother."

Pierce stared. This was nothing like the Silver he knew...but then again, his frustration had always been in not knowing Silver at all. He was always so quiet and aloof - this assertive and commanding side, the quiet, gentle jests interjected throughout...

Intriguing.

Seymour chuckled. "You are a St. Rose through and through, Silver. Always so stern when I saw you as a child; you've not changed a bit."

"You have, however," Silver said. "I am thankful you've overcome the abysmal shadows of your father."

"I assure you, no one is more thankful for that than I," Seymour replied quietly.

Pierce shook his head, laughing softly. "It would seem, then, that this affair is well ended. Seymour, shall we get you to your betrothed before she comes to fetch us?"

"Do not say such things," Silver said, looking pained. "I would not put it past her, and I do not want to deal with the debacle that would ensue. All of this nonsense is quite enough for me."

"Well said," Pierce replied, grinning. "Let us return before the ladies notice our names missing from their dance cards."

Silver made a face, and Pierce agreed with the sentiment wholeheartedly. He smiled in sympathy - and how strange it was to be exchanging such things with Silver.

The three men made their way out of the hotel, standing in silence as they waited for Seymour's carriage. Inside it, the silence stretched on, but for whatever reason it did not feel awkward to him.

All too soon the carriage pulled up to the St. Rose estate, and one by one the men clambered out, handing off their overcoats and hats to the footmen just inside the door.

Silver slipped away to join his family inside, while Pierce and Seymour waited patiently to be announced.

"I wish that we'd had time to speak before tonight," Pierce murmured as they were announced and entered the ballroom.

Seymour grimaced briefly. "Yes, I know. I can hear the reprimand in your tone."

Pierce smirked and bowed low before he was lost to the whirl of social niceties. Though he wanted badly to be close as the chaos played out, this was Cressida and Seymour's moment - and he would be less likely to become a target himself if he hid from sight.

He'd just finished waltzing with a girl whose name eluded him but whose dance steps were lethal to his toes when he saw signs the storm had begun - Cressida, her parents, Silver, and Seymour all ducking discreetly from the ballroom.

Half wishing he could be there to see the ensuing argument, half grateful he was not, Pierce took the girl he'd been dancing with back to her mother and went to find the next one to whom he owed a dance.

Just as he was bowing over her hand, a footman approached discreetly seeking his attention.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Beg pardon, my lord, but his lordship requests an audience at once."

"Of course," Pierce replied. He turned back to the girl with whom he'd been about to dance and made his apologies, then followed the footman quickly from the ballroom to what he knew to be the study.

He was greeted by an expression that was part glare, part resigned amusement. "Pierce, you knew about this."

"If I said no, would I stand a chance of being believed?" Pierce asked.

That earned him a few rolls of the eyes.

Lord St. Rose gestured to Seymour, who stood beside Cressida, his stubborn expression wholly unchanged, except it had been cuter when he was a boy.

Pierce strove not to snicker.

"What say you, Pierce? If you have been party to this ridiculous shenanigan, I can only hope you stand firmly by your decision."

"Of course I stand firmly," Pierce said sharply. "We three have been friends since we were children. I know how they feel; I know those feelings have not changed. This entire time I have watched the situation closely, prepared to end the entire matter the moment I felt it was necessary. Not once have I ever felt so. They have always had my support, and I will always give it."

St. Rose snorted indelicately. "I might have known some manner of scandal would follow in your wake, Pierce."

"Pish posh," Cressida interjected. "If we'd had a row in the ballroom - that would have been scandalous. I doubt this will even make the gossip columns."

"That is enough out of you," her mother said firmly, but there was a trace of amusement in her voice she could not entirely hide.

St. Rose glared at his daughter.

"Oh, honestly," Cressida said with a sniff. "I don't see what the fuss is about. Great grandmamma was not much better in the end, what with her sending those letters."

Silver stirred from the corner where he had been quietly observing the proceedings. "That has nothing to do with this," he said sharply.

Rather more sharply than Pierce thought was necessary, but then again he did not know this family story.

"Oh, phooey on you," Cressida retorted, and Pierce suddenly felt afraid for Silver. That gleam in Cress's eye only ever spelled trouble. Silver glared at her and snarled at her to be quiet, but Cressida ignored him - and around them the rest of the family had fallen silent. Clearly no one was willing to interfere when Cressida had that look in her eye.

She turned abruptly to him, smiling that too-sweet smile of hers that spelled not just death, but a slow and painful one. "Pierce, do you know this story?"

"Um-"

"It's rather embarrassing, so the family never speaks of it. My great grandmamma was in love with another man, but was forced to marry my great grandpapa. Still she could not entirely give up her love for the man she could not have."

"Cressida!" Silver hissed.

She ignored him. "She wrote him letters; the family only discovered this after she had died, and was quite horrified it had been going on for so long. We took her letters into our keeping. They likely should have been burned, but for whatever reason we have kept them."

"Devil take you then," Silver snarled abruptly, pushing away from the wall and storming from the room, slamming the door behind him.

"Well," said Lady St. Rose. "What the devil has come over my children this evening?"

"Pierce," Cressida said too sweetly. "Pay attention."

"Never fear," Pierce said dryly. "I know not what you're about, but I want to continue living. Finish your tale."

Cressida nodded approvingly at his words, and obediently continued. "The letters she wrote were quite pretty. At the end of each she always signed them 'watching from afar, a pale and distant star'. Because she'd always been called the Star, you see? It was her nickname among her peers."

But Pierce had stopped listening, all his attention focused solely on those words...and the way Silver had left. No - the way Silver had fled.

"I told you it was familiar," Cressida said softly. "We got into an argument because I said that he should tell you the truth."

Pierce nodded, trying to figure out what to say - but all he could manage was to make his clumsy excuses before bolting from the study.

Silver...

All this time it was Silver?

Damn and blast, where was the man?

He heard the sound of glass shattering, a muffled shout - and grinned.

Naturally. The library.

Bolting down the hallway, he had a brief moment of panic that the door would be locked - but then it turned easily beneath his hand, and he nearly tumbled into the room from surprise.

Shattered glass lay on the floor nearby, the scent of spilled brandy filling the room.

Silver was leaning against the back of a sofa, his back to the room, staring out the wide window overlooking the garden behind the house.

Pierce closed the door, and the noise made Silver visibly flinch.

What did one say in a moment like this? He still could not fathom it. Silver...this entire time his admirer had been his best friend's brother...had been the man who confused him like no other. "It was you the entire time?" he finally asked.

Silver stiffened, and did not turn to face him. "I would say the answer to that is obvious, Pierce."

"Why?"

"Why what?" Silver asked, sounding both tired and curt.

Pierce motioned impatiently. "The secrecy. The letters. All of it. Why did you not simply say something? I was quite firmly convinced you could not stand me; at the very best, that you simply did not care one way or the other."

He strode across the room and around the couch, somberly regarding the man who still refused to look at him. "Silver..."

"What was I supposed to say? I'm sure you must have noticed by now that I am nothing like my vivacious sister. She can charm a room full of people with a single sentence, and I am lucky if I can string words together long enough to form a sentence, never mind somehow manage to interject charm. You two have been as peas in a pod for as long as you have known each other..."

Silver removed the monocle from his eyes and polished it with a handkerchief, and Pierce realized this was another nervous gesture. "For years I believed the two of you were or would be much more than friends. I could not even begin to compete with my little sister, and I did not intend to humiliate myself by trying."

Pierce frowned, but forced himself to remain silent.

"Yet much like my notorious great grandmother, I could not give you up." He shrugged. "So I wrote the letters."

"You were going to say something, weren't you, that day in the library?"

That startled Silver enough that he turned to look at him, and Pierce made his move, stepping close enough to reach out and grasp Silver's chin, keeping him from looking away. "What were you going to say?"

"I didn't know," Silver said. "I just... you were talking to me for once and treating me like I was normal...I was tired of the secrecy and feeling foolish. Initially I thought the letters would be enough...instead they just made it all worse." He jerked free and looked away again. "My stupid sister figured it out; that was the reason we were arguing. I said she had no place instructing me on matters of the heart when she knew nothing about it." His lips twitched briefly. "So of course Cress being Cress, she told me precisely how much she knew about it."

Pierce laughed. "She is quite irate with you."

"Yes," Silver said, face clouding. "So angry she told secrets that were not hers to tell."

Oh, he was really getting sick of not being looked at. Reaching out, Pierce sank his hands into Silver's hair and forced his head around and up. "I thought you must always dislike me, if not hate me, between monopolizing your sister and nearly blinding you."

"This?" Silver asked, touching the frame of his monocle lightly. "It was an accident, Pierce, and I've grown so used to it I scarcely notice. Are you really that concerned over it?"

"You never told me you weren't," Pierce replied.

Silver frowned slightly. "You were so upset I figured I wouldn't bring it up."

Pierce laughed and shook his head. "All this time..."

And it struck him then, really struck him, that Silver had been writing all those letters. Every last amorous word of them. He drew a sharp breath as the letters connected with the face before him.

It...was a surprisingly heady combination. He'd always noted Silver's beauty - he was at least the equal of his sister, and only Pierce's frustration and confusion where he was concerned had kept him from thinking of Silver in such a way.

"You wrote those letters," he said quietly, letting go of his grasp on Silver's hair to pin his hands to the couch, legs spread just so Silver's were between his. "Every last word was yours."

Silver looked at him, face flushing scarlet, and if that wasn't the oddest thing he'd ever seen...and he found he rather liked the look of a thawing Silver.

"You should have said something," he said quietly.

"I could hardly compete with my sister or any of the other brilliant stars around you," Silver replied. "Pale and distant, that's all I have ever been when it came to you."

Pierce grinned. "Your face is too red to be pale, and it seems to me you are far from distant now." He didn't let Silver reply, but took extreme liberty and kissed him.

He was fed a startled gasp, and used that to his advantage, deepening the kiss, and was astonished to hear himself groan - but Silver tasted like perfection, tart and sweet, and after a moment the mouth beneath his began to move, returning his kiss and that extracted a second groan.

The hands trapped beneath his tugged impatiently, and Pierce obligingly let them go, but only so he could take more liberties by touching.

Silver. He was kissing Silver, whose aloof façade hid a man capable of writing letters that made him hot and hard just thinking upon them.

He broke the kiss only to breathe, and the sight of the icy Silver with wet, kiss-swollen lips, his hair disheveled, and the monocle knocked aside...Pierce nearly lost himself then and there, utterly taken by the sight of Silver so well thawed.

It was a sight fine enough that he could no more resist taking another kiss than he could stop breathing. "Silver..." he breathed, licking those well-kissed lips before claiming them fully, feeling more than hearing the way Silver said his name in reply.

"All this time!" He said when they broke apart again. "I feel like an idiot."

Silver shook his head. "Well, I am dumbfounded you are kissing me, so I would call us even, Pierce."

Pierce looked at him, memorizing every line of that face in a way he never had before. He cupped the back of Silver's head and drew him close, kissing him long and slow, learning every last bit of that warm and pliant mouth, committing it to memory. "I've wondered as to the identity of my admirer for ages. I despaired of ever finding you."

Silver smiled ruefully. "I despaired you would discover me."

"I am happy Cress interfered," Pierce said with a grin.

"I am looking forward to getting revenge," Silver retorted.

Pierce smiled and leaned in so that their foreheads touched, utterly lost in those blue eyes which were no longer aloof. Hesitant, unsure, but no longer aloof. "Would skipping out on her betrothal ball to engage in base behavior be revenge enough?"

"No," Silver replied, then shifted so that his arms were around Pierce's neck and their mouths were only a space apart. "It is, however, a good start."

"Then let us make a start on your revenge," Pierce said with a laugh, and kissed his not so distant star.

## Lessons

Jude strode along the park, desperately bored and eager for anything to relieve it.

Famous last words, he knew, but he meant them all the same. Whatever might come to pass, it had to be better than this awful ennui.

He gazed with disinterest across the lush surroundings, all manner of plants and trees and flowers combined as only a royal could command. The royal park was a thing of beauty, truly. More times than he could remember had he brought one lover or another here for an intimate picnic or a moonlight tryst.

Rare were these solitary visits. He wasn't quite certain what to do with himself.

There were people he could have brought...but where was the thrill in the familiar? The tried and true? He wanted someone new to amuse him.

Or perhaps he should just cease to take lovers altogether. Each one bored him more quickly than the previous.

A breeze stirred the trees that lined the path upon which he walked, blowing pale pink petals everywhere. He brushed them from his deep blue coat and brown breeches, picked them from his now-tousled pale gold curls.

One little bit of amusement, that was all he asked for. Something really and truly worthy of his attention. Something to capture and enthrall him.

Instead he was spending the afternoon trolling an empty park, because it was the only way to avoid all the bothersome people who wanted him to do dreadfully boring things.

Sighing at himself, as disgusted by his petulance as his apathy, Jude continued walking.

Eventually the cherry trees came to an end, the pathway taking him to the large pond. Swans glided across the surface, thankfully quiet. Marble benches dotted the bank, empty to the last.

No. Not quite.

Jude slowed his steps a bit as he drew closer to the occupied bench. The man looked familiar, and he rifled through his store of faces and names.

Ah. There it was. Crispin, the youngest son of Earl Ford. His mother was a foreigner from the northeast, and her youngest son bore the marks of that - blue-black hair, cut unfortunately short. A bit more length would do him wonders, as would clothes finer than the simple things he wore. Such severe black and the plain knot in his neck cloth...

Well, it was nothing to do with him. If he recalled correctly, the man was only a year or so out of school, and the reclusive sort. At least, Jude could not recall ever seeing him dancing and drinking with his peers or even his family.

Presently, young Ford was bent over a writing case, scratching furiously at a piece of paper, writing then crossing words out, writing again.

Jude weighed his options. Walking was boring, would conversation with a quiet young man be equally as boring? Well, at least with young Ford there was some chance he might prove distracting.

"Good day to you. What brings a young man to this dreadfully boring park?"

Ford yelped, there was no other word to describe the sound, as his papers went flying all about. His eyes - a deep, dark blue, Jude did not recall his brothers having such eyes, and they were so different from his own pale green - went wide, face flushing red. "My lord, I did not hear your approach."

Jude chuckled. "So I see. I do apologize. Let me help you gather your papers." He snatched one from the air as the wind tried to steal it, one brow quirking at the slightly panicked look that overtook Ford's face. "Hmm," he teased, amused by the obvious discomfort, taking a guess as to the reason. "Writing sonnets by the pond? How...traditional."

Though he hadn't thought it possible, Ford flushed even darker. "Hardly sonnets, my lord. Only a letter, and I have not accomplished even that." Hastily Ford finished gathering all his things, stuffing the papers into the writing case.

"So it is a matter of affection," Jude said, amusement growing. "Traditional, indeed. You do not simply choose the route of seduction? That is more traditional still."

If any more blood stained those pretty cheeks, the lad would pass out for want of blood in other portions of his body. "I am hardly capable of seduction, my lord," Ford replied, bitterness and sadness thick in his voice, woven through with mortification that they were even discussing it.

Jude chuckled softly. "Seduction is not so hard a thing to learn."

"Indeed, my lord." Sadness dominated his voice this time, flickering across his face. "Everyone knows, my lord, you are a master of such things. I am precisely the opposite." He looked away, then looked back and bobbed his head in an apologetic nod. "No doubt I am also quite boring. Forgive me, my lord. I should not burden you with my problems."

"Not at all," Jude replied, and realized he meant it. How could he complain? The conversation was amusing, entertaining, and an idea had begun to tease. Outrageous, to be certain, but now that he'd thought of it, he could not give up the thought. "I was the one to startle you, after all. So you know nothing of the ways of seduction? The pleasures of the flesh?"

Ford's face flushed anew. He half wondered if it was a perpetual state. "Do I look as though I would, my lord?" His eyes flashed with an anger at odds with the discomfort turning his face red. "I have done nothing to warrant such mockery, my lord."

Jude lifted both brows. A shy little kitten, to be certain, but even kittens had claws and teeth. How



deliciously distracting. "No mockery was intended, I do beg your pardon. It was meant as an honest question. You are pretty enough, and many favor that youthful, innocent air."

"Indeed," Ford said tightly, eyes jerking away to gaze out over the pond. "Unfortunately, too many prefer experience."

Jude smiled, surprising himself. Then again, he was most certainly not feeling bored now. That was plenty enough reason to smile. "So you reduce yourself to penning letters, rather than going about learning the ways of flesh?"

The cheeks burned again. Honestly, that would have to be overcome, amusing though it may be. Jude wondered idly how far the flush extended, if he burned red from head to foot when truly overcome. The idea was...strangely appealing. "As I said, my lord, I lack your talents. Neither have I a way of obtaining them. What is easy for you....is far more difficult for me." He stared at the ground, cheeks deep scarlet, and Jude realized now the flush carried a touch of shame.

Well, that certainly was not necessary. Not everyone need be a hopeless rake like himself. It was a vastly amusing life, most of the time, but it had its own pitfalls.

He moved the slightest step closer, just barely invading Ford's personal space - but it was more than enough to make Ford take a step back, then another as Jude moved closer again. Until Ford collided with a tree.

So easy.

Jude braced his hand just to the left of Ford's head, almost laughing at the way those dark, dark eyes went wide. "Would you like to learn?"

Ford choked. "W-what?"

This time he did chuckle, reaching up idly to dust the knuckle of his right hand down Ford's left cheek. "Well, you call me a master, and you are an innocent in need of lessons. I am in need of an interesting way to pass the time, and you want to know how to seduce your man. I would call it a fair exchange."

It was a wonder there was blood left for the rest of his body, so much of it seemed to have gathered in Ford's face. "My-my lord. You could not possibly mean..."

"Oh, but I do," Jude said, dropping his hand and stepping away. "One month, say? That will bring us to her Majesty's Summer Gala. The perfect opportunity to seduce your man. By then, I will have made you a master in your own right."

Ford's eyes were still so wide. He licked his lips. "You are making a mockery of me, my lord. I cannot see why you would offer such a thing. Indeed, are you not one of those who prefer experience?"

"I prefer not to be bored," Jude replied, moving close again, trapping Ford between him and the tree. "So what say you, innocent? Yes or no?"

Seconds turned to minutes as Ford stared at the ground, at the pond, at his discarded writing case. Finally he looked up, a hint of something - determination, stubbornness, or maybe defiance - in his eyes, the tilt of his chin. "Very well, my lord. Accepted. However, if you are to give me lessons, then there should be payment?"

Jude laughed and bent down just enough to brush a feather-soft kiss across Ford's lips. "Oh, I think I shall receive payment aplenty from the arrangement." He pulled away, amused at the dazed look upon Ford's face. "And as I said, it will keep me from boredom. That is all I truly

require."

"Of course," Ford replied, the words oddly calm. Then again, he did look rather overwhelmed. How entertaining. He was used to men who knew all the rules, all the plays, men far too jaded to be affected by such a simple kiss - if they bothered to kiss at all.

"Call upon me tomorrow, young Ford," Jude said stepping further away, giving Ford breathing space.

Ford looked at him, then looked away, cheeks once more burning fiercely. "Yes, my lord."

Jude laughed softly. "Under the circumstances, I think you must call me Jude."

"Crispin," Ford replied. "Calling me Ford makes me think of my father or brothers."

"As you like, then, Crispin. Call in the early afternoon, I will treat you to lunch. Lessons will begin shortly thereafter." Winking, Jude turned and strode away before Crispin could say anything further, mind spinning with ideas for all the lessons he could and would give.

\*~\*~\*

The next day brought rain, a summer shower that made it impossible to do anything but stare out the window and wait for it to end. The rain was so heavy he could scarcely see the stoop, never mind the drive and the lawn beyond.

Jude rather felt like sulking.

Glaring at the rain once more, he abandoned the front salon and made his way to his study to do precisely that. Settling behind his great desk, he worked his way without interest through correspondence he had been avoiding the past few days.

Invitations to various fetes, a weekend party, letters from distant friends, one from his sister who lived halfway across the world now. Quickly he sorted everything into that which could be discarded, those to which his secretary would need to reply, and the letters he would like to keep.

The clock in the hallway chimed the fourteenth hour, and Jude lost interest in the letter he was pretending to read. Such foul weather made travel foolish, if not downright impossible, though the Ford estate was only an hour or so by horseback from his own.

No note had come stating that Crispin was canceling their appointment, but Jude had not sent a note either. There was no need - the weather was plenty note enough.

Still, when he had been looking forward to a day that should have been anything but boring...rain and correspondence made for poor compensation.

Bother it.

Shoving back from his desk, Jude stood and strode over to his bookcases. The majority of his books were kept in the library proper, but he had several of his dearest in his study. He touched the spines lightly, perusing his options, but in the end returned to his desk with nothing.

He had just begun going over his accounts for the month when he heard the sharp, echoing bangs of the knocker being struck. Who the devil would come knocking in this weather? Surely not...

Jude stood up and moved round his desk, even as he saw Feathers stride by the open study

door. Moving slowly toward the door, he paused there as Feathers opened the front door and spoke to someone outside.

The rain drowned out any chance he stood of hearing the speaker, but a moment later Feathers stepped back and ushered in a short, thin figure draped in a sopping cloak.

It was rare anything surprised Jude. He could count on one hand the number of lovers who had ever braved such inclement weather to visit him and still hold a glass of brandy without difficulty. His feet were moving before he quite realized it. "Feathers, have a hot bath drawn. Tell the cook to prepare tea, we'll take it in blue room. I will tend our guest here."

"Yes, my lord," Feathers said, and vanished to carry out his orders.

Jude watched in silence as Crispin stripped off his sodden cloak. The clothes beneath were only slightly better off. "I left my horse in the stable, my lord. I hope that was not taking liberty."

"It is not, but were it, I could hardly take issue," Jude replied, teasing him with a gentle smirk. "The entire purpose of our acquaintance is, after all, to take liberty. Extreme liberty." And oh how he suddenly wanted to take them - the depth of that want was startling, but he never had been the type to deny what he wanted. Soaked from the rain, very little of Crispin was left to the imagination, dark strands of hair clinging to his cheeks, the pretty eyes moving restlessly. "I did not expect to see you today, my dear boy."

"Oh," Crispin said, eyes widening with dismay, cheeks turning ruddy. "Shall I take myself off? I..."

Jude caught his forearm in a light hold as Crispin started to pull his cloak back on and turn away. "Not at all. I simply assumed the weather would not be worth braving."

Crispin looked at him, amusement flickering across his face, but the reason for it went unvoiced.

"What has you so amused?" He drawled the question, making the question sound as though it was asked out of bored curiosity.

There was a moment of hesitation, wariness in Crispin's face - but a smile twitched his lips. "I have braved more than one storm in my life, my lord, and will face many more, if the only other option available to me is to remain trapped inside with my older brothers.

"Ah, yes. Siblings." Jude found himself returning the hint of smile. How strange, that was twice now Crispin had tricked him into smiling. "My sister oft found herself the victim of rainy day pranks."

"Yes, my lord," Crispin said, smile settling more firmly on his mouth. "So, you see, the storm is not much of an obstacle."

Jude nodded, and finally took the wet cloak, passing it to the maid who had appeared.

"My lord, the bath will be ready shortly. We've also put out some suitable clothing. All is waiting in the burgundy room..."

Ah, he had neglected to say where to put Crispin. Most of his guests came with amorous intent, but not all, so it was hard to anticipate his wishes. The burgundy room was across the hall from his own. "That will suffice, thank you, Abigail. See his cloak is dried and neatened, if you please."

He waited until she had gone again before speaking to Crispin. "Does your family know where you are?"

Crispin shook his head. "I did not feel at liberty to discuss our...arrangement, my lord, not certain of your wishes in the matter." His gaze landed on the door through which the maid had vanished. "You need not trouble yourself, my lord. I assure you I am not so wet as that."

"Nonsense," Jude said, and moved close enough to place a hand lightly on the small of his back, gently urging him forward. The fabric of his jacket was cold, but beneath he could feel the warmth of Crispin's body.

Perhaps this distraction would prove far more interesting than he had dared hope.

Continuing to half-push, half-guide, he got Crispin up the stairs and into the burgundy room. Steam curled from the copper tub set before a fire, and Jude nodded in approval that Feathers had thought to set out a glass of brandy on the small table near the bath. "Here you are, then. If you were willing to come see me in such foul weather, the least I can do is see you do not catch your death. Bathe, get warm, then find me in the blue parlor room."

"Y-yes, my lord."

Jude departed before he gave into a sudden temptation to begin lessons that very moment. He had far better control than that, and he must be more bored than he thought if he was this taken with the idea of playing tutor to such an innocent.

Shaking his head, he returned to the study to put his things in order, as he would not be getting further work done that day.

It was half past the fifteenth hour when Crispin reappeared, dressed in clothes finer than those in which he had arrived. Jude tried briefly to recall which of his myriad lovers might have left such finery behind, but could only manage to narrow it to three possibilities, and then only because few of his lovers were that slight.

All things considered, the clothing fit Crispin well. Black breeches and a deep violet afternoon jacket. The knot in his neck cloth was more intricate than he suspected Crispin ever bothered.

He fought a sudden, surprisingly hot, urge to tear the neck cloth away. Obviously the lack of boredom was going straight to his head. Or perhaps straight to his prick. Amused with himself, Jude beckoned for Crispin to sit.

His mouth curved when Crispin chose the nearby chair. "Now, now, my pretty pupil. There are different ways to go about the little game I am teaching you to play. 'Hard to get' is, I suspect, too advanced a style of play for you. A bit of forwardness will contrast beautifully with your innocent air." He crooked his fingers idly. "Sitting over there is playing hard to get. Forwardness would be to come and sit by me."

Crispin flushed, but did not move.

"Now, now, do not be a naughty student," Jude said. "Hmm, perhaps it is better to say do not defy me. You are more than welcome to be naughty. Now, come and sit by me."

Face burning, Crispin stood and moved to the settee, sitting at the far end of it.

Jude chuckled and snagged his arm, tugging him closer, so that their thighs were not quite touching. "Better." He let his fingers slowly fall away. "Now, the next part of this lesson - showing your gratitude properly."

Crispin started to speak, but Jude placed a finger over his lips, then slowly slid the finger away and cupped his chin, tilting Crispin's head up, angling it just so. "Now tell me thank you, as prettily as your tutors taught you to say it. Do not move your head or look away until I bid you."

Red-faced and embarrassed, Crispin nevertheless obeyed. "Thank you, my lord, for your fine hospitality. You are most generous."

"Oh, very prettily said, indeed. I think you will be a fine pupil. Now, here is an important lesson for you. Seduction is all about control. You are the seducer, therefore you control the situation. We are playing off your quieter nature, therefore, your goal is to coax me into taking liberties."

He was so very tempted already. Perhaps he should consider giving lessons more often, if it stirred his blood so much. It was an idea he had given in to on impulse, but he was utterly taken with it. Why, he was not quite certain. Simply because it was such an amusing way to go about those acts in which he'd engaged a thousand times and more.

"Tempt me, lovely. Take full advantage of the situation. Thank me again, but this time offer a desire to thank me, or perhaps being at a loss as to how to thank me. Lean forward a bit as you say it, invite me with body as much as words."

They really would have to overcome those red cheeks, amusing as they were. Crispin gave a slow blink, eyes darker than ever. "Thank you, my lord, for your generous hospitality." He obediently leaned forward the slightest bit. Perfect, really. Perhaps a natural seducer lurked beneath the flushed face and nervous mien.

A surprisingly unpleasant thought, though Jude could not say why. If the lessons were in seductions, all the better if Crispin showed a natural capability for it. Still...it would make the lessons too easy, and easy was boring.

"I am at a loss as to how to thank you properly," Crispin finished, and then his nervousness got the better of him, as he licked his lips.

The gesture was a perfect touch, even if he didn't realize it.

Jude sank a hand into the soft, dark hair, tugging his head back to a sharper angle, falling into the proper role for this little lesson. It was entirely too easy to do. "I'm certain we can think of something, if you insist, but it is my pleasure to be your generous host."

Then he kissed Crispin, because that was the natural conclusion to this little play. He'd intended to keep it brief, so as not to overwhelm, but the mouth beneath his was surprisingly soft and warm, flavored with brandy, and shockingly pliant.

Crispin's responses were awkward, clumsy, but he quickly grasped the basics. How strange a feeling, to know he was the first to have done this. He avoided innocents like the plague, preferring the company of those who knew what they were about and would suffer no illusions. Nothing spoiled a dalliance like declarations of love and eternity and other such claptrap.

When he finally broke the kiss, Crispin looked thoroughly dazed and wonderfully mussed, and in no small way seriously affected. Jude almost smiled. His ego hardly needed the stroking, but he liked to see a mere kiss have such a strong affect.

It was, however, more than a little astonishing that the kiss affected him.

Attributing it to an amusing distraction after so many days of ennui, Jude sat back and summoned an approving smile. "Well done for a first lesson." He idly reached out and brushed back a loose strand of damp hair from Crispin's cheek, then sat all the way back in his own seat. "Now, if you would, pour us some tea and we shall move right along."

Nodding, face hot, Crispin moved to pour the tea. Jude considered and discarded instructions on teasing and playing with food, serving tea - such things required a degree of artifice and

playfulness that would likely prove problematic for Crispin to affect.

He accepted his tea as Crispin offered it, holding the fragile-looking green and blue porcelain cup lightly, sipping idly. Dark and sweet, exactly as he liked it. Taking another sip, he then set the teacup aside and reached for a bit of savory pie, eating it slowly as he regarded his pupil, who sat quietly eating a scone and sipping tea.

Another bit of pie kept him from reaching out to stroke the still-red cheeks.

So easily embarrassed, so shy and awkward - yet there was boldness beneath that, to agree to such a thing as these lessons. Boldness or pure determination...desperation? Either way, it was remarkable. Jude was impressed, and despite himself wanted suddenly, badly to know who would inspire so quiet a boy to such lengths as these.

Well, he had never been one to deny himself. "For whom do you take these lessons?" he asked, breaking the silence. "Seduction works all the better when tailored to the last detail for a specific person? What arouses one will repel another."

Crispin shrugged, eyes meeting his briefly before skittering away. "I feel foolish enough, my lord, without confessing the object of my torment. I beg of you not to demand of me a name."

He moved before he thought, licking crumbs from his lips as he loomed over Crispin, bracing his hands on either side of him, forcing Crispin to lean back, putting him at a lovely angle. "Well, normally I would demand...but I like the way you beg, pretty pupil."

The blue eyes widened, Crispin drawing a sharp breath, and the heat from the kiss that had only just dissipated came back in full. Before he realized what he was doing, Jude was kissing him again, taking all the pleasure to be had from Crispin's warm, untutored mouth.

Jude broke the kiss, sternly admonishing himself to focus. "You are proving to be the finest of pupils, Crispin." He rubbed his thumb over the kiss-swollen lips. "Fine, indeed. Which brings me to a question that perhaps I should have addressed sooner. How much do you want to learn from me? A line must be drawn somewhere, after all."

Crispin stared at him, then his chin lifted slightly in a gesture of stubbornness that only young men could affect so well. "I want to know what you know, my lord. I did not agree to this only to do things by half."

"Good answer," Jude murmured, satisfaction making his blood hot. Oh, the things he would enjoy teaching this one. A better man would feel ashamed at the idea of taking such advantage of Crispin. Jude had always enjoyed being a rake; let the better men have their rules and propriety.

He wanted Crispin hot and slick with sweat, gasping beneath him, or atop him riding with that strange mixture of shy and bold. Ah, yes. What a fine thing his impulse of yesterday had brought to him.

Sitting back, Jude retrieved his tea and sipped it slowly. "So tell me more about yourself, Crispin, if you will not speak of the object of your affections. If we are not to know the prey, then we must know the predator."

Crispin laughed, and Jude could not miss the trace of sadness in it. "There's not much to tell about me. The youngest of three, and I take after my mother. I studied abroad in her homeland for a couple of years." His mouth quirked in a smile. "It was good to return home; I never developed a true taste for most of the food there. Too spicy."

"I never favored it, myself," Jude said, smiling. "In fact, I believe one of those confounded dishes rendered me sick abed for three days. I have stuck to less exotic dishes ever since."

"I suspect I know which dish was the culprit," Crispin said, hesitant smile turning into a grin. "My mother occasionally has the cooks make her the food she misses. None of us ever eat with her, much to her dismay."

Jude nodded, and set his empty cup down. Before he could move to pour more, Crispin was already doing it, fixing it quickly and smiling shyly as he handed it back. Oh, a natural indeed.

He found he rather wished Crispin was not proving so very good at his lessons, for that would bring them all the sooner to an end. Reaching out to accept the freshly filled teacup, Jude let his fingers brush Crispin's, lingering a moment. "You are taking well to your lessons," he murmured, gazing at Crispin over the rim of his teacup.

Crispin flushed. "You - my lord is a fine instructor."

That was not what he had first intended to say, but Jude squashed an urge to ask. "Have you any plans for the rest of day, Crispin?"

"No, my lord."

Jude chuckled and set his teacup down. "Now, did we not already dispense with formalities? If you are going to continue to address me so, I shall have to cease calling you Crispin, and that would be a pity."

"Oh. Of course, my-" Crispin licked his lips, and his voice had softened when he spoke again. "Jude. My apologies."

He'd not heard his name said that prettily in many long years. As if being permitted to say it were a privilege, rather than a right.

A dangerous thought slipped into his mind, that whoever had snared this young man was very lucky indeed. He did not like it, that thought. Dismissing it, he focused on the matter at hand.

Cupping Crispin's chin, he tugged him gently forward and brushed a slow kiss across his mouth, wondering at the way it burned right through him. "Well, if you have no plans, then remain here with me the rest of the day. You take so well to your lessons, we may as well keep them going at a vigorous pace."

Ah, yes. There were his red cheeks. "As you wish, m-Jude. I should send my family a note, however, for they will miss me come the dinner hour."

"Send any note you like," Jude said, letting go and sitting back, sipping his tea. "It certainly does me no harm for all to know you dally here with me. For your part, it would help to make you a man of experience in the eyes of your true love, to know I had coaxed you into my lair. Hmm? So send your note, and by tomorrow afternoon all will know you have entered into a dalliance with me. He smiled. "Why, come the Summer Gala, you will have your man all but melting in your palm."

Crispin smiled faintly, staring into his tea for a long moment. Finally he looked up. "As you say, my lord. Very well. If you have the materials, I will pen a note to my family." He laughed briefly. "I half wish I was home to see the looks upon their faces. The very moment I return, they will wonder where I really passed the time."

Jude smirked, and pitched his voice low, injecting unmistakable intent into his tone. "Then we will have to make certain you return home looking thoroughly tussled."

He found, to his great horror and dismay, that he was finding those flushes less and less

amusing, and far more like something suspiciously close to endearing.

Foolishness. He had been bored so long, he had forgotten what it was like not to be bored. It was going straight to his head. That was all.

Jude stood and crossed the room to the bell pull, summoning a servant to fetch writing implements and to see a proper dinner was prepared.

\*~\*~\*

He suspected he was spying, or cheating, or something equally unbecoming his character.

Jude could not bring himself to care. In fact, the only thing which bothered him at present was that he still lacked an answer to the burning question that gave him no rest.

Who did Crispin love?

He stared at the gallery below, the people milling about, eyes following Crispin, hoping to catch some clue as to who had captured his fancy.

So far, he could not determine it. Crispin had spent the last quarter hour engaged in conversation with St. Rose. Jude had for a moment thought St. Rose was the one - and he would hardly be able to fault Crispin's taste, for St. Rose was lovely, indeed - but the ease with which they spoke to one another denoted a friendship, not a deeper infatuation.

Anyway, St. Rose was hardly a man of experience, and rumor had it he'd taken up with that duelist.

He didn't know why it nagged him so much. Well, he wanted to know who would ultimately benefit from the thorough education he was giving Crispin. He would be thoroughly annoyed to learn some foppish ninny or cold cynic would be reaping the benefits of his own hard labor.

Irritated with himself and his uncharacteristic behavior, Jude forced a halt to his spying and made for the grand staircase, descending with his usual air of bored detachment.

Crispin caught his eye, but then slowly turned away, returning his attention to St. Rose.

Good boy. Jude had not initially thought to carry their lessons into a public setting, but the instructor in him insisted upon thoroughness. It would do Crispin a great deal of good to grow at least moderately comfortable with flirting and playing in public.

He took a flute of champagne from a passing footman, sipping it as he made a circuit of the gallery, nodding to a few, murmuring brief words to another few, catching Crispin's eye here and there, smirking occasionally, chuckling at the flushed cheeks, the brief smiles, the sweet and simple way Crispin was oh so obediently flirting with him.

It made him want to take Crispin out into the garden and ravish him thoroughly.

His lessons were working all too well.

Stifling a sigh, utterly sick of his mood of late, Jude finished his champagne and snatched up a fresh flute.

It was time, he decided after a few generous sips, to move to the next stage.

He turned to make his way toward Crispin, only to find his way abruptly and pointedly blocked.



Bartholomew Ford glared at him, and though his coloring was fair to Crispin's dark, there was no mistaking they were siblings. "Prescott."

"Ford," Jude greeted. He did not know the Ford family well, though he and Bartholomew had attended school together. They had been too far apart in interests, however, to be more than passing acquaintances.

He recognized that look in Bartholomew's eyes, however. Too many times to count had he come up against one outraged relative or another. He was surprised only that it had taken the Fords this long to lodge a protest. "My brother is not one of your playthings, Prescott."

Jude shrugged. "He is a man full grown, and capable of making his own decisions. If he chooses to dally with me, that is his affair. Not yours."

"Crispin has no idea what he's gotten into."

He almost laughed, but checked the impulse. Crispin was neither as gullible nor naïve as his brother - family - seemed inclined to believe. Innocent, yes, but not so innocent as that, even before the lessons had begun.

Offered the chance, Crispin had taken up the offer of lessons. He was taking to them beautifully, and Jude did not doubt that in two more weeks Crispin would have the object of his desire bedded and thoroughly enamored.

That word hammered through him, and Jude shoved it back, buried it, furiously ignored it. "I assure you, Crispin knows precisely into what he's gotten himself."

Bartholomew glared, all but vibrating with anger. "Do not speak of him with such familiarity."

Jude nearly rolled his eyes. Bartholomew took issue with his calling Crispin by his given name? He fought a childish - suicidal - impulse to tell Bartholomew where precisely Crispin's mouth had been the previous night, and how eagerly Crispin had put it there. They were a bit past being formal in the matter of names.

He struggled to recall himself, unable to believe how easily distracted he had become. "He has given me leave to address him, thus, Ford. It is not your name to dictate who may or may not use it."

"Bart!" Crispin's voice broke in as he abruptly appeared at Jude's side.

There was nothing shy or hesitant about him at the moment, eyes pure blue fire as they focused on Bartholomew. "You had better be discussing the weather, Bart," Crispin snapped.

"What we are discussing is none of your business," Bartholomew snapped. "I told you-"

"Bugger off," Crispin replied, cutting him off. "I'm not in the schoolroom any longer, Bart. I haven't been for a long time. You don't have to like my decisions, but they are my decisions. Cease interfering right this moment or I will march across the gallery and tell Miss Merrick the real reason you cancelled your outing in the park last Saturday. Do I make myself clear?"

Bartholomew bristled. He pointed a finger at Jude. "You can do far better than this cold rake, Cris."

"I thank you for your concern, Bart," Crispin said softly, but firmly, "but it is my decision. You do not have to like it, but it's none of your business."

"Fine," Bartholomew said, then turned and stalked away.

Jude frowned, even as he noticed the hand that had wrapped around his upper arm and remained there even after Bartholomew vanished from sight. "I confess I knew it would likely please no one that I have apparently taken you as my latest paramour, but I did not intend to cause you such strife."

Crispin rolled his eyes, hand falling away from Jude's arm. "If they were not taking issue with my dalliance with you, it would be something else. I am the youngest, and will always be the youngest. They have trouble understanding that I am no longer a boy in the schoolroom." He rolled his eyes again, then smiled in rueful amusement. "You should have seen them when I was packing for my journey abroad. I half expected Bart to decide to accompany me, after all, as I was wholly incapable of caring for myself. My father is the only one who sees fit to give me a chance, and he finally had to drive them all from the house to give me a moment's peace." He held Jude's gaze a moment longer, then the pretty eyes skittered away. "They are none of them pleased that I have succumbed to your rakish wiles, but it is none of their business."

"Rakish wiles?" Jude asked, surprised laughter overtaking him.

It was not the first time Crispin had so managed to coax laughter from him, and the ease with which he managed it was in no small way distressing. He reached out to ever so lightly touch Crispin's hip with his fingers. "You were doing beautifully, pet. I was not the only admiring you, and I think were it not I, you would have offers aplenty to show you to the gardens." He meant to keep speaking, but the words stuck in his throat, unexpectedly. Furious, he forced them out. "If you want to call off the lessons at any time, you have only to say."

Something flickered across Crispin's face, too quickly for Jude to puzzle the emotion out. "Of course, my lord, if that is what you wish. Am I keeping you from some other dalliance?"

"Not at all," Jude replied. "Our lessons are vastly more amusing than a simple dalliance would be, at least so far." He motioned. "Speaking of lessons, we have thoroughly fallen out of today's lesson. Let us resume it, for it will be this public method you first employ the night of the Summer Gala. Now, does your beau favor dancing?"

Crispin shook his head. "No, he does not. I rarely see him anywhere but watching the festivities from a distance."

Well, that was some relief. Jude detested dancing. There were infinitely better ways to spend one's time than gallivanting across a crowded floor, getting one's toes smashed and other similar bothers. "All the easier then," he replied. In the back of his mind he shuffled through names and faces, drawing out a dozen or so likely candidates.

He found none of them pleasing, or worthy of the effort he was putting forth with Crispin. Not that it mattered to him, particularly. Still, for all his trouble...

Mentally giving himself a stern shake, he focused. "Let us resume where we would be had your charming brother not interrupted the lesson."

"Yes, Jude." Crispin brushed back a strand of hair which had fallen forward, then let his hand drop. He took a slow breath, gathering himself, then looked up again with one of his soft smiles. "Is my lord enjoying the gallery this evening?"

It was truly fascinating, how Crispin shifted from his quiet self to...being a good student, Jude supposed. He took to his lessons beautifully, even when it was obvious they discomfited him - always obvious by the flush to his cheeks, though right now they were only pink.

"Quite," Jude murmured, falling easily into his role of seducer. "Many of the pieces are not worth a glance, but one or two are most pleasing to look upon." He let his eyes wander slowly up and

down Crispin's body, his own going tight and hot as flashes of their every intimate encounter chose that moment to invade his mind.

Crispin flushed, but he struggled to remain as cool as Jude. "Indeed, my lord. What pieces do you favor?"

A tidy reply. Jude could answer it at face value, and talk about the artwork, or he could be bold and make his feelings even plainer. The seducer was forcing his prey to make his wants clear. It was a bolder, simpler way to play the game, but for Crispin, that was probably best.

That Crispin obviously understood this was commendable. Nothing was more tedious than a man who played a game to which he was not suited.

However, Jude was not inclined to make it too easy. Lessons learned too easily did not truly take. "Perhaps you would care to make a guess?" he replied.

Crispin blinked, clearly startled by the response, but he rallied quickly. "Oh, now that is entirely unfair, my lord. There are one hundred and seven pieces on display this evening. Won't you at least be kind enough to narrow down the choices? It is hard to guess a man's mind when it comes to art." He paused ever so briefly before that last word, a beautiful execution.

Jude barely kept back the grin that fought to overtake his face. Truly, he'd not had this much fun in longer than he cared to recall. Crispin was a fine student. "I would hate to make it too easy."

"Yet if you make it too difficult, I shall spend the night guessing and never land upon the answer. I would hate for the night to end in disappointment."

He stepped a bit closer. "I would hate for you to guess too quickly, and the night end early. There too lies disappointment."

Crispin chuckled. "An impasse, then, my lord?"

"I fear most discussions of art usually end thus," Jude replied. "Art is engaging only for those who do the creating, I feel. The role of observer is rather lacking."

"My lord would prefer to be an artist? You did not seem the type to take up such an active role."

Jude's mouth curved in a smile of unmistakable intent. "I prefer action to observation in all things."

"Indeed, my lord," Crispin replied, cheeks hot but meeting his eyes all the same, pushing on, flirting back. "Yet I seldom see you take part in anything. Indeed, you have been inactive this entire night."

"All action requires...motivation...perhaps inspiration would be the better word." He gave Crispin a long thorough look.

"I see. Where does my lord most frequently find his inspiration?"

Jude motioned. "The outdoors, naturally. Gardens, I find, are particularly inspiring."

Instead of the expected reply of some request or demand to be shown the gardens, essentially the goal of their playacting, Crispin said, "I cannot see what there is to inspire in a summer shower, my lord."

"What?" Jude said, surprise jolting him from his role. He looked toward the balcony, and realized abruptly that he was far more distracted than he had realized. Horribly, distressingly distracted if

he had failed to notice that it had begun to rain. Bugger it, he was heartily sick of these summer showers.

He finally laughed. "I suppose inspiration has abandoned me this night, gone to drier places."

"Myself," Crispin replied, "I have always found inspiration comes best when there are no distractions about. The outdoors offer far too many distractions."

Jude quirked one brow. "There is distraction no matter where one goes."

"Not if one knows of a room with a lock that would forbid entrance to all distractions, and keep inspiration firmly within."

Well played indeed. He would never be a rake, or even remotely close to one, but Jude could not comprehend why Crispin had been so hopeless that first day. He could seduce away the heart of whomever he wanted, truly.

"I find myself in doubt," he finally replied.

"Come, my lord," Crispin replied. "I shall prove it to you."

Jude sketched a playful bow and held out his arm, allowing Crispin to guide him from the gallery. At his back, he could all but feel a burning, angry glare, but he paid it no mind.

When they reached a small office, he waited just long enough for Crispin to lock the door, then shoved him up against it and took his mouth.

He was dismayed to realize the groan he heard was his own, but then Crispin's blended with it, and he kissed harder, deeper, thrusting a leg between Crispin's thighs, feeling the hard heat of him.

Crispin's fingers dug into his shoulders, then slid up to tangle in his hair, clinging for dear life, whimpering as he rubbed against Jude like a cat in heat.

Jude slid his hands down Crispin's sides, circling around to his back, then down to his ass, grabbing it firmly and tugging hard, making Crispin buck and gasp at the increased contact. Gods in heaven, he wanted this man.

So far they had done much, but that which he most wanted...he held back. He did not know why, or perhaps did not want to address why. Normally he did not shy away from matters in his own head...with Crispin, however, he was hiding from things more and more.

He didn't intend to stop hiding now. No, at the moment he had matters more interesting than the contents of his own head to attend. Releasing his hold on Crispin, he shifted enough to get his hands on the front, swiftly undoing Crispin's breeches. Shoving away bothersome fabric, tugging the breeches and smallclothes down just enough to be out of his way, he took Crispin's cock firmly in hand and stroked it briefly, teasing and tormenting.

The needy moans fed into his mouth were untutored and all the more heady for it. In this, of all things, he should be teaching Crispin how to play the jade - yet he could not bring himself to do it. He liked too much the noises and responses so freely offered, given up simply because it would never occur to Crispin not to surrender them.

Heady. Intoxicating. Jude turned away from thinking about it, instead dropping to his knees and replacing hand with mouth.

Crispin let out a hoarse shout, muffling it too late with the sleeve of his jacket. Jude would have

laughed, were he not otherwise engaged. He licked and sucked, wrapping one hand around Crispin's hip, using the other to tease his balls, to slip just behind them, drawing out every last response he could, until with another cry Crispin found his release.

Swallowing all evidence of pleasure, Jude once more stood and took Crispin's mouth, and the deep moan that earned him was the sweetest sound on earth. He allowed one hand to stray, caressing the flesh now bared, pressing every so slightly.

Fingers dug into his jacket, Crispin clinging for dear life. "Jude..."

"You are the finest of students, pet," Jude replied, pressing his fingers into hidden places, drunk on the expression that overcame Crispin's face.

Crispin shivered and kissed him, and the unexpected initiative was nearly Jude's undoing.

Then a hand ran lightly over his prick, and he gasped. "Crispin-"

"You never-" Crispin broke off, and even in the dim light Jude could see he was flushing.

"I never what?"

"Finish these lessons," Crispin said, staring hard at Jude's jacket. "I-I'm not wholly ignorant, you know. I have books my parents and brothers don't know about it." He shifted, pressing against Jude's fingers still teasing ever so slightly at his entrance. "I've seen-I know-you never-"

Jude groaned and kissed Crispin hard. The most experienced men and women in the world had never so deeply affected him as this single, inexperienced young man. He'd always stayed away from innocents for a reason - he hadn't known this was that reason. "Is that what you want, pet?"

Crispin nodded, hiding his face against Jude's shoulder.

Kissing the small bit of exposed neck, Jude forced himself to withdraw his hands, pushing Crispin up to right his clothes, give them both some semblance of respectability. "Come, then, and we will continue tonight's lesson at my home. Not here." As fine an idea as it was to take him hard and fast against the door, that was not even remotely appropriate for the first lesson.

Holding fast to Crispin's hand, unable to make himself let go, he avoided the main gallery in taking them to the entrance, and when he called for his carriage it did not come nearly as fast as he would have liked.

The ride home was interminable, though he was at least compensated with stolen kisses and fevered caresses. When they finally arrived home, he barely waited for the carriage to come to a halt before threw the door open and Crispin out.

Inside, he attempted to regain some of his control, taken aback at how easy it had been to lose. He drew Crispin close for a deep kiss, wrapping an arm around his waist, sinking the other into his hair, drunk on the taste and feel, the open, needy sounds.

It all combined to want to make him drop his own long-established walls. Shivering, he broke the kiss and turned away to lead Crispin up the stairs. He tried to recall the last time he'd actually bothered to take anyone to his room. Though he often brought lovers home, most often they wound up in one of the other bedrooms.

For this, however, that somehow struck him poor form. He was...a good teacher, and would not do things by half.

His valet had lit the lamps, casting a rich, warm glow across the deep crimson and rich brown of

his room. Turning, he drew Crispin close for another kiss, undone the hundredth time as easily as the first by the simple open eagerness with which Crispin responded.

It took some effort to divest them both of clothing, effort and a fair bit of swearing, and he was at least grateful the gallery fete meant they'd not been required to wear boots. Crispin's skin positively glowed in the warm light, looking all the finer as Jude pushed him gently down upon the crimson coverlet of his enormous bed.

He had seen all that lovely flesh before, had become thoroughly acquainted with it in the past fortnight...but never quite like this, or for this purpose. It should not be so thrilling; he had taken and been taken more times than he could count in his life. His sole missions in life had ever been to see that his sister married well and happily, and his own pleasure. The first was long ago taken care of, and the second an eternal pursuit.

Smoothing his hands along Crispin's thighs, stomach, chest, he slowly joined him on the bed, making them both gasp at the contact, taking a kiss to distract himself from doing or saying something foolish.

He nuzzled the soft skin of Crispin's throat, stroking his chest and stomach, fingers sliding through the early evidence of desire smeared there. "Ah, pet, you are the finest of students."

"You are the finest of teachers," Crispin said, twisting and writhing, struggling to touch and pet in his turn. Untutored, though more experienced than when they had first begun such things, and all the more delicious for it.

Catching one hand up, Jude pressed a kiss to the palm, the wrist, trailing his way slowly to the fine shoulder, back to the soft skin of his throat. Fingers sank into his hair as he moved lower, Crispin groaning low and long, growing clumsy as Jude got the better of him, consumed him.

Jude reared up abruptly to kiss him, not breaking it until the need to breathe became urgent, then tore away only to fetch the oil he would need very shortly. He took another kiss as he rejoined Crispin. "Are you certain this is what you want, pet?"

Crispin nodded, eyes bright and sharp, unflinching even as his cheeks burned hotter than they ever had before, the flush consuming his skin right down to his chest. "I want thorough instruction. In everything."

There it was again, that sudden boldness even as he was obviously embarrassed. Then again, when one was naked and spread and hard, there was little sense in remaining hesitant.

Jude laughed softly and spread Crispin's legs, settling between them and slicking his fingers. "Here I thought you would be a bit frightened. You are not even overwhelmed."

Crispin blinked at him. "Why would I be frightened of you?"

Oh. That was unexpected, and Jude realized that he had well and truly lost the battle against those things he had avoided thinking upon. He bent to give a kiss, taking Crispin's mouth hard enough to bruise, as he pushed one finger inside.

He had teased and pressed before, but always halted before matters went too far. Not tonight, and he pressed the finger deeper, swallowing every gasp and cry. Breaking the kiss, he studied Crispin's flushed face, the eyes as dark as an evening sky.

"Pretty, pretty," he murmured, and added a second finger, beginning to stretch and prepare Crispin in earnest now. Beneath him, Crispin moved and pleaded, a sheen of sweat making his skin shine. He seemed made for pleasure, and something hot and fierce made it suddenly hard for Jude to breathe.

When he added a third, Crispin's entire body rippled, and he cried Jude's name in a desperate, eager plea.

A few moments more was all he could take, and Jude shifted to arrange himself properly. "Breathe, pet," he murmured, then slowly began to push inside. The tight heat, the hot eyes watching him even as he saw Crispin struggle with the foreign sensation, the initial pain, was nearly his undoing.

Nearly. Who was he fooling? Certainly not himself, any longer. Crispin had, indeed, proven himself to be a natural at seducing away hearts. Even hearts he did not want.

Shoving back unwelcome thoughts, for they had no place here, he finally seated himself fully within and stopped. "Good, pet?" he asked, taking a soft kiss.

"Uh huh," Crispin said, lips warm and pliant, but the fingers diggers into Jude's shoulders belied the mellow nature of the kiss. "Shouldn't you...move?"

Jude laughed and kissed him again, then braced his hands and slowly withdrew before thrusting back in. Mm, yes. That was a beautiful sight. "As you command, pet." He began to move in earnest, slowly at first, but rapidly moving faster, harder, as Crispin quickly proved how much of a natural he truly was, meeting every thrust, finding their rhythm so easily.

It was not long before Jude found his release, wrapping a hand around Crispin's prick, their cries tangling together, filling the bedchamber, and the only thing finer was collapsing atop his lover - his <i>student</i> -- and inhaling their mingled scents.

He stirred a moment later only to fetch a rag to clean them both. It was all too easy, after, to bundle Crispin close and let sleep snatch him away from those thoughts he still did not want to linger upon.

\*~\*~\*

Jude conceded, if only in his own head, that it was exactly what he deserved.

Once upon a time, he had met with one of his teachers after classes. Halfway through the interview, the naïve youth he'd been had stumbled upon the realization his teacher was attempting to seduce him. Surprised, Jude had given in to it.

That had opened up a world he had never wanted to abandon. By the end of his school days, he had excelled at lessons precious few knew were on offer. Set loose upon the world, he had only broadened his education.

The only useful thing he'd ever done with his skills was use them to mark and weed out the rakes and the cads from among his sister's multitude of suitors. Beyond that...well, up to the very day they'd died, his parents had said he was nothing but a spoiled brat, and they should have taken the strap to his backside a bit more often.

Jude had privately agreed, though the devil in him had been tempted to horrify his proper parents by telling them that in school, he'd had a strap applied to his lovely backside many a time. Such games had lost their charm as he grew older, but they had amused him for a time.

So at four and thirty, he supposed he was long due for a comeuppance. He had no one but himself to blame for this, and perhaps that would finally teach him there were worse things than being bored.

He sighed softly as the hallway clock struck the seventeenth hour, sipping at his brandy, wishing the night were already over. One last meeting, and then Crispin would be off to seduce the man he really wanted.

Jude wished he knew the object of Crispin's affections, so he at least had a face to put to the man he hated, but all his attempts, both subtle and overt, had failed miserably. Well, no matter, he would learn the secret in a few hours. He had told Crispin he'd no interest in attending the Gala, for typically such events bored him, but he fully intended now to linger just long enough to learn the identity of Crispin's beloved.

No doubt it was the poorest of form for the teacher to observe his pupil so, given what Crispin would be about...but Jude wanted to know against whom he had never stood a chance. He was not opposed to fighting a battle...he was opposed to the idea that he had lost before he'd known there was something worth the fight.

Try as he might, for he was not above a bit of seduction of his own, Crispin remained unmoved. Whoever held his heart, he held it truly. For all eternity, as the poets would say. The knowledge soured Jude's stomach.

He listened, heavy hearted, as Feathers answered the sharp knock upon the door. Generally inclined toward silence, Feathers was as charmed as the rest of the household by Crispin, and Jude could hear them chatting amiably as Feathers escorted Crispin to the study.

Ah, Crispin did cut so very fine a figure, now that he was dressed in clothing worthy of him. The evening jacket was a deep wine red, the breeches a blue dark enough to almost pass for black, pale gold shining from the folds of his intricately knotted cravat. Jude wore a shade of green he knew very well matched his eyes, the rest of his ensemble black. He always made certain he looked his finest, but the hot approval in Crispin's eyes was pleasing all the same.

A sudden, powerful urge rose up to beg Crispin to stay with him, forget the damnable lover too stupid to have failed to notice Crispin all this time. He was the most notorious rake in the country, far more experienced a lover by far than the other cads running about the place.

He ignored the impulse. Many a time had he been called cold, even cruel, though he had always struggled never to stoop so low. It was only one reason he had avoided innocents - they did not know how to hold partly back, how to remain detached.

If he had known an innocent would prove his undoing, he would have remained firmly against dallying with one. Ah, well. The mistake was made, he would have to live with the consequences. "You are a sight to behold, pet," he finally said, standing and moving around his desk. "A prize pupil indeed."

True to form, Crispin flushed at the praise, even as he proved his lessons were well-learned by lifting his head just so in silent request for a kiss.

Jude gave it, tasting a hint of wine, sharing the flavor of brandy which lingered on his own tongue.

"Well, pet, I would say you have surpassed any lessons I might give you. Tonight you are on your own, and I have not a doubt you will succeed beautifully." He stepped back, lest he give in to temptation to touch. Worse, he was yet again dangerously close to begging Crispin to give up this foolishness and remain with him.

Pathetic, that's what he had become. He was a notorious rake, mothers hid their sons and daughters from him whenever he drew too close. Only men as jaded as he, or those who thought they wanted to be so hardened, dared approach him.



And here he was, disgustingly smitten over a man who saw him only as the means to an end.

It was, he could not help but concede, exactly what he deserved. His parents would heartily approve of such just desserts. Were it anyone else, Jude would appreciate the delicious dark humor in it.

As it were, he wanted to be left alone to drink himself to oblivion, or possibly he would skip oblivion and go straight on toward death.

Oh, he was falling beautifully into the role of scorned and heartbroken lover, wasn't he?

Disgusted with himself, Jude reached out to tweak and adjust Crispin's neck cloth. "Ready for your evening, pet?"

Crispin nodded, eyes sliding away. Nervous, no doubt.

"You should not fret so, pet," Jude said. "You have done beautifully, you will continue to shine. By this time tomorrow, you will have your man composing sonnets."

That earned him a weak laugh.

"Come now, pet, show me that boldness I know hides beneath those flushed cheeks."

He really would miss the way that face turned so red at even the slightest intimacies. It was at the tip of his tongue to ask, to beg, Crispin to stay, and he fought them back only with years of discipline. He was a rake, but not a complete scoundrel. If Crispin's heart lay elsewhere, he would have to accept that.

Reaching out, he tilted Crispin's face up, dredging up a taunting smirk. "Come now, you should not retreat to your letter-writing days now. I know you hesitate, pet, but you are more than capable of taking what you want."

Crispin nodded, but did not look wholly convinced. In fact, he looked rather as though he had already lost the battle. Such a case of nerves would never do - though he hated Crispin was not staying with him, he wanted more than anything for Crispin to be happy.

He managed a teasing laugh. "Come now, pet. I have taught you better than that. This panic will never do, your man might think he must tie you to the bed in order to have his wicked way."

The gasp and shudder that extracted were heartbreaking. If Crispin found the idea of such submission to his man so appealing...then he was well and truly beyond Jude's reach. He had known it, but such a hard final blow was more than he could take - was more than he thought it fair for him to endure.

He let go of Crispin's chin and stepped back, wrapping himself in the familiar role of bored rake. "Our month is officially at an end, Ford. I see nothing in you which requires further refinement on my part. You have been an excellent pupil, and I like to think I was a sufficient instructor."

Crispin was obviously taken aback by the sudden coolness of his tone, but after a moment, he only nodded. "Thank you, Lord Prescott, for all that you have done. I will always appreciate it." He hesitated, then nodded. "I bid you farewell."

"Farewell," Jude replied, and allowed himself one last touch, bending to brush the softest of kisses to one warm cheek. Then he withdrew, putting a distance between them that he would never again breach.

He watched in stiff, miserable silence as Crispin departed, sagging against his desk only when

he heard the front door close. Twisting slightly, he snatched up his glass and drained the brandy all at once. It burned as it went down, and he welcomed it.

When the alcohol added its warm dullness to his pain, he barked for Feathers and ordered his carriage brought 'round.

A half hour was all it took to get him to the palace, and another quarter hour found him skulking in the shadows of a balcony, looking down upon the fete below.

He looked and looked, but nearly an hour later he still could not spy Crispin. Where was he? Surely he had not given in to his nerves...? No. A man who agreed to lessons in seduction and passion would not at the final hour abandon his plans. He must be about somewhere.

The scuff of boots turned his attention, and Jude turned to see Bartholomew glaring at him with a level of anger Jude had rarely seen. "We need to talk, and if you attempt to argue with me, Prescott, you will regret it."

Jude quirked one brow, but nodded. He was not up to his usual games tonight - though he resented being taken away from his chance to learn who Crispin loved.

He followed Bartholomew through the palace, deserted while everyone enjoyed the grand fete in the garden, until they at last stopped in what proved to be a small parlor.

"You are bloody fortunate I do not simply call you out, Prescott," Bartholomew snapped, all but bellowing the words. "What you have done to my brother is unforgivable. He is not of your world, you bastard."

Jude bristled. "I did nothing that he did not want, and you know nothing of the matter."

"Nothing of the matter?" Bartholomew roared. "You seduce and discard my brother, and leave him heartbroken, and you say I know nothing of the matter? I am two seconds away from challenging you, Prescott, and I am not sure you deserve that much respect."

"What?" Jude asked, dumbfounded. "I have done no such thing! I am guilty of many a crime, but not that."

"Forgive me if I do not believe you," Bartholomew sneered.

"No, I will not," Jude snapped. "Your brother claimed he stood no chance of attracting the man he loved for want of experience. I offered to teach him seduction and pleasure. He agreed. That was our arrangement. It ended this very night, that he might seduce his man at the Gala."

Bartholomew opened his mouth, then closed it with a snap. "That bloody *idiot*," he finally snarled. "I am going to wring his neck."

Jude glared. "I sense there is something here I am missing."

"You-is that truly what this past month has been about?" Bartholomew asked. "I could never get two words on the matter out of Cris."

"That was the arrangement," Jude said stiffly. "If your brother is heartbroken, it has nothing to do with me. He left my home this evening fully intending to come here and seduce the object of his affection."

Bartholomew's glare reached new levels of anger. "Bloody fool! My brother hates these affairs. He never agreed to go, and in fact said quite pointedly not to include his name on the RSVP. Not once did he ever plan to attend the Gala."

Jude frowned. "That...cannot be...why would he not come? He agreed that it was the perfect chance..."

"He's in love with you, bastard!" Bartholomew shouted the words loud enough Jude swore the glass in the room trembled with it. "He thinks he hides it, but we know him better than he likes to acknowledge. That bloody idiot has pined after you from the moment we dragged him to his first real fete."

"W-what?" Jude asked, unable to keep the tremor from his voice. That was impossible. He would have noticed, surely... "That cannot be. You must be mistaken."

"I am most certainly not mistaken," Bartholomew hissed, snatching Jude by the front of his jacket and snatching him close. "He is all too good at hiding his deepest feelings beneath all those he lets surface. Our mother is the same way. Now I ask of you, Prescott - what are you going to do about it? If I do not like your answer, I will put a shot in you here and now."

He really was the greatest of fools.

Shoving hard, he sent Bartholomew stumbling back, then bolted to the door.

"Where in the hell-"

"To find him," Jude said, cutting through Bartholomew's anger. "Apparently, we are not as finished as I thought."

"Truly, Prescott?" Bartholomew asked. "I do not like you, or trust you, but I would see my brother happy."

Jude nodded. "Truly." He departed before Bartholomew could say anything further.

Where would Crispin be? Why had the bloody idiot not said something?

The better question was - how could Jude have been so blind? Looking back, it now seemed so painfully obvious...

Really, it was almost amusing. Poor Crispin, sitting on that bench, struggling to write a letter, only to be startled by...

Ah. That's where Crispin would be. Of course.

Eschewing his carriage, or even a horse, Jude made his way as quickly as he could across the royal lawn and finally reached the royal park.

Normally he would not be able to resist admiring, if only briefly, the way the long rows of cherry trees looked in the moonlight. Tonight, he could not have cared less about them. At last reaching the end of the trees, he made straight for the pond, and the bench where boredom and curiosity had first compelled him to stop.

Crispin sat facing the pond, arms resting on his spread thighs, folded hands falling lifelessly between them.

"You are not penning letters?" Jude asked softly, and almost laughed at the way Crispin startled, yelped, nearly toppling over as he shot to his feet. "I suppose the moonlight is not sufficient enough for it."

"M-my lord," Crispin said, eyes fastened upon the ground. "I did not expect to see you here."

"I could say the same," Jude said slowly, moving around the bench, drawing close, wanting so badly to touch. Was it true? Did he dare believe it? What if Bartholomew was mistaken? "You are supposed to be seducing your true love this very moment. Why are you brooding alone in the park?"

Crispin laughed sadly. "Because I have already failed, as I always knew I would."

"How do you know you failed?" Jude asked, moving closer, capturing Crispin's chin as he had so many times before, wishing it were not so dark for he ached to see the deep, deep blue of those eyes.

"My lord?"

Jude smiled gently. "Perhaps, pet, you simply never realized how beautifully you succeeded."

Crispin's eyes widened. "That's impossible. How-who told? Bart did, didn't he? I'll kill him."

Jude threw his head back and laughed, then released Crispin's shoulders to yank him close, kissing him deeply, ravenously. When they finally broke apart, it took him a moment to recall how to breathe. "Ah, pet, how did I never realize?"

"I don't know," Crispin said. "Every moment, every word, I expected you to finally discern the truth. When you never did, I assumed it was simply because you had no interest beyond amusing yourself with the lessons."

He could not help but take another kiss, near dizzy with the knowledge that he would be able to take all the kisses he desired for a long time to come. "I was seething with jealousy, pet, that you loved another."

Crispin shook his head. "You have never favored innocents."

"You are hardly an innocent," Jude replied. "Any man so willing to take up such lessons was never truly innocent - merely awaiting an opportunity to finally gain experience."

Even in the dark, he knew Crispin flushed. "I-you came upon me that day, and I could scarcely manage to string my words together. When you offered the lessons...I figured it was my one chance to be with you. An entire month to pretend we were lovers..." Crispin looked away, staring at the rippling reflection of the moon. "It was not an opportunity I was strong enough to resist, my lord, even as I knew it would end in pain."

Jude stroked his cheek, turning his head back around. "Well, you have well and proven yourself to be a natural in the romantic arts, pet. Despite my best efforts to resist, I find myself quite thoroughly and happily snared."

The fingers buried in his sleeves tightened. "I can scarcely believe it." Crispin leaned toward him, however, silently begging assurance.

He gave it gladly, kissing him until they were both rendered breathless once more. "You may believe it, and depend upon it, pet." He brushed a soft kiss across the wet, swollen lips. "I know it is not the done thing, pet, but would you consider taking up permanently with your tutor?"

"Yes," Crispin replied, arms wrapping tightly around Jude's neck, the force of the gesture all but knocking them over, and Jude held him just as fiercely.

He laughed softly. "I guess this means I am no longer a rake. I am not certain I know how to be anything else."

Crispin smiled, still clinging, the press of his body a divine thing. "I can give you lessons on how to be a boring, ordinary noble."

Jude laughed again, a sound that only Crispin could draw so easily from him. "You are many things, pet, but boring and ordinary are not among them. I'm sure I'll find ways to adjust." He took another searing kiss, leaving no doubt as to what those ways would be. "Come home?"

"Yes," Crispin said fervently, and strode alongside him as they quickly returned to the palace and Jude's carriage.

## The Wager

## The Wager

Lazare longed for his childhood, when he might get away with pitching his teacup across the room and enjoy the sound of fragile porcelain against fine wood, the angry but defeated sigh of his nurse as she threw up her hands and stomped from the room.

Alas, adulthood required good behavior.

He just wished the others in the room might recall it.

Forcing himself to use the manners no one else would, wondering what was wrong with this uncouth country he was to be stuck in for only the gods knew how long - until his mother saw fit to bring him home, and given she had not even bid him farewell, so great was her anger, he suspected he would not be going home for a long time.

Stifling a sigh, he smiled politely at the chortling men around the table, wondering what impertinent question they would put to him next. He dared a surreptitious glance at the clock mounted on the wall at the opposite end of the room.

Alas, at least an hour to go, and he doubted they would let him slip away before another half hour had passed beyond that.

"We hear there was nearly an altercation this morning, Highness," a man said slyly. "Giving his Majesty a run for his money, eh?"

A run for his money? Lazare frowned over that one, and made a note to ask Maitland about it later. He swore they did such things on purpose, and it was truly beginning to irritate him. He took a delicate sip of the fragrant tea. "I never discuss business over afternoon tea, gentlemen, but I assure you there was nothing so dramatic as an altercation."

The men laughed and exchanged disbelieving looks and snorts, but obligingly moved on to other matters, discussing plays and duels and other things which they thought might he might like to see.

Finally one man sat back and settled his hands on his massive belly. "So, Highness, how are you liking our Cat, hmm?"

Lazare frowned. What joke was he missing this time? If they did not stop with such nonsense, he would show them how cutting his own private jokes could be, truly. "Your cat? I beg pardon, but I do not take your meaning."

The men smiled, chuckled. "Why, Lord Maitland, of course."

"Ah," Lazare said.

A pleasant, if frustrating, thought, that one.

Kyler Maitland, the Marquis Lovett. He had been appointed Lazare's guide while he was here fulfilling his role as ambassador. He wished Maitland were here now, for he had already noticed that everyone tended to tread carefully and mark their every word when Maitland was around. Alas, he'd had some unavoidable private matter to attend, and Lazare had been forced to attend this tea alone.

He frowned. "Why do you call him cat?"

More chuckles. "For all the obvious reasons, Highness, and some less obvious. I take it you have not met his pet?" The speaker, another fat oaf, rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Then again, I doubt your Highness has had neither reason nor opportunity to visit the Lovett estate."

Lazare's frown eased slightly. 'The obvious reasons' certainly made sense. It was far too easy to describe Maitland as cat-like. Tall and long and lean, rich gold hair and eyes, and he moved with a sinuous grace that had, indeed, reminded Lazare of the mountain lions of his homeland right from the start. "His pet?"

"Oh, yes," said another man, spindly and pale. "You will have to contrive to see his pet." He winked. It was not a pleasant gesture coming from him.

"I see," Lazare said, making his disapproval plain. He did not want to gossip about his guide, and it was a poor showing indeed that these men saw fit to do so. Taking another sip of tea to calm his thoughts, he then set it down and opened his mouth to begin a new topic of conversation.

Alas, another started speaking first. "Speaking of Cat, are you going to join in the wager, Highness?"

"Wager?" Lazare asked. He was so very tired of being confused.

"Aye," said a man with a peculiar accent. Lazare was hopeless with accents in this confounded country. "Have you not heard of it yet, Highness? I'm astonished. The clubs have talked of little else since Cat was dragged out of his den to assist you."

Lazare bit his tongue. It was difficult. He would not stoop to their level by abandoning his manners. "Lord Maitland has been my savior," he said quietly, but firmly. "He is patient and kind, and I would be quite lost without him."

The table erupted in laughter. "Well!" said the fat man. "I certainly have never heard him so described! Perhaps you will win the wager, Highness."

"I-"

"Yes, indeed," said a man bland of face and voice. "The world would erupt to finally know the answer to that damned puzzle. Patient and kind? Never have I heard those words applied to Lord Cat!"

Lazare sighed and drank his tea. He wished Maitland were here.

"Has he mentioned the affair to you, Highness?"

"I do not inquire into the private affairs of another man," Lazare said sharply. "I was not aware such rudeness was considered acceptable in this country."

The men laughed again. "We mean no harm, Highness. Lord Cat is one of our own. If you are to work closely with him, you will hear of the wager at some point. Indeed, I believe many of the betting books are placing new wagers on whether you will be the one to win the wager which has been on the books for the past five years."

He was on the betting books? Lazare scowled into his tea. To the devil with manners.

Once more, however, the men spoke up before him. "It was a duel, Highness. Lord Cat was embroiled in a dawn appointment five years ago. No one can prove it, of course, but everyone knows he was there and that he fired the fatal shot."

Lazare's hold on his teacup faltered. Fatal shot? What nonsense was this? "I do not favor gossip," he said icily. "Especially such ridiculous statements as that. I would appreciate it, gentlemen, if you would find another topic about which we might converse."

"Oh, and you know Cat so well?" A man asked sneeringly. "It was his lover, you know. He challenged his lover to a duel, and shot him dead."

"I have heard quite enough," Lazare said coldly, slamming his teacup down and standing, then stalking to the door of the grand tearoom. A steward appeared almost immediately with his coat, hat, and walking stick.

Ignoring the voices that chased after him, Lazare stalked out of the building and into the street. His carriage...no, he did not feel like being trapped in the infernal thing. Waving off the stewards who started to call for his carriage, he turned and strode briskly down the street.

The sound of his voice, spoken in a gruff baritone, drew him up short. "Highness?"

"Lord Maitland," he said, blinking. "Did you conclude your business?"

"Yes," Maitland replied slowly, confusion in his gold eyes.

Such pretty eyes, for all they constantly seemed to hold something back. The very same shade of gold as his hair, which had been tousled by the brisk wind on the street, softening the strict lines of his handsome face. "If I may ask, Highness, why are you walking about? You were not due to leave the tearoom for an hour or two yet, and I saw you into the carriage myself."

"I am tired of the tearoom," Lazare said levelly. "Nor did I feel like being trapped in that wheeled box. I thought a walk might do me some good."

"As you wish, Highness. May I escort you back?"

Lazare smiled faintly, unable to stay angry with Maitland before him. He had only known Maitland three weeks, but there was something steadying about him. Ever since being sent of as Ambassador, he had felt lost at sea. Maitland, from the very first, had seemed an island. "By all means, please. Your business was well concluded?"

"Yes. I apologize again for abandoning you. Was the tea so unpleasant, then?"

"I do not care for malicious gossip," Lazare said with a shrug as they fell into step together. Even in the ripe smells clogging the streets, he did not miss the cinnamon and honey scent of Maitland. "Walking out was poor form, I know, but I will not be subjected to such unpleasantness."

Maitland's mouth tightened. "I apologize again for not being present."

"Do not worry upon it," Lazare said with a smile. "We have a free hour, shall we do something frivolous with it?"

"Frivolous?" The tightness eased faintly. "Now, Highness, I do not believe that was on your schedule for the day."

Lazare waved his hand airily. "Well, I shall have my man of affairs pencil it in."

Maitland laughed softly, and the sound warmed Lazare through with happiness and satisfaction, a faint thrum of victory. He liked getting Maitland to laugh; it seemed something Maitland did not do enough.

"Consider it penciled in, Highness. Where would you like to go?"

Lazare hesitated, then shrugged. "I do not care, really. I did have a question for you, however, if I am permitted to ask."

Maitland stiffened, but if he had not been watching Maitland closely then he would have missed it. "Of course, Highness. Ask any question you like."

"Some of the men wanted to know if I'd seen your 'pet'," Lazare said. "What did they mean?"

"My pet?" Maitland asked, steps faltering. "That's what you want to know?"

Lazare ducked his head. "I apologize if I was completely out of line. It was such an odd thing to ask, it stuck in my head."

"No, I do not mind." Maitland smiled faintly. "I am only surprised they mentioned it. None of them have actually seen it; I suppose they were hoping you were not one ahead of them in bragging rights."

"I should have known," Lazare said, amused - and relieved, for he realized he had been stupidly hurt Maitland had not mentioned it. "So what is this marvelous pet?"

Maitlan's mouth curved, something decidedly...mischievous and almost boyish about it.

Lazare found it hard to look away - indeed, he was so busy staring at Maitland's far too appealing mouth to notice where he was going, and walked straight into a vendor bellowing out the quality of his apple tarts.

The bellowing quickly turned to a litany of what he thought were curses, but were spoken too quickly in a dialect he stood no chance of comprehending, the entire situation making him feel every inch a foreigner - and an especially stupid one at that.

Before he could gather himself and begin to offer apologies, Maitland was bellowing right back, his accent better but the words still odd, and spoken too rapidly anyway.

A moment later they were away, Maitland's hand wrapped firmly around his arm.

His cheeks flushed hot, and he tried to form an apology, but his tongue seemed stuck fast.

It wasn't until they were back on much calmer, less crowded streets, that he finally felt he'd regained enough of his wits. "My apologies," he said slowly, wincing that his accent was more pronounced than usual, surely given away his unsteadiness. And over such a simple, clumsy moment. Stupid.

Maitland merely gave one of those small, barely-there smiles. "No apologies necessary,



Highness. Rather, I should extend my own. We both were too lost in conversation to pay proper attention - and the vendor hardly did our country proud."

Lazare smiled weakly. "I did almost knock him over."

"Well, I gave him coin enough he can take the whole day off and go spend it on gin," Maitland said, rolling his eyes. "He will survive the encounter. Now," he continued briskly, the boyishness returning. "I believe you wanted to see my pet. I'm afraid he's some hours away, at my family estate. We would be gone a few days at the very least."

"I see," Lazare said, disappointed. He doubted anyone would let him slip away for a few days. Why was it the more titles and affluence one had, the less often one was able to abuse them to get away with doing as he pleased?

Perhaps he just needed to forget such bothersome things as duty and responsibility and obligations.

My, wouldn't that be nice? Lazare sighed. "It sounds a lovely lark, but I think my fellows and your King would all have kittens were I to caper off to the countryside for a few days."

Maitland smiled - and winked at him. "Now, Highness, I would be a poor man of affairs indeed if I could not arrange your Highness schedule to both please my King and suit your Highness. I am competent enough to manage that."

"You are always perfectly competent in everything you do," Lazare murmured, hoping that did not sound as flirtatious as he wished it could sound.

He got one brief, sharp, inquisitive - dare he think hopeful - look; it lasted only the span of a heartbeat, but Lazare liked to believe he saw it. Tucking the moment away to overanalyze later, he focused on the conversation. "So I can see this notorious pet of yours?"

"Would your Highness prefer to leave at once, or in the morning?"

"At once," Lazare said promptly, thinking of the dinner he was supposed to be attending in a few hours. Long and tedious, and his toes were still recovering from the last party.

Maitland gave an elegant half-bow as they reached the townhouse where Lazare made his home while in the city. "Then we shall depart before the sixteen hour, Highness."

Lazare returned the bow with one of his own, wondering if stood a chance of ever persuading Maitland to call him by his given name. Perhaps he was only suffering a silly infatuation, but he would like to know how his name sounded on Maitland's lips.

Thinking of Maitland's lips was a bad idea. Forcing himself to think of dinner parties and speeches and the poetry everyone seemed determined to inflict upon him.

As promised, less than three hours later they were on their way.

Lazare laughed in sheer delight. "However did you manage it?" he asked, not even the roughness of the carriage ride enough to dislodge his good mood. D

Maitland shrugged casually, but his voice held a note of satisfaction. "The trick, Highness, is to inform only the necessary parties, and to inform them without giving a chance for argument. His Majesty will be most put out with me, but will not press for your return."

"Oh?" Lazare asked, curious now, sensing there was something more to it.

"I might have implied that comments made by the gentlemen this afternoon upset you terribly, and put you in a state not fit for attending the public. The fact you stormed out of there lends credence to that implication - he will leave you in peace for a few days."

"You are truly a man of affairs," Lazare said, resting his hand briefly on Maitland's arm, giving it the gentlest of squeezes. "If you are not careful, I might try to pack you with my belongings whenever I return home."

Maitland laughed. "Make certain you put me in the trunk, Highness, and not one of the satchels. They are not terribly comfortable when it comes to the longer journeys."

Lazare threw his head back and laughed, the image of Maitland mashed up into a satchel leaving him gasping for breath, resting against what he realized was Maitland's shoulder as he finally returned to his senses.

Hastily sitting up, he finally managed a reply. "I will take care to see you properly packed, never fear."

"I thank you, Highness."

"My pleasure." Lazare settled back in the carriage seat, stretching his legs out as best he was able, trying and failing to suppress a yawn. "How far is it?"

"Several hours, Highness," Maitland said, voice a fine, low rumble.

Lazare nodded, but could not muster the energy to speak. Laughter faded, the warmth of the carriage and now smooth ride were all conspiring to make him sleepy.

Maitland continued speaking. "We could stop at an inn, if you like, but I would prefer to push on and arrive late in the night. I've already sent someone ahead to warn of our coming..."

"Push on, then," Lazare said, as his eyes slipped closed. Travelling always did put him right to sleep, if the roads weren't bad enough to make every bump a near-death experience.

"Yes, Highness."

Lazare slid a bit to the right, head hitting something both hard and soft, but it was relatively comfortable and so he did not bother to move. He settled more firmly against it, speaking sleepily, not really hearing his own words. "You can call me Laz..."

"Highness."

Lazare grunted, and reached out to grope for his blankets and pull them up over his head.

Instead he encountered something that was not a blanket.

Jerking awake, he yanked his hand from Maitland's thigh, realizing abruptly where he was and why.

"M-my apologies," he stammered, shaking his head to clear away the last of the sleep fog.

Maitland coughed. "We've arrived, Highness."

Even as he spoke, the carriage pulled to a halt, and Lazare heard voices calling orders and greeting and still more orders, and then the carriage door was yanked open and the steps put down.

He refused the hand held out to assist him, clambering out clumsily by himself, stretching and groaning before finally taking in the house before them.

Sadly, it was too dark to see much of anything, but it was most certainly impressive. He started to ask about it, but was ushered in by a hand on the small of his back, Lazare's voice rumbling gentle orders to the servants.

The inside was beautiful; simple but elegant, a mix of dark and light woods, fresh flowers on stands and tables, crystal sparkling from the ceiling, hanging in tiny hollows in the walls. The scent of citrus and sandalwood filled the air, mixed with the sweet scent of the flowers.

"You have a beautiful home," he said, and it only really and truly struck him then just how gracious and indulgent Maitland had been with all of this. He turned and caught Maitland by the arm, holding gently but firmly. "I thank you for this. I have been rude and selfish, and it was far more than kind of you to go to such trouble."

Maitland smiled, and covered Lazare's hand with his own. "It is no trouble, Highness. I enjoy showing my home to friends."

Lazare hesitated, then pressed forward. "If we are friends, then surely you need not be so formal?"

"I-"

His words were cut off by the sound of something hitting the floor with a hard thudding sound, and Lazare whipped around to see-but surely he was not seeing what he thought he was seeing. He drew a sharp breath, taking a step back, colliding with Maitland.

He was so transfixed by the sight before him, he almost did not notice the steadying hand which rested briefly on his hip.

"What in the world..." he breathed. "This is your pet?"

Maitland laughed softly, the sounds warm puffs of air against Lazare's cheek and hair. "Yes, Highness," Maitland replied, then moved away to kneel before the gigantic cat, a beast with orange fur and black stripes, then nuzzled and rubbed and pushed eagerly at Maitland, making all manner of sounds that seemed equal parts mews, growl, purr, and plaintive whine.

After a few minutes, Maitland stood and held out a hand. Lazare hesitated a moment, then took it and allowed Maitland to draw him close to the beast.

"Highness, may I present to you Ruffian, the true lord and master of Lovett. Ruffian, his Royal Highness Prince Lazare. I expect you to comport yourself properly for once, troublemaker." Maitland turned to Lazare. "You may pet him, Highness. He's quite friendly."

Lazare did so, allowing Maitland to take his hand and guide it, showing him the proper way to stroke the beautiful cat, though he still could not quite grasp that he was petting a beast and that beast was apparently a pet.

He looked at Maitland. "You will have to explain this one, good sir."

"In the library, if you like. We can have a late supper." Maitland turned, and with the tiger on one side, Lazare on the other, led the way to the library.

In due course they were settled with food and wine, in a room that was warm and masculine, the scents of books and leather and brandy strong. Settling deep into a sinfully comfortable leather chair, he stared at the giant cat which had stretched out by the fire, taking up pretty much the

entire rug there.

He shook his head in wonder. "How does a man come to keep a tiger for a pet? I have never seen them except when they come with the performers to the palace from time to time." Come to think of it, those specimens were always quite sad and pathetic looking.

Ruffian seemed healthy and happy - and rather adoring of Maitland.

Sipping at his wine, Maitland further surprised Lazare by eschewing a chair to sit on the floor with the cat, smiling fondly when Ruffian shifted to be petted, rubbing against Maitland's legs.

"I found him at one of those shows, actually," Maitland said quietly. "I had been dragged to one by a friend." His mouth tightened as he said the word friend, and he paused long enough to take a deep draught of his wine. "The entire affair was wretched. I abandoned the show before it was half done, and wandered amidst the tents and showmen and riff raff. Towards the very back end of it all, near the river, I heard a terrible crying mewling sound..."

He shook his head slowly back and forth at the memory, remembered anger and disgust flickering across his face. "I think the mother cat had been dead a couple of hours at least. Her poor cub..."

Maitland finished off his wine, setting the glass aside to stroke and pet Ruffian with both hands. "I wound up causing a great enough scene the whole of the crowd bore witness. By the time the matter was over, I found myself short a great deal of gold and in possession of a tiger cub." He smiled softly. "Ruffian and I have been together ever since."

"What did your friend think of the affair?" Lazare asked with a laugh. "I bet he never took you to a show again, or at least made certain no cats would be about? But it is a brave and noble thing you did; I do not know I would have been brave enough to try and raise a wild cat."

"He was not so amused," Maitland said with a shrug. "I did not see him again after that night."

It hadn't been a friend, but a lover. Lazare wasn't certain how he knew that, but he did, as sure as he knew his own name.

"Well, it looks as though you gained quite the friend in exchange, and I would wager Ruffian was the better of the two," he said, feeling rather jealous of the tiger and the way it could so casually bump and rub and touch.

He drank his own wine, squelching an urge to join them on the floor. It would not do to intrude further than he already had into Maitland's private life. His mother would box his ears for the rudeness he had already displayed.

"Truly, he is beautiful, Lord Maitland. Though 'Lord Cat' made sense before, it makes far more sense now."

Maitland rolled his eyes. "I am sorry your Highness was forced to listen to what must have been dreadfully boring gossip about me. One would think those men could find something better about which to converse."

Lazare almost asked about the wager, some terrible, secret part of him curious to know the truth behind such an absurd rumor - Maitland shooting a lover, the very idea was absurd. Maitland shooting anyone was patently ridiculous.

He drank more wine, and absently noted he should eat something before the potent red went straight to his head and he did something foolish.

Reaching for food took too much effort, however, and he sipped his wine as he continued to watch Maitland, whose attention was focused on the tiger. Together before the fire, they made an intoxicating sight. Who needed wine to get drunk?

He was busy drinking in the sight of Maitland in firelight that he did not catch it in time when Maitland abruptly looked up. Too late, he yanked his gaze away, swearing silently to himself as he felt his cheeks burn.

Suddenly the room seemed much too hot, and he set his wine aside before he lost good sense entirely. He finally looked back, though not quite at Maitland, as he heard Ruffian move.

Making soft rumbling noises, Ruffian stood and stretched, then rubbed against Maitland one last time before padding to the door and vanishing into the hallway.

Lazare retrieved his wine and drank deeply to avoid asking if he could take Ruffian's place, because hadn't he already humiliated himself enough for one night?

Maitland's softly spoken words made him choke. "Forgive me if I'm being forward, Highness, but it is much warmer down here, so close to the fire." The husky note to his voice made his message perfectly plain, and if that did not do it, the gold eyes were positively burning.

"You could stop calling me 'Highness'," Lazare grouched, and tipped back his glass to finish off his wine before he abandoned his chair in favor of being much, much closer to the fire.

And the hearth.

He went down on his knees, arms sliding bold as anything around Maitland's neck, dipping his head for a kiss as Maitland's arms wrapped around his waist.

Mmm, yes. That mouth was everything he had dreamed it would be and more besides. He pressed closer, sinking one hand into the soft hair, tilting Maitland's head just so, trusting Maitland to take his weight, wanting more and wanting it immediately.

The world spun a bit, and he broke away only long enough to drink in the sight of Maitland spread out beneath him. "I was not expecting this when I came to see your pet," he said, smiling faintly, fingers moving to attack buttons and knots.

"Nor I," Maitland said, tugging him down and taking another dizzying kiss.

The wine had been potent, and gone straight to his head, but it paled in comparison to what Maitland was doing to him.

Lazare moaned and reluctantly pulled away, determined to get at skin. "I have been envious of your cat, touching you with such impunity."

"Touch all you like, Highness," Maitland said with a smile. "I can be nothing but flattered and pleased if you want to spend such time with me."

Abandoning the clothes, Lazare made a sound like a growl and kissed Maitland hard, not pulling away until he their lips were sore and aching. "My name is not Highness."

Maitland chuckled softly. "My apologies, Lazare."

Lazare shivered. Oh, yes. He liked his name said that way. Liked it very much. He renewed his attack on Maitland's clothes, as well as his own, finally getting them free of the damnable things. "I do not think I have dallied on a carpet since I was seven and ten," he said with a laugh. "My father was not pleased to hear about that little adventure. I believe I was tutored on decorum and

discretion for six months straight."

"We can adjourn to my bed chamber if that would suit you," Maitland said, then bit down on Lazare's shoulder, soothing the mark with his tongue.

"No," Lazare gasped out, ducking his head to do some biting of his own, pressing firmly at Maitland's shoulders to keep him in place. "I intend to have you here, before some problem of state can appear to ruin my chance."

Maitland groaned loud and long, grinding up, pressing them together, making Lazare loose hold of his thoughts yet again. They really should move elsewhere, at their current pace they were likely to overheat - but he meant what he said.

If this was actually happening, he would have Maitland before something prevented it, be it a problem of state or old fashioned common sense.

"We will have to move, unless you planned this and came suitably prepared," Maitland said, groaning again.

"I'll improvise," Lazare said, and smirked before doing just that.

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Two days should not be enough time to become accustomed to being woken by the growls and nudging of a giant cat, but Lazare found he was used to it. Half-groaning, half-yawning, he tugged a hand free of the warm blankets to pet Ruffian.

A couple of minutes later, he felt a stirring from the pile of blankets next to him, then Maitland was pressing against him, warm lips against his throat. "Good morning, Highness."

Stifling the annoyance and disappointment that came with Maitland's seeming inability to call him Lazare more than once or twice - and those only in moments of passion - he threw back the blankets and turned to take a proper good morning kiss.

"Sow hat shall we do today?" Maitland asked. "You've got roughly two days of freedom left, Highness."

"I suppose simply staying in bed is out of the question?" Lazare asked with a smile.

Maitland laughed. "We've already nearly done that," he replied. "Would you like to see the rest of my home? The grounds are beautiful, and the village is only a few minutes ride away. We're relatively isolated here; the nearest neighbors are a few days away, closer to the coast."

Lazare nodded, murmuring absent agreement, more interested by far in the feast before him. Had he ever been this addicted to a lover? Though he did not flaunt and flash the way his brothers and sisters did, he had never been a shrinking violet either. Reserved and modest until the clothes came off, his eldest brother had once described him. What, Lazare had challenged, was the point in being reserved and modest at that point?

There mother had appeared before the conversation could be concluded, but his brother's laugh had indicated Lazare had made his point.

Maitland pushed. "You are the very definition of evil, Highness."

Lazare smiled and sat up, shoving back his tangled hair. "Very well, man of affairs. Show me your beautiful home."

"I'll take you up the kissing path," Maitland said, kissing him long and slow before finally pulling away to ring for a bath and food, ordering horses readied when the servants appeared.

Two hours later they were riding out, Ruffian dashing off ahead of them to...do whatever tiger pets did, Lazare supposed. "So does your family land boast ghosts? Smugglers? Anything like that?"

Maitland laughed. "No, Highness. Nothing so exciting as that. Our family has always been dreadfully boring."

"Boring is not so bad a thing to be, in certain aspects of life," Lazare said. "My family could stand to be boring, but we are royalty - I think it is impossible to be both royal and boring." He shrugged. "Though I oft am accused of it."

"Highness, I would describe you as many things," Maitland said, a slow burn rising in his gold eyes. "Boring is not one of them."

Lazare returned the look full measure, shifting on his horse in an attempt to make himself more comfortable. "That is certainly good to hear."

They explored all afternoon, stopping twice when taunting, heated exchanges got to be too much for either to bear, and once for a lunch that took nearly three hours all on its own.

Dusk was beginning to tease the sky when they finally began to make their way home, and Lazare noted with a yawn that the way they were going was not the way Maitland had taken them before. "Your lands are extensive."

Maitland shrugged. "Tracts of land were gifted to my family for one thing or another - we might be boring, but we do work hard for our country - so there is a great deal more of it than when we first were bestowed the Lovett title."

"I will have to tell his Majesty that you continue that tradition," Lazare teased.

"I am happy to hear it, Highness," Maitland replied, echoing his earlier words, but they were distracted. Maitland's brow was furrowed, eyes distant; obviously his mind was on something else, and that something was troubling.

His mood only plummeted as they continued. Three times Lazare started to ask what was wrong, only to remain silent each time. A few days abed with a man did not mean he had the right to intrude, and he felt very much that to speak would be taken as intrusion.

Still, he might have very well given in the fourth time, if Maitland had not abruptly turned off the path onto a smaller footpath. He left his horse, and Lazare was forced to do likewise, following Maitland in silence.

They came out of the woods into a pretty field filled with wildflowers, a tiny pond shadowed by what he thought might be an apple tree.

As they drew closer to it, he saw with a start that a gravestone was set beneath the apple tree, tilted every so slightly toward the pond.

"What..." He trailed off, not certain he could speak. He knew all the manners of this country, so far as ordinary situations went. The nuances of them, especially in strange circumstances, eluded him. If he caused offense now, he would hate himself for a very long time.

Silence stretched on for what seemed hours, until Maitland at last broke it, voice soft and

somber. "His name was Eric. We were lovers almost a decade ago. This," Maitland motioned to the field, "was his favorite place. We came here often...this is where he died, as well, and so I had him buried here." He stared at the headstone, a deep frown etched into his face, and Lazare didn't think he would notice if the King suddenly appeared and bolted stark naked through the field.

This couldn't be... It struck him so suddenly, he blurted the words out before he could catch himself. "You mean that whole wager thing was true?"

Maitland jerked as though shot, face going from troubled to cold in the span of a heartbeat. "You have known about the wager, Highness?"

Lazare took a step back, startled by the chill tone. "No, you-"

"Is that why you pressed to come?" Maitland demand, voice cracking out like a whip. "I wondered, when you pressed about my pet, but foolish me - I truly thought that was your only interest."

"Maitland-" He reached out to grasp Maitland's arm, but Maitland jerked well away, as though he found Lazare repulsive.

"What did I say wrong?" Lazare asked, confused and hurt, all the more upset because he could hear his accent slipping. "No offense did I mean." He struggled to hold on to his grasp of the language, always the first thing to when he lost his equilibrium.

"Did you join the betting books, Highness? Did they tell you the whole of the sordid affair?"

Lazare frowned. "Your lover you shot, they told. But me-"

"Is the wager the usual 20,000, or did it go up with your Highness joining in? You've got much farther than anyone else, that is for certain."

His temper snapped, and he realized distantly that he had given up on the damned foreign tongue completely, but he did not care. I did not join that wager, you wretch! They told me about it, and I stormed out, disliking they would gossip so about you to me! I did not join it, I knew nothing about it, I did not mention it because I feared it would upset you. To hells with you and your infernal country!"

He turned and fled the clearing before Maitland could stop him, suspecting he would just punch the bastard at this point. What had he done, but confess his astonishment there might be something to the rumor? Of course he did not believe Maitland had killed anyone, but was astonished to find there was a dead lover.

Throwing himself on his horse, he turned it and went back the way they had come, urging the horse to as fast a pace as he dared, seething with anger and shaking with hurt.

Oh, he would never understand this country! He had told mother not to send him, that one of the others would do much better - even his sisters showed more acumen for these matters than he. Only a few weeks and he had clearly lost the only real friend he had here, and there was no telling how much his lost friendship would adversely affect greater relations with King and country.

He had tried to tell them he was not fit for it. Of all this siblings, he was the most quiet. His few dalliances were always with those as quiet as himself. It was precisely what had drawn him to Maitland - that quiet demeanor, the kindness and simple courtesy. So unlike most of his peers.

These past few days had, of course, been too good to be true.



Perhaps he was overreacting, but that Maitland would just lash out at him without even listening-

He had never taken it from his sisters when they got in their snits, he had not taken it from his brothers, he most certainly would not take it from a man he-

Snarling, hearing Maitland call his name, Lazare increased his pace, blindly turning his horse down a path he didn't know just to get away and damn it all, why did they have to be on Maitland's land where he stood no chance of getting away?

He drew the horse to a halt, panting for breath, still thrumming with anger and hurt. Fine, if he couldn't get away, then he'd just punch Maitland precisely as he wanted. His mother would harangue for ages if she ever found out, but at least he would be home to hear the haranguing!

Except, when he turned, Maitland was not on his heels as he had thought. No one was around. He couldn't even hear Maitland calling his name...

Had Maitland given up so easily?

Lazare scowled and told himself to quit being an idiot. Maitland wouldn't have given up, and even if he had - so what? Hadn't he been trying to get Maitland to leave him the hell alone?

Sometimes, he made no sense even to himself.

Heaving a sigh, he took a closer look at his surroundings. "I don't suppose you know the way home?" he muttered to the horse, who did not admit to it if he did, merely stood restlessly in place.

Calling himself a thousand different kinds of idiot, for an angry snit was no excuse to get himself lost in a bloody forest, Lazare considered his options. He remembered turning off onto a small path - at some point they had lost it, but surely it must be about somewhere. Then he could simply take that back to the main paths, and find his way quite easily from there.

Easy as that.

Except he saw no sign of the path he had taken, and did not dare explore too far for fear of making his predicament worse. Damn it all, why was Maitland not here? Why must he have so much bloody forest on his land?

Lazare rubbed his forehead. Why had they both decided to handle this entire affair quite like children?

A cracking sound brought his head up eagerly, and he opened his mouth to say something - anything - but what he saw was not Maitland. He froze, wondering who the group of men were, noting nervously they looked more than a little unsavory.

Then he saw the dead deer two of them carried, and realization dawned - poachers. Damn it.

He tightened his hands on the reins, wondering if he could simply sprint past them, but even as he made to try it, one raised a flintlock and the sudden booming crack of it frightened his horse.

Try as he might, Lazare could not stay seated, and he felt a flash of pain in his head before the world went dark.

\*~\*~\*

The next time he had an argument with a lover, Lazare thought sourly, he was going to remind himself that he was the quiet, reserved, and level-headed one. No more of this running off in a fit of temper.

At least, not when he might become lost in a forest.

He seemed to be in some sort of utterly vile shack, and he wondered why they had not simply killed him.

Now that he was sort of thinking again, he wondered that anyone would be stupid enough to poach on Maitland's land. Surely they ran the risk of meeting up with Ruffian? He did not know a thing about tigers, but he sensed Ruffian would more than happily dispose of anyone who invaded his territory, and surely a cat of that size must have the run of the land.

His wrists and legs had been crudely tied. They must think him no threat whatsoever. True enough, as far as it went, but Lazare had four older brothers and two older sisters. So far as tying people up went, these poachers could learn a thing or two from his siblings.

Once he was free, Lazare gingerly tested each of his limbs, wincing at his throbbing, aching head. He wondered if these men knew he was foreign, and if that would work for or against him.

Not that he wanted to find out, particularly.

A quick peek out a filth-crusted window showed him what he had suspected - it was full dark. Stupid time to be going out and about in the forest, but if his only other option was to stay here and wait the return of the poachers...

If he was out there, he stood a good chance of getting well away from them. He could not see them, they would not see him, and perhaps come morning he could make good a real escape.

Grimacing at the idea of having to spend a night in the forest with none of the creature comforts, but admitting it was precisely what he deserved for being such an idiot. He hoped he could find his way back to Maitland come the morning.

Moving slowly, he pushed open the back door of the odd shack and took in his surroundings as best he was able.

A bit of moonlight filtered through the trees, reflecting on a stream or something which ran behind what he thought was the back of the cabin. Nearby, he saw what might be a footpath, and took it - and screamed as he turned the corner, stumbling back, tripping, wind up in a rather undignified heap on the ground.

Bloody hells, his head hurt something fierce.

He looked up again to see the glowing yellow eyes which had given him such a nasty start were still there - except they were really glowing, he supposed, merely seemed to. Then the eyes slunk from the shadows, and he saw it was Ruffian.

"What are you doing here?" He hissed, feeling stupid for talking to a tiger but really, he just wanted to be home in bed. "Do not scare me so."

The tiger growled softly and pushed at his chest, then began to paw and tug at his clothes, tearing them horribly.

Lazare could take a hint. Standing up, wishing the world would stop spinning for five minutes, he held his arms akimbo. "Well, Ruffian?"

Growling again, the cat turned and slunk back off into the shadows, only just visible because he moved, the only sound the occasional rustling of his tail against the leaves.

Keeping up with the damned tiger taxed his strength, but when his only other option was to make a night of it in the forest, Lazare found he could keep pushing on so long as he didn't stop for more than a moment.

Still, by the time they left the forest, the sky just barely beginning to turn gray, he was ready to fall over.

"Lazare!"

He jerked when he heard his name, and realized it was Maitland saying it, and saw a shadow separate itself from all the rest, and then he was caught up in an embrace as words spoken too low and fast to understand washed over him.

He didn't need to understand them to catch the meaning though, and simply held fast as Maitland guided him toward the house.

The next hour or however long it was passed in a blur, and the only thing he really remembered between being cleaned and dressed and put to bed was the soft kiss brushed across his lips before he finally fell asleep.

\*~\*~\*

He was woken by Ruffian, desirous of his morning petting.

Lazare groaned and tried to tug the blankets up over his head, but the tiger was having none of that.

Then memories of the night flashed through his mind, and Lazare realized the very least he owed the tiger was a few scratches behind the ears. Throwing back the blankets enough to sit up properly, he reached out and petted the tiger until his arms ached.

Satisfied, Ruffian turned and padded back out of the room.

Lazare hesitated. What was he to do now?

Well, make his apologies, obviously. He recalled very little from the previous night, but he did know he had not quite managed that. Oh, poachers. Maitland should be warned of the poachers, for what if it was Ruffian they were attempting to catch?

He shoved the blankets back entirely and started to climb from bed, but sat down heavily when the room spun just a little bit more than he would have liked.

At least his head did not hurt quite as much as it had the night before. He seemed to have knocked it quite soundly, but not as bad as he might have given the circumstances.

Fortunately, the matter of finding Maitland became academic when the man himself appeared in the doorway, bearing a breakfast tray that smelled almost as good as Maitland looked.

Suddenly aware of his lack of clothes, and uncertain where they stood, Lazare hastily recovered the blankets, staring at them until Maitland drew close enough he had no choice but to look up.

"I'm sorry-"

"I must apologize-"

They broke off, staring at each other, then smiled and laughed.

Maitland set the breakfast tray across his lap. "Highness, I must apologize. There was no excuse for my behavior. I overreacted."

"As did I," Lazare said. "I knew at once it must be a troublesome matter for you, that is why I never mentioned it. I was not trying to keep secrets or any such thing - I stormed out of that tearoom because I was tired of them gossiping about you." He played restlessly with the things upon his tray, wanting to eat but feeling too anxious to manage it quite yet. "I swear to you, I have nothing to do with any wager."

"I know," Maitland said quietly, covering Lazare's hands, stilling their restless movement. "I am so used to that being the sole reason anyone seeks me out, I could not believe you were different. So, I apologize, Highness."

Lazare withdrew his hands. "I am not going to accept any apology until you cease to be so formal," he said. "Perhaps it is merely my foreign ignorance showing, but to my mind, we are well past having to be so strict in our address? Is there some reason of which I am unaware that you refuse to use my name, except..."

A hand sank into his hair, and Lazare went easily as Maitland drew him into a long, thorough kiss. It seemed the final balm on all the aches acquired the previous night, and if he'd had any anger or displeasure left, it dissipated easy as that.

"Lazare," Maitland said softly when they finally broke apart. "I am trying and failing to keep some sort of distance between us, Hi-Lazare. If I use your given name, I'll start to think I can keep you." His thumb rubbed back and forth across Lazare's lips.

"Keep me?" Lazare asked, rather liking the sound of that. He liked it a great deal. "Why can't you keep me?"

Maitland looked at him, clearly startled. "Highness-you can hardly stay with me, and I cannot leave Ruffian to go with you. That aside, surely your parents want better for you than a reclusive Marquis who is in half the betting books in the city."

Lazare kissed him, breaking away only when the breakfast tray rattled ominously. Not wanting to tip hot tea over certain delicate portions of his anatomy, Lazare reluctantly broke away. "I am the youngest of seven children, my good Marquis. My mother sent me over here in a continuing effort to get rid of her children to obtain some peace and quiet. I promise you, so long as I do not force our countries to go to war, or empty the family coffers, she does not care what I do. Anyway, my brother has taken up with a musician, of all things. By comparison, you are positively perfect."

"I see," Maitland said, gold eyes bright with amusement. "Well, it is good to know I am respectable enough, if only by comparison."

"Oh, be quiet," Lazare said, rolling his eyes and finally reaching for the food with an actual desire to eat. He ate a warm scone with rather less dignity than a prince should show, but it started to make those gold eyes he loved so begin to burn, so he really did not care much about the lack of dignity.

Maitland leaned forward as he finished, licking strawberry jam from Lazare's lips with such thoroughness Lazare could not shove the breakfast tray away fast enough.

"I am sorry we so thoroughly botched yesterday," he said some time later, aching head returning but it was a price he would happily pay over and over again.

"I would say the matter is resolved," Maitland said with dry amusement.

"Still, you obviously were going to tell me something that was important to you," Lazare said. "I am sorry to have ruined that, especially since at the time it seemed I had quite violated your trust."

Maitland shrugged, or at least tried to shrug, given he was stretched out on the bed with Lazare still draped mostly on top of him. "The betting books all say that I killed him in a duel, and everyone wants to know if I fired the fatal shot."

"You do not have to tell me," Lazare said quietly. "That is not why I mentioned it."

Maitland kissed his nose. "I wanted to tell you, and only partly because you had nothing to do with the stupid wager. I knew you would hear about it before long; I would not want you thinking me a murderer."

"I never thought you were," Lazare replied. "That was why I stormed off, as I said. I could not tolerate them speaking of you so. I have to endure much - but not that."

You are far too kind," Maitland said. "Did you know, I almost refused to come out of seclusion to be your man of affairs? The King chose me because he knew I was not given to the same nonsense as the others, in addition to being fluent and all those other little things. I nearly refused, but my friend Bartholomew persuaded me at the last to go ahead. He claimed I needed to do something with myself before I became as difficult as my tiger."

Lazare laughed. "Ruffian is scarcely what I would call difficult."

Maitland snorted. "Just wait. He earned that name for a reason."

"Mm," Lazare said, stealing another kiss.

"Challenging one another to a duel was a game between us," Maitland said abruptly, and Lazare took a moment to catch up with the shift in conversation. "We always did it when we were arguing, and thought the matter was getting ridiculous." He smiled faintly. "Yesterday was hardly the first time I have acted before thinking, it is why I prefer to be quiet and keep to myself."

Lazare returned the smile, but did not reply.

"He killed himself," Maitland said, smile fading away, head turning away to stare out across the bedroom. "His family has long had a long history of mental instability, and it was painfully obvious he was following in those footsteps. He was ten years my senior, and I unfortunately was probably too young to handle the situation as well as I ought. I came here to stop him, when I realized what he was about, but I came too late. Rumors of course managed to fly that he had been shot, and I had done the shooting..."

"I am sorry," Lazare said quietly, not even trying to understand what that must be like. The look in Maitland's eyes was more than enough for him to catch an inkling of it. He kissed Maitland deeply, holding tightly, sorry not only for the terrible, tragic death but all that Maitland had put up with since that night.

"It's long past," Maitland said quietly, easing slightly. He dredged up a faint smile. "Now that you know, they will have all lost their damned wager."

Lazare shook his head. "I would wager to say that if we do not return soon to the city, it is our own lives we shall be worrying about."

"That is a wager you would likely win, and so I shall not take it - but I did send a note to the King saying we would be returning a day or two late."

"My mother is going to kill me," Lazare muttered, but then Maitland did something with his hand that made him utterly incapable of thinking about his mother. "Never mind my earlier wager," he said with a groan, even as he fumbled to exact revenge. "I wager that one of us will not be capable of leaving this bed come tomorrow morning, and it will not be me."

Maitland's eyes were hot and bright. "That is a wager I will take."