

*Seconds*

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By Megan Derr

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# *Seconds*

*Megan Derr*



*So* this was the lair of the dragon.

Certainly the sitting room was a trifle exotic, but it was in a simple, tasteful way. There was nothing overblown or garish or frightening about it. Indeed, it looked like the parlor of a man who genuinely enjoyed the items displayed.

Or maybe the unholy hour at which he was awake was warping his thoughts.

Honestly, he was going to kill Henry himself. Young men were entirely too exhausting to be endured, especially at a quarter past three in the morning.

Leaving off his sulky thoughts, he gave himself over to studying an exquisite fan made of jade and silk, a delicate watercolor of lotuses painted upon it. Beautiful.

The door opened in the middle of his minute examination, and he looked up to see that while the lair was rather anticlimactic, the dragon himself was not.

He had long ago sworn off anything which did not require coin, having been burned too badly to trust any pleasure freely given, but he was not above idle admiration. Beauty was to be admired, in all its forms.

Haven Linwood, the notorious bastard son of the late Earl of Chelsea, was certainly living up to the rumors. Half-oriental, the rumors said, and had lived abroad until only a year or so ago – it showed. The eyes were definitely oriental, and positively stunning in a face that perfectly blended two wholly separate and distinct cultures. His size was entirely his father's – tall and broad, and quite fit, if the way his shirt and breeches clung to him was any indication. The hair, deep brown or black, was just touched with silver and in need of a trim. He had not even bothered to comb it, and to judge from his casual state of dress, he had not been expecting visitors.

Society had exploded with scandal when the dying Earl had claimed his bastard son and declared him heir. They were still gossiping about it, likely for lack of anything better to talk about.

How the new Earl of Chelsea had managed to get tangled up in this affair, he did not know. It was none of his business, so he did not intend to find out.

Linwood looked at him with eyes the color of good whiskey. "You are the Viscount Knox?" His accent was almost perfect, but not quite. There was a...lilt to it, an almost sing-song quality, though not the sort of music to which Alexis was accustomed.

He smiled in reply. "Guilty as charged, I'm afraid. Alexis Mariemont, at your service, my lord. I do apologize for the ungodly hour at which I have disturbed you."

"Ungodly?" Linwood's mouth quirked in amusement. "I suppose that depends on which gods one follows."

Alexis laughed, surprised. "I prefer gods who bid me sleep at half past three in the morning."

"Then I suppose the hour is ungodly, indeed," Linwood replied. "What brings you here at this unholy hour, my lord?"

He quirked a brow. "I confess I am astonished you have to ask, my lord."

Linwood frowned, brows furrowing. "Well, I shall have to confess my own confusion. I am at a loss as to why you would be here. Has something transpired of which I am unaware?"

Alexis coughed to hide a laugh. "Indeed, my lord. I believe a self-proclaimed good friend of yours declared you his second after he was challenged to a duel by a young man who is a friend of the family."

"Otis," Linwood said with a groan. "No lad that young should be allowed to open his mouth unless given direct order."

"My sentiment exactly," Alexis agreed, laughing openly this time. "As we are the seconds in this little drama, I thought perhaps our cooler heads might prevail."

Linwood nodded. "Of course. Come, we can speak in my study. I was working upon translations when you called."

Turning, he led the way from the sitting room.

Giving the jade fan a last admiring glance, Alexis followed him from the room and down a couple of hallways to a room that was small and filled to bursting with books, loose manuscripts, and more of the exotic paraphernalia which had filled the sitting room.

Muttering apologies for the mess, Linwood cleared a chair of the books and papers filling it, then motioned Alexis to take it. "Would you care for a whiskey or brandy?"

Alexis shook his head. "I fear it would put me right to sleep, my lord, but I thank you."

Nodding, Linwood sat down behind his desk, absently raking a hand through his hair.

He was, Alexis noted, remarkably unpolished. The late Earl had been the very glass of fashion, the very definition of propriety and manners. If the man had ever seen his study look as it did now, he would have suffered an apoplexy. Never mind the utter impropriety of greeting a stranger in his shirtsleeves.

It was a pleasant change to deal with someone who had as little use for social frippery as he, even if it must be at this wretched hour.

"So what has young Otis done now?" Linwood asked. "That lad gets into more scrapes in a day than I thought was possible. Even I was not so creative in my youth."

"This is his first season, is it not?"

Linwood frowned a moment. "Oh. Yes, I believe so." He shrugged. "I met Otis Bolton shortly after my arrival, and he was most helpful. I fear he has decided we are fast friends since. He has a temper on him, as all boys do at that age. You said something about a duel? I had not known him to be quite that hot-headed."

"Henry Young is, however. His family and my own are quite close, and I have been appointed to watch out for him during his first season. Unfortunately, I arrived late to the ball we were attending this evening – too late to prevent catastrophe. Henry challenged Otis to a duel, and I fear the situation only deteriorated from there. I am hoping we two can resolve this."

"By all means," Linwood said. "As apparently my friend has not seen fit to inform me I am his second." He shook his head and raked a hand through his hair again. "What is the reason for this hot-headed duel?"

Black, Alexis decided idly. He had thought it might be a deep brown, but it was definitely looking to be more of a true black.

"If you ask me," Alexis said dryly, "the underlying matter would be resolved if they had chosen a bed as their weapon of choice, but let them figure that out."

Linwood snorted with amusement, leaning back in his seat and crossing his arms.

"The argument was over a supposed insult. To be honest, I'm not certain they remember who cast the original insult."

"I see," Linwood replied. "Well, then I shall pen my most sincere apologies on behalf of Otis, and offer them to you in person. That should settle matters adequately, hmm?"

"Quite," Alexis said, reaching into his coat and extending a sealed envelope. "I do of course extend the same on behalf of Henry. I am glad we could come to a more peaceful resolution."

Linwood accepted the envelope, then shuffled things around on his desk until he had clear space to work, and quickly penned and sealed a letter of his own. He sealed the wax with the ring on his finger – a coiling dragon, Alexis saw as he accepted it. Had the seal given rise to the name, or the name to the seal?

"I do hope this resolves matters," Linwood said, rising. "I am sorry you had to go to such my trouble, my lord."

Alexis shrugged. "Henry is a good boy, and Bolton too, from what I have seen of him. They are young, is all. That is why we are watching over them, is it not?"

"Of course," Linwood said, rising. "I am certain you would like to find your bed, my lord, so I shall not keep you longer."

Nodding, Alexis rose as well. He paused briefly at the door to bow his head politely. "Good night."

"Sleep well," Linwood replied, and then the door was closed.

Yawning, Alexis climbed into his waiting carriage and bid it take him to Henry's home, so he could finally put the entire affair to an end.

*Honestly*, Otis, you are not happy unless you are getting into scrapes."

Otis winced. "I am sorry, Haven."

Haven grunted, and clapped him briefly on the shoulder. "Simply learn to think before you speak. Also learn to tell me when I am to be your second, because it was deuced awkward to have the Viscount show up and I had not a clue as to why."

"I really am sorry," Otis said. "I didn't know he'd do that. I did not think to bother you at all; I just thought it would at least sound better if I declared a second."

"No matter, the affair is over."

Otis scowled. "So long as that ruddy bastard stays away from me, it is."

"Indeed," Haven replied, thinking back to what the Viscount Knox had said about the two really just being caught up in young lust. "Why are you so angry with him?"

"He's a bastard," Otis repeated, looking at Haven as though that should make perfect since.

Hiding a smile, Haven nodded. "Of course. What are you up to the rest of the day, my trouble-making friend?"

"I've nothing until the Ford soiree tonight. Are you attending? It's supposed to be a grand fete."

"No," Haven replied, repressing a shudder. He was barely able to behave properly throughout the day, never mind wading through the treacherous waters of a soiree.

Otis glared at a rosebush. "Lord Bastard will be there, and probably with his damnable Viscount nearby. If not for him—"

"You would likely be dead or locked in your bedchambers until it was time to retire to the country," Haven interrupted, trying to ignore the way part of him had latched onto the bit about the Viscount Knox attending.

Honestly, for all the rumors he had heard about the man, and the stormy figure he cut at a distance – he was rather more like a light summer shower than a thunderstorm. Perhaps it had only been the hour, for the man had seemed at least half asleep. Beautiful, despite that. He had only ever seen the Viscount at a distance. Their paths had never crossed. Up close, he was all gold hair and dark blue eyes and sun-touched skin, a lean, long body that moved with the sort of grace Haven tended to associate with dancers and other such performers.

Even now he felt a perfect fool. What a grand impression that had been – half-undressed, unkempt from being bent over his desk at least half the night, and completely clueless as to the fact he had been declared a second in some hot-headed duel.

He was used to making poor impressions, for his impressive education was still no match for the ease of those naturally born to this life. It had been the nastiest shock of his life to be summoned, at the age of thirty four, to travel halfway around the world to finally be accepted by a father who had only begrudgingly seen he was given adequate funds upon which to survive.

Now here he was, barely tolerated in society, and he had erred yet again.

It was unfortunate, for the Viscount had been polite, even congenial. When Haven had stepped into the sitting room to greet the Viscount, he'd actually seemed to be doing more than simply gawking at the items of Haven's homeland.

Nor had he given any sign the study had offended him, though Haven knew it must have. The place was a perfect wreck, but he never seemed to get it to the point where he trusted anyone to clean it properly. There was simply too much the damned servants might ruin.

He raked a hand through his hair, stifling a sigh. A wreck it might be, but if he were there, he would not be here, and that was infinitely preferable.



Still, he wished he had made a better impression. For just a moment, last night, it had almost seemed as though he'd found someone who might be a genuine friend.

"Haven!"

"What?" He jerked, then blinked at Otis. "I am sorry, my thoughts took me."

"I noticed," Otis said. "You looked unhappy. Is someone giving you trouble again? You should just call them out."

Haven laughed and shook his head. "Very few problems are best resolved through violence. No, no one has troubled me." He hesitated, then gave an inward sigh and let the impulse have its way. "I was only thinking that the Viscount was nothing at all like the impression I had been given."

Otis laughed. "Where do you think that bastard Young gets it? All I hear from him is Viscount this, and Lord Mariemont that – honestly, it's pathetic the way he admires."

"You sound jealous," Haven teased. "Jealous of Young, or jealous of the Viscount?"

"You are not amusing," Otis said, glaring. "I am not jealous of anyone. It's simply annoying."

"Mm," Haven said, hiding a smile.

"Anyway," Otis said pointedly, sipping at the coffee he had until then neglected. "They say it's wise never to let your guard down around him. He's all sunshine one minute, and thunder and lightning the next. He fought a number of duels back in the day. It's said he was nearly clapped in irons for the last one, and that was the only reason he left off dueling finally. A strong family, though, and he is fast friends with Lord Bartholomew Ford and the Marquis Lovett. No one dares cross him."

Haven barely stifled a groan. Wonderful. He knew he should have bothered to pay more attention to the nonsense people spewed when he was about. He would make a fool of himself in front of such a powerful man.

He only hoped the Viscount was not the sort to use it to make a mockery of him. He liked to think not, for hadn't the Viscount gone to an awful lot of trouble to keep two hot headed young men from doing something stupid?

Stifling a sigh, he motioned a server for another coffee. Strong and dark, but not nearly as good as what he was accustomed to drinking back in his homeland. He wondered sometimes why he did not simply say to hell with it, and return to lands that were more familiar. Lands where he was not rejected out of hand for his strangeness.

At thirty five, he should be well past clinging to stupid, foolish dreams.

Should be, but obviously was not.

"You're looking gloomy again," Otis said, breaking into his thoughts. He frowned, obviously miserable. "I'm sorry, did I really cause you so much trouble with the Viscount? I did not mean to, I swear it, Haven."

"Not at all," Haven replied, summoning a reassuring smile.

Otis didn't look convinced. "Well, you shouldn't worry upon it. He can be quite dangerous, but I don't think he's lost his temper in a long time. Since he was nearly clapped in irons, I think, and that was years ago." He tapped his chin thoughtfully, one hand idly tracing the rim of his coffee cup. "A love affair, I believe, was the cause."

"Isn't it always?" Haven asked dryly. "Enough. I should know better than to listen to gossip. If I was surprised by him, then it serves me right for forming unfounded expectations."

They subsided into silence, Otis quite happy to attend the treats which had accompanied their coffee.

Haven let his thoughts wander, until he noticed the way Otis kept looking at him. He attempted to ignore it, but at last gave a sigh of defeat. "Out with it, lad."

Otis ducked his head guiltily. "Um, I was only wondering...are you certain you won't attend the soiree?"

"Why?" Haven asked cautiously. "You didn't do something else involving me without telling me, did you?"

"No..." Otis said. "It's only that – well – I thought you might like to come." He looked down at his coffee, frowning deeply.

Haven frowned in his own turn. "What have you done now?"

"Nothing!" Otis said, head jerking up. "I swear it. Only – well – " He sighed. "I thought it might be nice if you came. The Viscount is showing stupid Young around, and Redbank is the Duke Piedmont's brother..."

Haven blinked, startled for a moment into silence. "Haven't you a brother or a cousin to run you about, Otis? Come to that, I cannot see that they would approve of you hanging around with the Dragon." He tried not to let the bitterness slip out, but sensed it had anyway.

Otis shrugged. "I don't have any brothers, only sisters, and they're all married and busy with their own children."

That made no sense – if they had husbands, those husbands should be more than happy to show around a brother in law. At the very least, they should be aware of their obligations.

"Anyway," Otis continued. "I've told everyone we're friends, but no one ever believes me."

"Well, they're all fools anyway," Haven said. "I cannot think it will do you any good, Otis, but I will attend your soiree if you like. Only promise me no more of this dueling nonsense, all right?"

Otis nodded, nearly bursting out of his seat with excitement. "I promise, Haven."

"Then I will meet you there...what time?"

"Ten o'clock, or thereabouts. It's poor form to be punctual."

What, Haven wondered, was the point in setting a specific time if no one intended for that time to be heeded? He would never understand all these little rules. It gave him a headache.

"Very well, then," he said, wondering what in the hell he thought he was doing. "Ten o'clock, or thereabouts. Try to stay out of trouble until I arrive." Leaving coin for the coffee, he took his leave.

Despite himself, he found he was smiling as he left.

Otis was more like a ward than a friend, but it was nice that someone was not completely repulsed by him.

Thinking that, however, reminded him of the spectacle he had made of himself last night, before the Viscount. It had seemed so very much, for a single wonderful moment, that he might have found someone he could someday call friend.

Anything more, he did not even dare think upon. He could not even make friends, what chance had he of a lover here?

But a friend, a real friend, would have been nice. Thinking back to his appearance, and his study, and his no doubt deplorable manners...next to the Viscount, who had looked perfect and stunning, and was so calm and polite and good humored about everything...

Well, naturally he would botch it right from the start.

Heaving another sigh, he made his way through the crowded streets back to his home, to see if he actually owned the sorts of clothes one needed for a soiree.

*Alexis* sipped his champagne without enthusiasm, though it was of the finest quality, barely resisting an urge to check his pocket watch. If not for Henry, and his own friends, he would be as far away from the soiree as he could get.

He glanced around the ballroom, shooting Henry a warning glare for good measure. Bolton had arrived just a few minutes ago, but so far the two had shown the good sense to stay on opposite ends of the room.

"—Lex?"

"Hmm?" Alexis asked, looking back at his friends as he realized they'd been speaking to him.

Bart rolled his eyes, while Maitland only smirked in amusement.

"I said," Bart said impatiently, "are you game for spending a week at my house? Should be a lark, we can sail and gallivant about the countryside, and just generally be disgraceful."

Alexis laughed. "Aren't we too old to be disgraceful?"

"Lord knows you and Lord Cat here prefer to act like it," Bart retorted. "Though, you've mellowed a bit since taking up with royalty," he continued thoughtfully, smirking at Maitland.

Maitland rolled his eyes, and did not dignify the comment with a reply.

Alexis chuckled. "So what week is this, Bart?"

"Two weeks hence," Bart said. "I thought—I say, who is that? What an exotic fellow. Is that the Dragon my sister and mother have been having hushed conversations about when their husbands aren't around?"

Alexis turned, surprised. Surely not—but it was Linwood, plain as day.

Though plain was hardly a word he would ever apply to the man.

"I wonder what drew him out," Maitland said thoughtfully. "The Earl has never attended any social affairs before, to the best of my knowledge."

"No idea," Alexis replied absently.

He truly did cut quite the figure all dressed up, at least as striking as he had been the previous night. He wore full formal black, head to toe, with only his stockings and the gold-threaded lace at his throat to provide relief. The bare touches of gold drew out the dark whiskey of his eyes.

"Like what you see?"

Alexis startled, then turned to glare at Bart, who had murmured the words in his ear. "Indeed. As you said, he is quite exotic. I was only noting how different he appears now, as opposed to when I visited him last night."

His friends looked at him in amusement.

"What?" Alexis demanded irritably.

"Lex, the last time you stared that hard at someone, it was Charles."

*Charles*

Alexis stiffened, grip on his champagne flute tightening. "Then it's a good thing I'm not that stupid anymore," he said tersely.

"Bah," Bart said. "You could stand to be that stupid more often. It was almost fifteen years ago, after all."

"For once I'm in agreement with Bart," Maitland said. "No doubt I will regret the words, but for the moment they are true."

"Just what you trying to say?" Alexis asked. "I did not come here tonight to be lectured."

Bart jabbed him in the chest with one finger. "I'm saying he is awfully pretty, which is precisely to your taste, and that delightful Oriental hint probably does not hurt in the slightest, hmm?"

"Remind me again why I associate with you?" Alexis asked, pushing him back just far enough there would be no more jabbing.

Maitland snorted. "Bart never gave us a choice in the matter, as I recall. He is rather stunning," he continued thoughtfully. "He's looked over here three times now." He smiled, something catlike in the expression. "At you, to be precise."

Alexis shrugged, refusing to say anything, because no matter what he said it would be used against him. Lord save him from bored friends.

"Hmm, looks like he came for young Bolton," Maitland said. "Braced, perhaps, for another duel?"

"If they try it, I'll kill them," Alexis said, and finished off the last of his champagne.

"Are you going to introduce us?" Maitland asked.

"What?"

Bart rolled his eyes. "Introduce us to your dragon."

Alexis glared. "He is not mine, you damnable—"

"Off we go, then," Bart interrupted, and grabbed his arm to half guide, half drag Alexis across the ballroom to where Linwood had tucked himself into a corner, sipping a glass of dark red wine.

Silently plotting revenge, he summoned a friendly smile and sketched a polite bow. "Good evening, Lord Linwood."

"Good evening, my lord," Linwood replied, looking almost stunned for a moment before he recovered himself. "I hope you are not here to inform me I missed the issuing of a challenge by mere minutes."

Alexis laughed. "Good lord, no. My friends desired to make your acquaintance. May I present to you Lord Bartholomew Ford and Lord Kyler Maitland, the Marquis Lovett. Gentlemen, Lord Haven Linwood, Earl of Chelsea."

"You look nothing like a dragon," Bart said cheerfully, shaking Linwood's hand. "Then again, they call Mait here 'Lord Cat' and he's more like a fox, really."

"Strange," Maitland retorted, "everyone says you look like a brat, and that suits perfectly."

"Do shut up, both of you," Alexis said, quelling them with a look. He turned to Linwood, smiling. "You may tell them to shove off. I often—"

He was drowned out by the sounds of shouting from the balcony.

And groaned as the voices registered. He took his eyes off them for five minutes!

Linwood was already halfway across the ballroom. Alexis chased after him.

They reached the balcony just in time to avoid their charges coming to blows, each grabbing his respective youth and hauling them apart.

He clapped his hand over Henry's mouth in the middle of an issued challenge.

Linwood merely looked at Otis, who wilted into a pile of defeat and guilt.

"Impressive," Alexis murmured to himself. He released Henry's mouth and gave him a stout clap upside the head.

"Don't you even think about it," he snapped, when Henry started to bellow in protest. "You do not want to dare try and start a fight with me."

Henry closed his mouth with an audible click.

"That's more like it," Alexis said, shaking him for good measure. "Now, what is going on here?"

"Perhaps we should discuss this elsewhere," Linwood said.

"Perhaps we should let them kill each other," Alexis muttered, but led the way back inside and through the ballroom, catching Bart's eye briefly and receiving a nod. "This way," he said, leaving the ballroom and making his way through the Ford house, stopping at what he knew to be Bart's office.

"Now," he said, once they were all inside and the door closed. "What in the devil is the matter with the two of you?" Like he didn't know the answer. He wondered how long it would take them to figure it out.

In reply, he received only two sullen glares.

Rolling his eyes, he tried again. "If you are both in such a hurry to get shot or stabbed, I will be more than happy to have at you."

Silence.

"If I do not get a response," he said very slowly and precisely, "I am going to lose my temper."

"He started it!" Henry blurted out.

"I did not, you—"

"Oh, for the love of—"

A sharp, rough, strange sounding noise cut through all the shouting, and after a moment Alexis realized it was actually a word, or words, and that Linwood had spoken them. He looked over at Linwood, who coughed in embarrassment.

"Now, then," Linwood said, when they were all watching him. "Shouting will solve nothing. Talking might, if we can keep our tones level? One person at a time, I think. Master Young, who truly started the argument?"

Henry scowled at Linwood, but after a moment dropped his gaze and replied, "I didn't mean to start it – he just took it wrong is all."

"You said maybe I wasn't so stupid after all," Otis snapped. "How was I supposed to take it?"

"Not the way you did," Henry snarled.

Alexis lifted his eyes to the heavens.

Nearby, he heard Linwood just barely smother a laugh.

"That's enough," he said. "Why not both apologize and let the matter end?"

"I'm not apologizing to that—"

"He's not getting an apology from—"

"Right, then," Alexis interrupted. "I'll just let your fathers deal with you."

Both boys looked abruptly stricken – but neither could quite bring himself to speak.

Linwood laughed. "Well, I suppose I could still act as Otis' second, and extend on his behalf his most abject apologies for any unintended slight."

Alexis nodded. "Then I will act as Henry's second, and likewise convey his most humble apologies for all misunderstandings."

Henry opened his mouth, looked at Alexis, and shut it again.

"Then I believe this matter concluded satisfactorily?" Linwood asked.

"Quite so," Alexis said. He glared at Otis and Henry. "If anything else happens tonight, or any other night, I will lose my temper. Have I made myself clear?"

"Yes, my lord," the young men chorused.

"Good. Now apologize for putting us to so much trouble."

They grimaced, but obediently muttered 'Sorry, my lord' to the rug.

Alexis lifted one brow. "Your apologies leave much to be desired," he said critically. "However, I know when to retreat. Off with you, then – and behave!"

"Yes, my lord," the two said over their shoulders as they bolted.

Alexis pinched the bridge of his nose.

"They got off lightly," Linwood said, mouth curved in amusement. "I once had it out with a friend of mine. We were, oh, all of sixteen, I believe. Right in the middle of an important dinner party. His mother got a hold of us and beat us right there in the middle of the room 'til I swore I would be black and blue for a month. We were nearly to tears by the time she stopped, and all the more for it being in front of our friends and all. We never again misbehaved in such fashion – at least at his mother's dinner parties."

Alexis snorted. "I rather like the idea. Unfortunately, if I attempted it, I believe many a person would take a switch to me, which I do not fancy. We shall simply have to keep them apart, or find some means of forcing them to get along." He motioned to the door, and together they left the study, headed back toward the ballroom.

Linwood sighed. "I guess this means I shall be spending more time out and about, then."

"Certainly I will be glad when I can leave Henry to his own devices," Alexis said. "If you and Otis are not already promised elsewhere, what do you say to joining Henry and I for a ride in the park? Perhaps we can force them to act civilized."

Again Linwood looked surprised, but then he smiled faintly. "Certainly, if you are sure you would not mind the company. The sooner they get along, I sense, the better for all parties."

"Precisely," Alexis said. He slowed his steps as they reached the ballroom, seeing Linwood hesitate. "Are you returning to the ballroom?"

"No," Linwood said. He nodded to the entryway. "I see Otis lurking, and think I should probably tend him before it becomes the source of another squabble. I bid you goodnight, my lord. It was an honor to meet your friends. I hope your gods let you sleep tonight."

Alexis smiled, but before he could reply, Linwood had turned and walked away, too far off now to hear whatever Alexis might say.

Frowning, he at last shrugged it off and went to go give his friends a tongue lashing.



*It* was stupid to be excited about a simple ride through the park. The Viscount had invited him solely for the purpose or reconciling their young charges.

Anyone who saw them – and a morning ride through the park meant *everyone* would see – would know it was only because of Henry and Otis.

He still did not know why the Viscount had introduced him to his friends. At least they were not cutting him – but they had been vastly amused by something while the Viscount had looked more than a little annoyed. Had the Viscount not wanted to speak with him?

What had he been thinking, agreeing to this?

"It's a beautiful morning, is it not?" Otis asked, smiling brightly.

"Quite," Haven agreed, hoping his anxiety was not showing. He also wished he had not stayed up until four in the morning working on his translations.

"There they are," Otis said, sounding far less enthusiastic than he had a moment ago. "Must we spend the morning with them?"

"Yes," Haven replied. "Consider it punishment, if you must."

"Yes, Haven."

Haven chuckled at the put upon expression on Otis' face, then turned to the Viscount as they drew close – and saw from the way his mouth was quirked in amusement, and the look in his eyes when their gazes met, that Henry was being just as petulant. He smiled, and realized he was far too pleased by the moment of silent communication.

"How does the morning find you, my good Earl?"

"Well, if still half asleep. I will never understand this desire people have to see the morning. And how are you fairing? I believe you favor mornings."

The Viscount laughed. "A bit of a night owl, my lord?"

"More than a bit, I fear," Haven replied, wondering if he was making a complete fool of himself. "I believe I climbed into bed as my servants were waking. They think me stranger than even all of society."

"Oh, mine are equally confounded by me," the Viscount replied. "I think they are offended that I wake up before them."

Haven laughed.

"Our charges are being remarkably silent," the Viscount said in dry amusement, looking between the two young men riding just in front of them. He prodded Henry with his riding crop. "You could imitate your seconds, my fine young lads, and hold a civil conversation."

When they only remained stonily silent, Haven shook his head in amusement.

"Well, if they want to spoil a perfectly good morning with sullenness, let them," the Viscount said with a shrug. "I believe the other night you said you were up doing translation? I dare guess that is what kept you up this past night as well? What manner of translations?"

"Various things," Haven replied, trying not to let his discomfort show. "I generally do historical volumes, novels, and poetry, though I do other types of prose on occasion."

"Remarkable," the Viscount replied. "Is this purely a leisure activity, or is this a professional following?"

Haven managed not to wince, but barely. It was, he knew, unseemly for a gentleman to take up any manner of real occupation. He was not certain how terrible it was to be a professional translator, but he supposed it did not matter now. He'd already foolishly admitted it, so there was nothing for it but to confess the whole and hope the topic of conversation soon shifted. "A professional calling, though not one I initially sought on purpose. However, I do love to read, and it seems a pity to be fluent in five languages and not make real use of the knowledge."

"Five languages!" the Viscount exclaimed. "Extraordinary."

Henry stirred. "Do you really know five languages, my lord?"

"Yes," Haven replied. "The two most common in this part of the world, and the three most often used where I used to live. I grew up in a city that is famous for trade, and it is impossible to get by without knowing at least two, and three is better. Most children grow up learning two or three without even meaning to. Given the, uh, unique nature of my heritage...I was obliged to learn an additional two."

"Incredible," Otis said. "What have you translated, Haven? Anything we might know?"

Haven frowned in thought. "I do not know. The historical works are well known in their respective circles, but obscure otherwise. I translate for two novelists and one poet regularly, and a handful of others less often. I believe the last novel I translated was *The Hummingbird and the Sparrow*. Does that sound familiar?"

"I know that book!" Henry burst out excitedly. "Bloody everyone knows that book! Gods, my mother and her friends never shut up about it, or the others he writes. I say, do you know when his next one is coming out? If I could tell her that—"

"She'd leave off punishing you for making a scene at the Ford house last night?" the Viscount cut in, smirking.

Henry glared at him. "I was going to say, she'd steam for days that I knew before she did, and it would be right entertaining."

The Viscount grinned, then turned to Haven. "I confess to being a fan of the books myself. I often read in the mornings with a cup of tea, since it's the one thing I can fix by myself without burning the house down or having the cook come after me with violence in her eyes. Do you know the author, by chance, or is it through a liaison that you have come to translate his works?"

Haven smiled. "As it happens...do you remember the story I told you last night? About the dinner party?"

"Yes," the Viscount said, with a smile and a pointed look at Henry and Otis. "I have not entirely abandoned the idea you mentioned."

"The friend from that story is, in fact, the author. He was always a writer, even as a child. When I was in school, studying languages, I often used his drafts to practice my translations. We are still quite close."

"Oh!" Otis said excitedly. "You never mentioned you were great friends with someone so famous."

Haven ran a hand through his hair, feeling suddenly nervous. He had not meant to make such a fuss. "I did not realize he was so famous, honestly. He is back home, of course, but to me he is just a friend." He smiled ruefully. "We grew up together, and saw one another in all manner of scrapes. It is hard to hold a man in awe when you have seen him at his worst and most humiliating."

The Viscount threw his head back and laughed. "That is certainly true. My friends and I have never impressed one another terribly. Too many nights stumbling about in a disgraceful state back to our lodgings, and the agonies of the morning after. Never mind a thousand other things which serve well to ruin any chance at being awed." He laughed again.

Haven turned away, realizing that if he did not, he would stare, and he hated to think what might happen if he were caught staring.

Gods, please don't let him start acting that stupid. It had already been proven impossible to make friends here. He did not need the additional heartache of hoping for more. The Viscount, he must remember, was only doing this so they would not have to continue playing seconds for a host of duels.

"It is simply extraordinary," the Viscount said as his laughter eased. "He is quite famous here, and all this time you are his close friend."

Haven smiled. "I suppose it must seem rather silly."

"Only impressive," the Viscount said, a soft smile curving his mouth. "In my experience, most men – especially those new to society – with such a claim to make would be shouting it into the ears of all and sundry."

"Oh," Haven said, feeling stupid he could think of nothing else to say.

"So when is the next book due out, Haven?" Otis asked eagerly.

"Well, the one which follows *Sparrow* is in my office this very moment. The last letter I received, he was a quarter through the next, which means by now he must be nearly finished."

"You're translating one now?" Henry exclaimed, all but falling off his horse in excitement.

Haven nodded. "Yes, though it is slow going. Another month or so, however, should see it completed."

"Oh, splendid," Henry said. "Can I tell my mother? Would that be permissible, my lord?"

"I do not see why not," Haven replied.

"I shall have to tell my sisters," Otis said. "Just think, I have the translator for the *Hummingbird* novels for a friend, and he is very close friends with the author!"

Haven shook his head, and looked around for any distraction which may finally turn the conversation.

At least Henry and Otis seemed to be getting along, or at least not arguing. That, he supposed, was worth a few minutes of embarrassment.

"Well, I would say we have about concluded our ride around the park," the Viscount said. "Would the two of you care to join us for breakfast?"

Haven was tempted – so very tempted. As foolish as it no doubt was, he was loathe to give up this semblance of friendship. Another hour or so of pretending sounded as sweet as it did painful. "I wish I could," he forced himself to say, "but I've another translation which must be finished by tomorrow, and I've quite a bit of work left on it. If I put them off another day, the publishers will come for my head."

"Of course," the Viscount said lightly, smiling as though his words had been expected.

He wondered, suddenly, if the Viscount had only offered to be polite, after all, and had hoped he would say no.

Just as well he had, then.

Shoving away bitter disappointment, he reminded himself he was only getting what he deserved for letting false hopes rise. "Otis," he said, "have a good day and try to stay out of trouble. Send me word, or come and see me, should you require anything of me. Master Young, I hope the rest of the day finds you well." He hesitated, then summoned as bright a smile as he could manage, hoping he did not look as pathetic as he felt. "Lord Knox, it was a pleasure to spend the morning thus. I almost see why people enjoy them. I thank you for the gracious invitation, and hope the rest of the day finds you well. Gentlemen."

"The very same to you," the Viscount replied, bowing his head and shoulders. "The pleasure was mine."

Nodding, Haven turned away and rode home.

*You* don't say," Bart said, sipping at his coffee. Around them their favorite coffee house bustled with fellow customers, clamoring and chatting, some shouting, and someone was singing. It was nearly enough to drown out his friends – but not quite enough. "Well, he did look as smart as he did pretty," Bart continued. "He really is quite perfect for you."

"He likes to read, knows five languages, is oriental, pretty, and pleasant and you think he is perfect for me?" Alexis asked dryly, and took a sip of cream-rich coffee. "Do stop interfering in my life, Bart."

"Can't help it," Bart said cheerfully. "Everyone knows this. Anyway, I never said a word about pleasant. I do believe you picked that one."

"Shut up," Alexis snapped. "It was simple observation. You know my rules."

"Made to be broken," Maitland said absently, not looking up from the book he was reading. "Even I know that much. Lazarre is fond of these books. He reads them in his own language, though. And your Dragon does the translations for both. Simple extraordinary. I'm astonished the Goldstone club has not snatched him right up."

"They don't know," Alexis reminded him, pointedly ignoring the 'your dragon' bit. "He was taken completely aback at the enthusiasm with which we responded to his revelation. I think he must have no concept just how popular those novels are."

Maitland snorted and closed his book, setting it down to take up his own black coffee. "Well, he will comprehend it soon enough, I should think. Once Bolton and Young tell their relatives, it will be all over society by afternoon tea. The poor Dragon will probably find himself drowning in invitations." He looked slyly over his coffee cup at Alexis. "You may want to snap him up before another seduces your Dragon away."

"Not you too!" Alexis said, exasperated. "Honestly, why are you doing this? What are you, a bunch of gossiping old biddies eager to pair off every unfortunately unattached person?"

"You didn't see the way you were staring at him last night," Maitland said with a shrug. "It's not something we've seen from you since..." He motioned vaguely in the air. "You know who."

Alexis glared, and demanded icily, "Just how was I staring at him?"

Bart was oddly solemn as he replied. "Like you didn't want to stop."

Glowering, Alexis said nothing, merely drank his coffee. Rubbish. Linwood was interesting and beautiful, he did not deny it. That did not mean he was besotted or some such rot. "Perhaps I'm just making a new friend," he said at last. "I do not know why it must be anything more."

"You have a great deal of nerve calling Young and Bolton hot-headed and stubborn," Bart replied, shaking his head.

Alexis rolled his eyes.

"Is he attending any affairs tonight?" Maitland asked. "I could find out for you, if you do not know. Alas, I cannot come with you, for I must play man of affairs the rest of the day and night, but I am certain if you require someone to support your efforts at snaring your dragon, Bart would gladly go along. He could at least watch Young and Bolton, so you might hunt in peace."

"He is not mine!" Alexi snapped, almost shouting, slamming his coffee cup down. "Cease with this harassment, I have had enough of it."

"All right, all right," Bart said with a sigh. "We'll cease."

"Thank you," Alexis said stiffly.

Bloody hell he wished Linwood had agreed to breakfast. Then he might now be discussing novels and the orient and history and not tolerating the well-intended but nevertheless aggravating harassment of his friends.

That, he admitted morosely, was the true source of his ire. He had offered the invitation impulsively, but sincerely – and had not expected the rejection, though he'd tried to accept it gracefully.

None of his friends shared his interest in the orient, and Linwood being a firsthand source...

He felt there could be a real friendship there, but perhaps Linwood had no interest in any friends he might make here. His family was an honorable and highly respected one, and they had held their title for nearly fifteen generations, but none of that would mean anything to Linwood. Certainly he was no famous author.

Or perhaps, he realized in annoyance and dismay, Linwood really did have work to do and he should stop acting like a disappointed, paranoid, *besotted* fool.

Grimacing, he finished his coffee and stood.

"Where the devil are you going?" Bart demanded.

"There are things I must attend," Alexis replied. "I will see the two of you at the Prince's ball, if not well before that."

Bart nodded – and did not look fooled for a moment. "Well, Maitland has secured permission for Lazarre to come for the week at my house, and of course Perry will be there. If you feel like bringing your new *friend*, do."

"Shut up," Alexis muttered, and stomped out of the coffee house.

Out on the street, he let out a long sigh, then began to slowly walk home.

Was he really being so stupid as to develop an interest in Linwood? Surely not. He knew better. Romances were all well and good, but he had learned the hard way he was not meant for one. He was simply incapable of being intelligent where romance was concerned.

*Charles*

Had it really been almost fifteen years ago? He wondered where the stupid bastard was now, if he was even still alive. Surely someone had finally put a shot in the bastard.

Alexis had never suffered from shyness or hesitation, at least not in those days. At one and twenty years, he'd had as many lovers to his name as duels – a number embarrassingly high, looking back.

He'd fallen in and out of lust and infatuation so many times, it was a wonder he didn't make himself sick with it. None of them had been even remotely close to Charles, though. As much as he hated admitting it, his friends were right. He'd stared hard at Charles that first night, and hadn't wanted ever to stop.

Charles had stared back, though, and Alexis had thought himself the luckiest man alive.

Looking back, it was so easy to see how bad the bastard had been for him. The duels had increased with Charles, as had the carousing, the spending...so many things that should not have increased.

Until he'd learned the bastard was gambling on his name and money, and cheating on him besides. With those sickening revelations came a whole slew of bitter realities, concerning both Charles and other aspects of his life. Nearly all of it his own fault, or of his making, and he had not trusted himself ever since.

Even at the end of it all, though, he'd not been able to do more to Charles than let his shot go wide, and tell the bastard to never show his face again. After that, he had sworn off duels and lovers.

Charles had not been half-oriental, but he'd been dark of hair and eyes, with sun-kissed skin.

Was he taken with Linwood? No, certainly not. He admired the beauty, any fool would. He admired the intelligence – brilliance, even. Such a thing was in rare supply and should be admired.

These weren't, however, the only things he admired. He liked that Linwood was so unpolished in a number of small little ways, though he could more than hold his own in any drawing room. He liked that Linwood would help young Otis, though he had no obligation whatsoever.

He liked the way Linwood smiled, and laughed, and raked a hand through his hair when he was agitated.

"Damn it," Alexis said softly. What was he supposed to do now?

Pursue it?

No. He couldn't. That would be the height of stupidity.

He glared at a street vendor, barley noticing the way the man recoiled. Refusing to think about anything, he increased his pace and stalked home.

Several hours later, he was hiding in a corner at the Summerton ball, still in a foul mood that was growing progressively worse.

He'd not expected to see Linwood here – but in he'd come, just half an hour ago, accompanied by a beaming Otis.

It had taken only minutes for him to be besieged by the curious and the admiring, and even across the room Alexis could occasionally catch snatched bits of the conversations. The reclusive Earl had already made of himself a celebrity.

"We told you to snatch him up before another seduced him away," Bart said as he slid up to stand next to Alexis.

"Shut up," Alexis snarled, too malcontent with the entire situation to even argue the point anymore.

Bart looked at him, expression equal part amusement and exasperation. "I think you may still have a chance, if you go over there straight away. I was watching him while I made my way through the buffet. He keeps sneaking glances at you."

Alexis' mouth tightened. He did not reply.

"Lex," Bart with a long sigh. "Just do it, for god's sake. You have wallowed in misery long enough. It will not kill you to take a chance."

Alexis was not so certain of that, but did not voice the thought. Bart would only take it as encouragement.

Bart rolled his eyes, then snatched away Alexis' wine glass and set both it and his own down on the window sill nearby.

Then he grabbed Alexis' arm and dragged him from the corner, all but throwing him in the direction of Linwood and his crowd of admirers. "Go talk to him," Bart said, "or I will do things my way."

Shooting him a nasty glare, Alexis obeyed. Bart taking matters into his own hands was more than sufficient as a threat.

He walked across the ballroom on leaden feet, heart racing with anticipation and dread.

Linwood was as beautiful as ever, dressed in deep green velvet with touches of dark gold. Stunning as he was, Alexis realized he far preferred disheveled Linwood. No one else clamored around that Linwood, no one else had ever visited that Linwood at three in the morning.

His stomach churned as he wondered if perhaps others had, and he was mistaken in assuming he was the only.



Seeking a moment's distraction, he looked around the ballroom and nearly faltered to a stop to see Henry and Otis speaking earnestly and peacefully together.

Then he was suddenly part of the throng surrounding Linwood, and had no means of stalling further.

"You really must come for tea," he heard Lord Caruthers say.

His lip curled in distaste. Caruthers. If ever there was a man he wished he did not know, the nasty little pig.

Caruthers currently had his hand on Linwood's arm, acting with what Alexis thought was entirely too much familiarity.

"I do not know," Linwood replied to Caruthers' insistent invitation. He turned his head to smile at Alexis. "If my fellow second has appeared, I must be certain my presence is not required by him to prevent some catastrophe."

He couldn't bear it, this stirring of possessiveness, the pangs of jealousy. The longing to never stop staring. If he were honest, his reply was fueled solely by panic, but there was more than enough honestly souring his stomach, and so he ignored the guilt that flared even as he spoke. "Not at all," he said smoothly, voice idle, polite – disinterested. "All seems well, please do as you like. I have no claims to make upon your time."

Linwood flinched for the barest moment, recovering almost as soon as he reacted. Alexis wanted to take the rejection back, but could not seem to make his tongue work.

The hesitant smile Linwood had offered faded into one of stiff, empty politeness as he returned his attention to the detestable Caruthers. "Then it would seem, my lord, that I can attend your tea."

"Splendid, I—"

Alexis did stay to hear what else Caruthers might say.

He almost escaped, but Bart blocked his route.

"You're a bloody fucking fool," Bart said. "You'd rather lead him to Caruthers than stake a bloody claim?"

Alexis glared. "He's an adult."

"He turned to you for help," Bart snapped, "and you left him to the sharks. I never took you for a coward before, Lex, but that is certainly the part you're playing now – and you're a bastard."

"So it would seem," Alexis snapped. "Bugger off."

Bart threw his hands up, tossed him a few rather creative epithets, and finally stormed off.

Alexis sighed, pinched the bridge of his nose, and decided he was going to spend the rest of the wretched night drinking himself into a stupor.

A gentle touch to his shoulder had him jerking around, ready to lose his barely contained temper on the unfortunate idiot foolish enough to bother him.

But Linwood's unhappy face drew him up short.

"I wanted to apologize," Linwood said quietly, dark whiskey eyes shadowed.

"What?" Alexis asked, confused. He was fairly certain it was he who owed the apology.

"You have been most kind to me, these past couple of days, since we met because of Henry and Otis. Since my arrival, other than Otis and my editors, you are the only one who has extended any kindness. I should not have abused that kindness by presuming a friendship. Please, forgive me. I did not intend any insult. I will certainly trouble you no further."

Alexis stared, too horrified to think of a single thing to say. Is that what Linwood—blast, he really was a bastard.

And a coward.

Linwood's uncertain smile faded away entirely as the silence stretched on. He lowered his dark whiskey eyes. "I—"

The sounds of shouting, as well as the sound of flesh striking flesh, cut off whatever he had been about to say.

"Damn it!" Alexis bellowed the words loud enough the whole of the ballroom fell into a stark silence. "I've had enough," he said, and charged across the ballroom toward Henry and Otis – lunging at the last when it looked as though they were going to run. "That is it, I can take it no more."

They were not the true source of his ire, but they would suffice.

Taking them by the scruffs of their necks, he dragged Henry and Otis from the ballroom, heedless of the spectacle he had just helped them make.

Finding an empty room, not really caring whether he had permission to use it or not – and he knew no one would dare tell him no right now anyway – he threw them inside and turned to shut the door.

Linwood appeared, slipping in and shutting the door himself.

Alexis turned away, and let his temper have its way.

"Are you quite happy with yourselves?" he demanded, taking in the split lip Henry sported, the bruise forming around Otis's right eye. "Is this what you want? Violence? Are you so eager to draw blood?" He pointed to the sabers mounted on the wall behind their heads. "Go ahead, have at it. Mark, wound, draw blood. Maybe when you are both bleeding to death, you will be content. Is that what you want?"

Neither man replied.

"If you do not get your acts together," he continued, barking the words, making them jump, back away, go wide-eyed with panic and dismay, "you will make mistakes you cannot repair. Dueling is not the answer. Fighting in general is not the way a gentleman faces his problems. If you continue down this path, you will do something you regret. Instead of fighting, try working on the real source of your problem."

Their only reply was yet more silence.

His temper had cooled, but not abated – the energy was still there, and the anger, and he knew most of it was really only for himself.

"Still you will not come to your senses?" He demanded, voice softer than it had been, sighing as he finished the question.

They shook their heads, cowed but still capable of being mutinous.

He would have smiled, if he were not so unsettled.

"Fine," he barked, making them jump again. "Then I guess that as your seconds, we must continue to do everything for you."

Gods, he hoped he would not come to regret this. There were already too many regrets in his past.

He turned to Linwood, who had remained still and silent all the while, and now looked at him warily.

"Lord Linwood, as Master Young's second, I convey to you his true sentiments for Master Bolton."

Linwood frowned in confusion. "As Master Bolton's second, I will of course accept them..."

"Good," Alexis said, then reached out and yanked him close, and covered Linwood's mouth with his own.

His lips were warm and soft, and his mouth positively hot as Linwood opened to his kiss. He tasted like champagne and melon, and Alexis thought that even if this was a stupid thing to do, for the moment at least he was happy he had done it.

When he finally could make himself break away from Linwood's entirely too delectable mouth, he glanced at Henry and Otis, capable now of being vastly amused by their twin expressions of shock. "Bugger off," he said cheerfully, "and next time convey your own sentiments."

They were gone almost before he'd finished speaking.

Slowly Alexis released his hold on Linwood's jacket, smoothing the crumpled velvet as best he could. "I am sorry," he said quietly, slowly dragging his eyes up. "I was a bloody bastard to you before, and all because I was fighting the fact I would quite like to have my wicked way with you. I suppose I really am no better than those two idiots."

Linwood stared at him, eyes wide. Then he seemed to shake himself, and gave the same hesitant, sweet smile he had before. "I thought you were displeased I was presuming a friendship which was not there, in trying to get you to help me contend with that rather unpleasant fellow, whatever his name was. I...I did not think you cared for me at all, and was dismayed, for I..." He shrugged and looked away. "I thought—hoped, I should say – we could be friends. More than that, I did not dare...think upon."

"Well, I was conveying Henry's sentiments to Otis, but I was also conveying mine, if you will still consider them, despite my wretched behavior."

This time, Linwood's smile was full and bright. "Forgiven and forgotten, if you like, my lord. I am more than willing to consider your sentiments, if you do not mind receiving like sentiments from an awkward and uncouth bastard such as myself."

"I will take any sentiments you offer," Alexis said, lightly grasping Linwood's wrist and drawing him close again. "Shall we explore these sentiments further, somewhere else, Linwood?"

"Haven, please," Haven said, cautiously resting his free hand on Alexis' shoulder, tilting his head, silently requesting another kiss, dark whiskey eyes hot and bright despite the lingering hesitation in them.

"Everyone close to me calls me Lex," Alexis murmured, and bent his own head to give the requested kiss, determined to banish every last hesitation between them. "Haven," he said quietly when they finally broke apart, taking a ridiculous amount of pleasure in being allowed to use Haven's given name, the intimacy between them it implied.

The smile he received when he said it, made him want to say it a thousand times more. "Where shall we go?" Haven asked.

"How rude of me would it be to ask that we go to your house? We do not want mine; my relatives would drive you mad. They drive me mad." Alexis said, forcing himself to behave, astonished at how badly he wanted to touch and taste now that he'd finally given in. It was far too easy to go along with, now that he'd broke his rule. Looking into the dark whiskey eyes, he could not seem to muster his hesitations and fears.

He hoped they stayed out of the way indefinitely.

"Not rude at all," Haven replied, his hand sliding down Alexis' arm until their hands met, tangled, and he smiled shyly again. "Though we shall have to discuss sleeping arrangements, since you wake when I go to sleep."

Alexis laughed. "Details to be worked out later. For now, I will be content to reach the bed." He grasped Haven's chin and tugged him forward for another kiss. "Lead the way, my dragon."

Haven flushed, ever so faintly, but kept hold of his hand as he led the way out.