

The Matchmaker

By Megan Derr

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Joss played nervously with his lace cuffs, smoothing the velvet of his jacket, peering at himself in the mirror, wishing he could say for a certainty that he looked presentable and respectable. These clothes were strange to him, not being at all what he normally wore back home. So fitting; they left very little to the imagination, and that did not make him comfortable.

There was nothing for it, however. He was here, he had a job to do, and so he would have to adjust.

First, however, he had to get through introductions.

He only hoped the natives with whom he would have to contend were as nice as the Queen who had brought him here.

Glancing back at the mirror, he tried to reassure himself he did not look like an idiot.

The clock began to chime, making him jump. Grimacing at his reflection, resigned to the fact that it didn't matter how he appeared for it was too late to change anything, Joss took up his leather portfolio and left his suite.

He could feel the eyes on him as he walked through the halls, though this early in the morning, he thankfully had only to contend with the servants.

Until he reached the sunroom the Queen had shown him last night, with instructions to join her there for an early breakfast, in order to meet those persons he needed to know.

As it was just past seven, he had hoped to be one of the first arrivals, feeling it was better to be in the room as they arrived rather than to arrive last and be greeted by a sea of strange faces.

No such luck.

He hovered in the doorway, resisting the urge to mess with his lace cuffs again or fuss with his hair. Such things were for privacy—in the public eye, he must always appear confident and collected. One in his capacity must never appear to falter.

Queen Mariana smiled warmly at him from where she sat at a moderately sized round table, early morning sunlight shining behind her, drawing out the slight hints of red in her blonde hair. She was young for a Queen, Joss knew, only twenty eight. He knew she was popular and well-liked, for her competence and her compassion. His own King would never have agreed to the current arrangement if he did not approve heartily of the Queen.

"Good morning, Majesty," he said, and sketched a bow.

She smiled at him. "Good morning, Matchmaker. Did you sleep well? Are your rooms adequate?"

"Yes and yes, Majesty. I thank you for the generosity you have shown me."

"Oh, la," Mariana replied. "I have taken you quite neatly from your home; the least I can do is see you are comfortable while my prisoner." She winked at him, and he felt a little less nervous.

Then she motioned to her five companions, and all the nervousness came rushing back trebled.

"Gentlemen," she said, holding her hand out with palm up toward Joss, "I introduce you to Jocelyn Worthington, a Matchmaker of Kevie. He is here at my request. Matchmaker, these are my friends and closest associates."

She indicated the man to her immediate right, a man who seemed tall even sitting. He had dark brown, curly hair, pale green eyes, and sun darkened skin. "This is Charles Boothby, the Duke of Corona."

Joss nodded, mentally ticking off what else he already knew—for the introductions, for his part, were merely to match real faces to the sketches and information he had long since been given.

The Duke of Corona was thirty one years of age, born to his late father's second wife. Enjoyed horseback riding, politics, and ale. Disliked balls, was not good with money, detested extremely rich foods. Several lovers in the past, all women, none in recent history. He had charisma and charm, and a politician's demeanor.

Queen Marianna indicated the man next to the Duke. "Eustace Summers, Earl of Drake."

Dark blonde hair, hazel eyes, freckles across the bridge of his nose. Young, only twenty six. Friendly, well-mannered. On the pretty side of handsome. Shrewd with finances, average in politics, took lovers infrequently and never for very long, both male and female. Did not spend much time outdoors, did favor cards and gambling, and was accounted quite skilled at both. Fond of wine, did not like sweet things. He smiled warmly, if cautiously, at Joss in greeting.

"Lyle Banks, Earl of Greymore," Queen Marianna continued on to the next one, who sat to her left, with one person between them.

Thirty five years of age, with black hair and dark brown eyes, set off by gold-framed spectacles. Appeared short, though height was hard to judge when seated. Sharp features, too severe to be handsome, but quite striking. Not much for politics, but was quite intelligent. Fluent in three languages, competent in three more, a professor at the Royal University. Dabbled in cooking, no known food dislikes. Not much for the outdoors or games, spend most of his time in his studies or helping her Majesty. No recent lovers, but one serious one in the past, male. Reserved and quiet, but well-liked and respected.

Queen Marianna smiled and rested her hand on the shoulder of the man to her immediate left. "This one is my darling cousin, Sorrel Dunkirk, Marquis of Bellow."

Twenty eight years of age, same as the Queen. He was the only child of the Marianna's aunt, who had been youngest sister to Marianna's mother. Like the Queen, his hair was spun red-gold, though it was cut too short for any hint of curl he might possess to show. His eyes were a pale gray that reminded

Joss of a cool, crisp winter morning. The deep blue velvet of his morning jacket was a perfect compliment...

And his thoughts were completely wandering. Sharply, Joss drew himself back.

Close friends with the Queen; they had grown up more like sister and brother than cousins. His skills were myriad – he was sound in politics, finances, academics, foreign relations...and all of those gave him a sound foundation for law, which was where he really shone. His athletic interests were purely at a social level, though he more than held his own. Frequented the Royal University, gave a lesson there from time to time, and rumors were he was considering accepting an offer of professorship. Many lovers, none lasting, male and female. Was fond of dancing, and had a passion for tea.

The Queen lifted her hand to indicate the man standing just behind her. "This is Michael Lowry, Baron of Cartwright. He is my personal assistant."

Joss eyed him critically, as closely as he had examined the Marquis. Of all those connected to his appointed task, these two would probably prove the most difficult. Like Bellow, Lowry had known the Queen since they were young, though not since childhood; they had only met in school. Like the Marquis, Lowry's strengths were wide and varied. He was also organized, focused, and sharp-witted. In other words, the perfect man for the role he had assumed.

Though only a Baron, his position as personal assistant to the Queen lent him much rank and authority.

He was pretty, Joss decided. His hair was pale gold, slightly overlong but it suited him. He was dressed in light blue to match the sharp eyes glinting behind silver-framed spectacles, and like Joss he held a leather portfolio. It was currently open, and even as he nodded in greeting, he was obviously more interested in whatever he was penning. He liked to read, and swim when he was able. No known lovers, as all his time was spent with the Queen. Friendly, well-liked, though there was some resentment that a lowly Baron—and relatively new to the title, it having been in his family for only four generations—had been given so powerful a position.

"Gentlemen," Joss said, sweeping them a bow. "It is an honor to make your acquaintance this fine morning."

"Please, sit," Queen Marianna said warmly.

Moving slowly, feeling all eyes upon him, Joss obediently sat. Sitting exactly opposite the Queen at the oval table, he had a perfect view of them all. He absently thanked a servant who set out a plate and poured tea for him.

Though he was hungry, he was far too nervous to think that anything would settle well on his stomach.

"So," said Charles Boothby, "what, precisely, is a matchmaker? Other than the obvious, I mean."

Joss frowned, not quite certain how to answer that. Queen Marianna had cautioned him that these men likely would not approve of his task, even if he was keeping most of it a secret.

"Now, Charles," Marianna said, "I know you are familiar with the Matchmakers of Kevie."

Lyle Banks adjusted his gold-framed spectacles. "Indeed, they are quite famous—infamous, really. Fascinating career, to be sure. Called masters at analyzing and understanding people, and use that gift to 'match' people together. They say there is no such thing as a disharmonious marriage in Kevie."

Joss almost laughed at that, for it was something everyone seemed to believe about his country. "Not everyone in Kevie chooses to use matchmakers," he said. "However, when our services are called upon, we do our best to ensure that our advice brings lifelong happiness to all involved parties."

The men all laughed.

He wondered why, and fought not to slump in his seat. Reassurance had been his goal, not amusement.

Queen Marianna smiled reassuringly. "The Matchmakers are a fascinating lot; they study far harder than either of you ever did, Lyle, Sorrel."

Sorrel snorted. "Everyone studied harder than I did, unless it was a study of the lovely offerings of Micah House!"

"You are terrible," Queen Marianna admonished, "and it far too early for such crude humor. Behave, or you will have the Matchmaker thinking you quite hopeless."

"Why shouldn't he?" Sorrel asked lazily. "That is what everyone else thinks."

Queen Marianna rolled her eyes. "Indeed."

"So tell us more, Matchmaker," Eustace said. "Why has our Queen brought you?" He slid his hazel eyes to the Queen. "Are we all quite doomed to be marched down the aisle, Mari?"

Marianna sniffed and sipped her tea. She smiled as she set it down.

All the men groaned.

"Devil take it," Charles said. "I know that smile. You are plotting."

"Indeed," Marianna said. "He is here upon my request, for reasons to which none of you shall be privy. He is a Matchmaker, that is what he will be doing, and that is all you are to know of the matter."

Now they all frowned, whatever levity they had been displaying vanishing like a match snuffed by the wind.

"What is going on, Mari?" Sorrel asked quietly, eyes like winter clouds. "We none of us are children; we do not require some foreigner to come in and tell use who we should be wedding."

Marianna gave a careless shrug. "I am Queen," she replied. "He was loaned to me for good reason, but I do not want that reason known. I introduce you to him, in his true capacity, because you are all my dearest friends. So far as the rest of the palace is concerned, he is merely my guest. Understood?"

The men all grumbled their agreements, but shot him looks that were both subtly and openly hostile.

"Oh, do stop acting like children," Marianna said irritably, sipping her tea again and setting it down with a loud clack. "Have I ever done anything to hurt the lot of you? He is here because I requested his services, and he is only doing what I ask. If you want to glare like petulant schoolboys, then glare at me, not him."

Grimacing, they all eased back slightly.

"So what is that curious broach you wear?" Sorrel drawled, looking down his nose in a way only a noble could.

Joss ignored the attempt to be insulting, and lightly touched the broach pinned to his lapel. It was actually two pieces, attached at the back to appear as one from the front. Two halves of a heart, one made of ruby set in gold, the other made of diamond set in silver.

Though these men would not know, the jewels spoke of his matchmaker rank—something else the Queen chose to keep back, for reasons of her own, and he was happy to comply in this case. "It is the mark of my calling," he explained simply. "In your language, I am called 'matchmaker' but a more literal translation would be 'heart matcher'."

Lyle looked at him with mild interest. "I did not notice it before, but you are correct. That would be the older form of the language, yes? I am rusty at best in the dead forms."

Joss nodded. "Yes. One of the few cases of our employing outdated modes of speech."

"Majesty," said Michael from behind her, a deep frown creasing his face. "Whatever you are about, are you certain it's a good idea?"

"Yes," Marianna said firmly, not turning to look at him. "You can stop pouting that I would not tell even you, my darling assistant. I have my reasons, and I expect *all* of you to understand that."

Sorrel grimaced and looked again at Joss, and there was nothing but frigidity in his winter gray eyes. "Oh, we understand," he said, sitting back in his seat and folding his arms across his chest. "However, that does not mean we have to like it."

"I expect you to be civilized," Marianna replied, looking at him coolly.

Sorrel returned her gaze, then shrugged indolently and looked at Joss again. "Civilized...an interesting word, that. Even a war can be described as civilized, if it is fought a particular way."

Marianna sighed. "Is that what you are going to make of this, Sorrel? A civilized war?"

"Yes," Sorrel said, and stood up. He was promptly joined by the other three. "We do not require a Matchmaker, and there is no other reason you would have brought in something so ridiculous. Good day to you, my Queen." He gave a short bow, bordering on rude—just barely, Joss supposed, being civilized. "Matchmaker."

Joss looked at his portfolio once the men had gone, not quite certain what to say.

"That went better than I could have hoped," Marianna said briskly. "What will you require of them, Matchmaker? I will see to it they obey."

"Interviews with each, at some point," Joss said. He looked at Michael. "Including you, Lord Michael, since you are also relevant to this matter."

Michael's brows went up, but he said nothing. "As you like," he said easily. "I will acquire their schedules from their secretaries, and see that appointments are scheduled. You may also want to send me a copy of your own agenda, so that I may match it with theirs and whatever—or whoever— you may require."

Joss laughed and spread his hands. "I have only just arrived, so there is no agenda. I will require a clean slate, for the most part, to observe and learn and interview. Majesty, did you want regular reports, or...?"

She waved her hand. "No, only the final. Let me know if you will require an inordinately long length of time, or things of that nature, but otherwise I leave you to your own devices."

He bowed his head low. "Thank you, Majesty."

"No, Matchmaker, than you," Marianna replied. "As we have just seen, you will have a difficult time of it. I fear their dislike will keep you from making real friends, and they will not cooperate overmuch no matter what I admonish. Your assistance means a great deal to me, and I hope I can repay it."

"My duty is to match hearts," Joss said formally. "It is an honor to serve in such capacity. If you will permit, I should like to begin my day."

Marianna nodded. "Of course. Michael will send round the schedules and interview times later today. You recall the location of your office?"

"Yes," Joss replied, and rose, sweeping her a bow before slowly leaving the room.

Even with his things unpacked and filling space, his office looked sparse. Barren, really. Nothing like the one he had left two months ago to journey here, the one he sorely missed.

Still, it was not a bad office. Quite the contrary—technically speaking, it was nicer than the one he had left. This one even had a wide bank of windows along one wall, looking out over the landscape. A long, deep bench was built beneath the windows, thickly padded with soft-looking cushions, scattered about with pillows.

Rugs were everywhere, colorful and soft. There was also a small fireplace, perfect for the spacious room. The last wall, behind his desk, was entirely shelving, minus a small corner which was given over to a bar, already stocked with fine liquors.

Before the fireplace were two comfy looking armchairs, a small table beside each.

In another corner, near the windows, was another small table and chairs—perfect for breakfast or tea.

All the wood was a warm gold, with pillows and cushions and such adding splashes of red and blue and green, gold and brown and cream. His desk was large, with plenty of space to work, and well-stocked besides. Two more chairs were on the opposite side of it, made to be occupied for a long period of time.

He rather thought that he could become quite comfortable here. It lacked only those things he had not been able to bring with him—gifts from grateful couples, rewards from grateful parents or guardians, awards from his own King, knick knacks from his family and friends. Some of those items had come with him, those from which he could not bear to be parted, but most had remained.

Sitting down in the deep leather desk chair, he reached up to remove his broach, curling his hand around it briefly before finally shutting it away in a drawer. He had worn it for his formal meeting of the Queen's men, but he had been instructed to keep his true profession a secret. The broach would be recognized by a few in the palace, and so he could not wear it.

All to the better, really. Constantly seeing it and being reminded of what he was would not endear him to men who had already chosen to dislike him. He hoped the dislike would ease; his time here would be difficult enough without being able to make so much as a single friend.

Shrugging off the worries, for he had work aplenty to keep him occupied, he opened up his leather portfolio and began to read through the papers inside. Dipping a pen in ink, he drew forward a fresh sheet of paper and neatly wrote 'Boothby, Charles' across the top, writing out his title below that.

Then he began to list general impressions, noting everything from speech to mannerisms to dress, and everything in between.

At the bottom of the sheet he wrote *No?*

Setting it aside to dry, he moved on to the next man.

Eustace and Lyle each got a *Yes?*

When he came to Sorrel, he did not hesitate but wrote *No*.

That, at least, was easy enough. If Sorrel had any reason, romantic, financial, power, or otherwise, to marry his cousin he would have seen to the matter himself. It did not take more than the brief meeting of that morning to see that one knew how to get what he wanted, and would not hesitate to get it.

Flirt said one of his impressions. *Manipulative?* Said another. *Arrogant. Proud. Likely to impede process however possible* said further notes.

He frowned at the page for a moment, added another note with a question mark, then set it aside.

Across the next piece of paper he wrote Lowry, Michael.

Though Michael was not on his list, after this morning, he felt obliged to add him. Interesting that the Queen had not put him on the list herself, and he made note of such on Michael's sheet.

Once all the papers were dry, he placed each one in its own portfolio, these covered with simple cloth rather than the good leather of his general one. They were also each a different color—green, yellow, red, blue, and violet.

Stacking the portfolios neatly, he then picked up the green one—Charles—and drew several fresh sheets of paper. Dipping his pen again, he began to write out the different sections that he would fill out over the course of his assignment.

He had just begun to work on the third portfolio when there came a sharp rap at his door. He had left it open, as a show of invitation, and so all it took was looking up to see Michael standing there politely. "Come in, please," he said.

Michael stepped inside. "Settling in?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Good. Do let me know if there is anything you require. Her Majesty has said I am to assist as much as I may."

"That is deeply appreciated," Joss replied.

Michael moved closer to the desk and held out a sheaf of papers. "Here are copies of all their schedules, including my own and her Majesty's, for the next three weeks. I will see you are kept apprised of all changes; one of my secretaries has been appointed with the task. His name is Roger; you have only to send a note to him should you need to know anything, and he will of course come to me if my personal interference is needed."

Joss accepted the papers. "You are impressively efficient. I think it is a good thing you were not able to accompany her Majesty when she visited my homeland—my King may have tried to keep you, by whatever means possible."

Laughing, Michael finally sat down.

Hiding a smile, Joss glanced briefly at the papers he'd accepted, noting who was doing what for the next few hours before setting them aside to inspect more closely later.

"You said you needed to interview me as well," Michael said after a moment of silence. "I am free now, if that is amenable."

"Yes," Joss replied, and put away the portfolio on which he'd been working to pull out the violet one he'd assigned to Michael. He'd not yet had time to draw up the forms properly, but that could be done later.

Michael sat back in his seat, crossing one leg over the other, folding his arms across his chest. "Well, I confess I do not like whatever it is that her Majesty is plotting, but stomping around about it will help nothing. I do not see how I am relevant, either, but I am willing to cooperate. Please, ask your questions."

Joss was torn between amusement and frustration. Back home, no one was ever offended to be invited to interview with the matchmaker. It was simply a cultural thing—back home, it was regarded as helping; here it was regarded as interfering. Still, he wished they would not regard him as some sort of executioner.

"You have been her Majesty's assistant for a very long time, have you not?"

"Ever since she took the throne at sixteen," Michael replied. "I was astonished, for I always thought that position would go to Lord Dunkirk. Her Majesty and I have always been friends, but she is closer to Dunkirk. Even her husband, for the three years of their marriage, was not as close to her as Dunkirk."

That Joss had already known, for the Queen had told him a great deal about herself already, but it was always interesting—and telling—who told him what. He nodded in reply to the answer. "Are you close to them in age?"

Michael smiled. "My birthday and her Majesty's are only two weeks apart. Dunkirk is a couple of months older than us."

Noting the age, for it was a bit of information he had been lacking, Joss moved on. "You were made Baron...?"

"At age fifteen, actually," Michael said, sadness flickering across his face. "My parents both died of the illness that swept the country that year."

"I am sorry," Joss replied. "My father died of illness as well."

Michael nodded.

"So you both have had enormous responsibility from a young age. Does the Marquis share that trait, as well?"

"Oh, lord," Michael said with a laugh. "Dunkirk is a class all his own. He took up the title formally only five years ago, but he has always carried the responsibility and authority. You shall have to ask him more about it yourself, however, for that is family business of his I would feel uncomfortable disclosing without his permission."

Joss smiled and made careful note. "Of course. Those are not the sorts of questions I would unfairly press. I was merely seeing that the three of you have a number of remarkable things in common. It must make you quite close."

Michael shrugged. "I think the only one truly close to Dunkirk is her Majesty. She and I are close, though, yes. It is truly an honor to be her personal assistant."

"What do you like best and least about your job?"

"A complicated question. I work for a Queen, Matchmaker, and a great part of being a ruler is doing those things no one else can, and much of it is unpleasant. I do not like seeing that burden upon her shoulders, especially as it was put there when she was but sixteen. She does it well, but at great cost. As for what I like...there is a challenge to it, and I can help her in ways I would not otherwise be able."

Joss nodded, and made more notes.

"Could I ask a question?" Michael said.

"Of course," Joss said. "This is not, contrary to popular belief, an inquisition. More like...simply getting to know you. As often as not, I simply meet people for tea, or a stroll in the park. I chose an office setting this time..."

Michael snorted. "Because the children stomped out before you could suggest anything?"

Joss' mouth twitched, and he coughed to cover it up. "I am certain they will mellow as they realize speaking with me today does not mean tomorrow they will be shoved into a gown and thrown down the aisle.

Choking, Michael then threw his head back and laughed. "If you can convince any one of them to wear the gown, I will pay any price you demand, Matchmaker. Oh, that is an image to amuse me for a very long time."

"So you are all friends, then? "

The laughter slowly faded. "Yes, I would say so, though they are closer to each other than they are to me. I am..." Michael shrugged. "I am only a Baron, and fourth generation at that. Their families go back to the creation of the country, and they would have attended one another in places to which I would never be invited. Being her Majesty's assistant obviously changes things, of course, and it helped she and I were friends since classes..." He shrugged again.

Joss nodded and made further notes.

"So on the rare occasion you have free time, how do you spend it?"

Michael smiled in rueful amusement. "I don't remember; it's been a very long time since I've had any of that. Swimming, or reading. I think these days when it manages to come upon us, her Majesty and I take a quiet tea in her private sunroom, often with the Princess as well. Her Majesty is fond of her daughter, but seldom gets to spend real time with her."

Jotting another note, Joss then set his pen aside. "That is all I have for now, and I thank you for your time and cooperation. I will likely have to speak with you again, and I should warn you now that if the questions reach a certain stage, they will become most personal."

"Personal...how personal?"

"About as personal as you are hoping I do not mean," Joss said, mouth quirking in the faintest of smiles. "I will say that I would be a poor matchmaker if I could not coordinate certain tastes and preferences between partners."

Michael's brows went up. "I see. Does that mean you are attempting to match me?" He immediately shook his head, and held up a hand to forestall a reply. "No, we're not to know what is going on. Knowing her Majesty, she could be dooming the entire lot of us, or merely one and making the others suffer as some sort of buffer." Something flickered across his face, but it was smoothed away a moment later. "There is never any telling with her, even for me," he concluded. "I hope the questioning does not reach that stage, but I will try to cooperate."

Joss held his hands out in a placating manner. "For what it is worth, matchmakers are made to sign a great many contracts upon taking up our profession, and we face the most severe penalties for breaking those contracts. Even the King is forbidden access to the information we collect, and once matches are arranged and the information is no longer required, it is destroyed. We take our jobs very seriously. You have no reason to trust me, from your perspective, but I assure you I have never violated a confidence."

Light blue eyes locked with his for what seemed ages, but at last Michael nodded. "I believe you, Matchmaker, or at least am willing to believe you, until I have reason not. Now, I think I hear the clock chiming four o'clock. Unless he decided to be a brat – not unusual – I do believe you have an appointment with Dunkirk in half an hour."

"Thank you again for your time," Joss said, and walked with him to the door, and out into the hallway. "Enjoy the rest of your day."

"The same to you," Michael said, and his eyes shifted briefly to something past Joss' shoulder. "I think you will also need a bit of luck, and I give it." With a parting smile, he turned and walked away.

Before Joss could turn around to see what had caught Michael's eye, a voice like crushed velvet purred in his ear. "My turn, Matchmaker."

His body tensed with a suppressed urge to jump and turn around.

Instead, Joss merely turned his head to meet the winter eyes, so close their noses almost touched, and he could smell tea and cinnamon on Sorrel's breath. "Marquis Bellow," he greeted politely, neither warm nor cool. "You're early, and here I did not expect you at all."

Sorrel rose to his full height, a good half a head taller than Joss.

He was, Joss realized, truly beautiful—the winter eyes against the summer hair, features elegant and refined enough to be worthy of being carved into marble or painted in rich oils. He wore haughtiness and arrogance like a second skin, and the twist to his mouth said he was used to getting what he wanted, and did not expect that to change any time soon.

Men who pretended to power and authority tended to be excessive in proving they already had it. Sorrel was dressed simply, elegantly, with only a small diamond in one ear, and a plain gold signet ring on his right hand. It was the sort of simplicity that said he had no reason to pretend anything.

Joss met the challenge in those eyes unflinching, and made a mental note to add further impressions to Sorrel's file: *Hostile. Willing to use seduction to get his way?*

"Shall we, then?" Sorrel asked. "The sooner this inquisition is over, the better."

"I would hate to keep you overlong," Joss murmured back, then turned around slowly and strolled leisurely back into his office.

He sat down behind his desk, and waited as Sorrel took his time in getting a drink from the bar and settling down in one of the seats in front of the desk. "So what would you like to know?" he finally asked, voice still holding a bit of that velvet purr. Nothing like the cooler tones of that morning, which meant he was hoping to rattle or otherwise upset Joss' equilibrium.

It was nothing he had not experienced before, and if the good Marquis wanted to play games...well, that told him more than Sorrel probably realized.

Not that it really mattered. His first impression was not changing, and while he would go through all the motions to ensure he was correct, he did not anticipate that impression changing. Sorrel would not be his final choice, or any choice at all.

Still, he could use Sorrel to acquire some of the information he needed on the other candidates. "You have known the Queen your entire life," he began. "Have you known Michael as long as she has?"

"Yes, and yes," Sorrel replied, looking amused. "What's your next question? Why haven't I married her? Am I jealous of him? You should ask the inhabitants of the palace, they could provide far better answers to those questions than I."

"While gossip provides information in its own unique way, my lord, I am not looking for lies and suppositions. I am looking for honesty." Joss looked down, then slowly dragged his gaze back up, looking through his lashes. "An interesting concept for you, I do not doubt."

Something sparked in Sorel's eyes, but whether it was amusement or annoyance, Joss could not quite say. "I have no interest in marriage, even to a Queen," he replied, stretching his legs out, half reclining in his seat, one leg crossed over the other, whiskey glass held loosely in one hand. "I have never denied that I do not favor fidelity."

No, he was certainly not the type to trouble himself with something as bothersome as fidelity. Why settle for a rose when the whole garden is available? Joss made appropriate notes in the file, taking his time about it, feeling the cool eyes watch his every moment. "I'm told you are quite adept with law, my lord."

"Yes," Sorrel drawled, pale lips curving a wicked smirk. "I find rules and laws an amusing challenge. Where to follow...where to bend...where to break..." He took a sip of his whiskey, and licked a trace of it from his lips. "I'm certain you must find rules just as interesting."

"It is true that I must follow a great man of them," Joss replied, jotting further notes, telling himself he wasn't doing it just because it obviously annoyed and rattled Sorrel to see notes being made about him. Except he got the feeling that Sorrel was seldom rattled by anything, and *that* was worth making note.

Sorrel's lip curled. "Must follow, yes. Question and harass and place people like so many pawns. I'm certain the rules for that game are most intriguing."

"People are not pawns," Joss replied and dipped his pen in the inkwell.

Trust issues? he noted, then looked up again, setting the pen aside for the moment.

"Her Majesty mentioned to me, not longer after we first met, that you greatly enjoy tea."

Sorrel looked at him, but said nothing.

Joss did not press him, refusing to rise to the bait. Sorrel wanted him to work for every single snippet of information, and that was not a game he intended to play. Let the bastard keep underestimating him; he'd already given away more than he would ever realize.

Realizing his own thoughts, he grimaced inwardly at his own bout of cockiness. Sorrel was not a man to be underestimated, either, and he needed to remember that.

A pity, really. Back home, during her visit and after her initial request, the Queen had spoken in detail about her friends. She had admitted her cousin was more than a little bit of a rake, and the living, breathing definition of arrogant—

—She had obviously also spoken with the familiarity of someone who had grown up with him, and so was immune or oblivious to certain aspects of his character which a stranger would note.

Joss wondered, if he were to inquire, how many people would describe the Marquis as 'devastating' or something much along those lines. 'Obnoxious' probably came up with more than a bit of frequency.

He looked at the general notes he had made while he traveled, and picked one that changed direction entirely. "Her Majesty's late husband—what did you think of him?"

"The King?" Sorrel shrugged. "He had excellent taste in women."

A flippant reply if Joss had ever heard one, and almost amusing—he meant it to be taken in the wrong vein, that the King had been a womanizer, yet in reality it was probably only a compliment to the Queen.

He picked up his pen again, and scratched out the question mark besides *Trust issues*.

Setting the pen down again, he stood up and smiled. "I believe that is all I need from you today, my lord. I prefer to keep the sessions short, though they will likely lengthen as you grow comfortable with me." He moved around the desk to escort Sorrel from his office, a reflexive gesture of courtesy.

Sorrel stood just as he neared, close enough their shoulders did not quite brush. His voice was all purr and velvet again as he dipped his head to Joss' ear once more. "As pretty as you are, Matchmaker..." He drew back as abruptly as he had moved in, voice suddenly frigid, "I doubt anyone could ever be comfortable with you." He set his glass down with a faint click on the desk, turned sharply away and stalked from the room, gone as quietly as he had come.

Joss stood impassive for a long moment, then moved back to sit behind his desk.

Sorrel knew where to thrust the knife, that was certain. He had gone straight for the heart.

A man like that, however, always excelled at finding the weaknesses in others. The trick was not letting him know he had found a weakness, and if there was one thing a lifetime of studying people had taught Joss, it was how to hide what he felt.

He shoved the self pity aside and drew his papers close, fleshing out some notes, adding in the proper, formal notations.

Looking over the schedules of the other three, and his own which Michael had been kind enough to write up, he saw that he would not meet with Eustace or Lyle until tomorrow, and Charles not until the day after.

Except...

He frowned in thought, weighing his options.

It looked as though they were all attending the affair listed as occurring tonight. A ball of some sort, he did not understand the brief notation made, one of those done unthinkingly because everyone who would see it was used to seeing it that way.

Dare he try it?

The longer he took to speak with them, the harder it would be to draw them out. Forewarned was forearmed, as the saying went, and they were already likely speaking with Michael and Sorrel over the matter.

While he could order them not to speak of their interviews with others, he did not think they would take well to such an order. Sorrel, especially, would simply see it as a rule to break.

His fingers clenched, crumpling the paper he still held. Frowning, he relaxed his fingers and smoothed the paper out.

Yes, the ball would at the very least provide a chance to observe.

Decided, he checked the schedules given him to see where her Majesty would be. Then he put his things away, locked the drawer holding the portfolios, and tucked the key into his jacket. Out in the hallway, he hesitated. He could get to the sunroom, his bedroom, and this office...otherwise, he was at a bit of a loss.

Well, nothing ventured, nothing gained. Hoping he did not wind up making a great fool of himself, Joss made his way back toward what he thought was a main section of the palace, where he would be sure to find assistance.

He caught his reflection in a heavily gilded mirror, and frowned at it as he passed. More than he liked of his inner turmoil was showing, and he paused long enough to ensure as best he could that he was firmly in control.

Matchmakers, by the nature of their following, could not be remarkable. They worked with a wide range of people, and in a capacity that by its very nature became extremely intimate. Even the Kings and Queens of the world did not know all that a matchmaker might about various people, and when called upon, even royals would have to answer the same personal questions.

Nothing was worse than attempting to convey such information to someone who was too beautiful, too graceful, too well spoken—too anything. Matchmakers must be many things, but never *too much* of any of them.

They must be comfortable, like a familiar chair or an old blanket, his mentor had said once.

Joss had never found the comparison flattering, but he accepted the reality of it because he loved what he did.

He would never be a Marianna or a Michael...and certainly never a Sorrel. His hair was brown, cut neatly and simply. His eyes were also brown, plain and ordinary. It was only the sharpness of the mind, and observational skills, which were above normal for matchmakers, and these were skills which could be hidden and downplayed to appear ordinary and therefore more comforting.

Despite all this...

Sorrel was far too correct.

No one felt comfortable around a matchmaker, even back home where it was considered an honor to have someone care enough to see to your happiness in such fashion.

Granted, not all the matches they were required to make were romantic in nature—in his rank especially, many wanted someone with the proper connections and whom they would not want to kill. Whether it went as far as love was immaterial, and often not even really possible. In those cases, Joss was expected to get as close as possible.

Such as right now.

He sighed as he passed another mirror, then realized what he'd done and gave himself a sharp, mental slap.

Perhaps it was simply being in a foreign nation that was causing him to falter. His task was difficult enough in a friendly environment, where he had to give bad news as often as good. Not everyone liked the outcome of his analyses, and some sought him out simply to have proof that a match was a bad one.

Well, no matter. He was not even a full day in and he had stricken one candidate from the list. If he had added one, well, that could be a good sign. It meant the foreign environment was not causing his abilities to falter completely.

Reaching the main hallway he had been seeking, he flagged down a servant and got directions to where he could find the Queen.

He forced himself not to hover in the doorway. Lingered would only prolong the inevitable, and it was not as though he had not been to countless parties before, and for this very reason. No reason it should not be business as usual. There was no reason to feel anxious.

Then again, he was not accustomed to being the focus of so many stares.

Did he look so strange? No one knew why he was here – but then again, he supposed simply being a guest of the Queen was more than enough to warrant staring.

Making his way across the room, smiling politely when someone managed to catch his eye, he at last reached Queen Marianna. "Majesty," he greeted, accepting the hand she held out, kissing the knuckles. "You are as resplendent as always. Thank you for permitting my attendance, this evening."

"La, dearest," Marianna replied, pulling him forward to kiss his cheek. "Why would I not see that a friend is invited to this small fete? It is nothing."

Joss barely kept back a snort at the idea of a crowd of at least five hundred described as a 'small fete'.

"Come, sit with me," Marianna commanded. "Michael—"

"Going, my Queen," Michael replied with a laugh, touching her shoulder briefly in a gesture that seemed to be of affection. "Have you a preference in beverage, Matchmaker?" he asked.

"No," Joss replied.

Michael nodded. "Then I will bring you a glass of our local wine, everyone loves it, and rightly so." Then he was gone, leaving Joss alone with Marianna.

"I will not pester you," Marianna said, waving a delicate fan back and forth, high enough that anyone who might be watching would not even be able to read her lips. "I want to, but I will not."

Joss smiled briefly. "Well, I can tell you that my initial analysis strikes the Marquis from the list."

Marianna gave an unladylike snort. "I gave his name for form's sake. Trust me when I say your analysis comes as no surprise. I do not think there is a man or woman alive who could tame that one. Even one of your skill, my darling Matchmaker, could not find a match for him." She gave a pointed look, more of a fond glare, at a figure across the room.

He followed her gaze, and, despite himself, Joss felt something catch in his chest.

Sorrel stood near the far wall, one forearm propped against it, over the head of a short, birdlike woman. Even at a distance, it was impossible to miss the way they were flirting and playing. Sorrel did it well, and beautifully. He wore a shade of dark gray that held just a hint of shimmer, accented with black lace at throat and cuffs, black breeches, with diamonds sparkling here and there in the profusion of candlelight.

"You'll only get burned," Marianna murmured gently.

Joss jerked, startled. "What?"

There was a too-knowing look in her eyes. "He's an open flame, Matchmaker. Beautiful, but he burns everything that touches him."

"I am old enough to know flames are to be admired, but not touched, Majesty," Joss said with a careless shrug. "Anyway, I am a matchmaker—your matchmaker. That eliminates me from any manner of dalliance with your friends."

Marianna smiled at him, and said nothing further.

Joss did not look across the room again, but focused on Marianna as he should have all along. "Do you ever dance with any of your friends, Majesty? Would it be out of place if you were to do so?"

"No, it would not be out place," Marianna replied. "The only dancing I do is with them, really, minus the odd visitor here or there who requires a bit of special attention."

"Then, if it pleases you," Joss said, "dance with each of them."

Marianna nodded, and snapped her fan shut. "Even Sorrel?"

"For form's sake," Joss agreed.

"Then he shall be first," Marianna said. Standing up, she stood for a moment, then lifted the fan and motioned imperiously.

Across the room, Sorrel abruptly bid farewell to his flirtation of the evening, then turned and strode straight toward them. He was even more stunning up close, the dark of his clothes and eyes drawing the fire from his hair.

He smiled a slow, burning smile. "Majesty, Matchmaker. Am I being summoned to present myself for inspection? Do I pass muster, Matchmaker?"

Joss smiled blandly, and completely ignored the jibe. "Good evening, my lord."

Sorrel lifted an elegant brow at the subtle return, but was prevented from continuing the battle of insults further by Marianna.

"Dance with me," she commanded, poking him in the chest with her fan. "Your little bit of lace will wait."

"If not, there is always another bit of lace," Sorrel agreed with a careless motion, and held out his hand. "I would much rather dance with you, my Queen, even if it is to put myself on the auction block."

"Pah!" Marianna said as she took his hand. "I would love to see what would actually happen were I to do such a thing. I guess it would depend on the nature of the auction. A tumble, plenty of bids. Eternal bliss? I am not so certain you would get one."

Sorrel laughed. "I would not bid on that. Come."

Just a moment after their departure, Michael appeared with drinks in hand. He looked at the dance floor, and shook his head in amusement. "People used to wonder, Matchmaker, why she never married him. They seem a perfect match, in many eyes."

Joss said nothing, but his opinion must have shown on his face, for Michael laughed and handed him a glass of jewel red wine. "Here, this is very good stuff. Even Sorrel cannot pierce the pleasantness this creates."

"Thank you," Joss said with a smile.

Michael nodded in reply, then smiled and motioned. "Look, there are Summers and Banks."

Immediately Joss followed the direction of his gaze, though he tried not to be obvious in his watching.

They both cut fine figures. Eustace was in dark jewel green tones, accented by cream and gold. He grinned and greeted various men and women as they made their way through the ballroom, turning occasionally to say something in Lyle's ear.

Lyle, older and dignified, was dressed in basic black. He smiled whenever Eustace spoke to him, and only greeted a few men here and there, one woman who looked to be at least fifty or so years in age.

A couple of minutes later they joined Joss and Michael on the dais.

"Where is Boothby?" Michael asked. "I thought he would be here to harangue Grosser to death over the new bill. He is going to miss an excellent chance at haranguing."

The other men laughed, but Eustace spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "He has run off again; I saw him riding away only three hours ago."

"Hmm," Michael murmured. "Are you positive it is unethical to have him followed?"

Lyle raised his eyes to the heavens. "Sorrel was the one to suggest the idea, should that not be answer enough?"

"True," Michael said, and they all shared amused shakes of the head.

Then Lyle turned to Joss. "Matchmaker," he said politely, if with no real warmth. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"It is hard not to enjoy oneself in such civilized company," Joss replied.

Eustace gave a reluctant laugh. "Oh, well done." He raised his glass in toast. "The Matchmaker has a bit of a bite to him."

Joss smiled politely and raised his own glass. "I am not your enemy, you know."

"You are putting at least one of us upon a chopping block we do not desire," Eustace replied. "It is hard to accept that with anything past civility, especially when she's got you being so deucedly mysterious about it."

Michael smiled. "Perhaps she's hoping to put a leash on Sorrel."

Eustace and Lyle burst into laughter.

"Now that I would like to see!" Lyle declared. He slid a look to Joss. "Is that why you are here, Matchmaker? No, you can't tell me, and I wouldn't want to have my hopes dashed, anyway. That would explain why he was particularly irate this morning, however. He must feel the noose tightening."

Joss glanced at the dance floor, where he could see Sorrel leading Marianna back to their little group.

"Ah, Eustace," Marianna said cheerfully as she reached them. "You will come and dance with me next. We always do splendidly at this one."

"Everything you do is splendid," Eustace promptly replied, and handed his champagne flute to Lyle, then held out his arm for Marianna to take.

Joss watched them go, sipping his wine and listening as Michael spoke idly with Sorrel, but his eyes were on all of them, as best he could follow—and he had followed larger numbers than this.

Michael and Lyle were more interested in watching the dancers, though he could not tell who each of them was watching.

He had a guess, where Michael was concerned...but Lyle he was not yet certain. His one serious lover had been male, but that meant nothing.

A few minutes later, Marianna and Eustace returned, and Lyle was commanded to dance in his turn. Joss watched carefully as they walked away.

"Do you dance?" Sorrel's voice washed over him, jarring him from his thoughts.

Joss hid his start by taking another sip of wine. "Yes," he said, "I do."

Sorrel gave one of his wicked smirks, and held out a hand. "Then dance, Matchmaker. The Queen does not spend her time on dull men, and if you do not dance, you will appear most dull indeed. We cannot have you making her look bad."

There was, unfortunately, no tidy way out of that. Sorrel had trapped him rather neatly.

"I did not think I was your preferred type of dance partner," he said as he accepted the black-gloved hand held out to him.

Sorrel barred his teeth in a challenging smile. "I have no one type."

"Easy come, easy go?" Joss asked coolly as they left the group and headed toward the dance floor. Really, he should be more circumspect, but Sorrel was off his list and he was not going to let Sorrel push him around.

Sorrel merely laughed. "That is not a type, Matchmaker. That is a failing." He lifted their joined hands high in the beginning position. "I hope you dance well, but I suppose I should have asked that sooner."

"Yes, you should have," Joss replied, and did not bother to say that he danced very well.

The first turn drew him close, his back not quite touching Sorrel's chest, the proper distance just barely obeyed, and he made a mental note to adjust his profile on Sorrel to *Willing to use seduction to get his way*, without the question mark.

He caught a hint of civet and orange blossom before the dance forced them apart, the scent lodging in his nostrils, and he noticed it again when they were brought close again.

"So how does one become a matchmaker?" Sorrel asked, as they went back to chest again, his hand curling briefly around Joss' hip in far too intimate a gesture.

Joss focused on the question. "The same way one becomes anything."

"Now, there are many reasons one takes up his occupation," Sorrel countered. "Aptitude, desperation, right of birth..." Joss turned, facing him again, and Sorrel moved so they were barely a breath apart, way beyond the bounds of propriety. "Thrust into it."

Joss stepped to the right in the next step, head turned away. "Aptitude, my lord."

"Mmm," Sorrel murmured in acknowledgement. "Aptitude for what?" His hand tightened on Joss', sudden and painful.

Joss refused to wince.

"For dictating with whom a person should fall in love? With whom he should spend his life? I do not see what grants you the right to dictate the intimacies of another's life."

"It is not my duty or my right to tell a person whom he loves, or should love," Joss replied, pausing as the dance steps moved them apart, resuming the moment they drew together again. "It is my duty, or one of them, to tell a person where love *might* be found. I do not dictate. I simply do my best to provide the best options."

The hand on his was still too tight; his hand would ache tomorrow. Still, he gave no indication of the pain, refusing to give in even that small amount. "You have never seen me work, my lord, or the results. Should you not at least be willing to judge me fairly?"

Sorrell laughed, and abruptly jerked him off the dance floor, out into the hallway, down the corridor and up a short flight of stairs.

When they emerged, Joss saw they were on the little balcony where normally the musicians would be. Her Majesty, for whatever reason, had them on the floor itself.

"Do you see the woman in ice blue?"

Joss looked where Sorrel indicated and then nodded.

"The man in hunter green?"

Again, Joss nodded.

"Six months ago they finally concluded a two year courtship that was the talk of the palace. Sweet, earnest, devoted, utterly charming when they spoke their vows of devotion and love and eternity. Two months after their marriage, she was bedding a visiting foreign minister and he let me seduce him in the garden." He gave a cold smile. "Not very talented, I can see why she ran to the minister."

Before Joss could reply, he pointed out another, two men—one in scarlet, one in simple black. "Betrothed, constantly declaring they love one another. A beautiful pair, everyone says. I had the one in scarlet over his desk just last week, at his request. Were I to approach the other..." He lifted one shoulder in a dismissive shrug.

He pointed out several couples, all of them 'in love' and at least one of every pair had been unfaithful, though it was not with Sorrel they always broke vows—though it was with him most frequently.

"Poor matches," Joss said when at last Sorrel fell silent, eying the various couples, settling finally on the men in red and black. "One should never judge at a glance, but sometimes a glance can say a thousand things or more."

Sorrel sneered. "Oh?"

"Yes." He said, pointing to the two men. "Every time they are left alone together, their conversation lapses. If two people cannot talk with one another, they should not join in a lifelong commitment. There could be other reasons for their silence, of course, which is the danger of trusting a glance, but still. That is a flaw to be noted, and further explored."

Sorrel, surprisingly, said nothing, but just as Joss turned to look at him, the Queen caught his eye. She had returned to her seat, and was speaking with Lyle, Eustace, and Michael.

Why had she not danced with Michael?

Frowning, forcibly reminded that had a job to do, and that job did not include confounding conversations with Sorrel, he turned away to head back to the ballroom proper.

"Leaving so soon?" Sorrel drawled.

"You may not believe in love," Joss replied, "but it is my job to see people find it, so that those things you pointed out do not occur. That means that at present, I have more important and interesting things to do than remain here with you." He immediately wished he had curbed the impulse to get in that last little dig.

Sorrel laughed, voice dripping arrogant amusement as he replied, "Now, I may not be more important than her Majesty, but I am infinitely more interesting than matchmaking."

"Are you?" Joss asked. "You have just exposed your contempt for the promiscuity of others, my lord. Why should I find interesting in you what is despicable in others? Thank you for the dance. Enjoy the rest of your evening."

He left before Sorrel could get another word in, and permitted himself a moment of silent gloating for having achieved the last word this round.

Then he wondered sourly why he was stooping so low as to engage in Sorrel's petty games.

Returning to the ballroom, he swiftly rejoined the Queen and the others.

"Sorrel stole you away, we saw," Lyle said, in the tone of a scholar examining a dry text he has read a thousand times before. "I would have thought a matchmaker to be made of sterner stuff."

"Nothing transpired," Joss replied.

They looked at him in patent disbelief.

"Ignoring the fact we were in plain view," Joss said, motioning to the balcony, which was now vacant, "we were gone not more than ten minutes. Even the estimable Marquis is not *that* talented."

Laughter erupted amongst the small group, and Marianna rolled her eyes.

He let them converse and laugh and idle after that, content to observe, offering a comment of his own only just often enough not to appear rude.

The men eventually wandered into a little group of their own, avidly discussing some recent hunting trip and the disaster which had struck it, leaving Marianna briefly alone.

Joss seized the chance, and moved to speak privately with her. "Majesty, might I ask a question?"

She looked at him in amusement, fanning herself in an attempt to cool off in the heat of the ballroom. "It is your job to ask questions, Matchmaker."

"Why did you not dance with Michael?"

"Michael?" Marianna repeated, and glanced at the man in question, whose back was currently turned. "I used to ask him, and command, but he always refused. Michael is very much about rules and place, which only makes sense, being a mere Baron yet finding a place amongst the greater lords. Being my assistant does not make it any easier to swim infested waters." She shrugged. "It would not be proper, typically speaking, for the Queen to dance with a man most see as a glorified secretary. So he will not, despite repeated requests and orders."

Interesting. That did further explain the way he always said 'Queen' and 'Majesty' and referred to the others by their surnames, when they all addressed one another by their first names.

"So why did Sorrel drag you away to the balcony?" Marianna asked. "I saw you up there; he had a look upon his face which always spells trouble. You are getting under his skin, I believe, Matchmaker."

Joss shrugged. "If that means that I anger him, then most certainly. He disapproves of me. Is it possible he knows what I am really about?"

"If anyone were likely to figure it out," Marianna replied, still vigorously fanning herself, "it would be he or Michael. Should they deduce, that would not endear you to them." She slid him an amused look. "Anger, however, is not what I meant. When I said you got under his skin, I meant precisely that. The anger is merely a reaction to it." She winked at him. "He should look up the laws pertaining to matchmakers; I am astonished he has not."

Joss smiled briefly, amused despite himself. "He will think of it, I do not doubt it."

"Yes," Marianna murmured, eyes darting around the ballroom. "Then my goose will be cooked. Roasted to a cinder, likely."

Their conversation faded as the men rejoined them.

"Michael," Marianna said, standing and snapping her fan shut. "I believe I have had enough this evening. Escort me to my room, if you please."

"Of course, Majesty," Michael said, promptly stepping forward and offering his arm.

They let a moment later, and Joss watched them go, making still more mental notes.

"So how much information have you collected this evening, Matchmaker?" Lyle asked with relative congeniality.

Joss smiled, and spread his hands in a gesture of harmlessness. "You are all splendid dancers, this ballroom is insufferably hot, and the good Marquis does not like me one bit. Neither do you, at that, but you are still being civilized."

They laughed, and Eustace clapped him on the shoulder. "You are not entirely detestable, Matchmaker," he said with a grin. "If only because Sorrel seems to be on the war path. He must really feel that noose tightening."

Lyle nodded. "Yes. Think how different this place would be without him seducing everything remotely human."

His eyes flicked to Eustace for a moment, a shadow passing briefly over his face.

Joss noted it with interest. That was jealousy, plain as day, but why? It would bear further investigation, and he had the sudden thought this group was going to cause him a great many headaches.

He lingered a little longer, until Eustace and Lyle at last took their leave, watching them depart.

Then he made his way to his office, and stripped off his coat before settling behind his desk and pulling out the portfolios. He wrote down his observations and thoughts for each person, then read through everything again. Adding a few more notations, changing some already written, he at last returned them to the drawer and locked it.

Sighing softly, he retrieved his coat and wended his way through the palace to his bedroom.

He spent the next day wandering the palace, speaking with all and sundry, observing the chosen candidates where he happened across them.

Except Sorrel, whom he avoided studiously whenever he got so much as a hint the man was in the general vicinity.

By the lunch hour, he was ready for a nice, long nap. Interviewing one person was exhausting; speaking with dozens upon dozens while not letting on his true purpose—

He wanted that nap, and if he did not stand up right this moment, he was going to succumb to that desire. Yawning, he dragged himself to his feet. Perhaps finding a real bite of food would help restore his energies. He rubbed his eyes, then dropped his hands and glanced at the various bits of papers waiting to be transcribed.

Sighing, he shoved them all into the drawer and locked it, then tucked the key away and went in search of food.

A few minutes later, he was enjoying bread and cheese and slices of unfamiliar but excellent fowl. Abandoning the palace, he slipped away to eat in peace and quiet on one of the benches that lined a stone path looping around the palace. This particular section of it was empty of others, minus a passing servant here and there.

The opinions of the inhabitants were wide and varied, though a few things remained common. Never play cards with Eustace, unless your aim was to lose your shirt. Lyle was steady and charming, and though he would never admit it, had more control of the University than the University Council. Charles was shockingly kind for a politician, though it never was wise to cross him. Michael was the Queen's faithful and attentive pup. Sorrel was a rake and a scoundrel and a brat. Throughout the course of the day, he had heard many interesting comparisons: sly as a fox, venomous as a snake, a feral cat.

'In need of castration' had been his personal favorite, and he'd been so amused by it he had noted it in Sorrel's portfolio.

He'd heard just as many compliments, which was interesting, but ultimately irrelevant because his only goal was to see which of the four men still on his list was most suited to marry the Queen. If she was being pushed to marry, she had told him, she wanted it to be as happy a marriage as possible, without ruining the friendships that meant the world to her.

They were the only men she trusted, and the best suited to marry besides—but which one, without completely ruining all their friendships. Or were they all out of the question?

So far he had subtracted one, and added one. He wondered what she would think of his addition.

Well, for the moment it did not matter. He had interviews with Eustace and Lyle later in the day. Tomorrow was Charles...which reminded him that he had not seen Charles once all day. Heard plenty about him, to be certain, from his political acumen to his surprising kindness to the one thing that had been said about all five men—never upset the Queen where any of them might find out about it.

More than one person had been dealt with, quietly but efficiently, for inflicting any manner of harm or slight upon Queen Marianna. Without her knowledge or approval, was the popular opinion.

So where was Charles? His schedule had said he would be in a number of places around the palace, and Joss had sought him out in most of them for observation, at the very least. Not once had he found him, and no one had seen him.

It reminded him of the previous night, when the others had commented on much the same thing.

Well, it could be anything to do with him, or nothing at all. There was nothing he could do about it, except wait for Charles to reappear. Hopefully, he would show for his interview. Until then, the remaining three were plenty to occupy his thoughts.

If he had any time remaining tonight, it would be in more mundane forms of research. Royalty made everything more complicated, for there were levels and sublevels that must be weighed as equally as all the other information he was gathering.

Taking another bite of cheese, he contemplated the trees on the far side of the wide path.

"Good afternoon, Matchmaker."

The smooth voice came from seemingly nowhere, and then Sorrel was beside him on the bench, far too fine in soft brown and gold that did marvelous things to his hair and complexion.

Joss remained carefully expressionless. "Good afternoon, my lord. Does the day find you well?"

"Quite," Sorrel replied, smiling like a satisfied cat. "Are you still spying away? Do the trees have something to tell you?"

"I was enjoying the silence, my lord," Joss said pointedly.

Sorrel smirked, then turned his head to give the trees a leisurely perusal.

Joss studied him surreptitiously, wondering what he hoped to learn. Formally, he had no further interest in Sorrel. He continued formal observation solely for the sake of appearances, and to triple check his own work.

Informally, he could not help but notice the way the ruby in Sorrel's ear drew out the red in his hair. The small shaving scar just at the edge of Sorrel's jaw, a tiny white mark that begged—

At least, he thought irritably, he was smart enough to look but not touch.

"Was there something you desired, my lord?"

Sorrel's smile was a slow burn, made to be hot and tempting—and dangerous. "Plenty. Are you offering to fulfill them?"

Joss stood. He would not get tangled up in this nonsense. He refused to play these games. Sorrel did not have to like what Joss was doing, but he did not have to take it out upon him, especially in such wretched fashion. "No. Were I a beggar without choices, still I would not choose you."

The reply lacked elegance, but sometimes the direct approach served best. He turned away, irritated that his lunch was ruined, feeling anything but rested now.

"Methinks he doth protest too much," Sorrel said softly, dangling the words out like one might a bit of string before a kitten.

They raked across his skin, all they implied, like nails across a chalkboard. The wiser course would be to ignore him, but Joss turned back before he could remind himself of that. "I'm protesting too much?" he asked. "You are the one who stormed from the room after our introduction, and who later turned up to attempt seduction with ill grace and no subtlety. Then you tried to show me the futility of my work. Do you loathe me, my lord, or do you fear me?"

Sorrel stood very slowly, tweaking the fall of his lace cuffs, the drape of his afternoon jacket. Then he finally looked at Joss, who fought a sudden urge to back away several steps, or stammer an apology, or simply bolt—anything to get away from the hot-cold look of those gray eyes.

"Fear?" Sorrel repeated softly. "What have I to fear from you?"

Joss shrugged, refusing to back down despite his every instinct screaming for him to do precisely that. He lifted his chin, meeting those eyes. "To judge by your actions, my lord, you fear the Queen has finally had enough of your philandering."

Sorrel sneered. "If Marianna was fed up with me, she would simply tell me so. Even if that were your assignment, I doubt your ability to succeed. Why should a pathetic, foreign stranger know better than I who might make me happy?"

"I see with unbiased eyes," Joss replied. "My emotions are not invested, and so I see more clearly."

"Have you any emotions to invest?" Sorrel asked. He reached out and grasped Joss' chin, tilting his head further up, casting him a critical look, as one might a new horse.

He simply looked coolly back. "Have you?" he challenged.

Sorrel only said condescending, "You are the one asking questions and jotting down your precious notes. You tell me, Matchmaker."

"The contents of my report are none of your business."

"If you are writing about me," Sorrel replied, "it most certainly is my business." He roughly let go of Joss' chin.

It ached, and he wondered if he would have bruises on his face, but he gave no indication he felt anything but annoyance. "You are not the one paying my fees. I owe you nothing."

Sorrel's lip curled in distaste. "So it is money you want?"

"No," Joss replied coldly. "I am presently engaged by her Majesty, and have no time for further contracts. If, after I have completed my current assignment, you are still desirous of engaging my services, I will be more than happy to compile a report meeting your exact specifications."

Sorrel's eyes glittered, hard and bright, and Joss wondered just how much those eyes saw when they looked at him in that way. He was not accustomed to being seen. He was used to being mediocre, plain, nigh on invisible. Not seen.

He did not know what Sorrel saw when he looked at him, other than someone he vehemently disliked, but Sorrel *saw* him, and Joss realized he did not know how to deal with that. Not even a little bit. It made his heart race, with fear and uncertainty, with anger and determination—and anticipation, though what he was anticipating he did not know, or want to know.

Braced for a fight, the very last thing he expected was for Sorrel to throw his head back and laugh, but that was precisely what Sorrel did. Joss stared at him, but before he could determine the appropriate response, Sorrel stepped close, crowding into his space. Once more he was grabbing Joss, but this time it was his upper arms, gloved hands curling around them, gripping not quite hard enough to hurt.

Sorrel smelled like lavender and mint, a faint hint of musk. The scents surrounded Joss, hideously distracting, and so he was caught unawares when Sorrel kissed him.

It was over nearly as soon as it had begun—too brief to be intimate, too hard to be impersonal.

Then Sorrel let him go, and it took all Joss had not to show any reaction.

"You are infuriating, Matchmaker," Sorrel said, "but you are also amusing. If a challenge you want to be, then so be it." Anger flashed in his eyes. "No stranger has the right to dictate my fate, or that of my friends, even if one of those friends was the idiot to hire you."

He turned and walked away.

Joss stood watching him until Sorrel was well out of sight. Then he waited several minutes more.

When at last he believed himself to be well and truly alone, he sat down hard on the bench and glared at the trees, trying hard to ignore the taste of Sorrel which lingered on his lips.

Eventually he stood, absently brushing off his clothes and adjusting them. Resolutely, he shoved all thoughts of Sorrel to the back of his mind. Thinking would only lead to further problems, or his doing something stupid, and he had enough with which to contend already.

He made his way briskly back to the palace, weaving through the halls, nodding in startled reply when several people greeted him and bowed. When he finally reached his office, he barely resisted an urge to slam the door shut.

Normally, he was used to such busy days. An average workload back home typically consisted of three to five marriage contracts, at least the same in approval contracts, and usually half a dozen basic contracts. Twelve to twenty contracts was, obviously, far more difficult to manage than a pathetic one.

Most of it was the location—foreign place, foreign customs, foreign language. It was an environment in which no one, save six people, knew his true role. Out of the six people who did know, one had hired him, one hated him, and the rest simply tolerate him.

Stifling a sigh, he shoved back his thoughts and doubts and self-pity, and focused on his work. Stripping off his stiff, dark green afternoon jacket, he retrieved a small notebook he'd tucked into it and then strode to his desk.

He was good at his job; his location did not change that. There was no reason to plague himself with these doubts. He was extremely good at his job, did he not have the royal diamond and ruby matchmaker heart to prove that even amongst matchmakers, he was worthy of note?

Pulling out the portfolios, he opened the small, black-bound notebook he'd carried around all afternoon and began to transcribe his shorthand notes into their proper places.

As he came to Eustace's name, he lingered, pen hovering over the paper before he realized it was dripping. Setting the pen aside, he reread all he had so far noted about Eustace.

Though he still had a formal interview...picking up his pen again, he scratched out where he had written *Yes?* and wrote instead *No?*

A polite cough interrupted his thoughts, and he looked up to see the object of his thoughts. "My lord," he greeted, and motioned Eustace to take a seat. "How are you this afternoon?"

"Curious," Eustace replied with a grin. "I do not believe I have ever been interviewed before in such fashion. Michael said it was quite harmless, however, so do proceed."

Michael had said that? Joss smiled at the thought that perhaps he had one person more for than against him. Tucking the happy thought away, he contrived to look confused. "Why is it that Michael refers to you all by your surnames, but you use his given name?"

Eustace snorted. "Oh, Michael is very big on formality and propriety—he is more aware than any of us that he is 'merely' a fourth generation baron, and the rest of us have too many bloody generations to count." He rolled his eyes. "Unless you're Sorrel, who remembers every last relative on his bloody tree and can and will recite them if suitably bored, or eager to annoy."

Joss almost laughed, able to picture it, then hated himself for being amused by Sorrel.

"He is not entirely detestable," Eustace replied, obviously reading Joss' face. "Occasionally, he forgets he's supposed to be obnoxious, and manages to be quite charming and engaging."

Hmm. Were those the words of a friend, or a former paramour?

Eustace's mouth twisted in a sudden, bitter smile that did not suit his pretty, vibrant face at all. "The rumors reached your ears, I see, matchmaker. That we were lovers?"

"It has been mentioned to me," Joss said, though nothing of the kind had been so much as whispered in his general vicinity. He only remembered that look Lyle had bestowed, the jealousy that said far more than words.

"We slept together one night," Eustace said, "and by that, I do mean *slept*. I had gone with him to his hunting lodge, as did some of the others. He and I stayed up all night drinking and playing cards, in his room when everyone else retired. By the end of it, neither of us was much for walking. I slept the night in his bed because mine was too far away." The bitter smile deepened. "No one, of course, believes me. You need not either, Matchmaker, I assure you I will not take special offense."

Joss considered his reply, and finally decided upon honesty. "Though I am a stranger whose opinion counts for little, I do not believe his lordship would take as lover someone he calls friend. Nor would he call friend someone he had bedded. You are friends, so my preliminary conclusion is that you were never lovers."

Eustace stared at him for a moment, then broke into a smile. "You are quite clever, Matchmaker, for all you seem so unassuming and soft around the edges."

"Thank you," Joss murmured, taking the words as an assurance that despite the obstacles, he still did his job well. "Now, forgive me the rudeness, but the matter requires clarifying. You have not slept with the Marquis—what of your other friends?"

Something flickered across his face. "No," he said. "They are my friends. That aside, Marianna swore off such things after her husband died, Charles and I would kill each other...and Lyle is too enamored of and enthralled with his precious University to even consider a dalliance, especially with someone he thinks already dallied with Sorrel."

Joss bit back his amusement, as he began to grasp the finer points of the relationships he was investigating. It was, of course, too early to tell for certain, but he would be a poor matchmaker if he did not have a sense for these things.

At least he was swiftly whittling down his possibilities.

"How long have you known the Queen, and the others?"

"Forever," Eustace said, "or so it often seems. I know Lyle from University." He flashed a grin. "Most of my tuition was paid by card games. I met the others through him. Sorrel is the only one who will play me cards anymore; the others just bleed gold when they try it. We all grew close because of Marianna; she drew us together. After the King died, it became even more important to be there for her. Nowadays, it is odd if any of us is apart for too long. Do you have friends like that, Matchmaker?"

Joss made a note. "I have friends," he answered slowly. "My mentor and I became friends, after my training was ended and I stood on my own. Other matchmakers. My own King holds me in esteem, as do various others. But I belong to no tight circle such as you describe, no. The demands of our job keep Matchmakers fairly solitary." He motioned absently with his hand. "How did you and Lyle meet? I would imagine you ran in quite different circles, your days at the University."

Eustace looked at him, confused by the relevancy of the question, then shrugged. "My family is an old one, but until very recent years it was not a wealthy one. The old estate on our land was shut up for decades until I reopened it and began renovations two years ago. There was no money for me to attend University, and I greatly wanted to attend, for it was a crucial stepping stone in my plans. So I gambled. Cards, mostly, but I know others – some savory, some less.

"One of those less than savory nights went wrong, and I wound up the worse for it. Lyle found me stumbling back to my room. He had only been made a professor recently, then. Against my protests, he took me back to his room and saw I got medical attention—which he paid for." Eustace shrugged. "We have been friends ever since." He frowned. "Until I 'slept' with Sorrel, anyway. He has not been quite the same since then, no matter what I say."

Joss nodded, and scratched out the question mark beside the 'no' in Eustace's file. "I believe that is all I require," he said, and stood. "Thank you for coming to see me."

"That's it?" Eustace said, looking surprised. "Michael was right, that was completely harmless. I guess I cannot know what you learn from it all?"

"No," Joss replied. "If you wish to learn the nature of my reports, I hand them over only at the command of the Queen."

Eustace grimaced. "I doubt I really want to know, anyway." He smiled as they reached the door, and clapped Joss briefly on the shoulder. "Good day to you, Matchmaker."

"You as well," Joss replied, and waited until he was gone from sight, then returned to his desk to tidy up his notes. He sighed softly as he worked, and glanced longingly at the well-stocked bar, but any drinking of that sort would have to wait until he had finished for the day.

He was reconsidering that stance when a soft rapping drew his attention, and he looked up to see Lyle standing in the doorway. "Welcome," he said.

Lyle smiled at him. "Matchmaker, you look as though you could use a nap. Shall I come back later?"

"No," Joss said, annoyed his exhaustion was showing. "Forgive me, it is simply the paperwork making me sleepy, after I have spent the whole day walking about. Please, sit. I promise I am more alert than I appear."

"Well, ring for some tea, then," Lyle said, and moved to do so himself. "Tea," he said when the servant appeared. "Food as well, something with substance."

The servant vanished, and instead of the chairs before the desk, Lyle moved to sit at the little table in the corner. Early evening sunlight shone through the wall of windows, catching on the gold-rimmed spectacles, drawing out bits of blue in Lyle's true-black hair. Settled at the table, looking in control though he was a visitor, it was not hard to see how he commanded the attention and respect of the entire University.

Joss did not bother to argue or protest. Tea sounded wonderful, and getting away from his desk would be a nice change. Gathering up fresh paper and pen, he joined Lyle.

"You are quite the professor, my lord," he began. "They say someday you will take over as President of the University."

Lyle shrugged. "Time will tell; I am still far too young for such a post. Anyway, I'm busy enough with my classes and private studies."

Joss nodded, but was prevented from asking his next question by the arrival of his tea. His stomach growled, and he realized that his lunch had been not nearly enough, or maybe the energy he'd gained from it had been promptly depleted by sparring with Sorrel. Irritated that thoughts of Sorrel had invaded, he reached for the teapot and poured for them both. "So you have known your circle for a long time?"

"Oh, quite," Lyle said easily. "I'm older than the lot of them by several years. The late King and I knew each other of old; we grew up together. I met Marianna, Sorrel, Charles, and Michael through him, and

Eustace through University. We have all been friends since then, especially since the King died. Marianna was quite distraught at his death. They were quite close, especially when you consider she was only sixteen when they married."

"That is quite young," Joss agreed. "They were happy, though, to all appearances."

"Yes," Lyle agreed. "She refused to marry again after his death." He laughed and shrugged. "Just as well, really. She is a fine Queen, but most men would expect her to step back and leave the bulk of the ruling to her new King."

Joss tended to agree, but he was also beginning to think he knew one man who might be more than amenable to leaving the Queen the bulk of the ruling.

"Eustace related how the two of you met," he said, switching topics. "He says you rescued him one night after a game of dice or cards or some other manner of gambling went wrong."

Lyle smiled, the expression more sad and wistful and bitter than happy. "Dice," he said softly. "He probably did not say that he had caught someone using loaded dice. It would have been wiser to remain silent, for it turned out three of them were involved in the scam. They beat him up and took all the money he had earned that night, a quarter of what he needed for a semester's tuition." His eyes grew distant. "He could barely move, but kept trying, and felt wretched that I paid the doctor who tended him."

A hint of teeth entered his smile. "The culprits were apprehended, a few days later, and the authorities even managed to reclaim the stolen money." He laughed softly. "Eustace tried to repay me the medical expenses, but I never did let him."

Joss bit back a smile of his own. Money reclaimed—that was a likely story. He would bet his royal matchmaker broach that the 'reclaimed' money had come from Lyle's coffers. He adjusted his notes to a definitive *No.* at the bottom of Lyle's portfolio.

"Forgive me any impertinence, my lord," he said, "but you appear to be a man of a simple and straightforward demeanor, insofar as one of your status and prestige may be." He continued when Lyle gave a cautious nod. "Why, then, do you not simply speak to Lord Summers of how you feel?"

Lyle stiffened in his seat, obviously given a nasty jolt. Then he shook his head and chuckled ruefully. "Matchmaker, how is it you have uncovered in a couple of days what my friends have not seen in all these years?"

"It is my job," Joss replied. "I am trained to see such things. If I did not see them, I would not be a matchmaker." Lyle did not bluster and pretend otherwise, and though there was no point now, he made note of it. There was no reason not to be thorough, after all. "So why do you not speak of it to him?"

"What would be the point?" Lyle asked, sighing at his teacup. "We are just shy of being a decade apart in age. Eustace is young and vibrant, he likes to gamble and play. I am a settled, unexciting professor."

Bitterness flooded his face "Nor could I even begin to compete with Sorrel, and who knows if those two still carry on."

Joss took a sip of his tea. "Ah, yes," he said slowly, weighing his words. "Rumors have come to me all day, about those two being paramours very briefly. Not more than a night, I believe."

"Yes," Lyle said flatly.

"You know this for fact?"

Lyle shrugged. "Eustace denies it of course, and only a fool would attempt to confront Sorrel with such a question. Even with his friends, Sorrel would find a way to torment and harass, and the very last thing I need is his being aware of my feelings for Eustace. What is there to ask, besides? No one, I think, has ever been capable of resisting Sorrel." He looked knowingly at Joss. "Even our new Matchmaker is losing kisses."

Joss rolled his eyes, too annoyed to be embarrassed. "I should have known that would find its way around. Beautiful though he is, and I would not attempt to deny that, I have a duty that comes before all else, and I know better than to dally with his sort, besides. I have fended off worse in my time. He is not nearly the temptation he thinks, I assure you."

"You would be the first to say so," Lyle said, clearly not believing a word he said.

Which was only fair, Joss thought morosely, for he wasn't quite certain he believed them himself. He gave an idle shrug. "That aside, I do not believe that they ever had amorous relations. Lord Summers, as unstable as his early life must have been, is not the sort to trust his...fate...to someone as careless as the Marquis. Sorrel holds in contempt every person whom he has bedded, and had he bedded Eustace, I do not believe they still would be friends. My professional assessment, if you are willing to take it."

"Why would you give it?" Lyle asked quietly.

Joss permitted himself a smile. "Because I love my work, despite the difficulties which come with it, and a good matchmaker does not limit himself only to those matters for which he is paid. I see strong sentiment between the two of you; the problem is that neither of you sees it in the other. I overstep my bounds, I think, but I also state only what I see—to you, for you are older and wiser, and would I feel best handle the situation. If you would like to be on your way, I have no further questions. Thank you for calling for tea."

Lyle nodded, and absently murmured the proper replies, but in the blink of an eye he was gone.

Not for the first time, Joss felt a pang of envy. The devil of his job was always seeing, never having. He had seen so many confessions, attended so many ceremonies, had countless thanks and gifts to his name for the hundreds of matches he had arranged...yet he had no real idea what it was like to be in the sort of relationship he helped bring about.

His thoughts flittered to the stolen kiss of a few hours ago, and he grimaced at himself in disgust. Was that the best he could do? Crass lust for a man who bedded people for cruel sport? From a professional standpoint, Sorrel was a bad bet. He treated lust like a game, and love like a bad joke. He was beautiful and knew it, powerful and knew it, intelligent and clever and knew it. He was arrogant and bad-tempered, ruthless and manipulative, condescending and mocking.

When his ingrained professionalism tried to offer the good points as well—loyal to his friends, willing to protect them at all costs, intelligent and clever for all it came with the arrogance, proud of who and what he was...and far too beautiful for peace of mind—he ruthlessly cut them off. He wasn't interested in anything positive about Sorrel.

Pouring a fresh cup of tea and snatching up a last little petite four, unable to resist the sweet, he gathered up his notes and returned to his desk. He worked until well after dark, pausing only to swallow a few bites of dinner, and did not go to bed until he knew no one else was about to bother him.

Five days passed in relative peace.

He left his office for the night, to the sound of the clocks tolling the third hour of the morning. Since his interviews with Lyle and Eustace, he had kept to his office and bedroom, pestering servants for any word of Charles. They had mentioned him more than once, but whenever he dared venture out to find the man, Joss always wound up just missing him.

Yawning, he wondered how much time he had left before the Queen summoned him to inquire as to the change in the relationship between Eustace and Lyle. At least, he assumed something had changed. Surely Lyle had not kept silent, and allowed things to remain as they were.

Then again, perhaps he had, for Joss had braced for both a summons from the Queen and an assault from Sorrel. Neither had come in the past five days, and that worried him, for his locking himself in his office or bedroom was not enough to dissuade an irate Sorrel. He knew that much.

He reached his bedroom, but paused with his hand on the doorknob. As tired as he was, he was sick of looking at the same walls, and if he went to bed now with thoughts of Sorrel hovering in his mind, he would not find a restful sleep.

Damn the man, anyway. Five days of nothing should have brought him some sort of relief. Instead, he was wound tighter than a spring with fear and anticipation of the eventual fall out.

Turning away from his bedroom, he wandered aimlessly through silent halls. Empty of people, the palace was a strange place. There was dreamlike quality to it—or perhaps that was simply the fact he was at least half asleep.

His reports were finished, minus the elusive Charles. Where the hell could he be? Even Joss' patience was beginning to wear thin. Why in the world would a Duke not want to be found? What could he possibly have to hide, when his title was one of the highest in the realm? Nothing touched a Duke, save the Queen.

Though, really, the disappearing act itself was nearly enough to strike him completely from the record. Someone so unreliable was not fit to be King, never mind matters of romance.

He frowned in thought as he left the palace to stroll through the gardens. The dreamlike quality was stronger here, perfumed by the profusion of moonlit flowers. He reached out to brush his fingers along them, catching up a small, white flower for which he did not have a name. It was sweet-smelling, a bit like vanilla, a bit like honey.

The scuff of boots on stone made him jump, and spin around, the flower falling from his fingers. He barely bit back an urge to swear loudly and profusely. "My lord."

"Matchmaker, Matchmaker," Sorrel said in a lazy, singsong tone. "Whatever are you doing out here all alone?"

He was not fully dressed, and if he had thought Sorrel beautiful dressed in his finest...he had no thoughts for Sorrel in only his shirt sleeves, and those rolled up, the buttons partially undone, the hair rumpled. He had no thoughts, because the sight before him made his blood too hot to think.

Damn it. He should have gone to bed.

Sorrel drew close enough the smell of him drowned out the cloying sweetness of the white flowers. He smelled like deep red roses and musk, a hint of brandy.

"Shouldn't you be in bed?" Joss demanded. As an opening salvo, it was weak, but it was all he could manage for the moment.

The smirk Sorrel gave him said Sorrel was very much aware how unsettling an effect he was having. Arrogant prick. Joss seethed, but did not speak. "I was in bed," Sorrel replied. "I could not sleep. I went out to my balcony for some air and lo, what do I spy? A lone Matchmaker in need of company. So here I am."

"I believe I already stated that I do not prefer to keep company with one of your ilk," Joss said.

"My ilk?" Sorrel repeated. "What ilk is that?"

Predator, Joss thought privately, but was not stupid enough to voice it. Sorrel would take it as a compliment, and a compliment as encouragement. Instead, he decided the best way to end this encounter before it could truly begin was to go for the throat. "Easy come, easy go?"

Even in the dark, he could see anger overcome that too-beautiful face

Then his space was being crowded, flooding him with roses and musk, brandy and body heat, and he hoped the dark was enough to hide the shiver he could not repress.

"Am I easy come, easy go, Matchmaker?" Sorrel asked, tone seemingly lazy, but threaded with anger and challenge. He grabbed Joss' chin, forcing him to look up, and though it was too dark, surely, Joss felt as though Sorrel could see him. "You avoid me, you all but vibrate with tension when I am near you...I do not think you find me easy at all."

Joss flushed, grateful yet again for the dark. "What of you, my lord?" he challenged. "So desperate to confront me, you would leave your bed at well past three in the morning to pick a fight?"

"Desperate?" Sorrel repeated, and laughed, letting go of his chin. "Only curious to know why you have been avoiding me these past days. Did you think I would not notice? Afraid of what I would do for the way you have interfered with my friends?"

They both knew the answer to that question was yes, and so Joss did not bother to answer it.

"You had no right to interfere," Sorrel said.

Joss shoved him back, and snapped, "But you did. All this time they cared about each other, any fool who bothered to look should have seen that—but your damned games helped to keep them apart. All it took was an assurance you had npt slept with Lord Summer, and now they are likely quite happy together. It *is* my right to interfere, my lord, as much you might hate it. I am a matchmaker, and those two are in love. There is nothing that says they must be apart, and they are a fine match at all levels."

Sorrel crowded right back into his space. "What happens if you're wrong, Matchmaker, hmm? What then? Do you simply say 'sorry, let me try again' and not care for the damage you have done?"

"No one can say what the future may hold. Events may transpire that alter the feelings they now hold. Lovers can become enemies, enemies can become lovers. Friends can turn to lovers, and lovers mellow to simple friendship. All I can do is my best, and my every instinct says they will love each other for a very long time to come. You may not like that I am right, my lord, but that does not change the fact that I am right."

Making an indistinct sound of rage, Sorrel yanked him close. "So who is next, Matchmaker? Are you going to pair all of us off?"

Joss shoved again, but this time Sorrel didn't budge. "I am a matchmaker," he said, suddenly feeling tired. Or maybe weary. "My calling is to help others find what happiness they may. You insist upon seeing the lack of love in everything, my lord—why do get angry when you see that real love might have been found? Shouldn't that be a reason for happiness?"

"Love?" Sorrel hissed, hands painfully tight on Joss' upper arms. "Love never lasts, and is never real. People only mean it until something better comes along."

He didn't know how he knew it, but once the thought lodged in his head, his instincts thrummed with the truth of it. "Someone you loved cast you aside," he said, and then gasped in pain as the hold on his arms tightened only further.

An answer was the very last thing he expected, but it was precisely what Sorrel gave. "Yes," Sorrel snarled. "I suppose an interfering little busybody like you would figure that out. We met the few years I studied abroad; he was native here as well. True love, precisely as the sonnets write it. He returned home a year before I, summoned by his father. Imagine my surprise when I returned home eager for a reunion with my true love only to find he was set to marry my darling cousin."

Joss gasped in pain and surprise as he was abruptly thrust away, crashing into a high shrub, barely keeping his feet.

"He wanted to continue our affair," Sorrel continued, voice the coldest Joss had ever heard—or felt. It sliced all the way to his bones, that cold, made him ache and struggle to draw breath. "The famous and much beloved, dearly departed King. Enamored of his wife, everyone said, they were the happiest and most in love couple in the world—but the whole time he sought to continue sharing my bed. So much for love."

That was news. All he'd heard from the Queen down to the staff was how in love she and her King had been, how close and wonderful and happy their marriage had been. Marianna obviously had never known of the affair between her husband and Sorrel, or that her husband had wanted it to continue after his marriage.

Sorrel, he suspected, had refused to continue it.

"So you see, Matchmaker," Sorrel said, "I know you to be a liar. If you were honest about what you did, and ceased professing to attempt to find *love* for people, I might come to regard you favorably. You have spirit, intelligence, and beauty, but you are ultimately a liar. Now you are spreading those lies to my friends."

Joss stepped forward, vibrating with sudden and hot anger. "I do not lie," he snarled. "The most common match requested of me is a love match! I have met that challenge time and again. Don't believe me? Then journey to my homeland and you will find hundreds of people who know my name, who can tell you firsthand all that I have done for them. Perhaps if you had hired a matchmaker, you would have known before hand that your lover was not your match! Do not call me a liar!"

"Oh, but you *are* a liar, Matchmaker," Sorrel said softly in the dark, and then Joss was yanked close again, pressed close against Sorrel's chest, as arms fastened around him like bands of steel. "Do you want me, Matchmaker?"

"I have no interest in the likes of you," Joss said, and tried to make the words cold, but he knew his effort failed.

Sorrel smirked with satisfaction in the dark.

Then Joss was being kissed, and this was nothing like the brief press of lips from several days ago.

No, this was full on heat and tongue, hard and consuming and he struggled not to groan, but lost the battle when fingers scratched across the back of his neck, another curled around his hip.

Joss knew how to kiss, and more besides, for his life might lack the romance he craved but lust was easy enough to sate when his bed grew too empty to tolerate. Sorrel, though—gods, the man could kiss. Joss suddenly knew all too well why he got away with so damned much.

He fought not to cling and grab and thrust the way he so badly wanted, resisted an urge to sink his hands into the beautiful red-gold hair, or see if that skin was as soft as it looked.

Stupid. This was so bloody stupid. He wasn't a cheap whore. Reality returning like a bucket of ice water, he kicked out hard, making Sorrel falter—then shoved him back, feeling somewhat mollified when Sorrel landed in an untidy heap in a low bush.

"Do not do that again," he snarled.

Sorrel righted himself with far more dignity than Joss thought it fair for him to have, given the circumstances. "I am merely proving you a liar, Matchmaker. If you can not even be honest about your own lust, what good is your word on anything else?"

Joss only grew angrier. "You are beautiful and seductive, my lord, and only a blind fool could look upon you and not feel immediate lust. But lusting after you and wanting you are two different things. I do not *want* any part of you, or this game you are playing. I believe in love, and I do my best to see people find it. I am an excellent matchmaker, and have too much self respect to sell myself cheaply. I set my price far higher than that."

"Oh?" Sorrel said, voice deceptively idle. "What price do you set for yourself? What are your charms worth, little Matchmaker?"

"Friendship," Joss said. "Fidelity. Forever. Passion. Romance. I have spent my life seeing these things go to other people. I will not settle for less than that for myself. That is my price, my lord. Nothing less than love. You cannot pay that, or will not, and so I request that you never touch me again."

Turning sharply away, he fled to his room.

Three days later he was ready to scream.

He smiled absently at someone who said his name, adding a belated bow when he realized it was a Lady, but did not pause or even really make note of which Lady spoke.

Sorrel was not the type simply to forget about their garden confrontation. Joss had waited for it...and waited...and waited..

Perhaps he had actually driven Sorrel away for good. If so, that was a relief. He had more important things to deal with than Sorrel.

So why did he feel disappointed?

Furious with himself, he reached his office and threw the book he'd been carrying into the nearest chair, then threw himself behind his desk and pulled out his portfolios.

At this point, only two of his portfolios were lacking. Charles, whom he still could not pin down, and Sorrel. He was in the middle of drafting his final report, and had given analyses on Michael, Eustace, and Lyle. Sorrel he could finish, but...

He scowled at himself and drew out Sorrel's report, reading over all that he had written—very little, nothing much since the ball, and nothing since the garden.

Why, he wondered irritably, did he keep thinking about it? Sorrel did not believe in love, and was more than willing to manipulate and play people to meet his own ends.

Was it so different, a voice whispered, from what he did?

Completely different, Joss thought. He did not use people, and he wanted only their happiness. Sorrel only wanted to prove his own points.

He rubbed the space between his eyes, feeling a headache coming on, willing it to subside.

All right. When in doubt, analyze. There was no point in denying he wanted to bed Sorrel—he had as much as admitted that to the man himself, however stupid it had been to do so. He seemed to enjoy provoking Sorrel, and then spending days waiting in agony for the reprisal.

So, analyze Sorrel and set down in paper why he needed to keep away—why they were not compatible. Was that not what he did?

One—Sorrel attracted attention. Joss' relied heavily upon keeping a low profile.

Two—they both excelled at getting what they needed from people, but Sorrel treated it as a game, and for Joss it was much more serious than that. Sorrel used it to humiliate and use people. Joss did it to help them.

Even to his desperate ears, the analysis was falling woefully flat.

He simply could not think clearly about the matter. His prized lack of bias had abandoned him; that was about the only thing this pathetic attempt was concluding. He could not analyze Sorrel, and that was that. A failure, because he had to go and be stupid about it.

Wretchedly he wrote one final note at the bottom of the profile, and to Sorrel's portion of the final report. *Cannot analyze. Personal feelings involved.*

At least, he thought miserably, only the Queen would realize he had failed completely in that area.

Scrubbing his face, wishing he could simply go back to bed for a time, he put his work away and decided that perhaps a ride would clear his head. Then he would push a bit harder on the hunt for the elusive Charles.

Half an hour later, he was riding away from the palace, along a road that would take him only the gods knew were—but away, and that was the only thing which mattered. He let the horse have its head, trusting it to know better than he where he should or should not go. That allowed his mind to wander, and he composed his final report in his head, wondering how the Queen would react to the news he would present, how the others would react. He thought home and how much he missed it, the friends he missed.

The only thoughts he did not allow to invade were those of Sorrel, because the moment he did that, his headache would return.

How long he rode, he did not know, but it was long enough he had to dismount and give his horse time to cool down and rest. Following the sound of water, he led it off the main path and to the edge of the forest, where just past the trees he found a small brook.

As well as another horse and rider.

Charles stared back, equally astounded—then laughed. "Matchmaker."

Joss bowed his head. "Your grace. I, and most of the palace, have been trying to find you for nigh on two weeks now."

"I know," Charles said, and raked a hand through his already disheveled hair. He looked extremely tired, and worn down to the bone.

"What is wrong?" Joss asked quietly. "You look as though one more day of it may break you."

Charles smiled weakly. "Going straight to your interview, Matchmaker?"

Joss flinched. "No. You look terrible, your grace, with all due respect. I ask only out of concern."

"No, no," Charles said, waving a hand absently. "I apologize. I was trying to tease. Though I have not been around much, I still pick up the gossip here and there." He smiled again. "Rumor has it that Lyle and Eustace are quite close now, and my impression was that you were the reason for it."

"I only told them what I saw," Joss replied. "It is what I do, after all."

Charles laughed. "So you were hired to deal with all of us? No, I don't expect an answer." He seemed about to speak, then hesitated, then shook his head and said nothing.

Joss cautiously moved a bit closer, appearing as harmless and mild as he knew. "You've no reason to trust me, and I would not ask it of you, but my job requires strong measures of confidentiality. I know things about people that others would greatly love to learn, and never once have I broken that trust. If there is some burden you would like to share, then you can share it with me and trust that it will not be shared with others."

He got a long look, equal parts mistrust and hope and longing. At last, Charles smiled. "You appear to be honest, Matchmaker. I am used to reading lies in people, being heavily involved with the Council requires it. I sense no lies in you."

"No," Joss said. "I mean what I say."

Charles nodded, and turned to his horse. "Then come with me, Matchmaker, and I will show you why I have been absent. You promise you will not speak to it of others?"

"I vow it," Joss replied. "Upon my King, and your Queen, and the heavens."

"Then follow me," Charles said, and instead of returning to the main road Joss had been travelling, veered away down a smaller path he had not until that moment noticed.

They traveled at a steady pace for nearly half an hour, exchanging no words, Joss' curiosity growing with every second. Just as he was about to burst from it, the path opened up to a clearing—and a house. It was the sort of place someone of Charles' class would call a 'cottage,' but which most anyone else would call a manor. It was small, as noble estates went; it could not have more than ten bedrooms, but it was pretty and elegant.

He also suspected he would not find it listed amongst Charles' official holdings.

They rode up to the front of the house, and the door opened. A man dressed in the livery of a butler came down the stairs and promptly took control of the horses. His eyes widened as he took in Joss, but his training prevented him from saying anything, and a moment later he gave no sign he had ever been surprised.

"Where is Seta?" Charles asked.

"The green room, your grace," the man replied.

"Thank you," Charles replied, and motioned for Joss to follow him inside.

It took only a moment to reach the green room, but Joss took only a cursory look around before his attention was stolen by the figure in the corner.

Or, rather, figures.

A woman sat in a deep, plush, green chair. She had pale blonde hair, pulled up in a simple bun, a few curls falling loose to brush her cheeks. She wore a blue afternoon dress, shoulders covered with a light, cream-colored shawl. She was petite, quite pretty, and smiled at them in welcome, though she was obviously worried by Joss' presence.

In her arms was a babe that could not be more than a few months old, though Joss conceded babies were a foreign thing to him. It fussed in the woman's arms, but she promptly soothed it back to silence, then looked up at them again. "Charlie," she greeted.

"Seta," he replied, and promptly crossed the room to kiss her cheek. "How is Kim?"

"He's fine," she said with a laugh. "As fine as he was an hour ago. You worry too much, darling."

He stroked her cheekbone with his thumb. "Dearest, I will always worry about the both of you, especially given how difficult the birth was..."

Joss felt suddenly like an intruder, and realized that he very nearly was—except Charles had brought him here, and so he waited patiently for them to remember he was in the room. He smiled at the fact he had been so quickly forgotten, but it was clear to see these two revolved entirely around each other.

At last Charles rose back to his full height, and turned to face Joss. "Matchmaker, I present to you my wife, Lady Seta Boothby, and my son and heir, Kimberly. He is three months old."

"Congratulations," Joss said, bewildered. "Why must this be a secret?"

Charles' strained look returned. "Most would say she is not fit to be my wife," he said quietly.

"Ah," Joss replied, seeing the obvious now. "She is, or was, a peasant."

Seta laughed. "Peasant, la. You may as well tell him the complete truth." When Charles merely shot her a look, she rolled her eyes and faced Joss again. "It will come out, one way or the other, because such a secret can only be kept for so long. I used to work in a brothel, Matchmaker. That is the real source of the trouble. It's not illegal for a peer of the realm to marry a commoner, but for someone as special as Charlie to marry a whore...." She shrugged, and looked back down at her son. "He is worried about us."

"I see," Joss said softly. That would rather make things supremely difficult. "Are you planning to tell anyone else?"

Charles shrugged, and reached out absently to play with one of Seta's escaped curls. "I had planned to go abroad, take her with me, and settle for a little while where we could live in peace." He smiled, soft and sweet. "Then Seta conceived a child, and travel was out of the question." His face clouded briefly. "The birth was difficult, and she is still recovering her strength. So we will not be going anywhere for a few more months, at least." He shrugged. "I am hoping the matter of disclosure will never come up." He looked anxiously at Joss. "You will not tell anyone? Even Marianna?"

"No," Joss said, choosing not to be insulted that Charles doubted him, given the circumstances. "I promised you my silence. For what it is worth, however, I think you should speak with Marianna. She is your friend, and Queen, and she would stand by you in this."

Charles laughed bitterly. "My wife used to work in a well-known brothel, Matchmaker. It is where we met. She is free of that life, but I think more than a few would know her face, and because of that she will never find the peace and respect she deserves. My being friends with the Queen will not change that; people are not so generous."

It would also ruin his political standing, Joss knew. Politics were a ruthless, bloody game to play, and his rivals would not hesitate to ruin him by pointing out his wife used to be a whore. Nor would they hesitate to malign them both by saying that Seta only wanted the money and title and prestige that came with being a Duchess.

As a matter of fact, it was precisely what Sorrel would say.

He would think the very same himself, except that watching them, it was obvious they loved each other.

Still, he had analyzed Marianna as thoroughly as he had the others. "I think you underestimate your Queen," he said, "but it is your decision."

Charles started to speak, but a sharp rap on the door stopped him. Frowning, he called for the knocker to enter.

The footman entered – held by the scruff of his jacket, and looking more than a little panicked.

Joss could understand the feeling, given the thunderous look that overtook Sorrel's face as he took in Seta and Kim.

"Sorrel," Charles said weakly. "What in the blazes are you doing here?"

"Trailing after a certain bit of trouble," Sorrel replied, letting go of the footman and unceremoniously shoving him out of the room. His eyes fastened upon Joss. "Matchmaker, Matchmaker," he sang, "what have you done now?"

Joss met his gaze unflinching, ignoring the way his heart sped up at just the sight of him. "Nothing, my lord, except found myself the recipient of the honor of meeting her grace, the Duchess of Corona."

The winter eyes flashed, looking almost more silver than gray for a moment, before Sorrel turned his attention to Seta.

To everyone's surprise, she stood up and gently handed Kim over to Charles—who looked more than a little frightened to be holding the tiny bundle—and strode to Sorrel. "You are the Marquis about whom I have heard so much."

"Indeed," Sorrel said, looking startled but amused. "Guilty, I'm afraid. I hope some good was heard of me, though I would imagine it was all bad. You are...?"

"Seta Boothby, Charlie's proud and adoring wife."

"Proud and adoring," Sorrel said, the words dripping with disbelief, "but kept a dirty secret."

"Because I used to be a whore," she said bluntly, "and I'll not have his name besmirched because my character is wanting."

"A duchy helps a lot with improving character in the public eye," Sorrel challenged, implying that she wanted the title and money, precisely as Joss had expected.

Seta laughed, once again startling all three of them. She tossed her head. "My lord, with all due respect, it would be stupid to marry a Duke, if money and power was all I wanted. You obviously know nothing about being a whore, for all I know you are quite free with your charms."

Charles groaned.

Joss barely bit back a snicker.

Sorrel laughed outright. "All right, we're both whores. Well said, *your grace*. What do you know that I, apparently, do not?"

"A wise woman in my former position finds herself either a husband or a protector. Titled gents make excellent protectors, but poor husbands, because nothing is worse than at least half your husband's acquaintances knowing what you did for a living. Better to find a quiet, unassuming gent of respectable income for a husband, my lord. Marrying Charlie causes us both more problems than it would have had he simply set me up somewhere as his mistress."

"Mm," Sorrel murmured, but did not argue with her.

Only the slight stiffness to his shoulders revealed he was not quite as uncaring as he appeared.

He turned sharply to face Joss. "Well, Matchmaker, that is three down, and two to go. Are you going to suggest I fall madly in love with Michael?" He sneered the words. "Am I secretly in love with my darling cousin?"

"I had nothing to do with this one," Joss replied, only barely resisting an urge to roll his eyes. "His grace merely trusted me enough to share his secret with me." The implication being that he had trusted a stranger, a matchmaker at that, and not his friends.

As he had known it would, the implication made Sorrel furious.

He hated that these fights heated his blood, that meeting those winter eyes made it so damnably hard to breathe.

"As to her Majesty," he said, responding to Sorrel's last statement, "I think she would kill you two days into the marriage."

Sorrel conceded that point with a nod, but said nothing further, though it was obvious he had much to say. Instead, he whipped around to face Charles. "I am telling on you."

"No!" Charles burst out, then went immediately contrite as it caused Kim to stir and begin to cry.

Rolling her eyes, Seta moved to take the baby back, crooning to it as she resumed her seat.

"You can't," Charles said desperately. "She's still recovering from the birth, there is no way she is up to dealing with the wolves—and what will Marianna say? Damn it, Sorrel, you should not even bloody be here."

"Next time," Sorrel said haughtily, "do not run off with my matchmaker before I have concluded my own business with him. Serves you right, keeping secrets from your friends. If you're going to cause a scandal, *Charlie*, you could at least be kind enough to let me in on it."

"You—" Charles said, then threw his hands up. "Why in the devil do I put up with you? Why does anyone?"

"I'm too pretty to resist," Sorrel said in his best lordly voice, but Joss thought he detected a trace of bitterness in it. "Will you come along to face the music? Or shall I simply tell her to fetch you here at your lovely little cottage?"

Joss rolled his eyes.

Charles reached out absently to stroke his wife's hair, looking more miserable than he had when Joss had first stumbled across him.

He resisted an urge to throw something at Sorrel's head. "Let me tend the matter," he said, before Sorrel could say something obnoxious. "I do agree her Majesty should be told, because if you want to live together in peace and happiness, she is your best bet. My assessment of her leaves me believing she will support you one hundred percent."

"Your assessment," Sorrel mocked. "What would you do without your bloody assessments to guide you, I wonder."

Joss ignored him, and focused only on Charles. "This concludes the last of the business I had to see to before submitting my final reports. If you like, I can mention this in that report. It is for her eyes only, to act on or not, as she sees fit."

Charles' shoulders slumped. "I guess not saying anything at all is no longer an option," he said with a sigh. "Fine, Matchmaker. I leave the matter to your discretion. Thank you, for everything."

"Of course," Joss replied. "I am happy for you both, and hope the road is easier than you think it will be." He swept them a bow, then brushed past Sorrel to stride out of the room.

Nodding to the butler, he strode outside and found his horse waiting, alongside a brown stallion.

He heard movement behind him, and stiffened, even as his heart began to pound anew.

"I suppose you believe it is love, Matchmaker?" Sorrel said from behind him.

Joss mounted his horse, and only then looked at Sorrel. "Yes," he said firmly. "What else would you call it?"

"A disaster waiting to happen," Sorrel said flatly. "The deed is done, however, whatever nonsense it may or may not be. Let Marianna decide the matter; that is her job. If Charles wants to be a fool, it is his life."

"Why do you find it so hard to believe your friends could be in love?" Joss asked. "Are you so embittered by your own experience, you refuse to believe in it at all?"

Sorrel looked at. "What of you, Matchmaker? Why do you believe in it? A thousand marriages you have no doubt arranged, but never a one for you? Perhaps you set your price too high, for obviously that love you staunchly defend finds itself too good for the likes of you."

Joss flinched, unable to hide the pain, the way that remark struck true and deep. His lot was to arrange love, but never to have it. He knew that. Must it be shoved so cruelly in his face? His throat was raw from choking on bitter pain, voice rough as he spoke. "Then I guess neither of us has any business criticizing the other, my lord," he snarled. "We neither of us is meant for love—I because I give it to others, and you because you reject it. I have my countless reports, and you have your countless beds. A stalemate. On a positive note, however, all I have left to do is submit my final report. In a matter of days I will be shipped off back home. You will never have to endure me again, my lord. Indeed, this is likely our last conversation. Farewell."

He turned his horse and urged it to go as fast as it possibly could, hoping Sorrel would not follow him, dreading it—but more than a little crushed when he reached the palace unimpeded.

I confess, Matchmaker, that I am not even certain what there is to report," Marianna said, lightly touching the portfolio, but making no move to open it. "You already told me that Sorrel was quite firmly out of the picture." Her mouth quirked in amusement. "Obviously, Lyle and Eustace are out of the picture. That leaves only Charles, unless something has changed your mind about Sorrel."

"No, Majesty," Joss said quietly. "His lordship is not an option." He nodded at the portfolio. "There is someone else, whom I added myself. Shall I leave you to read that privately?"

"Another option?" Marianna asked. She shook her head. "No, you may remain. I would only summon you, anyway, to discuss it all." She reached out and picked up her tea, taking a deep swallow. Then she set it down, took a deep breath, and opened the portfolio.

She read in silence for several long minutes, smiling faintly here, chuckling there. He had listed Eustace and Lyle first, followed Charles, then Sorrel, and finally Michael.

"Oh, my..." her head shot up. "Is this true? What you say about Charles?"

"Yes, Majesty," he said. "You should speak with him."

"He and his wife," Marianna murmured. "My, oh my, his relatives will have kittens. He will certainly have a hard time of it pushing his precious bills through, now." She frowned. "They must have had to marry in secret, poor things. Mich—" She stopped, then laughed at herself. "I will have to remember to tell him to begin arrangements for a proper wedding reception. That will nip much of the gossip in the bud, though she will have a rocky time of it no matter what."

She turned a page, and immediately stopped. Her face was full of sympathy as she looked at Joss.

He lowered his own head. "I am sorry, Majesty. It is highly unprofessional of me to be incapable of writing a report."

Reaching out, she patted his folded hands. "Darling, no one is capable of being professional around Sorrel. I know he has made your life difficult, and I am sorry for it. If it is of any comfort, he is as frustrated by you as you are by him. No one has ever argued with him as you do, even I."

Joss shrugged. "It does not matter, Majesty. I was hired to do an analysis, and failed."

"No, you did not," Marianna replied. "Years ago, I vowed I would never marry again. I loved my husband, and he loved me, and I thought it would be wrong to marry another when I had known such a love. Age and experience have taught me that is nonsense, and I am lonely despite being Queen, and having my friends. I am also being pressed to marry again. I did not want an empty marriage, and I did not want to upset my friends by marrying someone they detested. I thought one of them would be my best chance for a compromise. No romance, but no strife. You have told me which of those men might be possible, and explained to me why certain of them are not." She made a face. "All of them, in fact. Not a one of the four is suitable?"

"Not of the four, Majesty...but one of the five."

Marianna returned her attention to the portfolio. She drew a sharp breath. "Michael?" she asked, and looked up at him.

"Does it truly surprise you?" Joss asked. "He is devoted to you. I believe he loves you."

"But—he always keeps his distance. He's always so proper, always 'Majesty' this and 'my Queen' that. He will not even dance with me." She shrugged, glaring at the absent subject of the conversation. "He is a Baron, I am Queen—he keeps that division firmly in place."

Joss smiled. "Is it a division, Majesty, or a protective barrier? If he does not address you casually, it is because he very much wishes he could. If he does not dance with you, it is because there is nothing he wants more. I would imagine that very few let him forget his place, and a Baron turned glorified secretary becoming King? I doubt he dares consider it, if I am correct in my assessment of him."

"Your King said you have never been wrong," Marianna replied, and shook her head. "How did I never see?" she whispered.

"If there is one thing at which every last one of you excels," Joss said dryly, "it is hiding things from one another. I have given you my report, Majesty. You may do as you see fit with the knowledge contained therein."

She nodded. "I thank you, Matchmaker. I know you had a difficult time of it, and they were not the sort of difficulties for which money can compensate. You are no doubt eager to return home, but you are welcome to stay as long as you like. I would like you to remain, for at least a time. Perhaps long enough for the betrothal announcement?"

Joss smiled, despite the ache that came with thinking that he would be forced into close proximity with Sorrel for only the gods knew how long. "Of course, Majesty. I would be honored, and thank you for your generosity. Are you going to marry Michael, then?"

"I think he and I need to have a long conversation," Marianna replied, but he could see that the answer was yes.

At least he had accomplished his goal, then. If it had gained him a private heartache in the end, well, that was his own stupid fault. Had he not said he knew better than to play with fire?

Certainly he knew better than to do it, now.

"May I show this to Michael?" Marianna asked, breaking into his thoughts.

Joss frowned. "It is your report, to do as you like, Majesty. However, it is usually a bad idea to show such things to the subjects themselves."

Marianna nodded. "I know, but I would feel better showing it to him, if I am to consider him as my husband."

"Then do as you see fit, Majesty," Joss replied with a smile. "If you feel it necessary, then it must be, though I do caution against showing it to anyone else."

"Such as Sorrel?" she asked quietly.

Joss said nothing, merely stood. "I am certain you would like to speak with Michael, as well as the others, so I will leave you to it."

She looked faintly amused, but only nodded. "Yes. Michael should be in the outer office. Send him in, would you?"

"Yes, Majesty."

Michael was, indeed, in the outer office, and even Joss could see he was contriving to look busy without actually working—and he looked wretched. "Her Majesty would like to speak with you," Joss said, and bit back a smile as Michael only looked more miserable than ever. "I assure you, you need not be worried."

Then he left, walking quickly to his own office, where he rang for tea and then tidied up his desk to give himself something to do.

Contract complete, he was at loose ends. No one else would be stepping forward with requests for him, and who knew when he would be leaving.

He missed home—familiar, friendly faces, work to do, acceptance. A sense of belonging.

Except more and more people were greeting him here, and if it was by title, well that was only because he had never told them to do it by name. Once the Queen announced her betrothal, he did not doubt the truth of his occupation would come out, and there was no real predicting how that might go.

Oh, who was he fooling? It was a pleasant place, and he thought he could call it home if circumstances warranted...but that circumstance had pointedly avoided him ever since their final confrontation at Charles' house. He had finally succeeded in getting Sorrel to leave him alone.

He should be ecstatic, or at least relieved.

Instead, he felt as though he had come out the loser in the affair.

A servant came and went, laying out a tea service for one on the table by the window. For one. Always for one. When had he dared to hope that would change? Never back home, where it was somehow easier to ignore his lonely state. Here, though, it had come into sharp relief...and becoming painfully obvious since the beginning of...whatever it was...with Sorrel.

Suddenly unable to bear the confines of his office, he fled to the gardens, wandering and walking until the dinner hour had come and gone. Only then did he drag himself back to his office, fervently hoping he had finally made himself too tired to think.

He drew up short as he saw that his office was not deserted, and stared in fury and dismay at the way Sorrel had made himself comfortable in Joss' seat at the desk.

"That is not your seat," Joss snapped, slamming the door shut and stalking toward him, going immediately on the offensive. "Remove yourself at once."

Sorrel did not even bother to look up, or reply.

Joss glared at him—then realized what Sorrel was reading. "That is none of your business!" he snarled, and lunged forward to snatch the portfolio away. "How dare you invade my private matters!"

"I dare quite easily," Sorrel said. "Marianna was so busy cooing over Michael, and all of them wallowing in their own romances, I could have taken a vow of celibacy and they would not have noticed." He stood up and snatched the portfolio back. "I do not think they noticed my taking it, or my departure."

There was bitterness and hurt there, but Joss only noticed it because he could not help hearing it. Training, he told himself desperately. He was trained to hear such things. Otherwise, he would not care how Sorrel felt about anything.

"You are quite observant, Matchmaker, I will give you that," Sorrel said, and flipped the portfolio open again. "There is no flaw in your assessment, save the emphasis on love."

Joss gave up trying to get it back. Let the bastard pick his fight, humiliate him, then they could part once and for all. "We have already agreed that we disagree on that point, my lord," he said stiffly, crossing his arms across the chest and shrugging, as though to say he were already weary of the argument. "If you came here to rehash that tired argument, then I would prefer that you simply leave." He turned his back, refusing to so much as look at Sorrel, and glared out the window.

He heard Sorrel settle behind his desk again, the shuffling of papers as he made himself comfortable. Joss gritted his teeth and refused to say a word. He would simply ignore the bastard until he grew bored enough to leave.

"Is this addendum about castrating me a professional assessment, or one of those personal feelings?"

"What!" Joss bellowed, and jerked around to see that Sorrel was not reading the report he had composed for the Queen, but the colored portfolio he had kept on Sorrel. "How *dare* you," he said, and stalked across the room to snatch it away. "This was in a locked drawer, you bloody bastard."

"Was it?" Sorrel asked, smirking.

Joss scowled. Yes, he had put it away. How the hell had Sorrel broken into the drawer? "It doesn't matter," he said crossly. "It's none of your business."

"Oh, I think it my business if someone puts forth the professional opinion I need certain parts of my anatomy removed."

He refused to answer that. "My portfolios are none of your business," he repeated. "You had no right to read anything I wrote."

Sorrel shrugged, and stepped forward.

Joss took a step back, then realized what he was doing and refused to budge again—or acknowledge the smug amusement in Sorrel's eyes.

"My friends are all sickeningly happy," Sorrel said. "It is rather frustrating."

"I'm sorry it makes you unhappy they're in love," Joss snapped.

Sorrel looked at him, expression unreadable. "I did not say unhappy. I said it was frustrating." He snapped the portfolio he was holding shut, and threw it carelessly behind him to just barely land upon the desk.

"Only you would see love and find it frustrating," Joss said, feeling angry and wretched. "Did you come here to threaten me into revealing it is all a lark? I hate to upset your view of the world, my lord, but they are in love and likely to stay that way. Even you can't tear them apart."

"No," Sorrel agreed, startling him, "I do not believe I can. Not that I would try, for I do not mix friendship and fucking."

The crude word jolted him enough that Joss did not think to step away as Sorrel closed in, trapping him between Sorrel and the windows, the back of his legs knocking against the bench beneath them, but he refused to sit and put himself in an even weaker position.

"The only thing they are crowing more loudly than their own joy is your wondrous talent, Matchmaker."

Joss said nothing.

Sorrel smirked. Joss wanted to hit him. He wanted to punch him square in the face and then demand to know the point of all this. Why, he wanted to scream, why are you tormenting me this way?

"So, Matchmaker," Sorrel demanded, grasping his chin, forcing Joss to look into his eyes. "What personal feelings are involved, that you cannot neatly write me out on a piece of paper, as you have my friends? Hate? Loathing? Disgust? Contempt? Pity?"

"Misery," Joss said through his teeth, tired once and for all of being played with, tired of being the mouse to Sorrel's cat. "Frustration. Anger. Confusion. Lust. Mostly misery. You have me right where you wanted me, my lord. Caught in your web like a fly, and there is naught I can do about it but wait for you to feed upon me and bask in your victory."

Go away, he begged silently. Just go away.

Sorrel did not go away, however. Instead, he spoke, and the mockery Joss had braced for was not present. "I do not like you, Matchmaker. You are arrogant and pushy, interfering and too intelligent by far, and excel at insinuating yourself where you are not wanted. You see too much, know too much, and do not scruple to use that knowledge to your own ends."

Joss bristled. "Are we describing me or you?" he demanded. "That is nothing like me, whatsoever."

"Indeed," Sorrel countered. "I assure you, I was describing you. A more infuriating person, I have never met. I want to strangle you and put an end to that arrogant assurance that love exists, and you are capable of ensuring people find it."

He let go of Joss chin, and trailed his fingers along his jaw, down his throat, lingering there for a moment before grasping his chin once more. If Joss had been able to formulate a reply to his shocking words, it was ruined by the strange caress.

"You drive me positively mad, Matchmaker. I do not like you one little bit," Sorrel said, and his eyes were dark gray, a winter sky overtaken by evening, but they lacked their usual ice. He was not certain what it was they held now, only that they held *him*. "Yet I cannot see to escape you. Somehow you have gotten under my skin, and I cannot get you out again."

Joss' breath caught, heart pounding in his ears, and he wished he could say for a certainty where this all was headed. "Should I say I'm sorry, my lord?"

Sorrel made a sound that was part curse, part sigh, and one hundred percent irritation. "Would that I could simply strangle you, Matchmaker."

Joss started to reply, but before he could, he found himself the victim of a kiss even more dizzying and overwhelming than the one they had shared in the garden. He fisted his hands in the fabric of Sorrel's jacket, to keep himself from doing something stupid.

Moaning was probably stupid, but he was not able to hold it back as nails scraped the back of his neck, and he wanted to know how Sorrel knew the effect that had upon him, but then the kiss drew more dizzying still, and any ability to think died a sudden death.

"Matchmaker, Matchmaker," Joss said. "What am I going to do with you?"

"You could try using my damned name," Joss snapped before thought about it.

Sorrel looked at him in surprise, clearly not having expected that. Then he smirked. "What was your name? Jocelyn, I believe? Yes, Jocelyn Worthington."

Joss almost told him never mind, because he did not like how deeply it affected him to hear Sorrel say his name. He rallied, however, refusing to show any weakness. "Joss," he said. "Back home, everyone calls me Joss."

"Joss," Sorrel said, as though tasting the name. "What am I going to do with you, Joss?"

"You seemed determined to strangle me," he retorted.

Sorrel shrugged, the move jostling in their present tangle. "Marianna would be displeased if I killed you, and murder does terrible things to ones reputation."

Joss rolled his eyes and shoved him away, righting himself with an effort, wishing his blood would cool, but it always seemed perpetually on the verge of boiling when Sorrel was around. "What do you want, then, my lord?"

A hand capture his chin, forced his head up. Joss really hated the way he did that.

"You could try using my damned name," Sorrel said with a smirk.

Joss rolled his eyes. "Very well, *Sorrel*. What do you want, then?"

"To be rid of you," Sorrel said quietly, winter eyes fierce, "but I don't think it's that simple."

"So, what?" Joss asked, feeling exhausted from the foolishness of hope. "We continued until we finally kill each other?"

Sorrel let him go. "That is an option, and enjoyable though the idea of strangling you is, I keep wondering what it might be like to pay your price."

Joss' heart lodged in his throat. He did not realize he'd stopped breathing until he drew the breath to speak. "What?" He shook his head and shoved Sorrel back a bit. "If you only came here to mock me, you are doing a fine job of it, but I am done tolerating it. Get out of my office."

Instead, Sorrel sat down on the wide bench beneath the long bank of windows. "What was your price?" he asked. "Friendship. Fidelity. Forever. Passion. Romance."

Hearing the words he'd spoken in anger so smoothly repeated made Joss wince, but he did not back down. "Yes."

"Well, you annoy me too much to be something as simple as a friend," Sorrel said. "Fidelity is easy enough—I, after all, was never the one breaking my vows, and I only bedded them one at a time." He stretched one arm across the back of the bench, the very image of uncaring casualness, as though they were two friends discussing the latest book. Except for his eyes. Those burned. "Forever is beyond my control. Someone might castrate or throttle me at any time. Passion is certainly no chore." Joss shivered as the burning eyes only grew hotter. "Romance..." Sorrel flapped a hand lazily in the air. "I do not do sonnets; I am retired from such nonsense."

Only Sorrel would *negotiate* such a matter.

Joss realized with sudden annoyance that he was fighting a smile.

"Speechless, Joss?" Sorrel drawled. "Surely you have something to say."

"Indeed," Joss replied. "I shall have to consult my reports, of course—"

Sorrel snarled and yanked him down, so that Joss wound up lying with his head in Sorrel's lap, sprawled inelegantly across the bench. "Shut up, Matchmaker. Truly, you are the most annoying person I have ever met."

"I shall have to consult my reports," Joss repeated doggedly, "but my initial assessment indicates that your terms are satisfactory for the present."

"Didn't I tell you to shut up?" Sorrel said, and then bent to see to the matter himself.

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