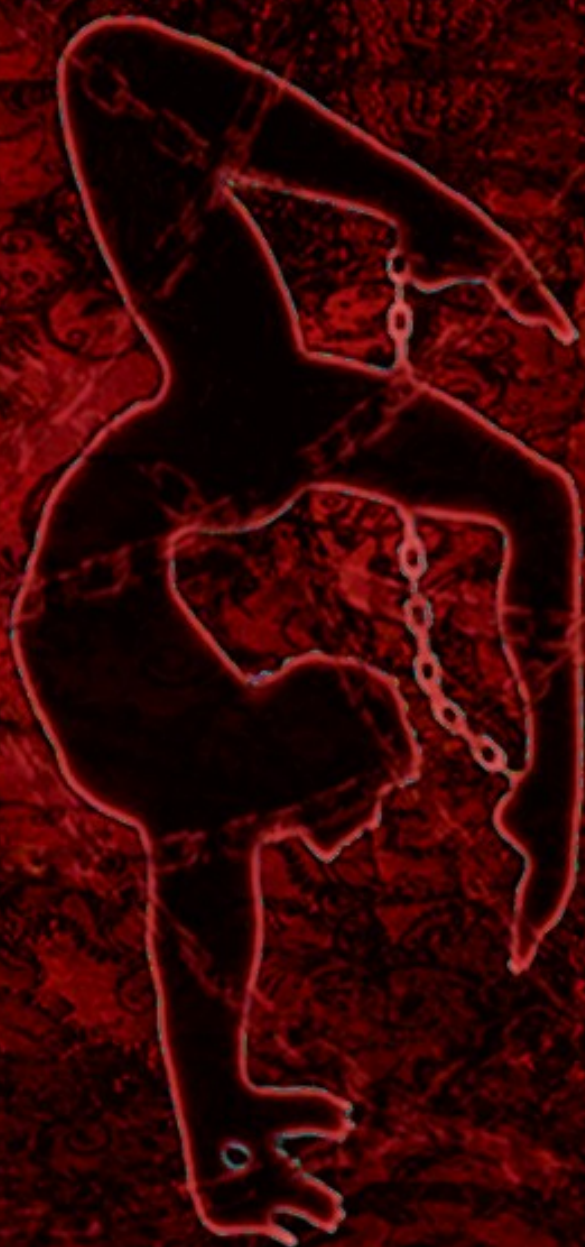


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LIA BLACK

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

WORTHY

By Lia Black

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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WORTHY

By Lia Black

Photo Description

An agile young slave is bent backward over the knees of his doting master; his bindings are loose and their arrangement is “in the cards”.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This is a dystopian class-based society where being a slave boy is a prized position. For those not born into the wealthy class, there are few options for work. A position as a slave boy means security and safety from a life of poverty and the danger of the streets.

Dystopian - set in a world similar to ours but with a few tweaks. Usually a bit darker or a more frightening version of what our society could become

Thank you,

Bree Cheese (who loves dystopian novels and wishes there were more out there!)

Story Info

Genre: dystopia

Tags: master/slave, one-time threesome, cross-dressing, BDSM, bondage/discipline, acrobat, contortionist

Word count: 47,622

WORTHY

By Lia Black

CHAPTER 1

The sun beat down, warming the stone of the high, white wall, and the young, hooded man who perched there. A sultry breeze blew in from the coast, flipping back Sev's dingy hood, and he closed his eyes, relishing the feeling of the light wind through his hair.

They had just arrived in Athena a few days ago—the *Golden City*—and already Sev was captivated by the place. He'd never imagined how beautiful such a big city could be; the dual golden towers that stood at the entrance could be seen for miles, welcoming in the procession of limousines that carried the aristocracy. Today was the opening day of the slave auction; something Sev had heard about, but had never dreamed he'd see. Although he would never be a candidate, he enjoyed watching the slow parade of wide-eyed, bright-faced young men and women heading inside to the promise of a better life. These were the fortunate few—fortunate to have been born to families who could keep them fed and cared for—fortunate to have found sponsors or parents who would pay for their safe passage once they reached the proper age—fortunate to have been born without flaw.

To Sev's back was the ghetto, and despite the brightness of the sun, the ghetto and its inhabitants seemed always in shadow. In sharp contrast to Athena's wide, white streets were the garbage-strewn pathways of the dreg's slum. Those who dwelled within were the unfortunates, the *unseen*; people born without name or title. Those who began life in the ghetto died in the ghetto. Sev had initially been born elsewhere, and he maintained the hope that it might mean some escape, regardless of how unlikely it seemed.

“Oi—what you doin' up there?”

Sev flinched at the sound of the familiar voice of his unfortunate guardian, Phineas, calling up to him from below.

“Get down here, mutt, you’re wanted at the Palace.”

Sev grabbed the wall and swung his legs over the other side. The wall was at least two stories high, but Sev had always been good at climbing. With his lithe, acrobat’s body, he could scale almost anything, and manage to get into the most difficult spaces with ease. It had been for this reason alone that he’d been able to stow-away on the boat that had brought them to Athena. Phineas had been able to bribe himself aboard the leaking freighter, while Sev hid inside small a crate, only able to come out for a few hours at night over the two-week journey. But when the alternative was to be a prison laborer, Sev was willing to put up with some temporary discomfort.

Through a series of impossible twists and tumbles, Sev leapt down off the high wall, landing in a graceful crouch in the dead-end alley below. A few people stopped to watch him, but turned away when he lifted his head. Even the dregs were uncomfortable looking at him for too long.

“Oi—put your hood back on—you’re scarin’ the locals.” Phineas clapped him on the back of the head, and Sev shook his sandy-brown hair down into his face, replacing his hood.

He followed the limping, smelly, old man back through the wide alley, past the derelicts sleeping in the sun and the dubious *physics* selling their cures. Around the corner, near the heavily guarded entrance to the slums, was the red door that opened to the Treasure Palace.

It was daylight yet, but on auction days like today the seedy club opened their doors early to entertain some of the *wealth* that might just happen to get lost and wander inside.

Today would actually be Sev’s first time performing at the club. Phineas knew the owners from his travels, or so he claimed; it was difficult to know the man’s half-truths from his lies. Initially, they didn’t seem too fond of the man; but once Sev became part of the deal, the owners began to at least tolerate Phineas. Sev had performed as an acrobat in a gypsy circus; dancing for a few drunks was a fair price for a place to sleep and possibly something like food in his belly.

Count Demetrie Silvastrano settled back into the seat of his limousine, letting the silver-white smoke from his cigar obscure the faces of the men in front of him as he exhaled.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve been to the auction house in Athena,” said the older man to his left, Lord Walter Hammill. He had been one of Demetrie’s father’s most valued friends. Since the elder Silvastrano was gone, Walter fancied himself as having filled the imaginary void left in the young Count’s heart since his father’s death.

“I remember the day your father bought his first slave—Roger, do you remember his name?”

Roger Wendt, Demetrie’s father’s accountant, was a meek little man who looked like a rodent. Roger had been fortunate in that his own father had also been a successful accountant, as had his grandfather before him. It had kept his family at the lowest edge of the aristocracy; affording them a name but no benefit of title. The elder Silvastrano had done the family a favor by keeping Roger employed. He wasn’t very good at anything but numbers, and too ugly to have been a pleasure slave had he not been good at that.

“Was it the girl?” Roger asked. His voice sounded like a rusted hinge, even when he wasn’t sniveling.

Walter, on the other hand, always spoke as if he were giving a speech in an auditorium. His thick, white mustache billowed any time he said any word beginning with a *P* or an *F*.

“Ambree? Amabel? No, no... That was the boy—Aubrey.”

Demetrie sighed and looked out the tinted windows. He could see them coming up on the auction house, those rows of strapping young men and dazzling women, all very well-bred and well-trained and hoping for a chance to live a life of leisure as a domestic slave, pleasure slave, or—the worst-case scenario—as a labor slave. The very fortunate ones were given an opportunity to learn to read, to write, or to dance; to entertain their Masters and hopefully be cared for until the day that they died, almost as if they were family. Some slaves, after twenty years of service and upon their Master’s death, could

become freedmen laborers and be able to go wherever they chose to serve, no longer bound by contracts of sale.

“Pull over.” Demetrie said through the intercom to the driver as they were driving past the large iron gate that kept the west end slums sealed off from Athena’s market district. Without waiting for the driver to open his door, Demetrie got out of the car.

“Demetrie, where are you going—we’re nearly at the auction!” Walter stammered, sliding across the leather bench seat after him.

“It’s a nice day. I want to take a walk,” he said, heading towards the guards at the gate.

“B-but, you’ll miss out on the best selection!” Walter sputtered.

“Then you go and pick one out for yourself. I want to walk.”

Despite all the protesting, Walter and Roger followed Demetrie for a few paces as he gained privileged entry into the slums. It wasn’t completely unheard of for members of the aristocracy to seek out the kinds of forbidden entertainment that only the slums could provide. There were certain decency laws in effect, though men like Demetrie were never concerned about being considered indecent.

Walter and Roger did their best to keep up, but when they began to move towards the seedier district of the ghetto both men grew quieter, trying not to draw any more attention to themselves than necessary.

“Demetrie, why are we here?” Walter whispered harshly; his eyes darted nervously towards every passing glance.

“I wanted to buy a gift for someone,” Demetrie lied, stopping at one of the many booths full of strange—and likely stolen—wares.

This was the oldest section of Athena’s hidden slums, close to the docks, where the fishing boats once moored, before the water became polluted enough to burn. On the other side of the high, graffiti-covered wall, the water looked sparkling and clean, although that was itself only chemical. Just like

everything else, the face Athena showed to the world was unflawed, so perfect and artificial that Demetrie found it boring. The old section was far more intriguing with its unwashed streets and equally unwashed inhabitants.

Walter moved up closer to Demetrie. “Your Lordship, I’m certain if you tell me what it is you’re looking for, either Roger or myself could acquire it someplace less... *dangerous*.” The last word was a whisper as Walter flinched from an old woman offering up a fur stole that looked suspiciously like a dead alley cat.

Demetrie ignored them, his attention drawn to a toothless old dreg calling out an invitation to “come inside the Treasure Palace and be seduced by drink and dance.”

“What have we here?” Demetrie mused and began to approach the barker outside the garish red door.

“Demetrie!” Walter grabbed his sleeve, and then, more quietly, “Count Silvastrano, I must object!”

Demetrie shrugged. “By all means, Walter; object away. Don’t let me stop you.” He brushed off the older man’s hand and made his way into the dark club. “Go back to the car, I just want to get a drink.”

The Treasure Palace was, as expected, a dump of epic proportions, yet somehow Demetrie felt more comfortable here. The place stunk of sweat, sex, and alcohol. Fortunately, most of the filth was hidden in shadows cast by the anemic red bulbs hanging bare from wires in the ceiling. A few lazy whores smoked hand-rolled cigarettes in a back corner. One smiled, gap-toothed, at Demetrie and scratched at the inside of her thigh.

Demetrie smiled back with a small shake of his head and found an empty booth that had an unobstructed view of the stage. Walter and Roger had reluctantly returned to the car rather than try and argue with him and risk making a scene. He’d assured them he’d only be a little while; long enough to have a drink, and then they could be on their way. Demetrie was not in the mood to buy a lovely blond slave. Even the pleasure slaves were sexually pent-up prima donnas whose flavors came only in vanilla. Demetrie’s tastes always ran decidedly towards a spicier appetite.

“Ah, Sir, what can I get you?” The bartender spoke slowly, as if enunciating his words would make the rich man forget he was in a place of dregs.

“Whiskey, top shelf if you have one. Tell me, is there any entertainment this afternoon, or am I premature?”

The bartender grinned; one of his few teeth was partially black and looked like a floating crescent moon in the dim light.

“You’re in luck—just got a dancer in from Nissim—it’s a boy, but don’t let that put you off. They say he has rubber bones.”

“*They do, do they?*” Demetrie raised an eyebrow.

Much to Demetrie’s annoyance, as soon as the bartender left to fill his order, a large man with a thick, grizzled beard and balding head limped over and sat down in the booth opposite him. “Name’s Phineas,” the man introduced himself, having only one name. Only the aristocracy could claim surnames, and this man was certainly not of his kind.

Demetrie declined the offer to shake his hand, glad that his drink had arrived so he could pay attention to picking out whatever was floating in the glass rather than looking at the old man’s pock-marked face.

“I manage the boy,” Phineas said, waving his arm towards the stage as if the boy in question was there. “His mother was such a beautiful ballerina. So lovely and pure, she danced like a dream...” Phineas gazed wistfully at the stage, “But she fell for the charms of a *foreigner* and became with child. The cad left her stranded, and in her last, dying breaths she gave birth to a foul, twisted creature. The boy was a stain left behind by his poor mother’s sins!”

“Whatever happened to her being so lovely and pure?” Demetrie muttered, wiping his fingers off on his trousers once he’d successfully removed the foreign object from his whiskey. He had not come in for a story, and he was considering getting up to leave when the stage lights came up and a strange angel appeared from the darkness behind.

The boy could very well have been the son of a beautiful ballerina. He was thin, his body mostly hairless, but lean muscle bunched under his skin,

revealed by form-fitting black shorts, which was all the clothing he wore. It was difficult to be certain of his age, but certainly closer to a man than a child, or at least Demetrie hoped as much.

The shape of his face resembled a narrow heart, his lips full and curved, his nose slender and straight. His eyes had the exotic slant of a foreigner, and while his right eye was a lovely copper-brown, the other was a pale green, the color of mint tea diluted with cream. Had it not been for the darker ring of his iris, it might have seemed he had no color in it at all. And it was on this side of his face that his golden-olive skin was bleached, as were the eyelashes, and edged with a lacy port-wine stain like an intricate tattoo.

Demetrie sat mesmerized as the dancer did a high pirouette, arching his spine impossibly backwards. With one leg raised behind him, he reached back and grasped the ankle, pulling it up over his shoulder. His dance was almost painful to watch, his contortions so graceful yet erotic in the fantasies they inspired. The Count's mouth suddenly felt dry as he imagined the many ways he might bend and break this lovely boy.

“How much?” Demetrie's voice was hoarse as he remained unable to tear his eyes away.

“For an hour? An evening?”

“For him. I want the boy. How much?”

Phineas cleared his throat. “Er... how about a game of cards? If you win, you can have the boy.”

Demetrie knew that it was a fool's game that most men would have no chance of winning, but the more he watched the boy on stage and thought about the man before him, the more certain Demetrie became of his winning hand. “How is it played?”

“Well, there are three rounds; you bet as much or as little as you like. You draw a card from the deck, and I draw a card. If you have the higher card, you keep your wager; if I win, I take it and we start again... doubling the offer on the next round. Whoever has the high card in round three keeps all his winnings and the boy...”

Demetrie smirked at the man's ignorant gaffe. Apparently Phineas had never lost even a round in this dubious game.

"...But whoever draws the joker loses it all. Ready?"

The boy on stage went up on his hands, first spreading his legs in a wide split, then going down on his elbows and bringing his legs over his head until his toes touched the stage in front of him. Demetrie kept one eye on him and one on the deck. "Ready."

As he danced and moved through his contortions, Sev watched the exquisite man gamble with Phineas. The man was much younger than his guardian, but older than Sev; his handsome face sculpted by firm cheekbones and a squared jaw. Black hair, trimmed close to his nape, settled in silky waves along the top of his head; his eyes were just as dark, and fringed by thick lashes. His flesh was clear and pale, with a light shadow of blue beneath the skin where he shaved his beard. The clothing he wore was well-tailored, without so much as a thread out of place, and it was clean—*he* was clean, his scent exotic and foreign against the sour sweat of so many dregs. *An aristocrat*; Sev had only ever seen them by accident, and he couldn't help but wonder why such an elegant man would venture here just for a drink.

Phineas never lost this game because it was one he'd made up himself—there were several jokers in the deck and he knew exactly which cards they were. Sev had no idea that the prize they were playing for was him.

The aristocrat set down a gold coin and Sev's eyes widened. He looked again into the man's handsome face, and the man's eyes caught his, holding them as he gave Sev a smile.

Sev felt color rise to his cheeks, and he smiled as well—something he had rarely done in his life.

"You know," Demetrie said, fingering his card before casting it, "when I was twenty, I traveled to Nissim with my father." His voice was low, as if carrying on a casual conversation with Phineas, though his eyes continually

sought out Sev. He cast his card, a two of clubs, and Phineas beat it with a queen of hearts. Demetrie sighed and shook his head, then pulled out two more coins, placing them where he'd set the first one, now on Phineas' side. He drew another card, turning it through his fingers as he spoke.

“Nissim's business district is not the sort of place that would hold the attention span of a brash young man for very long, and so I wandered to Low Town, hoping to find a tavern where I might be a little more... *entertained*.”

Again, Demetrie cast his card, and again, he shook his head when he lost. Briefly his eyes darted to Sev, who did a slow, standing backbend, grabbing his ankles and turning to the side, a maneuver that made Demetrie wonder if he was seducing him on purpose, or truly oblivious of his effect.

Demetrie's gaze moved along the arch of Sev's body, and his tongue played behind his top teeth. *No*, obviously the boy was following a practiced script meant to distract so that Phineas could manipulate the game.

“I never made it to the bar... there was a circus in the square. Really just a bunch of gypsies, but there was this peculiar little boy, doing the most amazing things with his body, and in between acts, I watched him pick several pockets faster and more nimbly than a monkey.”

“Mmph,” Phineas said, paying no attention to what the man was saying as he focused on the four gold coins now lying beside his three.

“I never really thought very much about it again until now, you see. Recently, about two weeks ago, a business associate of mine in Nissim suffered a break-in. An old man and a young contortionist were nearly apprehended for the burglary—the old man had actually taken a bullet to the leg; yet, somehow they escaped. And I was just thinking what an unlikely story that might seem, if I hadn't once seen that little circus boy with my own eyes.”

Demetrie drew his card and smiled at it, then slowly laid it down. It was the joker. Phineas made a quick grab for the money but Demetrie snatched up his wrist and held it, his fingers wrapped around it so tightly that they squeezed the color out of the old man's dirty skin.

It was then that Phineas realized what the other man had been saying. “Okay—fine—take your money back!” Phineas growled, still trying to seem threatening, though it was a pitiful attempt.

“That won’t stop me from telling the authorities that I have found the fugitives from Nissim... Or perhaps I should simply mention the reward to any of the *upstanding citizens* outside?”

The old man’s eyes bugged. “What do you want?” His voice was high and hoarse.

“I’ve told you. Him.” Demetrie pointed at Sev who dropped onto his back and sat up blinking stupidly.

“The boy? No—I won’t...”

“I’m willing to let you keep the gold you have there. If you refuse you’ll be headed to a labor camp and I’ll take your boy anyway... unless you think you can outrun the guards.”

Phineas ground his rotten teeth. “I want more.”

Demetrie raised an eyebrow. “How much more?”

“Make it fifteen—no, twenty.”

Demetrie kicked Phineas in his bad leg. The old man coughed and his face went white.

“You’re hardly in a position to bargain, dreg, but since I’m feeling benevolent, I’ll make it ten.”

“Fine.” Phineas’ voice was barely a squeak as beads of sweat blossomed on his forehead.

Demetrie let go of the old man and stood up, dusting off his pants and he tossed him a few more coins. As a last consideration, he reached down and snatched up the deck of cards, tucking them into his vest, before holding his hand out to the boy still sitting dumbfounded on stage.

“Come with me, I’m taking you home.”

Sev walked quietly beside the man who held him by a hand at the back of his neck. Even if he weren't slouching, Sev's head would have only reached about the height of one of the man's broad shoulders.

At the gate, the guards called the man "Lordship" and allowed him to take Sev out without so much as one question asked. Sev couldn't help but wonder if it was something he had done many times before.

"Demetrie, really! Your father would not approve!" An older man gasped, his white mustache puffing, as they arrived at a black stretch limo.

Demetrie. Sev looked up at the man who held him. The name sounded exotic, offering whispers of dark promises and deep passions. Sev wondered how much of either he might come to know in this man's company. He blushed and lowered his gaze as Demetrie's stormy eyes met his own. After a moment, Demetrie's attention shifted briefly to the older man, as if he'd only just noticed they weren't alone.

"My father is dead, Walter. Take it up with him if you like."

Sev had little time to process the cool delivery of this information before he was sent scrambling into the car by a brush of Demetrie's hand on his backside.

CHAPTER 2

Sev was doing his best to become invisible as he rode in the car with the three men. He knelt on the floor with his head down, but was acutely aware of Demetrie's eyes upon him. The cavalier aristocrat lazily smoked his thin black cigar while the man he had called Walter sputtered through his arguments. The other man stared at Sev, his thin lips twitching as he smiled.

"He is unclean!" Walter accused, jabbing his finger at Sev.

"I plan on bathing him."

"He-he's a mongrel! A freak! Look at him! He hasn't said a word! I doubt he can even speak!"

Demetrie raised an eyebrow, "Can you speak, boy?"

"Yes, Sir," Sev said in a small voice. His tone was smooth, his voice too low to be a child's and ringing with the vestiges of a lyrical gypsy accent. It made people turn towards him in a crowd, then look abruptly elsewhere when they saw his face. But Demetrie had yet to turn away from him. His eyes had scarcely left Sev's face since they'd entered the car.

A smile curled the corners of Demetrie's sensuous mouth, and Sev couldn't help but bask in the warmth it elicited.

"What is your name?" Demetrie asked him, his deep voice was soothing as it moved through him.

"Seven, Sir."

"Seven?!" Walter balked. "He's an idiot! That's a number, not a name!"

Sev bristled. He could handle being called a lot of things, but idiot wasn't one of them. "I didn't name myself, Sir. It's just what I was given. Most call me Sev."

"And what would you like me to call you?" Demetrie asked, sliding his foot across the deep pile carpet and nudging Sev's knee lightly.

"You may call me what you choose, Sir."

"What if I called you slave?"

“Demetrie!” Walter and the other man gasped in unison.

Sev felt the blood rise to his cheeks. “Sir, I am not worthy to be called such a thing.”

“You see?” Walter’s earlier agitation gave way to a note of triumph, “Even he knows it. Demetrie—play with him for a few days if you must to get it out of your system, then at the next reserve auction we’ll go out and find you a proper slave.”

Demetrie said nothing, but drew deeply on his cigar and looked out the window.

It felt like they had been driving for hours. Sev was hungry and tired and needed to pee, but was afraid to upset someone by mentioning it, worried that they would drop him off in the middle of the Coldfields. He could tell they had traveled far outside the city center, and he knew only of the regions of Nissim, where the stretches of land between settlements were dead zones. He’d traveled through them many times with the caravans. When he was older he helped to light the way as they’d journeyed through darkness. He’d heard stories about wild creatures that would snatch up those foolish enough to wander the Coldfields alone. But more frightening were the things that he had witnessed: wild dust storms, extreme and sudden drops in temperature, and randomly shifting earth that would open up and swallow a man whole.

Walter was dropped off first at his home. He got out and shot a threatening glare towards Sev but said nothing to Demetrie before he went on his way.

As the car pulled away and they resumed their journey, Demetrie turned his attention to the remaining passenger. “Roger, what do you think of Sev?”

Roger licked his lips, his body visibly trembling. “I find him... intriguing.”

Demetrie smiled. “Do you now?”

“Might I ask what you intend to do with him?”

Demetrie shrugged. “As Walter suggested, I think I’ll play with him for a while.”

“Sir... might I... might I have him when you’re finished?”

Demetrie laughed. “Feel nice, does it? The thought of having something uglier than yourself to admire?”

Sev flinched at the cruel remark, delivered with such a cool smile. But Roger didn’t seem bothered, and his tongue kept wetting his thin, colorless lips. “Yes... yes it does.”

“Goodnight, Roger.” Demetrie laughed as the car stopped and the door opened.

Roger reached out to touch Sev’s hair but Demetrie smacked his hand away. “It’s not nice to touch other people’s property, Roger.”

“S-Sorry, Sir... Good night.”

When the car started up again, Demetrie sat quietly smoking his cigar for what seemed like several minutes as he looked his new acquisition up and down.

“Come to me, Sev.”

Sev crawled to Demetrie, stopping when he felt the Count’s powerful hand press against the top of his head.

Demetrie’s fingers carded Sev’s hair. “Your hair is very soft,” Demetrie said in a voice that vibrated through Sev and felt like a caress even more so than his hand did. “Dirty, but soft.” Demetrie frowned and pinched dead an insect.

Sev relaxed, sighing appreciatively under the contact.

“Tell me Sev, have you ever been with a man?”

“Yes Sir.”

“Ah... was it that old grifter?”

“Never, Sir.” Sev closed his eyes, his sounds close to purring with each long pass of Demetrie’s big hand.

“I would like you to let me have your body for a while, Sev.”

“As long as you wish, Sir... you may keep it and do with it as you please.”

Demetrie chuckled, and Sev worried that he'd said something foolish.

“Ah, Sev; I think you were born to be a slave.”

“I wasn't, Sir. My mother was not a ballerina—she was a foreign whore from Ishmay. I don't know my father. I was not born to be anything... I shouldn't have even been born.” Sev said the words without emotion.

Demetrie pondered the younger man's face for a moment. “That doesn't make you cry?”

“No, Sir.”

“What a pity... I think I should like to see what you look like when you cry. I think you'd look lovely.”

Sev peered through his overgrown bangs, and Demetrie thought he saw fear there.

“What makes you cry, Sev?” Demetrie's voice was husky, and he spread his legs, adjusting himself through his tailored slacks.

“I don't know Sir.”

White teeth—perfectly straight—the canines slightly pointed, lit up Demetrie's face when he grinned.

“Then we'll find out together.”

It was after dark when they reached Demetrie's estate. Outside, the front of the mansion was lit up by a warm, artificial radiance that transformed the narrow columns and tall multi-paned windows into a stunning geometry of light and shadow. Inside, the home was no less impressive. From the high ceiling of the rounded foyer hung an enormous chandelier of smoky cut crystal and amber-colored lights. The floor appeared to be one huge slab of stone, only broken up along the borders by intricate tile inlays, and rising above was a wide, curving staircase with a deep, burgundy runner.

A Freedman domestic—no longer a slave—met them at the door. Like the driver and everyone else so far, the servant initially appeared unimpressed by

his employer's new acquisition, however, Sev caught the man offering several curious glances out of the corner of his eye.

“Stanley, take my new toy upstairs and have him cleaned.”

Stanley was a tall, pale-haired man in his early forties. Although not quite as tall as his Master, he still looked down upon Sev with a scowl. “Follow me please.”

Sev glanced back at Demetrie who had already turned, his attention moved to an older female domestic who had handed him some letters. Sev shrugged and followed Stanley through the foyer and up the stairs.

“I must confess, I knew the young Count's tastes ran counter to the norm, but I had no idea that he'd ever find anything like you.”

Sev frowned, but didn't respond otherwise. He assumed this meant that Demetrie had brought home a lot of toys over the years, and that Sev was just another thing to play with then toss aside. Right now he didn't care. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been clean.

His stomach growled audibly, and Stanley glared at him over his shoulder.

He led Sev through a door into a bathroom that was probably as big as the entire bar that he'd just come from. The floor was covered in dark granite tiles, and one wall was a giant mirror. There was a toilet and sink that seemed that seemed to have sprouted from where they sat, being made of the same dark granite, and a large shower enclosed in clear glass. In the center was a raised tub that could have easily accommodated two men the size of Phineas' bulk.

“I suggest you shower first to rid your body of as much vermin as you can.”

Stanley went to a recessed cabinet and reached deep inside to pull out a bottle and a plastic garbage bag. “This should kill any pests.” He handed Sev the plastic bottle.

It seemed to be about half-full, with a white label and a line drawing of an insect crossed through with a red “X”.

“The elder Count Silvastrano kept hounds,” Stanley explained. He held up the bag, “All of your clothing will go in here.”

Sev took the offerings, such as they were, and set them down as he began to undress. Behind him Stanley turned on the shower.

“I will bring you some towels and start the tub when I return.” He turned around and looked at Sev, who kept his hair covering his face and his head turned to expose only his *good* side.

Sev was aware of the man’s gaze moving slowly over his body. He had always been thin, but his muscles had begun to atrophy from his time on the boat, and today’s contortions had left him feeling achy and weak.

“You’re very thin... When did you last eat?” Stanley’s voice was notably less harsh.

“I had some supplements the other day.”

Unlike many other places, the aristocratic government of Athena offered nutritional supplements to the derelicts registered in their ghettos. It was a small kindness, though so strictly controlled that the supplements were often used as currency. Some more unscrupulous individuals would rob or even murder others and hoard their meager rations—selling them for favors. That was how Phineas had acquired a portion for himself and Sev—although the favor he’d offered had been Sev’s body.

“I’ll make certain you get something proper to eat. Use as much of that as you need to.” Stanley jerked his chin towards the bottle in Sev’s hand, but his eyes were glued to the boy’s uncircumcised penis.

Sev looked down at himself briefly, then raised his face to look at Stanley, offering a lascivious little smile. “Do you find it obscene?”

Stanley swallowed hard, his eyes hesitantly rising to Sev’s face. “Extremely,” he muttered, then he walked out of the room, pausing briefly to catch a glimpse of Sev’s backside before he left.

Sev went and used the toilet first. It was the kind that flushed itself, and Sev was fascinated by the power of the miniature whirlpool. The spray in the shower was hot and strong and wonderful. Because Sev was considered

lesser—even among the dregs—he was forced to wait on the days the public showers were opened, and by the time he arrived, the water was always down to just a cold trickle. Sev rinsed his body down, then crouched and scrubbed his head, watching the bugs and filth swirl with the foam going down the drain. He scrubbed the hair on his head three times, then used the rest of the bottle to get the hair under his arms and the patch covering his groin. He never grew hair anywhere else—not like Phineas, who seemed more hair than man at times. He was glad to finally be away from him—for a little while at least.

Phineas had found Sev living among the gypsies. It was the gypsies who'd trained his body to bend, and dance... and fuck. Sev closed his eyes, remembering the humid summer evenings at the camps they made inside the various settlements between the Coldfields. Naked young bodies stretched out on top of the garish caravans while the adults slept on the ground below, because inside the enclosed space was like an oven. It was always the boys Sev liked the best. They passed him around like treasure, sharing in the spoils of his wealth. Sometimes he was so languid that he couldn't count how many hands were upon him, how many tongues in his mouth and on his dick... how many cocks and fingers shoving in and out of him at once...

Sev gasped, pressing his palm against the glass enclosure as he became painfully erect. God, he hadn't had a hard-on in so long. It felt raw, and claimed so much blood it made him feel dizzy. He bit his lip, feeling certain that he could come without even touching himself. Sev groaned softly, putting both palms and his forearms against the glass. His cock bobbed as he clenched his groin muscles, flinging a bead of precome against the glass where it stretched in a glistening thread like spider's silk. He looked down at himself, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Stanley in the doorway watching him.

Sev dropped down to his knees with a startled yelp. "Don't you *knock*?" Sev snapped, his face red. He didn't so much mind that Stanley had been watching him, it was that he'd been watching him without Sev's knowledge. That was one kind of vulnerability Sev couldn't manage. No matter how naked and exposed he was, he needed to have some control over his audience—to show them only what he wanted them to see. It was why he'd done so well

with the circus; he could be a fantasy at a moment's notice, but only when notice was given.

"I've brought your towels," Stanley said, clearing his throat, "As soon as you are ready, you may enter the bath."

Sev swore under his breath and pushed his hair forward to cover the left side of his face. The shock of being discovered in such a compromised state had caused his cock to shrivel back down with an unsatisfied ache. He stepped out of the shower and headed for the tub as Stanley passed him to turn off the spray.

From the tub rose steam scented with some exotic sweet and spicy fragrance, and when Sev dipped his foot inside, it felt like ribbons of silk embracing his skin.

Gingerly he settled into the hot water until it rose up over his chest, and closed his eyes with a heavy sigh.

"I will tend to your hands and feet now," Stanley said, and sat on a low stool on the far end of the tub. On the ledge were two towels; one was folded while the other held numerous implements laid out side-by-side. It looked like Stanley was about to perform surgery.

"What's all that?" Sev reluctantly offered one wet foot.

"Your feet are in terrible shape... the calluses on the balls of your feet and your toes..."

"It's from dancing."

"Dancing?" Stanley's eyebrows rose high on his forehead.

Sev inclined his head in affirmation, his eyes watching Stanley's actions but his mind someplace else. He missed the caravans. It was with the gypsies that he'd felt the most at home. They saw his unfortunate birthmark as a sign of something special—referring to it as an *angel's kiss*. Sev would have stayed with them forever, but Phineas' greed and Sev's misguided loyalty took him away and into a life far beyond the petty crimes of the gypsies. It was why they'd had to leave Nissim so quickly, and why Sev could never go back. Demetrie obviously knew they were wanted fugitives, so Sev had no illusions

that when the Count grew tired of him he'd be handed over and extradited for his crimes. If he was lucky, he'd die before he ever made it to the salt mines or whatever godforsaken labor facility they'd send him to for punishment.

"Ouch." Sev flinched as Stanley accidentally cut a toenail too far down. Not considering the action, Sev brought his foot to his face—without using his hands—and sucked on the bleeding toe. When he chanced a look at Stanley, the man was gaping.

"Sorry," Sev whispered, and returned his foot to the towel.

"Well your allure for the Count is no longer a mystery," Stanley muttered and went back to work.

"What happened to the Count's last entertainment?" Sev asked, though he wasn't entirely certain he wanted to know.

"The Count usually goes out for his entertainment. He's never brought it home, and frankly, I believe it should have remained so."

Sev shrugged. "And just when I was beginning to think that you liked me."

Stanley rolled his eyes.

"You were a slave—but never entertainment?"

"I belonged to the elder Count Silvastrano. Our personal arrangements before I became a Freedman domestic are *personal*."

Sev offered a wry smile. "Even though the feeling isn't mutual, I like you, Stanley."

"Lucky me," Stanley huffed, shaking his head as he did the best that he could with Sev's long overdue pedicure. "I only hope for the young Count's sake that he gets you out of his system and finds a proper slave soon."

By the time Stanley was finished with Sev's hands and feet, the water was uncomfortably tepid and Sev couldn't wait to get out. He never could have imagined he'd get tired of soaking in such a luxurious tub, but Stanley's clipping and buffing had added just enough discomfort to want it over with.

Sev dried himself with the towels, wrapping himself in their damp softness with a contented sigh.

Stanley looked past Sev, his body becoming a rigid line as he bowed his head unexpectedly, making Sev wonder why the condescending servant suddenly appeared so humble.

Sev glanced at him, then looked at the door and realized that the Count was standing in the open doorway. “Oh! Sir!” Sev dropped to his knees, still wearing the towel like swaddling.

“Stanley, I do hope that you are finished,” Demetrie said, looking past Sev as though he wasn’t there.

“Forgive me, Sir, I was just about to bring him in.”

“Never mind, I’m here now; I’ll take him.”

Finally Demetrie looked down at Sev. “On your feet.”

Sev quickly stood, peering up at Demetrie through his messy damp bangs.

Demetrie shook his head and slid his fingers through Sev’s hair, pulling it back from his face. “Your hair is very nice when it’s clean, but it’s your remarkable flaws I’d rather see.”

Sev felt himself blushing; somehow Demetrie’s words seemed like a compliment, whether or not that’s how they were meant.

“Come.”

Still wrapped in a towel, Sev followed Demetrie out of the bathroom and into the hall. They passed an open door that Sev assumed must be Demetrie’s room because of the brief glimpse of masculine opulence he’d seen—a massive bed covered with dark, sumptuous linens, heavy wood furniture, and thick, elegant rugs—but they did not pause here. Instead, Demetrie led Sev down to the end of the hall, around a corner, and to a long, narrow corridor. There were no doors or windows, and the floors here were bare wood rather than the thick runners on which they’d been traveling before now. At the end of this hallway was a very solid looking, dark paneled door.

Sev stood behind Demetrie, watching the Count pull out a brass skeleton key and work it into the lock. The door opened with a heavy groan.

“Go inside.”

Sev took a few tentative steps forward. The room was so dark, it appeared that beyond the threshold there was only a yawning black void. Sev yelped as he was shoved hard from behind, and, disoriented, he stumbled and fell down onto his side. When he looked towards the hallway, all he saw was the brief silhouette of Demetrie before the door was slammed closed.

Sev began to struggle to his knees, but he was grabbed around the ankle and dragged across the smooth wooden floor. He whimpered, instinctively scrabbling with his hands for some safe hold, but there was not even a loose floorboard for him to clutch. And then he was flung hard and released, sliding easily across the polished floor and tumbling in a heap against some heavy piece of furniture.

A clink of metal and the scent of sulfur preceded the small flame that revealed Demetrie’s face as he lit another thin, black cigar. Twin fires were reflected in his cold, dark eyes for a moment before he snapped the lighter shut.

Sev stared at the red cherry glowing at the end of the cigar, but it didn’t come any closer. Finally Demetrie turned on a swing-arm lamp and angled the intensely bright bulb towards Sev.

Sev squinted, trying to shade his eyes.

“Beside you is a special piece of furniture. You will leave your towel on the floor, and stand up, facing this item.”

Demetrie’s voice sent a shiver through Sev that he couldn’t claim was entirely from fear. Standing up, Sev let the towel fall. The furniture Demetrie had mentioned was more like a large, heavy block, bolted to the floor and covered with studded leather. On the far end was a smooth wooden bar with what appeared to be leather handgrips and open shackles. Sev blew out a long breath, waiting for the inevitable command.

“Spread your feet and bend forward to hold the bar.”

The leather was cold against his thighs and chest but seemed to warm as he settled against it. It was firm without much yield, but a studded dimple in the diamond pattern fell in line with his crotch, giving him a slightly more comfortable indentation to rest against.

“Do I need to shackle you?” Demetrie’s voice was closer.

“No Sir,” Sev said, his voice sounding hoarse.

“Do you know why we have come here, Sev?”

Sev’s mind cycled through several possible answers, but in the end he only answered, “No.”

“No? Really? Well then, let me explain it to you so there is no misunderstanding.”

Demetrie began to pace very slowly behind him, and Sev fought the urge to turn his head.

“You did something to which I object, and although you didn’t know the rules, I think this infringement deserves *correction* nevertheless.”

“Sir? What did I do to displease you?”

“You allowed yourself to be seen in a state of arousal without my permission, or my presence.”

Sev remembered his humiliating display in the shower and felt the blood drain from his face. He turned only enough to catch Demetrie out of the corner of his eye and saw that he was examining a long, narrow riding crop. Sev swallowed hard, his knuckles whitening on the hand grips.

“Sir, I think that maybe you’d better use the shackles after all.”

Demetrie made a soft sound that might have been surprise or approval. He came to stand beside the block and leaned down, looking into Sev’s face as he reached across Sev’s back and secured one shackle, then the other. They were lined and lightly padded inside to keep the metal rings from cutting flesh, but they were not simply for show. Even if he’d wanted to, there was no way to squeeze out of them without being released.

“Too tight?” Demetrie’s voice was soft, with just a hint of amusement.

Sev shook his head, suddenly finding himself unable to speak. He closed his eyes as Demetrie faded away again behind him.

“Rule number one.” The flexible riding crop came down hard across Sev’s buttocks and he swallowed a yelp of surprise. “A slave shall never flaunt his body outside the presence of his Master without his Master’s command.”

The crop came down again, sending an initial shock through his nerves that dulled for a moment, then suddenly flared up into a painful, stinging burn. It was the exclamation point on the end of a statement that Sev would be expected never to forget.

“Rule number two.” Another smack crossed over the first two; the intersection sent fire drilling down through Sev’s muscles and straight into his groin. “Until I release you from my service, you shall comport yourself as my slave.”

Sev gritted his teeth, waiting for another blow which never came. He startled slightly as Demetrie pressed against him from behind, rubbing the inflamed marks with his hand. The contact raised conflicting sensations and emotions in Sev. The warmth of Demetrie’s palm caused the burning to rise, and Sev wanted to beg him to stop. But at the same time he relished the touch, and yearned for more.

“I think that is enough for now. Three should be sufficient to help you remember.”

Sev shivered as Demetrie’s breath warmed the skin behind his ear. The Count reached over Sev’s head and unlocked the shackles, but did not give him permission to let go of the bar, so Sev continued to grasp it.

“Are you crying, slave?”

“N-no M—Sir.” He fumbled between the two words.

The hand stopped, and Demetrie brought his head down to look into Sev’s face. “You will not call me Master?”

“I would not dishonor you like that. It would be an insult to your status to have a *dreg* for a slave.”

The hand on his skin began to move again in slow circles. The light pressure felt like a caress of broken glass each time it passed over one of the burning welts.

“You seem more concerned for my status than I am. Very well, *dreg* Sev; you may call me Sir for now, but in public it is Master. Do I make myself clear?”

Sev swallowed his protest, bobbing his head as emphatically as he would have argued.

“Your ass is striped, Sev; a few more strikes would have broken your skin. Did it not hurt you?”

“Sir, it did hurt me.” Sev’s mouth was dry.

Demetrie glanced back when he saw Sev squirming against the block. He slid his hand around Sev’s hips from the back to the front and chuckled softly, finding him fully erect.

“It seems we’ll have to find a more suitable form of punishment in the event you break another rule... it appears this one constitutes foreplay.”

Demetrie squeezed Sev’s cock, and Sev groaned softly, unconsciously thrusting into his hand.

Demetrie moved his face away. A moment later, Sev felt the sear of hot breath along his backside as Demetrie kissed along each welt.

Sev bit his lip, stifling a whimper. He yelped and thrust into the block when teeth came down like a razor across one of the raw stripes. Demetrie’s other hand continued to squeeze and jerk him lazily, peeling back his foreskin and rubbing his thumb along the groove on his weeping head.

“I see I’ve made you cry a little,” Demetrie murmured. He moved both of his hands around to Sev’s ass once more, rubbing in slow circles on each cheek before he cupped one in each palm. Sev’s cheeks were parted and Demetrie’s tongue ran through the cleft.

Sev shivered, rising up onto his toes as the wet heat of Demetrie’s tongue found his tightly pinched entrance and began to make lazy, small circles. The

Count's big hands pushed harder against his backside, forcing Sev's cock against the smooth leather. He pressed against Sev's hole with his thumbs, pulling it open and spearing it with his tongue.

Sev whimpered, grinding his hips against the block as Demetrie fluttered briefly inside of him. Sev didn't want to come, but there was no way that he could hold back. A shudder went through his body and every muscle locked. Sev cried out, his cock pinched between his belly and the leather block, as weak spurts of semen glazed the surface. It was too much—the burst of adrenalin from his whipping and the intensity of his orgasm left his body pitifully weak. His legs buckled and Sev felt himself slide down into a blissful, dizzying blackness.

CHAPTER 3

It was soft, the softest thing he'd ever felt, and warm, but not overly so. Sev stretched, arching his back. A delightful smell filled his nostrils as he breathed in, and his stomach growled, clawing at him from the inside.

Sev opened his eyes. He was lying in a big four-poster bed on top of a silky black duvet. Beside him on the bed was a tray filled with slices of meat and assorted cheeses, grapes, finger pastries, and a pitcher of water. Sev looked around, debating whether or not he should eat, when the door opened and Stanley walked into the room.

“Finally awake, I see. The Count wants you to eat your fill; I will discuss some rules for you as you are eating, then I shall take you down to meet him in his study, and with any luck we will not cross paths any time again soon.”

Sev had stopped listening just after the words *eat your fill* and began to do just that, using his hands to shove food in so quickly, he barely tasted it before swallowing it down.

Stanley curled his upper lip and huffed in displeasure as Sev consumed the meal like a starving animal. “The rules are as follows, and certainly more will be added should certain situations arise... assuming he isn't sick of you by the morning,” Stanley added dryly.

“On the floor, at the side of the Count's bed, which you currently occupy, you will notice a cushion. That is where you will go when the Count wishes to sleep.” Stanley waited for the full effect of his words to reach Sev, but Sev never stopped eating; he simply leaned over the side of the bed to inspect the cushion, nodded, and stuffed a pastry into his mouth. Frankly, with the exception of the bed, the cushion would likely be the softest thing Sev had ever lain on, and he was surprised that the Count would want him—not just a dreg, but a thief—in his room while he was resting unawares.

Stanley droned on about Sev's place in the Count's home and in the world in general; how Sev should kneel, how often and the manner in which he should bathe, and on, and on, until Sev again stopped listening. This was something that Stanley and other *acceptable* slaves did not understand: dregs

already knew the rules of subservience. They knew never to meet the eyes of a better, never to let their shadows be longer or cross over a better man's sun. They knew that food, water, and health were luxuries, and that when they died, their bodies were to be pushed against the curbing for the street cleaners to collect with the road kill. Sev knew how to be less than nothing, and so any recognition at all—even punishment—made him *something* closer to human.

No doubt Stanley's family had worked hard to produce such a perfect son worthy of a Master, and it had probably taken many years, a great deal of money, and hours of painful correction to train Stanley in his proper role as a slave. Sev, in this respect, represented an insult to the system, an insect in Stanley's hard-earned yet sweet reward. And this was why, Sev assumed, Stanley—and many other slaves—hated him.

Although Sev struggled, at some point his body refused to take any more food, and he had to give up with a large portion left untouched. When Stanley wasn't looking, he'd started to shove a handful of grapes under his cushion, but realized that he would probably never be alone in the Count's room to eat them, and if he was thrown out, he couldn't very well gather them up as property. With a sigh he got up from the bed.

“Put that on.” Stanley pointed to a small piece of white fabric folded on the end of the duvet.

Sev picked it up and realized it was a pair of very small, very clinging, shorts. He shrugged and stepped into them, thinking he looked more obscene with them on than without them. Their fit left very little to the imagination, but if that was what Demetrie wanted, Sev wouldn't object.

“Sir, I've brought the *young man* for you.”

Stanley announced Sev's presence, then left Sev standing just inside the room as Demetrie turned in his chair.

Sev dropped to his knees, bowing his head.

Demetrie smiled. “Stand up and come here, Sev. Let me look at you.”

Sev rose to his feet and padded across the plush carpet to stand before his temporary Master. He liked to see him smile; it made him feel that he pleased the Count and his smile was the reward, his acknowledgement.

“Turn around.” Demetrie lightly touched Sev’s hips, guiding him as he rotated slowly.

Sev unconsciously clenched his buttocks when Demetrie’s hand brushed the curve of them.

Demetrie chuckled softly. “Does it still hurt?”

Sev shook his head. “No Sir.”

“The crop hurts immediately and leaves a sharp mark, but the pain rarely lingers.”

“I wouldn’t mind if it did, Sir,” Sev said candidly.

Demetrie turned him around to gaze up at him, taking his hands. “You are a very lewd boy. Now then, on your knees. Service me, as you managed to avoid it before.” Demetrie spread his legs wide.

Sev knelt between his thighs, bringing his hands to the fly of Demetrie’s finely-tailored slacks. The fabric was smooth against his fingers as he worked the metal closure then pulled down the zipper. Demetrie wore briefs underneath, looser in the pouch, black and made of the softest knit. The small area of visible skin above the waistband was pale, adorned with a narrow strip of silky black hair. Sev could already smell him faintly—warm, heady and slightly bitter, masked by layers of light cologne and scented soap. He hooked his fingers under the waistband and raised his eyes briefly to Demetrie’s face, looking up through his thick mop of hair, then he tugged down Demetrie’s underwear and freed his cock. Demetrie was flaccid; his penis was circumcised, as were all males above dreg caste, and it was very impressive in size. He kept himself neatly groomed, and the pale color of his skin became darker here as it flushed with blood. Sev began by running his tongue along the length of him, alternating feathery licks with long, slow strokes.

Demetrie sighed and his cock swelled, rising up towards his belly from its nest of dark curls. Sev caught it with his hand, pulling it downward as he

stroked the heated rod. Demetrie clenched his thigh muscles, giving a little jerk of his hips as he slipped his fingers through Sev's hair. He pulled up Sev's bangs, watching his face.

"Suck me." Demetrie's voice was a low growl, quickening the pulse of blood through Sev's own growing erection. Sev wrapped his lips around Demetrie's plum-colored head, savoring the clean, salty tang of fluid that leaked from the slit. He knew that Demetrie was watching his face, watching his eyes as Sev took him deeper. Sev wanted to please him—to show him gratitude in one of the few ways he knew how to express it.

Demetrie let out a low hiss as Sev swallowed him whole. It was not an easy feat, because of both length and girth. But being part of a circus allowed one to learn various useful skills—one of them was sword swallowing. Demetrie's penis was no sword, but still a weapon worthy of respect.

Sev worked his throat around Demetrie, pleased to feel the trembling hand pressing harder on his scalp as Demetrie fought to keep his restraint. Sev backed off slowly, drawing the remaining air from his mouth into his chest, hollowing his cheeks from the suction. He looked up through his eyelashes at Demetrie as he used his tongue on the thick vein pulsing along the underside of his shaft.

"Beautiful," Demetrie moaned, his stormy eyes sparkling through his long, satin lashes.

Sev made a ring around the base of Demetrie's cock with his thumb and forefinger, squeezing and releasing as he used the other hand to cup and caress his balls. Sev could feel Demetrie throbbing between his lips, the muscles of his groin contracting as Sev began a rhythm with his mouth. He blunted his teeth with his lips to protect the delicate skin as he bobbed his head up and down, his rhythm increasing with the pressure he felt building through Demetrie's body.

Sev's own cock was aching between his legs, causing him some distraction, but he didn't dare touch it without permission and did his best to put it out of his mind. He wanted to give Demetrie so much pleasure that the

next person who attempted as much would pale in comparison, making Demetrie remember only him.

Demetrie's hand tightened against Sev's head as the other one dug into the leather armrest on his desk chair. His breath was coming in shallow gasps, and with a sudden upward thrust, Demetrie growled and released himself into Sev's mouth.

Sev felt the orgasm against his tongue and immediately swallowed as more hot jets stung the back of his throat. The Count must not have come in some time, because there was a lot of it, and though Sev managed to swallow quite a bit, some still managed to run from the corners of his mouth and dribble onto his lap.

Demetrie sank back into the chair with a heavy groan, his cock slipping from Sev's raw lips. His eyes were closed and his face turned up to the ceiling as his breathing gradually slowed to normal, and he began to laugh softly,

“Well done.”

“Sir, it was my pleasure,” Sev said, smiling, his head appropriately bowed in humility. Pride was something he'd never felt before, and he should probably have been reprimanded, but it appeared his effect on Demetrie was considerable enough for him to overlook it this time.

Demetrie tucked himself back into his pants and zipped up, then turned in his chair and began working through papers at his desk. Sev kneeled quietly, his hands resting on his thighs, though his eyes kept wandering to the right and left, his mind too active to be content while sitting still.

The study was a circular room, with curved bookcases flanking a large window, made of the same dark wood as the bench underneath. The desk was also a very solid-looking piece of furniture. Demetrie's chair was oxblood leather, and again, made with dark wood. Sev knew the decor was expensive, and not just because it belonged to an aristocrat, but because wood was such a scarce and valuable commodity. The few trees Sev had ever seen before coming to Athena were like scraggly weeds, half-dead and too spindly to survive anything stronger than a light breeze. In the Golden Corridor of Athena near the slave auction, he'd seen tall palm trees, and Sev would have

believed that they were fake if he hadn't watched a worker early that morning, high on a boom-lift, cutting away a few dry leaves.

Sev's back itched and he tried to ignore it, but like any minor irritation ignored too long, the itching spread to other places—his side, the back of his knee, his nose. Then the wetness that had seeped into his shorts—from his arousal and the unswallowed remnants of Demetrie's orgasm—started to dry, and *that* began to itch.

“You're squirming,” Demetrie said without looking up from his writing.

Sev hadn't realized it until he'd mentioned it. “S-sorry, Sir... I...”

“Stanley!”

Sev startled at Demetrie's sudden volume, and a moment later, Stanley entered the room.

“Yes Sir, how may I be of assistance?” Stanley stood next to Sev, towering over his kneeling form.

Demetrie spoke without looking up. “Bring the restraints.”

“Tell me Sev, can you hold this pose safely for some time?”

“Sir, safely, yes.” The unspoken admission that it would not, however, be comfortable, was entirely the point.

Demetrie was looking down at the young man who was bent in half and secured. Sev had begun in a cross-legged lotus position, then was rolled up onto his shoulders and his chin was tucked against his chest. His body was folded at the waist so his knees and shoulders were on the rug. Then his arms were brought around and bound to hold him tightly closed. Stanley had not gloated as he stood by to assist; handing Demetrie the leather restraints as he requested them, holding Sev in position when the buckles were pulled tight and secured. Yet Stanley was not entirely detached. Sev interpreted his reaction as a form of pity, and that in and of itself was humiliating.

Sev remained in this excruciating position—unmoving—for well over an hour while Demetrie finished his work. And Sev silently thanked him for the

correction. It meant that Demetrie saw value in his discipline, whereas he could have easily just cast him aside. It meant that Demetrie wanted him to succeed, to be worthy of punishment for even small infractions so that he could be better in the future. It meant, to Sev, that *he mattered*.

It was well into the evening when Demetrie called for his supper. He ate at his desk, continuing to write letters, seal envelopes, shuffle papers. Sev was unbound at this point and given a piece of cold chicken and some greens to eat. It was not the feast that the Count enjoyed, but any meal for Sev was a banquet. His body was stiff from being held in the same contortion for so long, but he would not complain. Demetrie was a very kind Master—Sev doubted if other slaves being punished would even be allowed to eat.

When Demetrie was finally finished working for the evening, Stanley came to get Sev, taking him for a quick shower and giving him a clean tunic to wear. Sev was then shown to a bedroom that would be his own for those times when the Count preferred privacy, or was not otherwise in need of him. The room was very small, only having enough space for a bed and an armoire where Sev would store the garments he was provided. The bed was narrow, comfortable for one, and covered with simple, white linens with a small rug on the floor below. There were no windows but two doors; one that led to the hallway, and one that attached to the Count's room. A small bell hung near the door that Sev was told would ring should the Count decide he wanted him. Sev hoped he would be able to hear it in his sleep if Demetrie rang late at night.

He was then led into the Count's room via the main hallway. Stanley knocked at the Count's door, frowning at Sev and staring at the imperfect left side of his face. The Count had instructed that Sev should have his bangs secured to remain out of his face as much as possible. Although he hated showing his defects—and assumed others hated seeing them—it was Demetrie's decision.

“Come,” Demetrie's voice called from within the room.

Stanley opened the door and gestured Sev inside, closing the door behind him.

Sev began to drop to his knees but Demetrie stopped him. “Go to the bed.”

Sev walked to the bed, but wasn't certain if he should climb on or simply wait beside it, so he chose the latter, only scrambling into the center of the mattress when Demetrie jerked his head to indicate that was where he wanted him.

Demetrie wore a long robe, fresh from his own shower or bath. His hair was damp, and Sev could smell the clean scent of him as he dimmed the lamp near the bed, then removed his robe.

Although he didn't realize it until he saw Demetrie raise his eyebrow, Sev made a small whimper of approval when he saw the Count's naked body. He was a warrior—his shoulders wide, tapering to slim hips. His figure was sculpted and broadly muscled, indicating that his enviable genes were supplemented by regular exercise, if not medically enhanced. His torso, forearms, and legs were generously—but not superfluously—dusted with silky black hair.

Demetrie settled into the mattress, lying back into the pillows as Sev tried to remain kneeling beside him. His warm hand began to make slow circles on Sev's knee. “How are you feeling, Sev?”

“Sir, very fortunate... but... I am confused by your regard for me.”

“Oh?” Demetrie's eyebrows rose, but he didn't look up at Sev's face. He simply continued to watch his own hand play over Sev's skin.

“Sir, I am a dreg... you shouldn't want to trouble or soil yourself by touching me...”

Sev took a sharp smack to the side of the face that sent him toppling and left his ears ringing. He cowered, immediately going to his knees and pressing his forehead to the mattress in supplication.

Demetrie's fingers carded his hair, but he did not raise his voice, “Do not presume to tell me what I should and should not do. Is that clear?”

Sev nodded, rubbing his face against the mattress as tears stung his eyes.

Demetrie slid his fingers under Sev's chin, raising his face so that he could see his flushed cheeks and the tears that flowed down over them. "Why are you crying?" he asked with mild amusement.

"Sir... I... I have disappointed you. I wish not to disappoint you. I want to behave as a good slave would, but... I have known all my life that I was not worthy of the title. I *am* not worthy of the title."

"Sev, did you not see the slave auction?"

"Yes, I did Sir." Sev bobbed his head, his chin still cupped in Demetrie's warm hand.

"Describe one slave to me—only one."

Sev opened his eyes, blinking. "Sir? I don't understand..."

"Tell me which slave caught your eye. Tell me which slave you would like to be—which one you would like to *have* if you were someone worthy of choosing."

Sev's face pulled into a frown and his brow furrowed in frustration. Finally he said, "Sir, again, I disappoint you, because they were all so lovely, I could not remember just one."

Demetrie's hand moved to his cheek, stroking it. "You do not disappoint me, Sev. That is the reason why I chose to bring you home. All of them look alike to me... not a memorable face in the lot. But you, Sev... you intrigue me. Come, let me see you."

Sev gnawed his lower lip, but crawled forward so his face was close to Demetrie's.

Demetrie clasped the back of his head and pulled him down, running his tongue up Sev's cheek and licking away his tears. "I was right." He turned his head and whispered against Sev's ear, "You are lovely when you cry... and your tears are delicious."

He nipped Sev's ear lightly, moving his hands to Sev's shoulders. "Take off your tunic, find the belt from my robe, then straddle my waist—facing my feet."

Sev did as instructed, aware that he was trembling, but not from fear.

“Hands behind your back—grasp your elbows.”

Again Sev complied, his heart beating harder in his chest and blood rushing to fill his loins.

Demetrie wrapped the silky sash around Sev’s wrists, leaving it loose at first. But as he finished his slow, methodical swaddling, Demetrie jerked the smooth material tightly and bound his new pet. “Turn around.”

Sev stood up and turned, settling himself back down astride Demetrie’s midsection. His cheeks were flushed and his breathing was heavy; and despite his best efforts, his cock was pointing skyward.

Demetrie smiled. “Lovely,” he said, and reached up to roll Sev’s nipples between his fingers.

Sev’s hips gave an involuntary jerk when Demetrie pinched them, and a bead of precome swelled from his unsheathed tip. He closed his eyes, his teeth pressing into his bottom lip. “S-sorry, Sir... I...”

“Shhh...” Demetrie moved one hand to Sev’s lips, caressing them with two fingers. Sev opened his mouth and let them come inside.

Demetrie moved his fingers in and out, occasionally smearing Sev’s lips with saliva. With his other hand he reached into the nightstand and pulled out a tube of lubricant.

Sev’s eyes flashed as Demetrie flipped the top with his thumb and worked the opening so he could squeeze a few crystalline drops into his hand. He moved it around behind Sev and slicked up his own penis. “I want you to fuck yourself on my cock, Sev. Now.”

Sev sucked in a sharp breath, his eyes glazing over. He let Demetrie’s fingers slip from his mouth as he rose up in a crouch, rocking back until he was hovering over Demetrie’s cock.

Demetrie held himself at the base, watching Sev’s face as he moved into position. He shifted until the head pressed against his pinched star, then Sev

bore down, contorting his face through the bliss and agony of impaling himself on the Count's steely shaft.

"Fuck!" Demetrie cried out, trying to catch his breath. He looked down as if he didn't believe he was completely inside, though Sev could attest to the strain as Demetrie filled him completely. After resting a moment to adjust to the pressure, Sev began to rock his hips, and Demetrie's eyes rolled up into his head.

The pain was incredible for Sev; Demetrie was much larger than he'd ever had, but he wanted to please him, and if Demetrie's pleasure came from his pain, then so be it. Demetrie's firm crown pushed deeper each time he moved, sending shockwaves through Sev that radiated from his insides and left him hanging on the sharp crest of impending orgasm. His own cock throbbed against his groin, bobbing as he pistoned up and down while the length of his channel gripped and squeezed Demetrie with each rise and fall. He'd never felt so full and knew he'd be sore the next day, but it was worth it to see Demetrie's face and hear the low sounds of pleasure that Sev was bringing out of him.

Demetrie rested his hands on Sev's slim hips, guiding; helping him to keep a rhythm. But then something in the Count's features shifted, and his expression changed from one of desire, to that of dominance.

Sev yelped in surprise as Demetrie pulled him off his cock and pushed him onto his back on the bed. Before he could get his bearings, Demetrie grabbed Sev's ankles and bent him in half with his ass in the air, then he slammed inside.

The hurt was shocking and intense but Sev endured, choking back his sobs as he struggled to accommodate Demetrie's punishing thrusts. A shudder went through Demetrie's body as Sev involuntarily clamped down around him, his body fighting against the sudden and violent invasion. Demetrie pulled out so that only the tip was nestled inside the constricting ring of Sev's anus, then he speared through him, releasing Sev's ankles to grab his pelvis for more leverage.

For a moment, Sev was certain he would die. He'd never known such pain before, and he believed that Demetrie meant to split him wide open. The angle of Demetrie's penetration was so deep, Sev could feel it in his stomach, and each pound against the gland inside made his own cock ache and his balls swell with sperm. It was a truly ecstatic torment; the irony of suffering and orgasm blending until Sev didn't know where one sensation ended and the other began. When he felt the thrusting becoming more erratic, he knew that Demetrie was going to shoot his load and the sensation pushed Sev to his own climax. He cried out, spurting white ribbons of ejaculate against his neck.

After seeing Sev cover himself with his own come, Demetrie roared through his own orgasm. The sensation started low in his spine, pulling his muscles so tightly that his toes curled and he nearly forgot to breathe. Demetrie's body twitched with spasms long after he'd emptied his balls. With a grunt, Demetrie managed to drop back onto the bed, and rolled to his back to catch his breath.

Sev was afraid to move; Demetrie had filled his insides with come, and as soon as Sev's ass became reacquainted with gravity, that evidence would be all over the bed sheets. Sev didn't mind being punished for such a thing, but he didn't want to make a mess and upset Demetrie. Sooner or later his novelty would wear off for the young Count, and he definitely wanted it to be *later*.

"Here."

Sev tensed briefly when he felt a towel pressed against his backside. Grateful, he bent his knees to hold it in place and rolled until he was kneeling upright on the bed.

Demetrie tugged at his elbow, coaxing Sev to move around so that he could untie his arms. For a moment after the bindings came off, he rubbed Sev's back in a gesture that felt like kindness, before he rolled over and went to sleep without a word.

Sev watched him, examining the long line of his body, the curve of his muscular buttocks. He wanted to curl up in the hollow of Demetrie's spine, he wanted to thank him for his attention, even if it was purely as a vessel for his pleasure. But his interpretation of the rules that Stanley had given him told him

that when Demetrie slept, Sev slept below. He crawled carefully off the bed so as not to disturb Demetrie, keeping the towel pressed against him, and settled into his cushion on the floor. Exhausted, aching, yet still almost sated, Sev closed his eyes and drifted to sleep.

CHAPTER 4

The next morning, Stanley took Sev to shower. He gave him a tube of ointment to rub on any injuries “*down there*” and brought him a new tunic, a pair of short leggings, and some soft slippers for his feet. It felt strange wearing something that covered his toes, so he decided to leave the shoes behind. The rest of his outfit was simple, casual, and—strangely—it made him feel as though he were at home. The servants were all dressed in uniform, but Sev was dressed like someone who belonged to the leisure class; the lazy, grown child of a wealthy man. Still, it was confusing to him; if he was being kept for entertainment purposes, it would seem that Demetrie would be far more entertained by the sight of him with a lot less clothing.

At roughly ten o'clock, Sev was collected by Stanley from his lone musings in his small bedroom and taken downstairs to have breakfast in the kitchen while the Count's morning meal was prepared.

Excluding Stanley, there were three servants in the kitchen—all but one appeared to be Freedmen. There was a large, red-faced woman quite a bit older than Stanley, called Gerta; she was the cook. A much narrower woman, Mary, was a few years younger than Gerta but seemed ancient because of her graying hair and pinched face. The last was a young man in his late-twenties or early-thirties that also helped in the kitchen, though he seemed to handle the more menial tasks like dish-washing, heavy lifting, and generally banging things around. From his age and station, he was possibly a labor slave. Sev wasn't certain if the thick bracelet on his wrist indicated his status as such. While he knew a little bit about slaves, he'd never really been in a position to meet many. Those he might have come across during his late-night burglaries back in Nissim were sleeping or otherwise went largely unnoticed to him, except on the rare occasions they served as a threat to discovery. That was what had happened on his last job with Phineas. Sev had been dangling like a spider on a thin line, high above the exotic plants in the home's conservatory, when a couple of male slaves had wandered in for a late-night tryst. In the heat of passion, one had thrown his head back and opened his eyes. Sev had actually

felt strangely sorry for them because it meant admitting to their Master that they were not sleeping as they should have been, and had probably resulted in some painful punishment.

The younger laborer was neither particularly handsome nor particularly unattractive. He was sturdily built, but his face seemed set with a permanent scowl, and his forehead sloped low, his eyebrows too dark for his brassy yellow hair. He watched Sev enter the kitchen with a mix of curiosity and disdain.

“What the hell is this, Stanley?” Gerta snapped when he entered with Sev.

“The Count has found himself a temporary diversion. Just feed it, and ignore it otherwise, because soon it will be gone.”

Sev wasn't bothered by Stanley's use of the pronoun; dregs *were* “its” because they weren't often regarded as people, if they were regarded at all.

“What's wrong with it? Why is the face all like that? Is it blind?” the man asked.

Stanley sighed, “No, Laurence; the Count seems to think of the deformity as some sort of *enhancement*. Apparently the dreg has acrobatic skills that the Count finds intriguing for the moment.” Stanley jerked his chin at Sev. “Go ahead, show them something.”

Sev looked around at the impatient yet inquisitive faces around him. He set his hands on a stool near the table where they were preparing breakfast, then braced himself by locking his elbows into his chest and did a handstand. Mary opened her mouth, seemingly already impressed, then Sev arched his back, placing his feet on his own shoulders and lifted himself on one arm while stretching the other one out to the side. Gerta gasped and Laurence grinned, the gleam in his eye showing that he understood Sev's obvious appeal. Mary clasped her hands to her chest and appeared to be praying, her face white like a ghost.

“Alright, that's enough,” Stanley told Sev.

Sev gave himself a little push-off with his hand and flipped over, landing on his bare feet on the rough stone floor.

“It’s unnatural.” Mary shook her head, her gray-streaked ringlets bouncing.

“I’ll say.” Laurence licked his lips.

“Just feed the Count’s new toy and send him off when the Count is ready. I have things to do.”

For once, Sev was not happy to see Stanley go. He wished he had his hood or at least the ability to hide behind his bangs but, once again, Stanley had been told to secure them, pinning them back with a few hairpins. It was the compromise for not having them cut off.

“Well, sit down then,” Gerta sighed. “Mary, get some oats and I think we have a few sausages that are about ready to turn.”

Mary eyed Sev uncomfortably but went to make up something for him to eat.

“You a gypsy?” Laurence asked, leaning on the table across from Sev.

Sev’s stomach fluttered, perking up at the nostalgia experienced by the connotation. “I used to travel with them,” he admitted. He wasn’t a gypsy by birth, even though the tribes had considered him one of their own.

“Circus?”

Sev offered a slight nod, uncertain where Laurence was headed. But Gerta interjected before he could find out.

“Bah—thieves the lot of them. Between circus gypsies and dregs, I don’t know what’s worse.”

“Someone that’s all of that, I suppose,” Sev muttered, seeing no point in pursuing his defense.

Gerta grunted and Mary returned with Sev’s food, pushing it across the rough wooden table using a spatula. The others frowned at her.

“It’s unnatural is what it is—a devil. Mark my words.” Mary crossed herself and moved away, refusing to turn her back on Sev completely.

“Seems to have some sort of temptation to offer somebody,” Gerta grumbled, cuffing Laurence on the back of the head, “Get to work cutting

those fillets. When you're finished with that, there's stuff we need from the cellar."

Laurence rubbed his scalp, still leering at Sev, and wandered out of the kitchen.

"I'll be keeping an eye on you, gypsy," Gerta said to Sev. Her meaty fists rested on her ample hips. "Anything comes up missing, you'll be the first suspect."

"I always am." Sev shrugged, not feeling particularly gracious at this point. The hard stool on his sore bottom wasn't helping his mood any. He finally resorted to squatting as he finished a few bites of the gooey oats and ignored the sausage completely. Surprisingly, Gerta didn't remark. She just gathered up the dishes once Sev appeared to be finished and scraped the leftovers into the trash.

The Count was sitting outside on the veranda, sipping his coffee and reading a newspaper when Sev found him. He approached tentatively and knelt a few feet to the right of his chair.

"Come, Sev. Sit up here," Demetrie said, patting the chair beside him without taking his eyes off of his reading.

Sev stood up and padded over, keeping his head low, then he sat down in the chair next to Demetrie, pulling his knees into his chest.

Demetrie glanced down at him briefly, then back at his paper as he held it up to fold it. "Where are your shoes, Sev?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Sir... I forgot them... I am not used to wearing shoes, but I will if that's what Sir requires."

Demetrie looked down at Sev's feet. "No. Normally I might punish you, but as long as you promise to wear them the next time I tell you to, I will allow this mistake."

Sev was almost disappointed that he wouldn't be getting another lashing, but they'd already established that to him it wasn't a punishment.

“Sir, thank you for the very fine clothing.” Sev knew he was speaking out of turn, but wanted Demetrie to know that he appreciated the gesture.

Demetrie set down the newspaper on the table and looked at Sev. “You’re welcome. Are you hurting from last night?”

“Sir, I am happy that my body could please you...”

“That’s not what I asked.” Demetrie’s voice lowered almost imperceptibly.

Sev pursed his lips. “It does hurt a little, Sir.” He perked his head up with a smile. “But I don’t mind it much.”

Demetrie stroked Sev’s head. “You’re an odd lad, Seven.”

Sev sighed, his shy smile becoming more natural. “Sir, I thought that’s why you chose me.” He was surprised to hear Demetrie laugh.

“Indeed it is.”

This morning the Count was wearing loose-fitting charcoal lounge pants, a narrow-ribbed, white tank top, and his black satin robe draped casually over his shoulders. He reached into the pocket of the robe and brought out a familiar deck of cards.

“Tell me Sev, how many cards are in this deck?”

Sev watched Demetrie place them on the table. “Sixty, Sir. I don’t think it’s a standard deck.”

“Very good. And of this sixty, how many are jokers?”

“Fifty, Sir.”

Demetrie raised an eyebrow. “So there are ten cards which are not jokers.”

“Correct, Sir.”

“How did Phineas know which ones were one of the ten?”

“The pattern on the back, Sir.”

“Show me.” Demetrie handed Sev the cards, and he sorted through them, pulling two out and showing Demetrie. One was a joker and one was the three of spades.

Sev flipped them over on the table and indicated the star design in the center. “Here, the star on the three has a shorter spoke on the bottom. When they’re being shuffled, that’s where the dealer’s thumb rests.”

Demetrie peered at the two cards and nodded. “Of course. When you point it out, I can see the difference. Interesting. Tell me Sev, what do these cards represent to you?” He picked up the deck and began shuffling.

“They used to represent failure, Sir,” Sev said honestly.

“Failure?”

“Phineas won me by swindling the gypsies with these cards, Sir.”

“Swindling the gypsies?” Demetrie balked, “But gypsies are thieves...”

“Sir, thieves, yes—but honest thieves. Those who have lost to a gypsy know they have lost something. If they’d been wise, they would never have lost it in the first place. A gypsy can’t steal a wallet unless he knows where it’s being kept, and a man keeping his wallet displayed is chancing fate. Just like a gypsy fortune-teller won’t lie unless she’s paid to. These are things most people are aware of, but choose to ignore out of arrogance, not ignorance.”

Sev worried that he’d babbled too much but Demetrie offered a small incline of his head.

“You said these cards used to represent failure... what do they represent now?”

Sev’s cheeks reddened and he bowed his head. “Sir, forgive me for not knowing my place. Now these cards represent hope.” He tensed, wondering if he’d receive a blow or an insult.

But Demetrie simply sat back in his chaise and said, “I see.” He stopped shuffling the cards and laid them on the table once more. “Sixty cards; ten of which are playable cards. We’ll cut the deck in half to thirty.” Demetrie fingered the cards, counting out thirty, then put the rest back into his pocket. “One card for every day you will stay at my request. Each day you will draw a card. If it is anything but a Joker, you may request something from me or ask me a question. However, I may deny either and you only get one opportunity.

Additionally, if you don't use the chance you have been given immediately, it must be forfeited. How does that sound to you Sev?"

Sev lifted his face slightly, offering a coy smile. "Sir, I mean no disrespect when say that you swindle like a gypsy."

Demetrie laughed once more and ruffled Sev's soft hair. "Each time you draw a Joker, you are to bring it to me in private and I will decide what it is that I shall have you do."

"Yes, Sir."

Demetrie tapped the pile. "Draw."

Sev drew the top card and turned it over; it was the six of hearts.

"It seems luck is on your side today, Sev." Demetrie smiled coolly.

Sev stared at the card, considering what he might ask of him. Finally he said, "Sir, I would like to ask if I am behaving as you would wish of me... if I am pleasing to Sir?"

Demetrie's brow furrowed slightly as he raised his eyebrows. "You wish to waste one of your few questions on knowing whether or not you are pleasing to me?"

Sev nodded, his expression somber. "Yes, Sir. It is important to me."

"What if I were to say no?"

Sev lowered his eyes, shrinking down in his chair. "Then I would feel ashamed, but try harder."

Demetrie sighed and touched the young man's cheek, encouraging him to lift his face. "You are pleasing to me. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't try harder."

Sev smiled, accepting the compliment for what it was; a confirmation that he was good enough and Demetrie would give him a chance to be even better.

"Tell me about your name. Why were you named *Seven*?"

“I was the seventh child born in the brothel, and the only one that lived. My mother didn’t believe in abortion, so she gave me to the gypsy midwife. The name seemed good enough at the time, I guess, so it stuck, Sir.”

Demetrie nodded. “When did Phineas take you from the gypsies?”

“Sir, he arrived when I was sixteen. He took me about a month later.”

“You stayed with him for protection.” Demetrie nodded. He sat back, looking out into the open garden. “And what did you give him in return?”

Sev fidgeted, bowing his head. “My talents, Sir—as an acrobat and a thief. Once we fled to Athena, he used my body to secure us lodging, and my dancing paid for our room and board.” He was met with silence, and was certain the Count was having second thoughts about touching such a soiled body. When he lifted his face, Demetrie’s eyes met his own, and Sev felt shame heating his cheeks. He tried to look away, but Demetrie took hold of Sev’s hand, turning it palm-up.

“I should like to use some of your talents as well, Sev.” Demetrie ran his tongue over Sev’s open hand, then curled the boy’s fingers closed over the moist heat left behind.

Sev shivered even as his body warmed with arousal. “Anything, Sir.”

Demetrie leaned back in his chair and patted his lap.

Sev understood the silent command and moved forward, straddling Demetrie’s thighs.

“We’ll have to get you some new clothing, Sev,” Demetrie said, almost conversationally, while he lifted the hem of Sev’s tunic and reached down the front of his leggings, fishing out his already hardening cock. He ran his thumb around the ridge of Sev’s foreskin, where it opened over the sensitive glans. “What an exotic toy,” Demetrie mused and rolled the skin back, pressing his thumb against the exposed cleft and squeezing out a glistening bead of precome.

Sev’s face contorted with both shame and arousal. He pressed his teeth against his lower lip, and fought to keep his burning eyes from closing as Demetrie slid his hand up and down his shaft.

“You like this, Sev,” Demetrie told him rather than asking, but Sev nodded his head emphatically, his hands gripping the arms of the chair as he drew closer to orgasm.

“B-but Sir... Your clothes...”

Demetrie stopped, creating a tight ring around the base of Sev’s cock with his thumb and middle finger. “You are worried about soiling my clothing?”

Sev nodded his head.

“Do you want me to stop?” He gave a few squeezes with his fingers and Sev shook his head frantically. “N-no.”

Demetrie curled his fist around Sev’s straining erection and began to pump once more. “What do you want Sev? Tell me what you want.”

Sev’s eyes squeezed shut as they rolled up into his head. “Please S-Sir... I want to come!”

Demetrie chuckled softly. “You want to soil my clothing with your wasted seed?”

The phrasing of the question was unexpected, and Sev gasped, panic flooding in with his arousal. The combination pushed him over the fragile edge of restraint. “Yes!” He yelped as Demetrie brought him to orgasm with his hand. Sev’s come spurted out, streaking pearly lines over Demetrie’s white shirt and dribbling over his fist to stain his dark pants.

“I—” Sev gasped through his aftershocks, embarrassed and afraid for what he’d done to Demetrie’s clothing.

Demetrie chuckled again and wiped his hand on a cloth napkin, using the same to dab up what was left on Sev’s cock.

Sev shivered as the rough square of fabric rasped his over-sensitive nerve endings. “S-Sir...”

Demetrie handed Sev the napkin. “Clean it up.”

Sev slid off of Demetrie’s lap, settling between his knees as he dabbed up the cooling globs of his ejaculate. He noticed that Demetrie was hard and raised his eyes. “Sir—shall I attend you?”

Demetrie reached down and adjusted himself behind his fly. “Not now, Sev. I want you to take that napkin and wash it in the bathroom sink; wash it well, and leave it in your room to dry. Then clean yourself up and meet me downstairs. We are going to buy you some new clothing.”

Sev had done just as Demetrie had told him, avoiding Stanley’s frown and his attempt to take the napkin to have it *properly laundered* with the rest of the linens. Sev washed the white square of material very carefully, as if it were made of silk rather than coarse cotton, then he took it into his room and hung it neatly over his metal headboard to dry.

After Sev finished cleaning himself up, he headed back downstairs, where Stanley directed him to a large room at the front of the house.

This room was done in shades of pale blue, with large windows on one side. It seemed to be some kind of lounge or sitting room, but there was a large upholstered folding screen to one side that seemed out of place.

“There he is,” Demetrie said, turning from a conversation he was having with another man in the room. The man was older; small, balding, and red-faced. His tiny blue eyes looked like glass marbles pushed into his puffy pink cheeks, but they opened surprisingly wide when he saw Sev. Sev was distracted by some movement to the far left of the men where two very statuesque blonde women stood wearing only flesh-tone undergarments. Another, much less attractive female stood with them, dressed in a plain beige dress, with a tape-measure around her neck. Sev guessed she was a labor slave judging by her simple appearance and chemically-altered blonde hair.

Demetrie’s voice drew Sev’s attention back to him. “Talbot, this is Seven. Sev, this is Mr. Talbot. He is my clothing designer.”

“Oh my! When you told me to bring the lady’s mannequins I assumed you were entertaining a young woman!” Mr. Talbot’s voice made everything he said sound like an exclamation. The man grinned, his very small white teeth lined up perfectly like two strings of beads between his thin lips.

Talbot's expression seemed more predatory than polite to Sev, and Sev looked away again to the two "mannequins". The women were alternating their uncomfortable glances between Sev and Demetrie. When one made accidental eye contact with Sev, she looked away with a shudder, apparently unnerved by his strange appearance.

"I think a modification of some of the styles you offer women would be more appropriate for a body like Sev's." Demetrie smiled at Sev, and he felt himself relaxing under the Count's commanding gaze.

Sev had worried at first that the mannequins were there for sexual activity. It had made him a little uncomfortable to consider that not only might Demetrie be more satisfied by their female bodies, but that Sev might be asked to perform with one or both of them. He would do whatever Demetrie asked of him, but his lack of enthusiasm would be obvious.

For his part, Demetrie seemed not to notice the beautiful semi-nude women as he looked through a catalogue of clothing options being offered to him by Talbot.

"Oh yes, I do agree." Talbot swallowed hard, as if his mouth was too full of saliva when he gazed at Sev. "He would look *lovely* in jewel-tones."

"White," Demetrie clarified. "Everything you make for Sev must be in white."

"Indeed... and very soft. I know just what you're after." Talbot snapped his fingers and the two mannequins stood rigidly waiting for his orders.

"Jessica, number A-five-oh-one-two-eight! Sasha, number H-nine-nine-six-two-five!" The two models scampered off like frightened gazelles through a door at the back of the room. "Monique." Talbot gestured to the bland girl. "Measure."

Sev flinched as the girl was suddenly behind him, pulling the tape measure taut. Close up he realized that she was much older than she'd seemed at first, her forehead creased by long, horizontal lines.

"What's wrong with your face?" she asked Sev quietly as she began to pose his body so she could measure him.

“A witch’s curse,” Sev lied, annoyed by her lofty demeanor towards him. She was apparently another slave who had worked hard to earn her position and resented him for being invited into her world.

“What are you?” Monique practically sneered. “A dreg whore?”

Sev bristled at the fact that such an inferior slave was exhibiting an attitude of superiority over him. “Why, wanna buy me?” He glared at her.

“You’ll be even more worthless than you are now once the Count has had his way with you.” She roughly spread Sev’s feet apart by kicking his ankles.

Sev refrained from responding to her baiting. As a dreg he was the lowest life-form, even below that of a dog. He wouldn’t risk his opportunity to play slave with Demetrie just to fight a losing battle against someone else’s property, so he remained quiet and watched the mannequins emerge one after the other from behind the screen.

The first one was wearing a long blue satin skirt that settled low on her hips. The material was held together only by two very large gold rings, leaving her legs bare on either side all the way up. On top she wore a halter that laced up the back and left her midriff bare. The other woman wore thigh-high red socks with tiny, low-rise shorts, similar to what Demetrie had made Sev wear to his study. Her shirt was long-sleeved and of a very soft yellow furry material but rode up to sit just under her breasts.

Demetrie approached the two women, looking them over as if appraising furniture.

“This one.” He tugged the skirt. “And this,” he said flicking the halter. His eyes met the mannequin’s as she gasped in surprise. “But with this fabric.” He moved to the other woman, touching the sleeve of her soft shirt. “And those.” He indicated her hosiery. “All in white.”

“Of course!” Talbot smiled broadly. “He will certainly look lovely, indeed!”

“What do you think, Sev?” Demetrie asked him.

Sev felt all eyes upon him, and looked down at the floor. “If it is pleasing to you, Master, then I am honored to wear such fine clothes.”

“Wonderful!” Talbot clapped with glee. “When would you like it all?”

“These, and the other one we discussed, by Friday. The rest of the pieces by no later than next Tuesday.”

“Of course, Your Lordship!” Talbot’s face was so pink, Sev thought he looked like his head was going to pop.

“Monique, you have the measurements?”

“Yes, Master Talbot,” the plain slave said, stepping away from Sev.

“Wonderful! Then we shall be on our way!”

The doors opened from outside, and Laurence came in, waggling his eyebrows at the mannequins, who paid him no mind. He hefted up their portable screen and began carrying it outside.

Sev startled as broad arms wrapped tightly around him from behind and Demetrie nipped at his ear. “Is something the matter, Sev?”

He melted into the Count’s strong body. “Master... Sir... I...”

“Let’s discuss this after I see my guest out.” Demetrie reached up and pinched one of Sev’s nipples through his tunic then released him, following the progression of visitors out into the hall.

Sev stood alone in the room, trying to find reasoning in his thoughts. By the time Demetrie returned a few minutes later, he still had no answers.

“Now then, what is it, Sev?” Demetrie asked, raising Sev’s chin with his fingers.

“Sir,” Sev began, looking up into Demetrie’s face, “would you prefer me to be a girl?”

“What?” Demetrie laughed. “Sev, if I’d wanted a girl, I could have had twenty, and if I’d wanted any other boy, I could have had at least as many. I wanted—and now I have—you.”

Sev lowered his eyes, blushing softly at the compliment. “Forgive me, Sir... it is all so strange to me.”

“Do you hate it, Sev?” Demetrie asked him seriously.

Sev shook his head quickly. “Oh no! No, no, not at all, Sir!”

“Good. Then you will wear what I tell you to wear, knowing that you are doing so because it pleases me.”

“Of course, Sir.” Sev lowered his gaze, ashamed for jumping to any unfounded conclusions.

“Shall I punish you, Sev, for doubting my motives?” Demetrie asked him softly.

“I think it would be best, Sir,” Sev answered, just as softly. His heart beat in his chest as he thought about the possible punishment he might receive.

Demetrie looked him over thoughtfully for a moment. “Very well then. Go to your room and kneel while you wait for me. I will come for you in ten minutes.”

“Sir, thank you, Sir.” Sev bowed his head and left the room, looking only ahead towards his destination as his mind continued its crazy spiral.

Sev knelt on the floor of his room, trying not to think about how uncomfortable the hard surface felt on his knees. He wasn't certain how long he'd been waiting until Demetrie opened his door from the one connecting their two rooms, but Demetrie had told him ten minutes, and so he believed him.

“Stand up, Sev, and come here,” Demetrie said, his body filling up the doorway.

Sev rose to his feet and walked towards Demetrie, stopping roughly a foot away from him.

“Turn around.”

Swallowing down the bitter taste in his mouth, Sev turned his back to Demetrie. He tensed when a blindfold was brought down over his eyes, masking out his world.

“Because you lacked trust in my motives, for the rest of the day you will be forced to trust me completely. Turn around Sev.”

Sev turned towards Demetrie once more.

“Follow my voice. Walk six paces forward, and then stop.”

Sev did not hesitate, but did as he was told, walking exactly six paces forward towards the sound of Demetrie’s voice, and then stopping. He knew they were in Demetrie’s room, and was trying to remember the layout to avoid banging into something.

“I want you to pour me a glass of water, Sev. If you spill a drop, you will be punished, but if you listen to my words—and follow my instructions exactly, that won’t be an issue. Now, turn to your left and walk three paces. You will feel the edge of the table against your hips.”

Again, Sev followed Demetrie’s instructions, feeling the table brush against him just as Demetrie said it would. From that point until the glass was safely in Demetrie’s hands, Sev focused on every instruction he’d been given and had behaved as a perfect myrmidon.

For the rest of the day, Sev was guided only by Demetrie’s voice, doing everything exactly as he was told, from pouring and serving water, to tending the fire, to cutting up his own meal at dinner. Never once did Demetrie mislead him or cause him to stumble in any way. Unfortunately, Sev had at one point anticipated an instruction before it was given. This had caused him to misjudge the staircase and he’d ended up with carpet-burns on his knees and elbows from falling forward onto the steps. But by the end of the day, Sev had built a strong wall of trust around the man who now—for a while at least—would control every aspect of his life.

“Come to my voice, Sev. Three paces, then stop.”

Demetrie had taken Sev into the bathroom, and the boy winced as a burning antiseptic was applied to his raw layers of damaged skin.

“There now, it hurts so you’ll remember. You’re just fortunate it wasn’t the fireplace.”

“Yes, Sir.” Sev said in a small voice.

Demetrie left him there, and since he hadn't given Sev any instructions, he stayed put. But soon he heard Demetrie calling to him from the bedroom. "Good boy, Sev. Turn around to my voice, walk ten paces, then stop."

Any time that Demetrie praised Sev, his heart felt like it was swelling in his chest. Sev carefully turned around, and counted out each step in his head, making certain not to vary his stride. Sev's breath caught as he sensed how close he was to Demetrie when he took his last step. His scent and the heat of his body filled Sev's awareness. Sev could hear the soft rustle of Demetrie's sleeve when he raised his arms to remove the blindfold, and the pounding of his own heart as his pulse quickened.

When the blindfold came off, Sev blinked several times, his eyes unaccustomed to even the dim light in the room. He was standing between Demetrie's knees as Demetrie sat on the side of the bed. There was a small fire—the one Sev had made earlier—burning in the fireplace adjacent to the bed, but otherwise the room was dark. Sev took a step back and dropped down to his knees. He pressed his forehead to the floor, "Thank you, Sir, for teaching me."

Sev could hear the smile in Demetrie's voice, "Come up here then, Sev, and show me what you've learned."

CHAPTER 5

Several days went by, with Sev falling more and more into a comfortable routine with Demetrie as his temporary Master. Sev performed well, or was punished, but in either case, he felt secure in the knowledge that, for the time being, he was a treasured item to the young Count. Sev dressed in the clothing that most pleased Demetrie; not so much feminine, but made with expensive, soft materials and cut in a way that showed off Sev's body without being lewd. Demetrie often treated Sev like a beautiful objet d'art, posing him in various contortions and leaving him on exhibit while he worked in his study. This was enjoyable for Sev, because it allowed him to perform for Demetrie, and his performances always ended with them having sex.

Each day, Sev drew another card from his partial deck, and each day since the first it had been a joker, which had introduced Sev to several new bondage techniques and sex games. Sometimes Demetrie was rough, sometimes almost tender, and soon Sev realized that his feelings for the aristocrat were going beyond that of a rented toy.

Sev had lived at the manor house for ten days when Demetrie met him after breakfast one morning with some news.

“Tonight, Sev, I will be attending a formal event with my mother. As you have no doubt heard talk, my father has passed not so long ago—three months to be exact. Tonight marks the official end of the mourning period. You will be coming and attending to me as my slave this evening, so you must address me as Master for the time being.”

Sev gaped, his mouth moving over a protest, but he remained silent, understanding that it was not a request nor up for debate. “Y-yes, Sir... Master.”

“Very good, Sev. My mother will be arriving here shortly. There is also a package for you in your bedroom. I want you to bring the package to me.”

“Yes, Master.” Sev got up from the chair and bowed, then quickly scampered off towards his room, his mind a whirlwind of questions and worries.

When he arrived he found a white box on his bed. It was roughly six inches square, and Sev gave it a little shake, but heard nothing more than the crinkle of paper inside.

Demetrie was still sitting on the veranda when Sev returned to him, but he’d turned his chair to face the door and watched Sev walking towards him. It was an affective experience for Sev and caused him to feel strangely self-conscious. He approached with his head down and offered the box to Demetrie, kneeling before him.

“Come closer, Sev.” Demetrie’s voice was husky, and Sev’s body warmed to it. He crawled forward on his knees, settling between Demetrie’s thighs.

“I want you to open it. It’s for you.”

Sev glanced briefly up at Demetrie, then opened the box with trembling hands. Inside was a wide white leather collar with a gold hoop riveted to the front.

Sev stared at it, understanding the symbolism—for a pleasure slave it meant that his Master took pride in his ownership; *if only he were worthy of being owned.*

Demetrie took the collar out of the box and reached around behind Sev, fastening it around his neck. “Too tight?”

Sev shook his head, unable to speak past the lump in his throat.

“Do you like it?”

Sev nodded emphatically.

“Then show me.” Demetrie unlaced the drawstring on his pants, and then undid the buttons.

Sev could tell he wasn’t wearing underwear. He set down the box and moved his hands to Demetrie’s fly, spreading it open and pulling out the Count’s stiffening cock.

Demetrie shifted in his seat and worked his sac out himself so that Sev could thank him appropriately.

Sev started by licking the delicate skin of Demetrie's scrotum; giving little sucking kisses that pulled the tender flesh taut. His hand stroked up and down Demetrie's hardening shaft as he carefully took one hard nut into his mouth, rolling it over his tongue.

"Yes... that's it..." Demetrie hissed, weaving his fingers through Sev's hair as he watched himself being pleased.

Sev continued to suck and lick Demetrie's balls as he pumped his cock almost leisurely. He brought his thumb to the tip, spreading the drop of precome that wept from the slit, and then stuck his thumb in his mouth, licking off the salty fluid. Sev raised his eyes to Demetrie's face, gratified to see his arousal there as well. He wondered how Demetrie would kiss, but it was something he would never know. Even pleasure slaves rarely were kissed on the lips by their Masters. There were apparently some intimacies that were sacred beyond sex.

Sev wet his lips and then wrapped them around Demetrie's glans, following the thick ridge with his tongue and pressing it into the salty opening. Fortunately, the lump in his throat had cleared, because Sev needed all the room he could to take Demetrie.

Demetrie held him in place for a few beats of his blood along his shaft, his hands pressing on the back of his head. Sev could feel him shudder with every flick of his tongue and twist of his lips. It wouldn't be long before Demetrie was spurting his thick come against the back of Sev's tongue. As Sev began to fellate him in earnest, Demetrie picked up on the rhythm and began thrusting his hips, lightly fucking Sev's eager mouth.

"Your Lordship, I—"

Sev heard Stanley's voice, and it startled him, causing him to jerk back for fear of embarrassing the Count, but Demetrie fisted his hands through Sev's hair and slammed him down hard over his cock. All Sev could do was blunt his teeth with his lips and try to keep his throat open as Demetrie pulled him

by his hair and ground Sev's face into his groin. He shuddered hard and emptied himself down Sev's battered throat.

Sev's eyes watered as he tried not to choke. When Demetrie finally pushed him away, Sev swallowed, tried to take a deep breath, and began to cough. He went prostrate before Demetrie, knowing he'd made another mistake, but he'd been concerned for Demetrie's reputation. It was one thing to believe he allowed a dreg to touch his noble body, it was quite another to witness evidence of it.

Sev wasn't certain how long he'd been kneeling with his face on the ground until someone nudged him under the ribs.

"Get up and stop sniveling, dreg," Stanley said. "We'll have to clean you up. The Count's mother will be here shortly."

When Stanley brought Sev to the bathroom, Demetrie was standing inside, shirtless and holding something in his hand.

Sev couldn't tell what the item was, and was afraid to be caught looking too closely. He quickly dropped to his knees.

"You may go now, Stanley. If the Countess arrives, show her and her attendant to the blue lounge."

"Yes, Sir."

Demetrie waited until Stanley left before he considered Sev. "Stand up and come here."

Sev was trying not to cry, but he could feel his nose start to sting and his eyes burned. "S-Sir... I am sorry, I—"

"Turn around, pull down your pants, and bend over, spreading yourself for me."

Sev's eyes quickly glanced at the item in Demetrie's hand, but still had no idea what he was holding. He bowed his head, his face flushing as he came to stand directly in front of Demetrie, then he turned and pulled down his stretchy

leggings, bending over and spreading his cheeks as instructed. He heard Demetrie utter a soft grunt.

“Have you applied the ointment?”

“N-no, Sir... It didn't hurt that badly.”

“I won't be able to use you if it doesn't heal properly.” Demetrie had been rough with him again the night before. It wasn't in response to anything Sev had done wrong, just an unfortunate accident caused by too much passion and too little lubricant. Demetrie moved away and retrieved something from the medicine cabinet. When he returned, Sev felt something very cold being sprayed on his raw hole. It smelled pungent and somewhat minty, but it felt soothing and lightly numbed the skin. He barely felt the ointment being spread until Demetrie inserted a finger inside. Just knowing he was being cared for by Demetrie personally, even so much as valuable property, made Sev's heart feel like it was going to burst.

“Better?” Demetrie asked, bending over him to murmur in his ear.

“Yes, Sir, thank you, Sir.” Sev's voice cracked with his gratitude.

Demetrie's finger remained inside Sev's ass not quite up to the second knuckle, and he thrust it lightly in and out. “I wish I had time to enjoy you... you look so delicious bending and spreading for me like this... but you must be punished for your lack of focus and discipline earlier. Don't you agree?”

“Yes, Sir,” Sev whimpered breathlessly, trying not to let himself become aroused because that wasn't what Demetrie wanted, despite his actions. *Focus. Discipline.* These were things Sev lacked, and things he must learn to please the man he would hope to call Master. Sev whimpered softly at the loss of Demetrie's finger.

“Stand up now and pull up your pants.”

Sev did as instructed, while Demetrie washed the ointment off of his hands in the sink. A moment later Sev felt his collar being removed and he let out a small whine.

“No,” Demetrie told him. “You will get it back, but you need to wear a different collar for discipline.” He slipped a heavy silver chain around Sev's

neck; the rattle of metal links through the ring jarred Sev's ears as it was tightened briefly.

"This is a choke collar. I demand your full attention at all times. You are to focus only on me, regardless of outside stimulation. If your attention begins to wander without my direction..." Demetrie gave a quick jerk to the chain for demonstration, and Sev gasped as the chain tightened and his air was briefly cut off before he was released.

Demetrie's shirt was hanging on the doorknob, and he retrieved it, pulling it on as he watched Sev. "Do you find me too harsh, Sev?"

Sev again shook his head, "No, Sir, you are right to punish me as you see fit. It was wrong of me to lose focus. Thank you for teaching me." Sev went to his knees, pressing his forehead against the cool tiles of the bathroom floor. He swallowed a sob of gratitude; Demetrie would not discipline something he had no concern for.

"Stand up, Sev. Straighten your clothes. It is time for us to meet with my mother."

Sev stood up and felt Demetrie's hand brush under his chin. He lifted his head obediently, his eyes sparkling with unshed tears.

Demetrie's dark gaze shifted between them, then to Sev's softly parted lips. He ran the pad of his thumb over them, "God, you're beautiful... Don't ever show that face to anyone but me, Sev... never."

Sev shook his head, his eyes remaining fixed on Demetrie's face.

Demetrie took in a shuddering breath. He reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a leather leash, clipping it to Sev's collar, then together they went down to meet the Countess.

The Countess was a harsh-looking woman, tall and rail-thin. Although only about Gerta's age, or so Sev assumed, she seemed to be fighting a losing battle for eternal youth.

Her face was white, enhanced by the powder she used to cover the lines in her forehead and the deep crevice between her brows, and her hair was unnaturally black. She wore heavy black eyeliner that offered her blue eyes a widened appearance like perpetual fright. Her thin lips were stained crimson and looked wet in contrast to her otherwise matte finish.

Beside the Countess stood her slave attendant. He was young, tanned, and blond. It struck Sev that he'd never seen anything but a blond slave—even labor slaves had their hair chemically lightened. Although Sev noticed all of this, he quickly returned his full attention to Demetrie, naturally inclining his head towards him as he kept his eyes downcast.

“Mother, how well you look.” Demetrie crossed to her, Sev’s leash still in hand, and he placed his large hands on her narrow shoulders, barely brushing her cheek with a dry kiss.

Her blond slave stared openly at Sev. Initially appearing startled by his strange appearance, the young slave now allowed his eyes to roam curiously over Sev’s lean, strong body.

“And what is this that you have?” The Countess scowled at Sev when Demetrie stepped back from her.

“This is my Seven.” Demetrie patted Sev’s head, resting his hand there and tugging his hair to give him the signal that he was allowed to move his focus for the purpose of introductions.

“Your *what*?” the Countess scoffed and transferred her glare to her son. Beside her, the blond slave giggled.

“He’s named after a very lucky number.” Demetrie smiled coolly at Sev. “Wouldn’t you agree, Sev?”

“Yes, my Master,” Sev said without hesitation or irony.

“Demetrie, if you’d wanted a dog, you should have gotten a four-legged purebred instead of this *mongrel*. There’s no telling what sort of diseases the thing has.” The Countess waved her hand dismissively, but the sharp edge of disapproval remained in her tone. She crossed the room and seated herself on the blue settee, her slave moving obediently and sitting beside her.

Demetrie followed and settled into the large wing-back chair across from the settee, and Sev knelt on the floor, sighing softly as Demetrie's big hand rested on his head.

"And for god's sake, Demetrie, at least get yourself a girl. Really, same-sex pleasure slaves are *unnatural*." The Countess's tight mouth formed into a half-smile as her slave nuzzled her neck.

Her slave's eyes were focused on Sev.

"You mean you were jealous that my father preferred Aubrey and Stanley to you."

Sev bit his cheek, trying not to react to the private information so casually disclosed between members of such an elite family.

The Countess's white cheeks mottled with red for a moment, but she quickly regained her composure, brushing off her slave's practiced affection. "What your father did and with whom was no longer my concern after I left."

"That was obvious," Demetrie said; Sev thought he saw the Countess flinch.

"Does your mongrel do any tricks?" The blond slave asked, seemingly oblivious to the tension in the room.

"Clayton, are you here as well? Still behaving as a proper slave should, I see," Demetrie mused and this time his mother's flinch was obvious.

"Clayton, know your place!" The Countess said shrilly, but her reprimand obviously carried no weight with her slave, who smiled in response.

"You see, Sev," Demetrie said, leaning down to speak softly in his ear. "My mother doesn't believe in discipline. That is why she lets her slave speak out of turn. That is why she was so willing to hand her misbehaving young son over to his authoritarian father..."

"Demetrie!" The Countess's voice grew louder, and her face twisted into a garish mask of anger, splotches of pink spread unevenly over her cheeks.

Demetrie sat back and smiled. "Forgive me, dear mother. You are right. It is not polite to speak so candidly about the dead."

The Countess smoothed out her navy blue silk dress and pressed her hand to the thick gold baubles at her throat, making certain she was fully composed before she spoke again. In the meantime, Clayton took her hand, stroking the back in a soothing manner; on his face was a sharp little smile.

Sev was doing his best to sit quietly and ignore any part of the conversation that was not in Demetrie's voice. He was beginning to know Demetrie's different tones, and the candid words of the young Count made Sev all the more interested in finding out about the man. It seemed he did not love his parents, and, from what Sev could tell, they had not particularly loved him.

Demetrie watched Sev carefully when Stanley and Mary came in to serve the small group some light snacks. All it took was a light jerk from the leash to tighten the collar and Sev quickly returned his full attention to his Master. Demetrie casually reached to the tray where he grabbed a cookie and broke off a piece, feeding it to Sev. He allowed Sev to taste his fingers for a moment before withdrawing his hand. Demetrie was finding his mother more irritating than usual and wanted nothing more than to spend time playing with his favorite toy.

The Countess rolled her eyes at their uncomfortably intimate gesture. "You *will* be fine with Clayton and I staying here tonight after the party?"

Demetrie looked at her as if he'd just remembered she was there. "If you don't have a problem with it. Will you be keeping Clayton with you, or should I have another room readied?"

"One is fine," The Countess said sharply. "Now if you don't mind, Demetrie, I have some personal matters to discuss with you before this evening. Send your pet for a walk with Clayton."

Demetrie grimaced briefly. "Haven't we had enough of these discussions already?" He rolled his eyes, "If we must." Demetrie leaned down and looked into Sev's face. "Go with Clayton. Do not disappoint me."

Sev shook his head, "Never again, Master."

Demetrie took off the leash and the choke collar and nodded to Sev as Clayton got up off the settee.

“Go out into the garden,” Demetrie directed them, and the two left the room.

Sev hadn't been outside other than on the veranda since his arrival, and he found the gardens to be almost magical. Everything was so green, and where it wasn't green it was bursting in bright reds or purples or whites. The foliage lent a hint of coolness to the otherwise warm summer breeze that played with the ends of Sev's shaggy-styled hair. A man had come in to trim Demetrie's hair earlier in the week and had also given Sev his first professional haircut—a far more flattering style than what Sev had previously achieved using the blunt, rusted shears borrowed from Phineas.

There were a couple of labor slaves grooming the high hedges when Sev and Clayton walked past. Clayton flirted openly with the younger of the two, but Sev shied away from their unabashed and curious stares.

“So how old are you?” Clayton asked Sev as they wandered down one of the gravel paths between flowerbeds.

“Eighteen.” Sev wasn't exactly certain, however—he was likely a little older, but since the only birthday celebrations he'd ever had were with the gypsies, and the day celebrated was the day they had taken him in—he'd been only casually marking the years that passed as he noticed them.

“You don't look it. You're still small and fragile looking.”

“I'm not fragile,” Sev retorted, though he realized it wasn't much of a comeback. There were things he'd wanted to say and likely things he would have done had he not been concerned about disappointing Demetrie.

“I didn't mean to insult you,” Clayton said, but the light dancing in his eyes belied his apology.

Still, Sev felt he had to give him the benefit of the doubt. Despite his time here, this was not his world, and the rules were very different as he'd already begun to learn.

Clayton's smile was not at all reassuring. "I think we should be friends; I can teach you how to be a real slave so that you can find a new Master..."

"I don't want a new Master." Sev inched away from Clayton, finding him suddenly uncomfortably close. "Besides, I'm not part of the slave class so no one would take me. When Master is tired of me, I will return to the ghetto with the other dregs." Admitting the truth out loud suddenly made it seem more real, and Sev found the prospect very depressing.

"How can I say this...?" Clayton pondered his phrasing aloud. "Athena tends to be *homogenous*."

Sev frowned. "I don't know that word."

"Well, you are obviously not from Athena... in fact, I might guess one of your parents was from Ishmay or someplace where they have olive skin, slanted eyes, and filthy minds."

Sev scowled. "So?"

"So, if someone reports you you'll be collected, sent away to a labor camp, killed, or whatever they do to keep the ethnic balance in the ghettos. The government of Athena cares for even the lowest of its residents, but they won't pay to keep other countries' mixed-up garbage. You're a mongrel. You'll have no home in Athena because you have no single ethnicity."

Sev was in no position to argue or question the accuracy of Clayton's statement. He didn't know much about Athena but had recognized that there were no children among the dregs, and certainly nobody who looked like him. He flinched when he realized that Clayton had inched up on him again.

"Let me help you, Seven... and you should help the Count. He's already considered a loose cannon, and many in the aristocracy don't like him. Count Demetrie needs to fit in, and to do that he can't have a mongrel dreg as a pet. He needs to take a good wife from Athena. That is what they are discussing, you know." Clayton placed a hand on Sev's shoulder, and Sev pulled away.

"That's none of my business." Sev stopped and leaned against a tree, suddenly feeling weak in the knees and like he might pass out. It had everything to do with what Clayton had told him, and all of it made logical

sense—*well, most of it*. “Why would you want to help me? What’s in it for you?”

Clayton’s smile was simpering; artificially sweet, and imbued with condescension, “Oh, Seven... your world is so different. I forget that you are not used to the kindness and civility of a higher caste.” His fingers feathered Sev’s hair gently, then moved to caress the birthmark on his face.

“Stop touching me.” Sev turned his head away. His voice trembled but not out of fear. He longed for the Count to treat him so kindly, but it was too selfish a desire.

Clayton sighed and stepped away. “I understand Seven. When you realize the truth, I will be here to comfort you. A slave’s comfort is truly only ever found in the arms of an equal... you, poor Seven, don’t even have as much.”

Sev shoved past him and went back towards the mansion. Demetrie might be angry with him for doing something other than what he’d been told, but rather than spend any more time with Clayton, Sev just wanted to be alone right now, in his own room, no matter how temporary of a place it might be. If the Count wanted to punish him he would welcome it; in his selfishness he would take as much as the Count could give him, and when it was over, he’d resign himself to whatever fate may come.

When Sev came out of the garden, fighting back tears and temper, Demetrie was standing on the veranda. Sev stopped and dropped to his knees, staring down at the concrete.

“Sev, is everything alright?” Demetrie’s voice was calm.

“It is as it should be, Master,” Sev mumbled. Demetrie was silent, and Sev finally lifted his face, looking up into his deep blue eyes.

“I’d like to spend some time with you before the event this evening.” Demetrie offered his hand to Sev and Sev grasped it, reveling quietly in its warm strength as Demetrie pulled him to his feet.

Sev decided to push everything out of his mind that Clayton had tried to put into it. He knew it was foolish to dwell on the limits of things rather than enjoy the experiences while they lasted.

They were in Demetrie's room; the Count was spread out in his big bed, leaning against the pillows, as Sev knelt between his legs, relishing the taste of him. He loved to hear the low purr of Demetrie's pleasure, occasionally augmented by an intake of breath or a deep moan as Sev feasted on his cock.

"Sev, come here," Demetrie told him after a few minutes.

Sev stopped what he was doing and crawled up to straddle his lap. Demetrie lifted him slightly, pinching one tight brown nipple as he took the other into his mouth, teasing it with his teeth. Sev shivered, bringing his hands to Demetrie's head and threading his fingers through his silky, black hair. Demetrie paused and took hold of Sev's arms, lifting them above his head.

Sev looked up when he felt metal cuffs encircle his wrists. He worried that he'd done something wrong and was being punished, but Demetrie went back to enjoying his body, and soon Sev was lost again to the sensations of a hand on his cock, teeth grazing his nipples, and a finger lightly fucking him from below.

"S-Sir... what about Sir's pleasure?" Sev stammered as a shudder coursed through his restrained body.

"I'll get mine, but first, I'd like to do something. It will be painful for you, Sev." Demetrie pinched Sev's nipple and was rewarded with an involuntary thrust of his hips.

"This body belongs to Sir," Sev murmured breathlessly. "It is yours to do with as you please."

Demetrie nuzzled Sev's ear. "*You* please me, Sev. Very much." Without changing his position underneath him, Demetrie reached into the drawer of the bedside table and pulled out a blindfold. "I'm going to put this on you so that you don't react to the threat of the pain, but to the pain itself."

Sev's world went dark as the blindfold was slipped on. His heart was hammering in his chest, and his breathing began to come in shallow gasps.

“Shhhh... relax, Sev.”

He felt something cool and wet being wiped over his nipple, then Demetrie’s warm breath as he blew it dry. A moment later there was a pinch, then a small stabbing pain. Sev forced himself not to flinch as he realized that Demetrie had just pierced him. The thought of being marked by him in such a way made Sev’s cock painfully hard.

“Lovely,” Demetrie sighed and kissed Sev’s chest just above his stinging nipple.

Sev shivered as Demetrie then wrapped a satiny cord around the base of his penis, knotting it tightly enough to control the flow of blood.

“I’m going to fuck you now, Sev.”

“Yes, please, Sir.” Sev felt Demetrie slide out from underneath him, then a hand caressed his hip from behind. Sev curled his spine, eagerly raising his ass, and groaning as Demetrie’s strong fingers slathered his hole with lubricant. A moment later, he felt the fat head of Demetrie’s cock probing. “Unnnnnghhh,” Sev groaned as Demetrie pushed inside. It stung just for a moment as his raw muscle was stretched, then Demetrie’s hands came around to grip Sev’s constricted, weeping cock, and he fed himself in completely.

Demetrie paused as he enjoyed the heat of Sev’s body gripping him. The boy’s spine was being lengthened by the restraints, and the chains rattled as Sev struggled with the angle. “Don’t pull—I don’t want any marks on your body that I haven’t put there,” Demetrie cautioned. He began to move slowly in and out, his breath becoming ragged as he sucked on the cartilage of Sev’s ear.

Sev forced himself to remain extended upwards so as not to put pressure on his wrists.

“You will not come until I tell you to come—then I will release you.”

Sev nodded with a whimper. Keeping his position, minding his body’s natural inclinations—all of it was going to require intense discipline, and Sev understood that was the point. His punishment hadn’t been finished with the light tug from his choke collar. Demetrie was going to be certain that Sev was

worthy of such a lesson, and that he'd learned to regulate his body's obedience. But Demetrie also wanted Sev to succeed, so he had offered the cord as an aid to his training. Although it would have been easiest to go inside of his mind and leave his physical sensations behind, Sev wouldn't insult Demetrie; it would lessen Sev's suffering, but that was the cheater's way out.

He endured as Demetrie's rhythm grew faster, his cock sliding in and out, the head mashing against the sensitive bundle of nerves inside. Demetrie's one hand held Sev's hip while the other slid the foreskin over his inflamed penis, pushing it up over his crown then sliding it back and tugging at the delicate tendons beneath.

Sev felt the pressure building in his balls and concentrated on holding it there, not letting it rise any higher, rather than trying to rely solely on the cord.

"Are you getting close, Sev?" Demetrie's voice was a growl as he was quickly approaching his own orgasm.

Sev could only nod his head as a crawling sensation started low in his spine and his balls began to ache. He squeezed his eyes shut, practically feeling the semen boiling and rising through his shaft.

"Just. A. Little. Longer," Demetrie grunted between each thrust. Finally he said, "Now!", as he ground against him, emptying himself inside Sev's ass, and jerking the cord free of the intricate knot.

Sev cried out as he let go, his body wracked with spasms from the magnitude of his orgasm.

Demetrie wrapped his arms around Sev from behind, holding him as thin ribbons of ejaculate slicked the pillows. He reached one hand up quickly and released the cuffs as Sev's body went limp.

Sev sagged as Demetrie held him. His mind felt shattered, still reeling from the punishing ecstasy, and he started to cry, unable to hold back the unexpected flood of intense emotions.

"You did well, Sev," Demetrie soothed him and removed the blindfold, his lips brushing his temple. He sat back with Sev, cradling him on his lap until Sev regained enough strength and composure to quiet his small sobs.

Demetrie marveled at the young man; Sev was so imperfectly beautiful, easily bent to Demetrie's immodest desires and unreasonable demands. But it was not out of weakness, desperation, or promises that Sev gave himself willingly to both passion and punishment. What it was, however, Demetrie wasn't certain.

Sev was looking down at the platinum ring shining in his left nipple. It was inset with a tiny green emerald and was certainly worth many times more than the Count had gambled away for the pleasure of Sev's company.

"It's so beautiful..." Sev smiled up at Demetrie, his eyes still sparkling with tears.

Gazing into that trusting face, Demetrie felt his own heart give a strange thump. His throat suddenly felt tight, and he looked away. "Rest here for a few minutes. Stanley will come get you to make sure you're cleaned up and dressed for the dinner this evening." Demetrie lay him down on his bed, smirking at the mess they'd made in it. Poor, chaste Mary was going to throw a fit having to wash these sheets. *Good for her.*

Stanley hadn't spoken much to Sev after he'd woken him up from the Count's bed. He took him to shower and then to dress in the outfit Demetrie had chosen for him.

It was a form-fitting long-sleeved tunic that hung to his knees, but was slit high up to just under his arms, the sides being held closed by silver rings that ended at his hips. Underneath, Sev wore opaque leggings and on his feet, soft-soled leather slippers. A heart-shaped hole had been cut and edged into the tunic over Sev's new piercing.

Stanley rolled his eyes as Sev looked at himself in the mirror, "Why the Count feels the need to be so rebellious is beyond me; but now that he has you he doesn't have to try nearly as hard to disrupt the status quo."

Demetrie consistently dressed Sev in white. It did set off his skin tone nicely, and exaggerated the bleached birthmark over his left eye. Because of its cling, the fabric showed off the shape of his body, and for the first time,

Sev didn't see only the hard angles of bone beneath his skin. Eating actual food had shaped his body into something more than a skeletal waif, and he admired his healthier appearance. Sev had never spent any time he could remember actually gazing at his own reflection. The gypsies were superstitious of mirrors used for anything but necessity, and dregs usually couldn't afford mirrors, or else had nothing about themselves they wanted to see. Sev had always been told he was a freak, that he was repulsive; people turned away from him when they saw his birthmark. But Demetrie seemed proud to show him off, and, regardless of the reasons, Sev was happy to be seen.

Gingerly, he moved the small ring in his nipple. The tender flesh was still a little swollen, which suggested an erotic appeal.

"Turn around, Sev. Let me have a look at you."

Sev felt the color rise to his cheeks as soon as he heard Demetrie's voice behind him. He turned, and although a good slave would have lowered his head, Sev wanted to watch Demetrie's face as he looked him over and see the approval in his gaze. He also wanted to look at Demetrie. The Count was dressed in a custom-tailored tuxedo with a vest of deep crimson, detailed and embroidered with black and golden silk threads. Instead of a tie, he wore a cravat that was the same shade as his vest, and with his black hair and ivory skin he was the most powerful and elegant man Sev had ever seen.

"Very nice, Sev. I knew that outfit would do you justice."

Sev smiled. "Sir—*Master*—is always correct... Master, why do you always dress me in white?"

Demetrie approached him and Sev started to go to his knees, but Demetrie caught his chin with his fingers, gently halting his descent.

"Because you are pure, Sev." Demetrie told him.

Sev smiled shyly, his cheeks warming with the compliment.

Demetrie pulled the white collar out of his pocket and fastened it around Sev's neck, then attached a sparkling golden chain. It was more decorative than restrictive, but the message it conveyed was absolute.

“You’re bringing *that*? Really, Demetrie!” The Countess was sitting in a chair in the large foyer. She was wearing a long black gown, and blue sapphires sparkled at her narrow throat. Her hair was pulled up into an elaborate style, which had the effect of making her head look a little too big for the rest of her fashionably starved body. If it hadn’t been for her large, sapphire earrings on either side to balance her, Sev would’ve worried that the weight of her skull would make it impossible to keep her head upright.

“It’s staring at my jewelry.” The Countess scowled at her son.

Demetrie rolled his eyes, ignoring her suggestion. “Where is your boy?”

“Clayton?” Her expression shifted as the annoyance on her face changed slightly with the new topic, “I have no idea. He said he was going to the kitchen almost an hour ago.”

“Sev,” Demetrie said to him softly. “Go down and ask Gerta if she has seen Clayton.”

“Yes, Master.” Sev nodded, and Demetrie removed his chain so he could scamper off. He felt badly leaving Demetrie alone with his mother. Even though Sev never knew his own biological mother, he’d believed that most mothers who had children did so because they liked them. The Countess didn’t seem to like her own child very much; she seemed demanding and disappointed despite what a handsome and independent man Demetrie had turned out to be. Sev sighed as he remembered Clayton’s words. It seemed independence was not what the Countess wanted for her son; she wanted him to have a wife, as did Walter, the man Sev had met in the car. The only one who didn’t want it was Demetrie himself, yet his expressions of self-determination were ignored by his own class, just as if he were a dreg begging for a few coins.

Gerta was surprised to see Sev when he came into the kitchen to inquire about Clayton’s whereabouts. She was actually blushing when she looked him over—especially the little bare heart over his new piercing. She didn’t speak, but jerked her head in the general direction of a narrow corridor that led to some storage rooms.

Sev heard them before he saw them through the open door. Clayton was wearing a white shirt, black bowtie, and black socks. Other than that he was completely naked and lying on his back on a table with his legs up over Laurence's shoulders as Laurence—pants around his knees—was fucking him. They were rutting like animals, and instead of finding it arousing or embarrassing, Sev found that it made him angry.

“As soon as you're finished it's time to leave,” Sev called into them, startling Laurence in the middle of his orgasm. Sev turned and went to wait for Clayton in the kitchen, leaning against the wall and crossing his arms, his face set into a scowl.

Laurence was the first to come out, fastening his pants and looking red-faced and sheepish. He immediately put on an apron and began washing pots. After a few more minutes, Clayton finally emerged dressed in his tuxedo.

His eyes burned over Sev's body. “Well, don't you look lovely.”

“How could you?” Sev glared at him and began walking back towards the foyer where the Count and Countess were waiting.

“How could I what, Seven?” Clayton didn't seem to be the least bit embarrassed.

“How could you disrespect your mistress in that way?”

“In what way? By fucking Laurence?”

Sev nodded his head.

“You're really not very bright, are you?” Clayton sighed, dusting a bit of flour off of his pant leg, “A slave doesn't have to *like* his Master—in fact, it's probably best if they didn't. Believe me, if you had to screw that old hag, you'd be thinking Laurence looked pretty good too.” Clayton glanced down at Sev with a grin. “Of course, if I was Demetrie's slave, as long as I didn't mind being used, abused, branded, and beaten, I think I could be quite comfortable being exclusive. I'm certain he insists on it, doesn't he?”

Sev remembered the first beating he'd gotten because Stanley had walked in on him in the shower. He crushed down the memory as soon as he felt heat beginning to rush towards his loins.

“That’s why he chose you. He can’t handle a regular slave who might be governed by any contracts or law. If he hurts you badly enough, or kills you, nobody will complain.” Clayton was still grinning when they entered the foyer where Demetrie and his mother stood on opposite sides of the room. The air was heavy with tension, but Demetrie seemed to relax when he saw Sev. He clipped Sev’s leash on, running his thumb over his lips briefly, then they headed to the car.

Sev knelt on the floor again, Demetrie absently combing his fingers through his hair. The Countess glared at the two men across from her in the limo and Clayton—sitting next to her—just stared out the window in boredom.

“I’ll only say this: it’s a mockery, Demetrie, what you’ve done to this family’s name,” the Countess said bitterly. The comment hung in the air, unacknowledged by the man towards whom it had been directed.

Sev wondered if her words ever got through to hurt him. He didn’t know what argument had brought them to this point, but as Clayton had already informed him: their world was very different from his.

The event was being held at a large banquet hall in the upper east quarter of Athena.

Sev was overwhelmed by the extravagance of the building and guests alike. The men all wore perfectly tailored tuxedos; the women were clad in beautiful shimmering gowns and adorned with gemstones and gold. Surrounded by such opulence reminded Sev that only a few blocks away, on the other side of the big wall, was the ghetto, and but for Demetrie’s intervention, Sev would have been there tonight.

“You’re mine now, Sev,” Demetrie murmured into his ear as they exited the car; his deep voice carved another notch into Sev’s heart.

“Always, Master,” Sev answered breathlessly, looking up at him through his thick eyelashes. He saw a nearly imperceptible shift of Demetrie’s eyes, the pupils dilating, and knew he had pleased him.

Sev was aware that his outfit was vastly different from the somber black formals and generally dark-colored clothing of the other slaves and Masters present. Although he would have stood out anyway with his facial abnormalities and the fact that he was the only slave who didn't have blond hair. The other slaves also wore no obvious collars. The few females present had on, at most, dainty low-set chokers disguised as jewelry, and some of the males wore small bracelets on their wrists. There may have been other indications of ownership, but none so readily observable as Sev's. It seemed that all eyes were on him, whether disapproving, curious, or *something else*.

Sev followed Demetrie inside. The Count remained oblivious to the men shaking his hand and the women who greeted him with air kisses as he made his way to the head table. Sev watched the other slaves, following their example and doing his best to perform as well as they did. He made certain to seat his Master properly, then stepped back and waited for his next command.

"You see, Sev, how you control them all?" Demetrie said to him as Sev stood behind his chair at the wide dining table. "All of them think they have so much power, but really they are weak; they follow rules blindly, too afraid to do anything that might compromise the status quo." He reached around and took Sev's hand, giving it a gentle squeeze, "What do you think, Seven; a dreg is the most influential man in a room full of aristocrats."

"Only beneath you, Master," Sev answered honestly.

Demetrie offered him a cool smile. "Very good, Sev. Never forget that." Demetrie kissed his knuckles and let him go.

There were over a hundred people present, and a third of them were slaves. The event was to signify the end of the official mourning period for the deceased Count Silvastrano. Demetrie and his mother sat at the center table, and beside Demetrie was a portrait of his father. The image was of a man in his seventies, with the remnants of Demetrie's jet-black hair, and dark eyes. It was obvious he'd been an attractive man, though not nearly so much as

Demetrie, and very stern. Even in the portrait he was scowling—punishing anyone who dared make eye-contact with his memory.

Sev watched the other slaves serving their Masters and tried to copy their gestures as the trolleys of food were shuttled by. Soup passed over the left shoulder, drink over the right; only once did Demetrie challenge him, and it was when he accidentally spilled a drop of wine on the rim of the glass. He thought that he would be pinched, as he'd seen happen to a female slave who had accidentally done the same thing; when she'd spilled a drop of water on the table, her mistress pinched the girl's wrist hard enough to bring tears to her eyes. Instead, Demetrie held up his glass, the red liquid running down the side.

“Lick it up, Sev.”

Sev did as he was told, catching the drop with his tongue before it hit the floor.

Not surprisingly, the gesture brought a fresh wave of murmurs nearby, especially when Demetrie made certain to take a drink at the same side of the glass where Sev's tongue had been. In all, Sev had filled Demetrie's wine glass five times before dinner was even over. The Count was drinking a lot; something Sev believed reflected Demetrie's level of discomfort among his own class.

As soon as dessert was served, the slaves were excused to quickly have their own meals, and they headed in a mass exodus down the stairs to the lower level.

Although Sev wasn't fond of Clayton, he was glad to have a familiar face nearby.

“You are certainly causing a stir among the aristocrats,” Clayton said as he walked beside Sev. Sev was lingering several paces behind the large group, not wishing to get caught up in their gossip. It was strange that so many seemed to resent their positions and their Masters. The girl who was pinched cried and was coddled by a few females her age who commiserated her cruel treatment. All of them, it seemed, had complaints about being woken up too early to tend to their Masters, being reprimanded for being too careless, and generally being told what to do. To Sev, they sounded like ungrateful children.

He dreaded the thought of having to be near all of these proper slaves. In the outside world he would've done his best to disappear, if he were even noticed at all. But here he was on display, and it wasn't in the context of the kind of performance he was used to. Some of the slaves continued to shun and ignore him as they would in any situation, while a few made lascivious comments. All of this was easy enough to accept, regardless of the level. But when a small group began saying very rude things about Demetrie, Sev became tense.

The slaves were all seated on two sides of a wide, rectangular table. Between every group of four was a large platter that held portions of meat, bread, and vegetables that they were to share between them. Although the food looked appetizing, Sev couldn't eat. He forced himself to nibble on a piece of warm bread as he tried to ignore the invectives directed at his Master.

It was a male slave in his mid-twenties who'd begun the discussion, but soon a small group chimed in, emboldened by their comrade's observations.

"Count Silvastrano has done some daring things in the past, but I never thought he'd stoop to something quite so low. He should have just gotten a couple of dogs—would have been a cleaner fuck, that's for certain." The slave looked directly at Sev as he spoke.

Soon another man joined the first. "And I've heard no women will have him—he doesn't want children so he keeps sticking it in the wrong hole."

"He'd stick it in anything—*obviously*," a woman drawled nearby, rolling her eyes at Sev. "Just what is he trying to prove, anyway? He's an insult to his title."

Clayton leaned over and whispered to Sev as he saw his fists clenching on the table, "Just ignore them, Sev—if you don't, you'll always be a dreg and nobody else will want you."

"I *am* a dreg," Sev growled, "and I don't care." He stood up abruptly, using his chair as a platform to rise above the din.

"Oh, look, it thinks it has something to say," the first slave said, sneering at Sev.

“I don’t care what you say about me, but you must not insult my Master,” Sev said, trying to maintain an even tone.

“Oh my, the little mongrel seems to be very protective...”

“It’s not worth it, Guthrie,” a female slave giggled nervously.

Guthrie turned to her. “*It’s* worth nothing, which is why I take its loyalty as an insult. It’s not a slave—it’s a little pet that thinks itself worthy of carrying *our* titles as slaves!” His voice had risen slightly, and anger flared behind his eyes.

Clayton shook his head, maintaining his attitude of indifference. “Guthrie, you are an excellent slave, so don’t demean yourself by starting a fight with this scrawny thing—it’s virtually a child.”

“I see that—so now the Count is a pedophile as well. Another noble item to add to the list of his indescr—”

No one expected Sev to move so quickly—especially not Guthrie. Sev launched himself over the table, springing on his hands in the center. Kicking Guthrie as he vaulted, he pushed him backwards, his chair toppling beneath him. Then Sev landed with his feet planted on either side of the slave’s chest as the shocked Guthrie looked up at him from the floor.

For a moment, time seemed to have stopped as the two men locked gazes, then Sev was grabbed on either side and hauled backwards by two male slaves.

Guthrie struggled to his feet, rolling up his sleeves. “You damn mongrel! You’ll regret—”

Sev leveraged himself using the two men holding him, curling his spine and bringing his legs up until he managed to rotate in their arms. The two men drew back, startled by Sev’s acrobatics, and let him go. He planted his feet on the table and finished uncoiling until he was standing upright on the edge of it, pointing a finger at Guthrie. “If you speak one more ill word of my Master, I will gladly suffer the consequences of breaking the law to have the pleasure of shutting you up.”

“Sev.”

Guthrie paled and the other slaves moved back to their seats, lowering their heads as Demetrie's voice came in from the doorway behind Sev.

Sev felt his heart drop into his stomach. He turned around, hopping off the table.

Demetrie's face was half in shadow from the darkness of the corridor, but Sev could feel his eyes boring through him. Regardless, he gave one final glare over his shoulder at Guthrie and the others, then went to answer his Master's call.

Demetrie had started back down the corridor, his body pressed close to the wall.

"Master, why did you come for me?"

"Clayton thought you might be in trouble."

"Clayton?" Sev hadn't noticed that he'd slipped out. "Please, Master—punish me if you must, but..." Sev felt the emotions he'd been trying to control come rising painfully to the surface and he started to cry. "T-they insulted my Master—I don't care what they think of me but—"

Demetrie turned suddenly and grabbed Sev's face, spinning him around and slamming his back against the wall. He was so close the alcohol on his breath burned Sev's lips. *He'd been drinking more than just wine.*

"You *should* care, Sev—you are mine; an insult to you is an insult to me."

Demetrie still had his fingers pressed hard along Sev's jaw. He stared into his face for a long time, rubbing Sev's lips now with the pad of his thumb as he seemed to contemplate every nuance of his features. For the briefest of moments, Sev saw the hard light in Demetrie's eyes soften, and he thought Demetrie might kiss him; but almost immediately it was consumed by anxiety, and then returned to stone.

Sev's eyelids fluttered when Demetrie pressed his hips against him.

"Did they touch you, Sev?"

"M-my arms, Master; they held my arms."

Demetrie's hands moved down to grip Sev's biceps and he squeezed, running down the length of his arms to his wrists. He closed his eyes and wavered slightly on his feet. "If I could, I would flay the memory from your bones." Demetrie's hand crept down and squeezed Sev between the legs. Sev was soft but immediately began to respond to his Master's touch.

They were assaulted by the smell of bleach as Demetrie hauled him inside a public restroom down the hall. He took Sev into a large stall and began removing his belt.

"Strip," he told him, pulling the belt so it snapped. "Leave on your collar."

Sev did as instructed, carefully hanging his clothing on the hook on the door. It was very cold with the hard, white tiles; the bright florescent lights made the contrasts almost painfully sharp.

Demetrie grabbed Sev's wrists and tied them behind his back to the metal safety bar that ran along the length of the stall. He took off his coat and hung it on the hook, then crouched on the floor and took Sev's hardening cock between his lips.

Sev gasped as he was enveloped by the heat inside of Demetrie's mouth.

Demetrie took him all the way in, running his tongue around the ridge under his hood, then drawing him out, sucking noisily as he pulled back.

Sev grasped the bar, his knees going weak as his eyes rolled up beneath his lids. He wanted to protest—to tell Demetrie that it was not necessary to pleasure him, but he didn't want the sensation to stop. Demetrie would do what he wanted with Sev and that was as it should be.

Demetrie lifted Sev's legs up easily over his shoulders and began to lick the area behind his balls, and finally the tight star of his anus. He probed with his tongue, making Sev groan and wriggle as he was spread wider. Demetrie unfastened his pants and stood up. Keeping Sev's ankles over his shoulders, he slammed into him with his thick cock, grinding against him as he gripped Sev's hips.

Sev choked back a cry.

“Shhhh...” Demetrie soothed Sev with small apologies, “Forgive me Sev... that I mark you inside and out...” Demetrie swallowed hard, as if dizzy from the sensation of being so deeply inside of Sev’s warm body. After a moment, he began to move.

“So... Tight...” Demetrie hissed between thrusts as Sev clamped down. He was now holding the bar behind Sev to maintain his balance and tempo. He shouldn’t have drunk so much, but he needed to escape, and Sev was fast becoming the one thing that could take his mind off of the rest of his miserable excuse for a future. He came, choking back a sob, just moments before the outer door opened and someone came into the bathroom.

“Demetrie! Are you in here?”

Sev recognized Walter’s voice, but Demetrie didn’t seem to notice. He was breathing heavily, his forehead pressed to the cool tile wall behind Sev. His breath was hot and seared the tears on Sev’s cheek.

“Demetrie? Answer me!” Walter rattled the stall door.

“Maybe we should give him a minute?” The second voice was Roger’s.

“It’s not fair, Sev...” Demetrie heaved a heavy sigh, and pulled out, tucking himself into his pants before pulling Sev’s legs into a more natural position.

Sev brought his feet to the floor slowly. He wasn’t certain what the comment meant, but it appeared Demetrie would not elaborate.

“Get dressed.” Demetrie stepped out of the stall, holding the door closed until Sev latched it.

“What do you want, Walter?” Demetrie sounded more tired than angry. He began feeding his belt back through the loops of his pants.

Walter sputtered some nonsense sounds for a moment, then recomposed and said, “We have been looking everywhere for you—your mother has been beside herself and you’re down here soiling yourself with that dreg?”

“Your point, Walter?”

Sev heard the familiar clang of Demetrie's lighter, then smelled the scent of the heady, bittersweet smoke from his cigar. He imagined he would never know of those things belonging to another; whatever became of him, should he ever experience that sound and smell he would always think *Demetrie*. Slowly, he dressed, and tentatively peeked between the gap in the stall door.

Demetrie was leaning against a sink, smoking while Walter paced and Roger stared at the stall. Sev drew back as he thought he'd caught the man's eye.

"This event is for your family, Demetrie! Have you no shame or honor?"

"This event is to commemorate the death of my father. It's his apparent honor they are celebrating; it has nothing to do with me." Demetrie's voice never rose over its steady, cool timbre.

"But there are some very influential people here—might I add one of them may soon be your father-in-law?"

Sev felt the air being shoved out of his chest. Was Demetrie engaged? Sev leaned against the wall. *It was none of his concern*. He was only entertainment for as long as the Count would have him, and Demetrie had never led him to believe otherwise. Sev's chest ached and his throat swelled around a sob. None of this should have come as a surprise; Clayton had even tried to warn him, but in his selfishness, Sev had chosen to ignore the message. Since he'd been with Demetrie, Sev was beginning to feel like he was worth something to someone—something more than a thief for selfish gains; *something a little more like a human being*. Demetrie made him feel safe—the punishments he inflicted were just. Sev would endure anything—do anything—for his strong and handsome Master.

"I'm tired, Walter, and unhappy because these ill-behaved slaves can't seem to keep their hands off of other people's property," Demetrie said and knocked on the stall door. "Sev, come out."

Sev hastily wiped his eyes on the backs of his hands and exited the stall, his shoulders drawn and head down.

“Forgive me Master.” he carried Demetrie’s coat, having retrieved it from the back of the door. He was aware of the other men’s disapproving gazes upon him as he handed Demetrie both his coat and the chain still attached to his collar.

Demetrie took his coat and fingered the leash, looking at Sev thoughtfully for a moment before he draped the coat over Sev’s shoulders. “Walter, if you see my mother, tell her I’ll be at the car.” Demetrie turned on his heel and led Sev out.

The car ride home was even more uncomfortable than the ride there. The Countess was upset with Clayton for intervening when Sev was in danger and Clayton was brooding, frustrated by whatever light punishment she’d imposed. Demetrie stared out the window, his cigar smoldering, ignored, between his fingers. Sev reached up and caught the long plume of ash in his hands before it fell onto Demetrie’s pant leg.

Demetrie seemed to come out of whatever trance he’d been under and crushed his cigar out in the ashtray on the arm of the seat. He jerked his head towards it and Sev crawled on his knees to deposit the grey dust. He closed his eyes and sighed softly as he felt Demetrie’s hand resting gently on his back underneath his jacket. *So warm*; he could feel the heat of him through his clothing. The fingertips made a small circle against his lower spine, but he returned his gaze to the darkness reflected back through his eyes as he stared out the window once more.

Sev wondered what went on in Demetrie’s mind. Phineas had convinced Sev at one time that the high caste were only counting their investments when they seemed deep in thought, but Phineas was a liar. There was darkness there—uncertainty—and Sev would have given anything to be able to ease Demetrie’s burden.

Demetrie heaved a heavy sigh as the car stopped and the driver came around to open their door. He leaned close to Sev as his mother got out of the vehicle. “Tonight, Sev, tell me of the gypsies.”

CHAPTER 6

They lay together in Demetrie's big bed. When they'd gotten home, Demetrie had told his mother goodnight and taken Sev to the bathroom to clean him up and tend to any new injuries. Now, Demetrie was lying back against his pillows. His eyes were closed as he took another drink. The ice rattled against the side of his glass and he sat up with a frown, reaching over to the nightstand to refill his scotch. "Tell me, Sev, if you had the opportunity, would you return to your life as a gypsy?"

Sev sat quietly for a moment as he considered his answer. At one point he would have answered with a resounding *yes*, because he'd never imagined anything better, but now... "Sir, there are many things about that life that I miss..."

"Like what? Tell me."

"Like..." Sev took a deep breath, "the feeling, Sir, that I belonged, the love that was given and received freely... the gypsies were my family, despite the fact that we shared no blood."

Demetrie was silent for so long, that Sev thought he might have fallen asleep, but finally he said, "You never answered my original question."

"Sir, I suppose I would return to that life, if I could. But I believe I know too much now. I did not realize before that I am a dreg... and I am aware now that there is no security in any life that I might have."

Demetrie opened his eyes. "Does that sadden you, Sev?"

Sev took in a stammering breath, more affected by Demetrie's dark gaze than his question. "Sir, it is... unsettling."

Demetrie closed his eyes. "I suppose it would be."

"Sir... forgive me for speaking out of turn, but... is something troubling you?"

"Why do you ask, Sev?"

"Sir... because I have concern for your happiness... I want to please you..."

“Haven’t I told you already that you are very pleasing to me?”

Sev lowered his eyes. “Then why, Sir, do you seem so unhappy?”

Demetrie set down his drink, but did not release the glass. “What purpose would it serve for you to know?”

“B-because, Sir... then... as unworthy as I am, I could share your pain.”

Demetrie finally released the glass and contemplated Sev, sitting with his shoulders hunched and head down. “Look at me, Sev.”

Cheeks reddened, Sev lifted his face, and Demetrie saw tears in his eyes.

“You cry for my pain but not your own,” he chuffed softly. “Why do you let me do these things to you, Sev?”

“Sir, it is an honor for me to be of service to you...”

“You’ve done enough for me tonight. Go to your room.”

Sev nodded, his chest aching as he pressed his forehead to the mattress in apology. He crawled off the bed and all the way to his room, where he sat on the floor and swallowed his sobs. He had insulted Demetrie, when all he’d wanted to do was to make him happy. It seemed that no one cared about Demetrie’s happiness, and maybe the Count had believed what Sev felt for him was pity. Or maybe he realized how selfish Sev was becoming, wanting to monopolize his time, wanting him to want him back.

“Why are you crying?”

Sev scrambled backwards as someone lying in his bed dropped a hand to his head. He realized it was Clayton as the other man reached over and turned the small bedside lamp on low.

“W-why are you in my room?” Sev wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his robe.

“I thought you’d be a little nicer to someone who saved your skin a few hours earlier.”

“I could have handled it myself.” Sev got up off the floor.

Clayton yawned, stretching out in Sev's bed once more. Sev realized he was only wearing loose shorts.

"You would have had your hands cut off if you'd struck Guthrie. By the way, very interesting acrobatics." Clayton rolled onto his side, propping his head on his hand.

"What do you want, Clayton?" Sev asked, standing rigidly in the center of the small room. It was just far enough away to be out of range of Clayton's fingertips when he reached towards him from the bed.

"I was hoping for a 'thank-you'."

"Thank you. Now go back to your Mistress."

"That old hag? I already nibbled her titties so all is forgiven... but there is something here I would truly like to taste." Clayton had to roll onto his stomach to reach, but he managed to tug the hem of Sev's robe. Sev pulled away and turned, pressing his back to the door of the wardrobe. "Don't touch me—you have no right—"

"Ah, that's where you keep getting confused. You're the one with no rights, Seven. Remember? That's why Demetrie likes you so much. Even if he breaks you, there is nothing anyone will do about it."

"That is *his* right, *not* yours."

"And why are you in here instead of there with him now?"

Sev's jaw tensed and he slumped against the wardrobe. "Because it is also his right to reject me." He longed to run back into Demetrie and beg for forgiveness for whatever wrong he'd done, but it was by his order that he'd been sent away.

"If you want to cry, it's alright. I'll hold you," Clayton taunted.

"I want you to leave."

"What do you think he'd do to you if he found me in your room?" With his knees bent, Clayton's feet swayed back and forth slowly, casting long shadows on the wall behind him.

Sev bit his lower lip and closed his eyes, trying to focus pain anywhere but his heart. “Why are you doing this?” He tensed when he felt Clayton’s hand suddenly on the back of his head, in his hair, and felt his tanned body move against his, the heat of it apparent through the thin material of his robe.

“No one has to know...” Clayton breathed against Sev’s lips.

Clayton was not physically unattractive—not by any means—but he wasn’t Demetrie, and so the thought of being touched by him made Sev’s insides cramp.

“I’ll know...” Sev turned his face away. “Do you hate me so much?”

Clayton’s warm fingertips traced the pale mark on Sev’s cheek. “It’s not hate, Seven.” He sighed and backed off. “How can you be so loyal? You’re like a dog.”

Sev opened his eyes, seeing Clayton’s exasperated frown. “I... love him.” He hadn’t known he would say the words out loud, but now that he had, he wondered why he hadn’t admitted it sooner.

“Ha—you’ve barely even met him! I can assure you, Seven, if that is the case, your love will be one-sided at best.” Clayton ran his fingers through his blonde hair, pacing slowly. “You really are a perfect toy for him... you seem to crave the pain he brings you, yet you offer yourself for more.” he sighed, shaking his head. “I pity you.”

“Then please leave me to suffer alone,” Sev muttered, unconsciously pulling his robe tighter around him.

“Fine,” Clayton huffed, grabbing his own robe off the end of the bed and pulling it on. “We’ll be leaving in the morning, and I doubt I’ll ever see you again. I hope it’s all been worth it.” Clayton started out the door that led to the hallway.

Sev withered to the floor where he stood, feeling completely hollowed out. He’d had to fight back his tears in front of Clayton—he’d sworn to Demetrie that he’d never let anyone else see him in such a vulnerable state—and now he had nothing left but an uncomfortable weight in his chest.

Sev hadn't realized he'd fallen asleep until he heard the bell ringing into his room from Demetrie's. He wobbled to his feet, his body stiff from sleeping on the hard floor, and rushed to answer his Master's call. Demetrie was still in bed when he entered the room; even lying down, the Count was no less impressive or intimidating.

"Yes, my M-Master?" Sev came through the door and knelt, keeping his head bowed. Suddenly, calling Demetrie Master felt more necessary to Sev, and it seemed that hearing the word had lightened Demetrie's mood.

Indeed, the Count was pleased to hear the word from Sev's mouth. "You have another card waiting to be drawn." Demetrie reached over to the bedside table and produced the deck.

Sev rose in one fluid motion and crossed the room. He drew a card and handed it back to Demetrie, who turned it over so Sev could see.

"A queen of clubs. Still very lucky, Sev. This card is yours to do with as you please right now." Demetrie handed the queen to Sev who took it, peering down at the card.

"Master, I feel all that I would ask is too selfish..."

"Remember, I can always tell you no." If Sev asked for his freedom now, Demetrie swore to himself that he wouldn't deny it, but a sick sense of dread filled him with the thought that it might come to that so soon.

"Master, if it's not too much to ask, I would like to request that I not be required to draw cards from this deck anymore."

Sev wouldn't meet Demetrie's eyes when he said it, and the Count's sense of dread increased. He held out his hand, accepting the queen from Sev.

"Very well, but I would like to know your reasoning." Despite the turmoil of his emotions, Demetrie's voice was its usual cool timbre.

When Sev met his eyes, Demetrie held his breath.

"Master, I can't read or write, but I can count—a little—and I don't like to be reminded that each card I draw brings me closer to the end of my time with you."

Demetrie clung to Sev's gaze until the boy became diffident and looked down at the floor.

Demetrie shuffled the cards once, then deliberately opened the bedside table and set them inside as if fitting them into a specific location. "I'll grant that request Sev, but I wonder why you didn't simply use that card and ask to extend your stay."

Sev's eyes widened in and he shook his head. "Oh no, Master... I could never take advantage of your kindness."

"Come here, Sev." Demetrie said softly, tugging at Sev's wrist.

Sev kneeled on the bed beside Demetrie, sighing and closing his eyes as Demetrie ran his big hand over Sev's hair and caressed his cheek. The young man seemed so willing to give himself over completely.

"You are too good, my Seven," Demetrie sighed. He rose slowly from the bed, sitting up on the side for a moment before standing up and heading towards his en suite bathroom.

"Stanley is seeing my mother off. I want you to attend to me this morning," Demetrie called without turning his head.

"Yes, Master." Sev followed after Demetrie, waiting outside the door for a moment so that Demetrie could use the toilet. The shower was already running, and steam gathered in a humid fog that blurred the otherwise gleaming surfaces. Sev took off his own robe and followed Demetrie inside the glass enclosure. His hands were trembling as he was closed inside, Even though the physical contact was purely as utility, Demetrie had never let Sev touch him for any length of time, and he watched the young man trembling through the hazy reflection of the glass as Sev stared at his back.

"Did you sleep last night, Sev?" Demetrie asked as Sev began soaping up a thick sponge.

"A little, Master," Sev admitted.

Demetrie grunted in reply.

Sev reached up and began washing Demetrie's back with the sponge, his hands still trembling as he did. Demetrie was about to ask him what was bothering him when Sev finally spoke up.

"Master... I feel I deserve punishment."

Demetrie glanced back over his shoulder at Sev. "For what reason?"

"Master, last night, after you sent me away... C-Clayton was in my room..."

Demetrie moved so swiftly, Sev had no chance to avoid him, even if he'd wanted to. He slammed Sev's back against the hard tile wall, squeezing his wrists until Sev undoubtedly felt his hands start to tingle.

"What?" Demetrie's voice was a low growl and his eyes bored into Sev's.

"M-Master... n-nothing happened... please, Master... punish me... please don't take it out on Clayton..."

Demetrie shoved his hard body into Sev's. "I'll *do* as I *please*," he growled. He examined Sev's face for any signs of dishonesty, though knew he'd find none. Satisfied, he released the young man and took a step back. "Nothing happened, you say?"

Sev shook his head. "No Master... nothing... I would never betray you."

"If nothing happened, why do you feel you deserve punishment?"

"Because, Master... I... I feel it is somehow my fault that he assumed I'd extended an invitation to my room."

Demetrie chuckled softly. Sev still didn't realize what effect he had on most people. He had no clue just how exotic and tempting a creature he was. "You'll never be a slave, Sev."

Despair drew lines across Sev's forehead and Demetrie was aware he'd misinterpreted his meaning of his words.

"I know this, Master," Sev said quietly.

"A slave wouldn't have told his Master anything," Demetrie clarified. "You could have kept it to yourself and I probably never would have known."

Sev shook his head. “Master, I could not lie to you. If that alone made me unworthy to be a slave, I wouldn’t change it.”

Demetrie touched Sev’s cheek, bringing his thumb around to caress his lips. Sev’s sharp pink tongue came out to press against it, and coax him inside. The sensation encouraged Demetrie’s blood flow to his cock, and he began to grow hard.

“Please, Master, let me give you pleasure.”

Demetrie said nothing, stunned by Sev’s unusual request. He gazed down and braced himself against the shower wall as Sev took his stiffening cock into the moist heat of his mouth. Sev’s long eyelashes sparkled with crystal beads as the water rained down from Demetrie’s wide shoulders. The drops could have been tears, and part of Demetrie understood that they were. This young man who had no place was working so earnestly to remain under his thumb. He couldn’t understand it, but didn’t want to let it go, as much as he realized that he should.

Sev’s lips pulled tightly down Demetrie’s shaft as he created a tight seal. He managed to take all of him, his lissome fingers caressing the heavy, smooth sac below.

“Touch yourself,” Demetrie told him, seeing how hard Sev’s cock had become just by fellating him. Sev glanced up, meeting Demetrie’s hooded eyes, and Demetrie felt the blood surge hotter through his loins. He placed a hand on Sev’s head, the other gripping the lip of a built-in shelf behind him, as Sev’s beautiful mouth worked over his desire. Below, Sev used one hand to lazily pump his own erection. The sight of the glistening rose knob peeking up from the golden-olive grasp of Sev’s fingers and cowl of his foreskin was incredibly erotic, but now it was getting too difficult for Demetrie to keep his eyes open.

Sev’s hot tongue circled his head, and drilled into his weeping slit. His own hand began to pump faster along his shaft, and soon Sev was coming, the water mixing with his orgasm as it swirled down the drain. He took Demetrie deep, milking him against the back of his throat.

Sev's moans of pleasure vibrated through Demetrie's cock as he emptied himself with a deep groan inside of Sev's sweet mouth.

Afterwards, Sev washed Demetrie with an almost shy reverence. As he was soaping his chest, Demetrie pulled Sev into his hard body, gripping his biceps tightly enough to bruise. "So fragile, and yet, I know what strength your body is capable of. Why, Sev? Why haven't you tried to escape?"

"Master, I did not realize I was your prisoner." Sev gazed up into Demetrie's eyes, and Demetrie could see his pupils were dilated with need.

He reached back and took the handheld showerhead from the wall. "Sit back and spread yourself."

The hot steam and recent activity had caused Sev's succulent lips to plump and his cheeks to flush. It lent to his features a beautiful androgyny, pushing him slightly more towards the feminine, but his body was very obviously male as his cock began to swell again.

Demetrie chuckled softly, thinking back to how good it had been when he was so young. Sev nearly made him feel like he was twenty again because of the amount of time Demetrie spent with a hard-on.

Sev leaned back on one of the built-in benches in the wall, clutching a set of safety bars on either side. His legs were spread and his feet pulled up onto the edge of the seat, tilting his hips obscenely so Demetrie had an unobstructed view of his most intimate parts.

"So dirty, Sev," Demetrie mused, dialing up a spray on the showerhead.

"Yes, Master," Sev agreed breathlessly. His grip tightened on the bars above him, and his cock throbbed, beginning to leak in anticipation. Demetrie aimed the jets and then he squeezed the button.

"Nnnuuh!" Sev cried out as the sharp, pulsing stream of a massage setting thrummed against his tender hole. His hips jerked as his body opened to the stimulating jets, the muscles of his groin tensing to make his cock beat against his belly. Sev moved up and down, as if the air alone might be enough to bring him release.

And then the spray was gone and it took Sev's heart a few stuttering beats to realize he was almost literally being left high and dry. "Mm-Master?" he moaned as Demetrie turned off the shower.

"You asked for punishment, Sev," Demetrie reminded with a sharp smile.

Sev groaned, squeezing his eyes shut with the agony of his arousal. Surely, this was the cruelest punishment he had suffered so far.

CHAPTER 7

Sev was kneeling, still naked, on the floor of Demetrie's room while Demetrie got himself dressed. He'd considered earlier that he'd have Sev do it, but in light of his punishment, the temptation was too great for either of them at the moment.

"I have some business matters to deal with which will be taking me away from home overnight and you will be left here in the custody of the house servants. This means that I won't be making use of your body for at least the next forty-eight hours; you need time to heal."

"I... understand, Master." Sev did not feel it was appropriate to ask if that meant Demetrie would also refrain. Just because he couldn't use Sev, that didn't mean he couldn't find someone else to make use of. The thought filled Sev with a possessive jealousy that he knew was wrong. Demetrie did not belong to Sev, and for the time being, Sev belonged to Demetrie only as property. Good property did not suffer envy.

Demetrie smiled as he read Sev's torment through his expressions. It was exactly as he'd hoped—to punish Sev by letting him feel the sting of what *he* felt every time he learned of another person coveting his lovely toy.

"When I return, I expect to have a very important guest with me, and I'd like you to provide our entertainment."

"Entertainment, Master?" Sev asked, looking up at Demetrie as he stood above him, finishing up the last few buttons on his shirt collar.

"We'll play it by ear." Demetrie smirked, acknowledging his enjoyment of Sev's unease. He crouched down, pressing his hands on Sev's shoulders as he moved his lips against Sev's ear, "Today, after I leave, I want you to remain here in my room, unclothed, for two hours. I will set the clock to alert you a few minutes before lunchtime when Stanley will come in and bring you food. You are not allowed to let him see your body. Do you understand Sev?"

"Yes Master," Sev answered, though he really didn't.

“After he leaves and you have lunch, I want you to pick out whatever clothing you wish to wear today, and set aside an outfit for tomorrow. Then you are free to do as you please for the rest of the day.”

“As I please, Master?” Sev gnawed his lip. So much freedom had become foreign to him and he was concerned with his ability to handle it.

“There are a couple of rules which you must obey during this time that I am away.”

Sev nodded, relieved that Demetrie would be giving him some specific commands to follow.

“When you sleep, you are to sleep in my bed, and you are not to allow yourself to become aroused or bring on an orgasm in any way.”

Sev let out a small whimper. “Master... I...”

Demetrie smiled. “I realize this last requirement is going to be very difficult for you, so I have something that will help. Stand up please.” Demetrie understood that Sev’s body needed control as much as his mind, and trying to accomplish both feats by himself was often beyond his ability.

Sev stood up, his legs still a bit wobbly from the shower and his anticipation of his continued suffering.

Demetrie went to one of his drawers and pulled out a flat garment box. He opened it on the dresser, his body blocking Sev’s view of what he removed from the crinkling paper.

“Turn around, Sev,” Demetrie instructed before turning himself.

Sev did as he was told, trying to maintain regular breathing as he felt Demetrie’s approach burn through him. Sev felt Demetrie’s hands come around to the front.

Demetrie was looking over Sev’s shoulder as he slipped an open metal ring around Sev’s genitals, then clamped it shut so it encircled both his penis and scrotum. “Too tight?” Demetrie’s voice vibrated through Sev’s chest.

Sev shook his head, fascinated with the contraption that Demetrie continued to install around him. The next item was like a codpiece that

conformed to Sev's shape in his restrained position with a decorative metal shell and an opening at the bottom to pass urine. It was actually quite attractive, and Sev felt flattered that Demetrie would let him wear such a beautiful item of security. A long, leather strap held the bottom of the metal cup in place, then expanded out to allow for any other necessities of elimination—the theory obviously being that any anal-play would result in such severe discomfort by its sexual arousal, it wasn't necessary to prevent it by means of a restriction. A belt around Sev's hips kept the whole thing together, attaching to a hasp on either side that fit over a thick metal staple.

“Now turn and face me.” Demetrie's expression was like stone, but his eyes lit up with pleasure to see how lovely Sev looked in his restraints. As the final touch, he slid a decorative, but functional, padlock through the curved staple and snapped it shut, removing the key. “Let's hope I don't lose this.” Demetrie held the key up for Sev to see before he slipped a chain through it and draped it around his own neck, feeding it down into his shirt. He took a step back and admired the workmanship of the chastity belt. “Lovely, Sev. I knew the silver would look the best against your skin.”

Sev lowered his head as a blush came to his cheeks with a flood of pride. “I am honored, Master. Thank you.”

“Come here, Sev,” Demetrie opened his arms in a rare display of affection and Sev eagerly came into them, pressing his cheek against Demetrie's chest where he could hear his heart beating through the layers of his clothing.

Demetrie circled him in his warm embrace and kissed the top of his head. He nearly said the words that came into his mind, but he pinched them back, squeezing them beneath the pressure of what he felt was right. The Count's voice was raspy from the effort of keeping his feelings withheld. “I have to go, Sev. Be good.”

Sev reluctantly remained behind as Demetrie withdrew, “I will, Master. Please return safely.”

“As soon as I can, Sev.”

Sev had no way of knowing that some of Demetrie's business was easily handled from his study, nor did he realize that the Count's room was full of cameras. They had been installed initially by the elder Count Silvastrano, who'd been paranoid about his slaves or other lovers stealing from him. Demetrie had been pleased to find that they gave him access to the entire suite, including Sev's room, which he could view from a forty-inch monitor hidden behind a painting in his study.

The resolution from the cameras was good enough to see that Sev's cheeks were flushed as he remained standing bewildered in the center of Demetrie's room, and Demetrie felt his cock stir in his pants. This forced chastity was going to be just as difficult on him as it was Sev—but this was his own punishment as well for being so rough with him at the banquet. At least Demetrie could jerk off; he unfastened his pants, bringing out his straining erection and slid his fingers down its length. He'd had no idea when he'd picked Sev up that the young man would be any kind of a match for his demanding sexual appetite. Perhaps carnal talents were inherited like many other skills; if that were the case, Sev's mother must have been a very popular whore indeed; and on the sinful island of Ishmay, that was saying something.

But there was more to this experiment than punishment and entertainment for Demetrie's voyeuristic urges. The young gypsy had likely been a thief since the time he could walk, and lately, Stanley and the other staff had been quick to blame Sev for anything that went missing. Demetrie knew Sev wouldn't do anything as ridiculous as creep out of bed under the cover of night just to swipe a spatula from the kitchen or Stanley's favorite pen, but still, he wanted confirmation for his own peace of mind before he committed to something he'd decided on only recently.

Demetrie sighed, his erection flagging as his thoughts rattled around his brain. At the banquet, he'd spoken to the friend whose house had been burglarized in Nissim, and heard that the authorities had made an arrest. If that was the case, Demetrie had no doubt that Phineas would start implicating Sev, and if the rest of the aristocracy caught wind of it, they could force Demetrie to hand Sev over for prosecution. But no one could do anything without an

arrest warrant being approved by the victim himself—Count Michael Ferrier, and Michael wouldn't do so without having some compelling evidence.

For his own reassurance, Demetrie wanted evidence that his faith in Sev was not misplaced; that the respect Sev showed to the man whom he called *Master* was not just a convenient way into his home, and ultimately, into his heart.

Demetrie tucked himself back inside his pants with a frustrated grumble. He would force himself to refrain, just as he'd demanded of Sev.

On the screen, he watched the boy's eyes darting towards the door several times as though he were waiting for a predator to come through and attack him, before he moved from the spot where Demetrie had left him. Finally Sev began to look around. There were several drawers, cupboards, and boxes that were just begging for curious, nimble fingers to examine their contents. Demetrie saw Sev running his fingers lightly over their surfaces, but also the bedding. The gestures were so deliberate, that Demetrie had to believe there was something behind it.

Sev moved to the window for a moment, but seemed to have lost the urge to look out. He went back to the bed and lay down, turning Demetrie's pillow vertically on the bed, then embracing it as he laid his cheek upon it.

The Count closed his eyes with a heavy sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose. Sev's gesture with Demetrie's pillow was not something done at random; it was an expression of affection that worried him. Any time Sev had begun to touch him in a way that felt like tenderness, Demetrie had tried to discourage it by pushing him away. At first he'd believed that Sev was doing it because the boy felt it was expected of him. But witnessing Sev now, when he thought no one was watching, conjured up emotions in Demetrie that he didn't know how to manage. The longer he was with Sev, the more he found himself enjoying beyond what the boy could offer him physically.

"Damn it..." Demetrie murmured, watching Sev doze. Occasionally he'd stir and look towards the door, then breathe in Demetrie's scent from his pillow each time he laid his head down. False acts of admiration or affection were impossible to maintain for very long, and unnecessary when no one was

watching. The time restriction he'd initially placed on their arrangement had seemed appropriate, and Demetrie assumed that even before that he would start to lose interest. Or that Sev would prove himself the same as any other dreg—hating the oppression of the aristocracy, but willing to do anything if it meant getting some benefit above everyone else in the ghetto.

Sev's honesty and loyalty had been charming early on; but now, especially after suffering punishments no slave would ever have to endure, and no dreg would put up with, Demetrie knew that they had crossed a line. They were developing a bond that defied any conventional rules of a Master-slave arrangement.

From the cameras, Demetrie watched Sev sit up quickly and look at the clock, indicating that he'd heard the alarm. He got up from the bed and hid inside the bathroom as Stanley came into the room with Sev's lunch. Demetrie watched the corner of the monitor that had a view of the bathroom interior, a small smile of amusement playing across his full lips as, from inside, Sev pressed his ear against the door, listening for Stanley's departure. He didn't come out until he was satisfied that Stanley was gone.

"Good boy, Sev." Demetrie rocked back in his chair, tenting his fingers.

A few minutes later, Stanley rapped lightly on the door to Demetrie's study. Demetrie switched off the monitor, pressing the remote button that slid the painting back into place, "Come in, Stanley."

Stanley entered the room, standing with his usual rigidity near the door, "Sir, the representatives from the Belarria family are here. I am having lunch sent to the lounge."

"Thank you Stanley," Demetrie said, and then, "Wait."

Stanley halted with his fingers on the doorknob and turned back to face the Count. "Yes, Your Lordship?"

"Stanley, do you miss my father?"

Stanley's jaw tensed slightly. "Sir, in what way?"

Demetrie sighed, running his fingers through his hair. "Was he good to you? Did you feel that he loved you?"

Stanley shifted his weight between his feet. “Sir, you know he took me to his bed...”

“I don’t mean that—I mean, did you feel that when he died, that you had lost something very special to you?”

Stanley cleared his throat, his discomfort deepened the lines in his face, making him appear much older. “Your Lordship, your father gave me a lot of things, but love was not one of them. It was Aubrey he’d wanted, and Aubrey was dead.”

Demetrie hadn’t known Aubrey well before the young man died very tragically—caught up in a dreg-riot during one of the rare uprisings. He’d never really learned the details, and couldn’t remember much about the slave except that he’d had red hair, which was very uncommon; the only slaves Demetrie had ever seen had been either naturally or chemically blond. Perhaps when his father had bought Aubrey, red hair was more desirable for a slave, or maybe he’d dyed it himself.

“It was after Aubrey’s passing that your father became so angry and distant. You did not ever know him as a kind man.”

Demetrie met Stanley’s pale blue eyes; the servant’s words surprised him. “No. You’re right, I didn’t.”

“It is a shame, Sir. Your father had many regrets that manifested into the anger you experienced growing up. But he did love you, and, I believe, wished that you would honor him by carrying on the family line. Now, Your Lordship, the Belarria representatives are waiting.”

Sev had gone around the room, touching every item to burn the memory of the rare objects into his fingertips. Wood was cool, smooth, but warmed to the touch; the curtains felt soft and rough at the same time depending on which direction he rubbed the fabric. He wanted to know these things, because they belonged to Demetrie, and Sev feared that these objects might be as close to caressing Demetrie as he would ever get.

He sighed and returned to the bed, reaching for Demetrie's pillow and breathing in his scent. He lay down with it, resting his head upon it as he would Demetrie's chest, if only he were worthy enough to do so. Any attention Demetrie paid to him, be it punishment or pleasure, Sev tried to maintain his initial contentment. But he was coming to realize that he was selfish and possessive when it came to Demetrie. Sev had never had these feelings before, and he didn't like them one bit. Perhaps Demetrie had noticed as well, and that was why he seemed so distant at times. Sev only hoped that time and more punishment would be enough to rid him of these shameful emotions.

He tried to sleep, wishing there was a way to remain unconscious until Demetrie's return, but that, in itself, would be violating his commands. So Sev forced himself out of the big, empty bed and wandered into his own room, wondering how on earth he was going to pick out his own clothing. Since he'd arrived, Demetrie had commissioned several outfits to be made for him, everything from undergarments to a wrap of the softest yarn. Sev often wore that when waiting for Demetrie to finish the work in his study. Sev pulled out several pieces, laying them on the bed to try and decide which combination to wear today. Although there were a few pieces he hadn't worn yet, those that he'd taken out today were all very familiar, and seeing each one triggered a memory of the last time he'd had it on.

He dropped to his knees with a huff, feeling overwhelmed with something as trivial as picking out his own clothing. He wasn't supposed to have developed such feelings for his impermanent Master. Dependence was one thing, but this was something that went far beyond. Many times Sev had remembered how the other slaves had acted at the banquet—how they attended to their Masters with false smiles and dead eyes. And their Masters had returned the same expressions, all of it ingrained so deeply that there was no thought or emotion, only procedure. But when he looked at Demetrie, his heart expanded with what he read in Demetrie's dark eyes. No matter how cold his expression, there was always a fire there when he looked at Sev, and Sev couldn't help but feel warmed in response.

Sev scuttled backwards in surprise as Stanley suddenly entered into his room. “D-don’t look!” He quickly reached up to cover himself with one of the items lying on the bed.

Stanley turned his head away, his face pale as his Adam’s apple worked in his throat. “I’ve come to tell you some things that I think you should know.”

“What is it?” Sev fidgeted into the short pants he’d grabbed with a frown. “Does the Master know what you have come to tell me?”

Stanley declined to answer him, sitting himself on the end of Sev’s bed.

Sev snatched up a cropped fuzzy pullover and squirmed into it, then grabbed his white thigh-high stockings from the bed and sat down on the floor again to pull them on.

Stanley glanced at him, trying to retain his air of aloof detachment. When he’d first seen Sev, he was a scrawny, filthy, little creature with a dim mind and a dirty mouth. But somehow, he’d been transformed into a beautiful little concubine who bent willingly and easily to the Count’s demands, and managed to rise above the rest of them in his gilded ivory cage. This lowly mongrel dreg, deformed so beautifully, had become more like a precious love to the Count than anyone who was not born an aristocrat had the right to be. And Stanley hated him—even more so because Sev seemed oblivious to the truth of his privileged existence.

“At this moment, the Count is meeting with the representatives of a very high-ranking family in the aristocracy. The family runs many government offices, nearly as many as the Silvastrano family, and is very well respected. It would serve the Count’s best interests to marry the family’s youngest daughter and begin producing some heirs. None of this is going to happen as long as you’re here, so I am asking you nicely: how much money is it going to take to make you leave this house and never show your face here again?”

It took Sev some time to digest what Stanley had just told him, but it came as no real surprise. Demetrie’s own mother had made it clear that she expected him to marry soon, as had Walter when they’d argued at the memorial dinner for Demetrie’s father. The only reason, Sev had learned, that the pressure was suddenly on Demetrie after so many years was because with the elder

Silvastrano gone, there was no possibility of even a bastard son being born to take over the line.

“I don’t want any money. The Count has given me a length of time that he has asked me to stay, so I believe my dismissal is up to him.” Sev wasn’t trying to sound impudent, but he wasn’t going to leave any sooner than he had to without a very good reason. He was too selfishly in love with Demetrie to let him go without Demetrie telling him it was time.

Stanley ground his molars, his fists clenching and unclenching as he held in any display of temper. “Fine. If you won’t leave for the sake of his family, then perhaps you will leave for the sake of his heart.”

Those words bit Sev considerably deeper than the less personal matters of politics. “What do you mean?”

Stanley smoothed his hair over the top of his head with a well-manicured hand; his ankle bounced slightly as he crossed his legs. “I served the Count’s deceased father, Renaldo Silvastrano; in many ways he was like Demetrie, though his rebellion was held appropriately in check. Except for Aubrey.”

Sev had heard that name before—when Demetrie and his mother were arguing. “Aubrey and you were his slaves...”

“Aubrey was *not* a slave. He was a dreg whom the Count tried to mold into a slave and it ended up ruining his life!” The older servant closed his eyes, his jaw tensing and releasing as he struggled to remain calm. After taking a few deep breaths, he began to speak once more, his voice low and steady. “Renaldo was so enamored with Aubrey that he wasn’t thinking clearly. Aubrey still had family in the slums and he convinced the Count to take him home so that they could see that he was doing well. Of course, the Count was so in love that he had no reason to suspect there might be another motive. He drove Aubrey there willingly, and Aubrey, together with his family, took Renaldo hostage and made their demands...”

“What sort of demands?” Sev interrupted, doubting the complete validity of Stanley’s interpretation of events. It was obvious that he’d harbored a strong dislike of Sev from the beginning, and perhaps him having to share his beloved Renaldo with a dreg was most of the reason why.

“What difference does it make?” Stanley stood up, annoyance darkening his pale face. “He betrayed Renaldo and was killed for it. The point is that the Count was never the same man after that!”

Sev wasn't entirely certain how he should feel. The story was certainly a sad one, but it was unknown which party had suffered the most, or even what the suffering was all about. If Renaldo had truly loved Aubrey, and Aubrey had loved him in return, then they should have been able to come to a compromise long before it came down to matters of hostages and demands. “I don't know why you told me this—”

“Damn it but you are thick-skulled.” Stanley shook his head. “I believe that you are a dreg—and you will always be a dreg—and should it come down to matters of loyalty, your loyalty will lie with your own kind. I believe that Demetrie *thinks* he has... *feelings* for you, and that because of it, he will decline marriage and will end up dying penniless and alone in the ghetto! How long do you think you would stay by his side when he no longer has anything to offer you?”

“Why would that happen?” Sev narrowed his eyes, not bothering to offer a reply to Stanley's ridiculous question.

“Because if he doesn't begin to fulfill his obligations as an aristocrat, he will be stripped of his title and his assets will be seized. Because you are such a selfish little whore, it will be your fault if that happens!”

Sev drew back, affected by Stanley's characterization of him. Sev loved Demetrie, and wouldn't leave him even if he hadn't a penny to his name; but because of Sev's selfishness and desire to be loved by the Count, he risked causing Demetrie's downfall. Sev stared down at his feet, shame and heartbreak burning through him.

“Seven... please... if you truly care for the Count... then leave him... the Lady Belarria is a very kind and beautiful woman. He will be happy with her, and she will give him everything... even children... something you could never offer.”

Sev heard the words, but it all seemed to be coming from someplace underwater. The lunch he'd recently eaten threatened to come up in his throat

and he swayed, closing his eyes as he swallowed back the burning lump and tears stung his eyes. He was being foolish—he knew that Demetrie was going to send him away soon, yet he'd still clung onto the belief that something might change his mind and he'd ask him to stay. He never thought for a minute that if that happened he'd have to tell him no. "I have one obligation left to fulfill for the Count. After that, I will do what I must to ensure his happiness."

Demetrie couldn't stop looking at the clock on the wall as he sat in the lounge with the uncle and the brother of Lady Tosca Nicoletta Belarria. They had brought one of the family's slaves and Demetrie was becoming annoyed with each request they made of the woman: *Michelle, bring me the folder; Michelle, my glass is empty; Michelle, stand in front of the window, there's a glare*. And like most young women of any class, she seemed both aroused and afraid of the attractive young Count. He suspected her Mistress, the Lady Belarria, would be no different.

As was custom for these kinds of meetings that would ideally result in an offer of marriage, Demetrie was shown photos of the woman, along with the family's financial records and any investments that could be considered part of her dowry.

Lady Belarria was a lovely nineteen-year-old girl, who was just like all of the other lovely young women of her standing. She rose every morning at eight, began vocal lessons at ten, met with her contemporaries at one of the ineffectual ladies charity groups at noon, dance lessons from one until two thirty...

Demetrie stifled a yawn, handing the piles of paperwork back to the uncle. "All very impressive, gentlemen, but I fear I must decline and apologize for your wasted efforts."

The two men looked at each other, then at Demetrie with widened eyes. It was the brother who spoke up first. "Your Lordship, might we know why you are declining the Lady? She is a lovely young woman, active in the

community, talented... and I believe you'll find our family's financial status more than sufficient."

Demetrie lit up a cigar, exhaling the smoke slowly as he leaned back in his chair. "I agree, she is a very good catch; but I am not interested in marriage to a woman, nor do I desire to produce offspring, and I won't pretend otherwise." He watched the two men fidgeting in the wake of his disclosure.

"Count Demetrie, are you saying that you are a homosexual? It is not unheard of for a husband to take a male slave to supplement that which he cannot get from his wife..."

"I am aware of this," Demetrie said. He balanced his elbow on the arm of his chair, watching the ash collect on the end of his cigar. He smiled a little, remembering how Sev had caught the ashes in the car—as if they were dangerous yet precious things.

"Yet you still decline?"

"Gentlemen," Demetrie began, annoyed by the interruption of his reverie, "as I'm certain you're aware, I have taken on a young man whom I find most suitable. He is not a slave, but a gypsy, a dreg, and a mongrel at that. I refuse to give him up for you, my mother, or the Lady herself. I'm sorry if you find that insulting, but I mean no insult to your family—just your politics." Demetrie looked at his watch and stood up. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have an appointment in the city. One of my servants will show you out."

Demetrie rose and left them, ringing for someone to show them to the door. He knew what he'd done would cause another uproar among the elites, but he was tired of playing these games.

CHAPTER 8

“I’m sorry we didn’t really get a chance to speak at the banquet last night,” Count Michael Ferrier said, sitting back on the sofa in his private hotel suite. His wife, the Countess Rebecca Holt-Ferrier, had already returned to their home in Paristad, the small noble district that ruled the northeastern regions outside of Nissim. The couple, like many others, had a marriage made for the sake of politics, and it seemed that the two hadn’t managed to form even so much as a friendship between them.

“It’s fine, I wasn’t exactly being sociable,” Demetrie admitted from the chair opposite him. The men had been classmates together in the private schools they attended growing up. Michael was a handsome man with wavy golden hair and an easy smile. It was only because Michael had gotten married and fallen in with the expectations of his title that they hadn’t gotten together as regularly as either man would have liked.

“Ah, well, it’s understandable. I was with Rebecca last night as it was.” Michael shook his head at Vera, the homely young female slave his wife had sent with him as she tripped and nearly spilled the coffee. Michael didn’t believe in keeping slaves. He had a few freedmen on staff, but it was his wife who seemed to be preoccupied with ownership. She’d left the female slave behind simply out of spite, knowing that her husband would have found some enjoyment in a male. Michael’s blue eyes followed the slave girl as if his gaze could keep her from fumbling again.

Demetrie wondered if his presence made her nervous; she seemed to be trembling and cast many blushing glances his way.

“Vera, you’re excused. I think that Count Silvastrano and I can manage from here.”

Vera curtseyed, bowing her head with a blush, and scrambled out of the room.

“You do that to women, you know... normally she’s at least half-efficient,” Michael blamed Demetrie.

“They have all heard the rumors,” Demetrie shrugged.

“What rumors? That you’re a sadist? Really, Demetrie, you’re a masochist because you continue to make yourself suffer by not just accepting your lot and giving in.”

“Like you did.” Demetrie sipped his black coffee with a smirk.

“Yes.” Michael sighed, gazing out the window.

“So how is Rebecca—still hates me, I’m certain?”

“Oh, more than ever, possibly even more than we hate each other. She’s finally pregnant, *thank god*. I don’t know if it’s mine, but frankly, it’s a load off of my mind.” Michael waved his hand, leaning forward to pick up his cup and saucer. Michael was always elegant, very proper. He’d probably been attracted to Demetrie when they were children because of Demetrie’s rebellious streak. It had actually been Demetrie who had taken his virginity because Michael was too afraid to approach anyone else with the truth of his sexual preference. In their world, titles and politics meant everything. Marriages were formed strictly as a means of leverage and alliance, and offspring were produced to continue the cycle. “I envy you, Demetrie. Holding out as long as you have... I was never strong enough... I’m not a brave man.”

Demetrie gazed out the window over Michael’s shoulder. “Sometimes I wish I could just go quietly to the slaughter with the rest of the lambs.” Although he’d been too young at the time to have known of the word, Demetrie had realized shortly after coming to live with his father that their caste was all about *hypocrisy*. If his mother had waited until he was a teenager to send him to live with his father then it might not have been so obvious that their marriage was nothing but a sham. His father obviously preferred young men to women, and maybe that was the reason he was so cruel to his own son; maybe he hated the fact that there was a male under his roof who would be his competition.

“Still, my mother is trying. Fortunately for me, there isn’t a woman over the age of consent who doesn’t fear or outright despise me.” Demetrie smiled, knowing full well that by the end of the week, the news of his rejection of marriage would cause yet another uproar.

“Well, after seeing your attendant at the event the other night, you’ve definitely opened up the floor for a whole new set of rumors. What an exotic young creature... He isn’t a minor, is he?”

Demetrie shook his head. Not that it would have mattered, because dreg minors were not subject to any protections under the law.

“He was really striking—even without you dressing him up. Rebecca was appalled, just as everyone else who was secretly lusting after him. Am I right in hearing that you picked him up in the ghetto?”

“I won him in a card game, although I wouldn’t have if it wasn’t for you.”

“Me?” Michael drew back in surprise with a little laugh.

“Remember the break-in at your vacation home in Nissim?”

Michael sighed. “Ugh, yes. I knew we shouldn’t have built anything that close to the city, but Rebecca wanted to be able to do some shopping when we stayed there. So I relented and had it designed as an *impenetrable fortress*.” Michael made air-quotes when he said the word. “Fortunately, there wasn’t anything of any great value taken, but I’m still stymied by the way the guards said the thief gained entry. Scaled the wall like a damn spider, then managed to work himself in under the eaves. Well, the authorities finally caught up with the old man and there’s no way that ogre could work himself through a crowd, much less an uneven gap about this wide.” Michael demonstrated the size with his hands—something Demetrie could easily imagine Sev fitting into. “I’ve had to extend my stay in Athena because the old coot claims he’ll tell me the whereabouts of his rubber-boned accomplice. Frankly, I think it’s a load of crap. I suspect one of the guards might have helped the old man... but what does all of this have to do with your card game?”

Demetrie shouldn’t have been completely surprised that Phineas would talk once he was caught, which was why he’d been determined to speak with Michael before Sev’s name could come up. “Michael, that young man you saw last night—his name is Seven—it just so happens, I took him from Phineas—the ‘ogre’ currently in custody. Seven is an acrobat, or was until Phineas got hold of him.”

“What?” Michael laughed, “Demetrie, what have you gotten yourself into this time?”

“Michael, I care very much about this young man’s future. I intend to release him from our contract at the end of the month, and I want to be certain he is able to remain free.”

Michael stopped laughing, his brows tilted upwards as he examined the determination in Demetrie’s face. “Truly? So you have become smitten with this strange alien?”

Demetrie sighed, dropping his head. “Smitten... yes.”

“And what makes you so sure he’ll want to leave you?”

“I won’t be giving him a reason to depend on me. I have been liquidating my assets and depositing the funds into private accounts since my father took ill three years ago. At the end of the month, I am selling the property and I intend to live off of the proceeds until they are depleted.”

“But the other investments and deposits? Demetrie, if you become exiled... You have no family. Your mother—she’ll be given control over all of your assets!” Michael looked as though he wanted to jump out of his seat and smack Demetrie across the face, which was probably exactly what he wanted to do. But Michael could never imagine living below his means. Poverty of any sort terrified him as much as it did the rest of their caste, and the ways to avoid it were to play by the rules and accumulate as much wealth as possible.

“Everything, Michael; all of it is to be put into Seven’s name. I have already met with an attorney and declared Sev my legal kin. All I need is for you to sign the paperwork that proves this is being done of my own free will and I am of sound mind.”

“What? Demetrie—! Truly, you must not be of sound mind to—”

Demetrie held up his hand, quieting his friend. As usual, his face was unreadable, and his demeanor unnervingly calm. “I have already declined the Belarria family’s offer. At the end of the month, the aristocratic elites will put me into exile status in order to force me into compliance. I won’t comply, I will disappear. I already have an empty house in Ishmay. I don’t want a title

anymore. I'm giving it to Sev, along with my name. Although he won't have the official responsibilities or privileges of an aristocrat, he will have the security of being protected as a Silvastrano."

Michael gaped, then realized he was doing so and closed his mouth, wiping at the corners in embarrassment. "Demetrie, do you know what you're doing? You're essentially making him your legal *wife*, and by giving him your title, a widow at that... I don't know what to say... have you told him any of this?" Michael was trying to maintain his composure, but his body twitched as he held himself in check.

Demetrie shook his head. "I don't want him to know until it's time for me to leave. That way he'll understand that for once in his life, he will truly have all the power he needs to make his own choices." Demetrie smiled faintly, imagining how happy Sev would be, knowing that for once and forever he was in charge of his own destiny.

"But Demetrie..." Michael pleaded, finally sagging under the weight of Demetrie's determination.

"Michael," Demetrie sighed, staring up at the ceiling, "we both know that I was never cut out for this. I am not my father, I'll never be my father, and I don't want to go through the motions just to maintain my tiny ledge on the high mountain anymore. Until I met someone with nothing, I never realized how precarious the balance of power was. If it is only having a name and a title that separates me from the bottom, then I am willing to give it to Sev and lift him up."

Michael sighed and ran a trembling hand through his hair. "My god, Demetrie... I've heard you complain for years about the hypocrisy of the system, but never could I imagine that you would actually go this far..."

Demetrie's eyes were downcast. "You know that until the dregs rise up against the aristocracy, this system will not change."

Michael nodded. "I heard that Athena cleared out another section of her ghetto last night. What are they calling it these days? Oh yes, '*progressive beautification*'." He shook his head slowly. Soon there would be no ghettos; the dregs would be buried under swimming pools, shopping centers, and

aristolitical complexes. The sign of a thriving society was its lack of a lower caste, and since raising dregs up economically, socially, and politically would create a strain on the wealthy, it made far more sense to eliminate the problem more permanently by eliminating those who suffered it.

Michael finally raised his blue eyes to his friend's earnest face. "This boy has certainly done a number on you."

"Michael... please, do this for me..." Demetrie looked down at his hands clasped as if in prayer. "Sev is... different."

"I expect he would be." Michael shook his head. "Is this really what you want, Demetrie?"

Demetrie met his friend's eyes. "Absolutely."

Michael sighed and stared at the floor for a few minutes as he considered his response. Finally he returned his gaze to Demetrie. "Before I agree, I'd like to meet this young man for whom you intend to sacrifice everything."

Demetrie nodded. "Of course, I've already anticipated as much. Thank you, Michael."

"Save it. As much as I trust you, Demetrie, if I think for a moment that he has any clue about anything you have done for him, I will be forced to assume he's taking advantage of my dearest friend and I will hand him over to the authorities for his part in the burglary." Michael watched Demetrie's face for any hint of a reaction, but his friend remained stoic.

"I've told Sev to expect he will be entertaining my guest. Will you return with me?"

Michael sighed, looking around his room. "Fine, I'll pack a bag and leave Vera behind to deal with the rest. Rebecca will be livid if she learns that I am going out unchaperoned with my untamed ex-lover, but it can't be helped." The small smile told Demetrie that Michael really wasn't bothered by the situation himself.

Demetrie smiled and winked. "Maybe she'll divorce you for it."

Michael rolled his eyes. “No, she’ll probably just make me leave my cock home in a jar from now on, so you’d better make this worth my while.”

Sev didn’t remember falling asleep. He’d been wandering in a fog for the past two days since his conversation with Stanley. At one point the day before, he hadn’t noticed Laurence following him until the slave cornered him and tried to feel him up. The hard contraption Laurence clutched in place of the expected softness of Sev’s flaccid cock had confused him and given Sev enough time to realize what was happening. Sev had punched him so hard he’d broken Laurence’s nose, and so he’d run to the familiar comfort of Demetrie’s room to await his final punishment. Sev couldn’t be arrested without the Count’s explicit permission, such was the power of the aristocracy; but the threat kept Sev crying in dread of his judgment once Demetrie came home. Last night he’d apparently cried himself to sleep.

Sev opened his eyes, the lashes stuck together with crusty remnants of tears, as he became aware of someone shaking him gently.

“My Seven, I’m home,” Demetrie murmured.

“Oh Master!” Sev cried, wanting to reach for him, but instead he pulled away, curling into a tight ball. “I have committed such a terrible crime...”

“Crime?” Demetrie looked around the room, knowing that if Sev had stolen anything, he would have been a fool to stick around. Because Sev was sleeping unclothed in his bed, it was obvious he hadn’t found a way to remove his chastity belt. Then Demetrie noticed the bruising on Sev’s knuckles.

“Sev, what happened to your hand?”

Sev sucked in a trembling breath, knowing he had to tell Demetrie the truth. “Master—I didn’t mean to—but he touched me and I—”

“Who touched you?” Demetrie was trying hard to keep the anger out of his voice.

“L-Laurence... he must have asked if it was all right, but I didn’t answer, and then when I realized, I... I hit him.”

Despite the fact that Sev was beside himself with dread, Demetrie couldn't help but smile. "You hit Laurence?"

"Yes, Master... in the nose!" Sev wailed.

"Why? Because you were afraid I would find out if he touched you?"

Sev shook his head. "No, because I belong only to you, Master! You are the only one I..." Sev stopped before he said too much. *Before he said the word 'love'*. He was surprised to hear not anger from the Count, but laughter, and Demetrie pulled Sev into his arms.

"Good boy, Sev. He had no right to touch you and I am proud that you fought back." Demetrie brought Sev's battered knuckles to his lips, kissing them gently. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, Master... I am now." Sev smiled weakly through the tears. He was so happy to see Demetrie and so relieved that he was not angry, that he allowed himself to forget the promise he'd made to Stanley—if only for a moment.

"Sev, did you remember that I was bringing someone here today?" Demetrie asked him softly, sitting on the bed and stroking Sev's messy hair.

Sev nodded, wiping his eyes. "Yes, Master. I will entertain for you."

"Very good, Sev... but not until later this evening. I want to spend some time with you alone before you are introduced... I've missed you very much." Demetrie kissed Sev's forehead gently, then began unbuttoning his shirt and fished out the key for the chastity belt.

Sev watched him release the small lock, and held his breath as Demetrie took off the straps and the plate, then released his genitals from the tight ring. Sev gasped as the blood flowed instantly to his cock.

Demetrie chuckled. "I've started a bath for us. Help undress me so we can make use of it."

Sev might have protested; but after two days of being held in the sweaty confines of his chastity belt, he certainly needed one. He worked at the buttons of Demetrie's shirt as Demetrie unfastened his pants. Once they had it all

undone, Demetrie slipped out of his shirt and slid his pants and underwear down together, pulling off his socks as he stepped out of each leg. He held out his big hand to Sev. "Come with me."

Sev took Demetrie's hand and let him pull him out of the bed and against his body. He melted inside Demetrie's arms as the Count held him and kissed his neck.

"It feels like it's been weeks since I've touched you, Sev..." Demetrie didn't want to think about how much he was going to miss him once all was said and done. He was going to Ishmay, where he could easily buy any companionship he might require, possibly even one who had a face similar to Sev's, but none of them would be the young man he held in his arms right now.

Fortunately they made it to the bathroom before the tub overflowed, and they rinsed quickly together in the shower before getting into the scented water.

Having Michael here willing to give Sev a chance was such a weight off of Demetrie's mind that for the first time, he let his guard down with Sev and allowed himself to enjoy Sev the way he deserved to be savored. Demetrie sat in the tub with Sev straddling his thighs. Their cocks pressed hard together underneath the water as Demetrie cupped the firm curves of Sev's ass in his hands and pressed his lips to Sev's ear. "Sev..."

"Master... please, may I touch you?" Sev asked him breathlessly, his hands gripping the rim of the tub to keep him from doing so without permission.

Demetrie smiled. "I'd be disappointed if you didn't."

Sev was so happy he nearly sobbed. He'd wanted for so long to touch Demetrie's skin, but such gentle caresses were as intimate as kissing on the lips, and now that Demetrie allowed one, he quickly succumbed to the other.

Sev sighed as Demetrie's mouth found his in a very gentle, yet hungry kiss. Sev felt the contact of their lips tingle all the way to his loins, and he throbbed against Demetrie's belly. Demetrie smiled against Sev's mouth, then teased his lips with his tongue, coaxing his to come out or to let him inside. Sev parted

his lips against Demetrie's and the Count's tongue darted into his wet heat, savoring him, at the same time his finger crept up and pressed inside of Sev beneath the water. Sev whimpered softly, moving his hips as Demetrie finger-fucked him lightly.

"Master," Sev moaned into his mouth.

"What do you want, Sev?" Demetrie murmured, sliding his lips to his ear, nibbling along his throat.

"Your cock... I want your cock inside of me, Master..." and then Sev added, "Please?"

Demetrie chuckled and removed his probing hand, then clasped Sev around the waist and lifted him, helping him to settle back down and guide Demetrie's cock inside. "Is it okay, Sev?" Demetrie asked through gritted teeth as Sev's long-missed heat enveloped him.

"Master... it's so good..." Sev moaned, winding his fingers through Demetrie's slick hair.

Demetrie let Sev drive the force and depth of his penetration as he flicked the silver nipple ring with his tongue, sucking on the hard nub of flesh that held it. Sev cried out, arching himself against Demetrie as the thick cock filled him so completely inside. Demetrie left the ring alone, afraid that they might accidentally pull it out in the heat of the moment, and reclaimed Sev's delicious wet mouth as he curled his fingers around Sev's cock and pumped him under the water.

Sev hadn't felt so much as a caress of fabric against his cock for the last two days, and all of it was just too incredible to manage to hold back for long.

"Mm-Master! Coming!" Sev cried out, too late to stop it.

Demetrie sucked hard on Sev's neck, mingling the sensations of pleasure and slight pain as Sev climaxed, tightening around Demetrie's shaft until Demetrie, too, let go with a yell. "Fuck, Sev!" Demetrie buried his face in Sev's shoulder, his eyes squeezed tightly shut as Sev's ass milked him dizzy. He blew out a long breath as the aftershocks finally subsided and he drifted slowly back to reality. *Christ, it was going to be hard to give this up, but it*

wasn't just the sex he was going to miss. "Sev." Demetrie raised his chin and kissed Sev softly, moved by the tears that glistened in the boy's eyes when he smiled. He was happy that he could do this for Sev, that he could give him a life free from harm, free from poverty and disease, where he could choose whatever he wanted, rather than suffer the choices others made in their own interests.

"Thank you Master," Sev murmured, hugging Demetrie. "Thank you for coming back home."

Sev was not nervous as he stood behind the curtain on the small, raised platform in the room. Demetrie wanted Sev to perform for their guest before dinner, *so that they'd have something to talk about* while they ate.

"Are you ready, Sev?" Demetrie asked from the other side of the curtain.

"Ready, Master," Sev whispered back. Demetrie peeked in and Sev smiled, blushing to see the pride in his Master's gaze. He could tell that Demetrie and his guest had been drinking, but it wasn't the same as the night of the memorial dinner for Demetrie's father. Demetrie seemed lighthearted and happier since his return home from his business trip.

"Oh really, Demetrie, do get on with it!" Sev heard another man scold with a laugh.

Demetrie stepped back and Sev heard him addressing his audience. "Please allow me to proudly introduce you to my beautiful ballerina, Seven."

The curtain was pulled away from the little platform and the visitor gasped when he laid eyes on the creature inside.

Sev was en pointe in black satin ballet slippers, with his spine curved back, his face tipped up, and his raised leg bent until his toes touched the top of his head. One arm was straight up from his body, and the other held out in front, working as a counterpoise to maintain his balance. He wore a black-and-white vertical-striped corset that stopped below his nipples, black-and-white horizontal-striped thigh-high stockings, and a small, flared black tutu that jutted out from his hips, doing almost nothing to cover the white satin thong

beneath. His eyes were lined in black, as were his white-painted lips, and his cheeks and temples were streaked with shimmering red glitter. All of it made Sev feel like he was truly a performer once more. The look of pride and lust on Demetrie's face as Sev slowly pivoted into another graceful, yet impossible, position was worth more praise than any words alone.

“My god, Demetrie...” Michael gasped. “He's exquisite...”

Sev had barely noticed the man sitting next to Demetrie until he spoke. But he knew that he was Demetrie's closest friend, and could see he was a very handsome man, though at the moment he appeared to be quite drunk. He was clutching Demetrie's arm, exclaiming, “My god!” and “Did you see that?” each time Sev made a move.

Sev met Demetrie's dark eyes, and Demetrie smiled with pride, making Sev smile shyly in return. Michael watched the exchange between them, finally quiet, as Sev finished his performance by walking on his hands to meet the men, one leg dangling down over his head and the other bent so the shin was parallel to the ground. He stopped and brought both legs over his head until his toes touched the floor, then slowly unfurled until he was standing upright and facing them.

“My god!” Michael exclaimed once more and rose to his feet, applauding loudly. “Incredible! Absolutely incredible! If I hadn't seen it—”

“Michael,” Demetrie laughed, standing up to pat his friend on the shoulder. “You'll give him a big head and I'll never get him to lie still after that!”

Sev blushed, smiling coyly as he realized Demetrie had likely explained their physical relationship to Michael, and Michael's small leer confirmed it.

“Indeed,” he said, looking Sev over approvingly.

Demetrie moved to Sev and gently placed his hands on his hips, whispering in his ear, “Go to the kitchen and get yourself something to eat. I'll call for you later.” He nipped Sev's ear, sucking on the lobe a moment before letting him go with a small, promising growl.

Sev nodded, his face flushing as he tried to keep from becoming aroused in an outfit that left no room to hide much of anything. He bowed to the two men

then scampered off towards the kitchen, comforted by the hope that everything would be back to normal for a while now that Demetrie was back home.

Before Sev had dressed for his performance, Demetrie had brought Laurence to his room to apologize. From the way he moved, Sev assumed he'd been punished, but unlike Sev, Laurence obviously took no pleasure in it. He'd gone to his knees in front of Sev, his face red and eyes blackened from his broken nose and he'd apologized sincerely to him. Sev had felt badly for him, and accepted his apology quickly, not wanting to see the man suffer any more. Afterwards he'd begged Demetrie not to dismiss Laurence and Demetrie reluctantly agreed.

Gerta tsked and shook her head as Sev entered the kitchen for dinner. Mary's face turned crimson.

"What's he got you wearing now?" Gerta huffed, but smiled nonetheless.

"You look beautiful, Seven," Laurence said politely.

Sev smiled, happy to see that there seemed to be no bad feelings between them. "Thank you, Laurence."

"Eh, Stanley, look at our ballerina!" Gerta called as Stanley entered the room behind them. Sev and Stanley hadn't spoken for two days, but Sev wasn't quite ready to end that arrangement.

"Excuse me," he said softly and began to rise, but Stanley pressed a firm hand to his shoulder.

"Sev, stay. I have something I want to say to you."

He must have indicated something to the others with his expression because the rest of the servants suddenly remembered they had other things to do outside of the kitchen.

"I told you, I'll leave when..."

"Sev, I have come to apologize for the things that I said to you."

Stanley released his shoulder, the touch softening to almost a caress as he came around to sit on the wooden stool next to Sev.

"What? Why?"

“I believe I was unfairly taking my own frustrations with the younger Count Silvastrano out on you. What Demetrie does is not controlled by anyone but Demetrie.”

Sev narrowed his eyes. “Then why bother apologizing?”

Stanley sighed and looked into Sev’s face. “Seven, I will be leaving with His Lordship, Count Ferrier, when he returns to his home tomorrow. I would like you to know that there is a chance you could come, too, when it is time for Demetrie to let you go.”

“Please.” Sev looked down at the table. “I don’t want to think about that now.”

“Alright,” Stanley said softly. “I just wanted to let you know, that you don’t have to worry. You can stay here to finish out your contract, and when it’s done, I’m certain that Count Ferrier will take you in as well.”

Sev closed his eyes, drawing back his emotions so that no one would see him cry. While part of him was relieved that he might not have to return to the ghetto, the fact that his time was still finite, and Demetrie would likely be getting married to fulfill his political obligations, was breaking his heart. “Thank you for telling me,” Sev managed to force out, through his tightening throat.

“Good luck to you Seven. Perhaps I will see you again soon. I promise to be kinder to you this time.” Stanley touched his back lightly, then rose from the stool and left.

It might have seemed like a miraculous coincidence that the rest of the staff returned to the kitchen in the wake of Stanley’s departure had Laurence not said, “So Stanley’s leaving too?”

Gerta whacked him in the back of the head with her meaty red hand.

Sev smiled, though it didn’t make the hurt go away.

“But that’s good news Seven! We’ll all be together again!” Laurence rubbed his stinging scalp as he tried to cheer up Sev.

“What do you mean?”

Laurence ducked another smack. “Geeze, Gerta, will you stop it? Somebody had to tell him something!”

“That’s up to the Count to tell him and not you!”

“Tell me what?” Sev insisted, standing up. “Is the Count letting you all go?”

“You—you, never you mind you little devil,” Mary stammered, clutching her apron as if it were rosary beads. “Thank god I’m going elsewhere!” She huffed and stalked out of the kitchen, keeping one eye on Sev.

Laurence had moved out of Gerta’s reach. “He’s selling the estate... must be moving in with the Belarria’s.”

“Oh,” Sev said softly, wishing he hadn’t asked.

“Seven, Their Lordships are ready for you!” Stanley called in from the hallway, and Sev stood up, realizing he hadn’t eaten a thing but couldn’t possibly do so now even if he’d had an appetite.

He met Stanley just outside, pushing a large cart full of fruit and pastries. “What is all of that?” Sev asked him, noticing several bottles of liquor rattling underneath.

“Dessert, apparently. The two men haven’t gotten together since Count Michael was married five years ago. I dare say it appears they are trying to make up for lost time.”

The two men were laughing, and Sev could smell Demetrie’s cigar when Stanley rapped on the door to their room.

“Your Lordships, dessert is here!” Stanley called through.

“Thank you, Stanley; send it in,” Demetrie called back.

“Go on.” Stanley nodded to the cart and pushed open the door. Sev seemed uncertain, but took the handle and pushed it inside.

They were back in the lounge. “Ah! Dessert!” Michael exclaimed, looking Sev over approvingly.

The men were down to their shirtsleeves; Michael's cheeks were flushed pink from the alcohol he'd already had and his smile was wide and genuine. Demetrie also smiled, but it was far more subdued and perhaps a little suggestive as he turned to Sev.

Sev felt oddly overexposed as he fought his body's reaction, and longed for the safety of the chastity belt.

As if Demetrie heard Sev's silent worry, he said, "Why don't you change into something you can be more comfortable in... the halter top with the silver stitching and those short breeches with the sash?"

Sev breathed a small sigh of relief. "Yes, Master; I'll return right away." He gave a small bow to Demetrie and one to Michael, then scurried off towards his room.

He didn't want to start ruminating about the gossip from the kitchen. Was this then a small celebration of his marriage acceptance? If it were, then Sev decided he should stop wasting the precious little time he had left with Demetrie by worrying.

He went to his room and dressed quickly in the outfit Demetrie had specified, feeling a lot less naked. When he opened his bedroom door to leave, Michael was standing in the hall.

"Oh! Seven, thank goodness a familiar face!" Michael gasped, his speech slurring.

Sev couldn't help but smile; Michael and Demetrie were almost complete opposites in appearance and demeanor, but they obviously shared enough in common to be considered *true* friends.

"I was looking for the lavatory and ended up all turned around... not surprising considering how much I've had to drink," Michael laughed.

"Your Lordship, Sir, I can show you the way," Sev offered.

"Would you? Oh, you are really such a dear boy." Michael put his hand on Sev's shoulder, and Sev led him a few doors down to the bathroom.

“Ah! It was here all along!” Michael stopped in the doorway and considered Sev once more. “Seven... what would you think of me offering you a very large sum of money to come home with me tomorrow?”

Sev felt his breath catch painfully in his chest. “Y-Your Lordship... the offer is very kind, but...” he sighed and his shoulders slumped as he bowed his head. “I beg your forgiveness, Lordship, but I would decline. I would like to remain by my Master for as long as he’ll have me.”

“Even if that means when he lets you go, you’ll have to return to the ghetto?”

Sev nodded. “I know it sounds foolish, Your Lordship, and I mean no disrespect, but if given the choice, I would rather spend every moment I can with my Master than sacrifice any of it for money.”

Michael was silent for such a long time that Sev had to look up at him to see if maybe he’d fallen asleep standing up. But their eyes made contact, and Sev saw an earnestness in Michael’s gaze.

“Your Lordship, shall I wait here to be certain you find your way back?” Sev swallowed hard. He thought that it was something he should offer, even though he was aware he’d be making Demetrie wait.

“It’s alright, Seven. Go on to your Master.”

Demetrie was standing by the window, smoking a cigar as he stared out through his dark reflection.

Sev wasn’t certain what to tell Demetrie about the conversation he had with Michael. He didn’t want to say anything that might insult his friend or anger Demetrie, but he knew he had to speak up.

“Master?”

Demetrie turned, and Sev saw him smile. “You look very nice, Sev.”

“Thank you, Master... I... I have something to tell you...”

“Can it wait until later tonight?”

Sev felt a bit of the weight being lifted from his shoulders. If they talked about it later, it wouldn't have a chance of spoiling the evening ahead. "Yes, Master."

"Thank you, Sev." Demetrie held out his hand and Sev walked towards him, ready to drop to his knees. Demetrie stopped him, placing his fingers under Sev's chin to tilt his face up, and kissed his lips softly.

Sev felt a sweet spark from the contact, which traveled down through his arms and torso, making his fingers tingle. He wasn't certain what to do with his hands, and Demetrie must have sensed it. He caught Sev's long fingers, threading his own with them until their palms met and they clasped hands.

"Hey, no fair keeping all of the sweets to yourself," Michael said from the doorway.

Sev, remembering his lesson from Demetrie, did not draw away from the kiss.

He felt Demetrie smile against his lips. "Very good, my Sev," Demetrie murmured and finally released him, looking back at Michael. "How long have you been spying on us?"

"It's hardly spying with you leaving the door wide open."

Sev bowed his head, kneeling quickly to receive his punishment. "Master, it was me who left the door open..."

"Oh *my*," Michael said in a low voice, "you certainly have him well trained."

Demetrie patted Sev's head. "It's alright, Sev. No harm done." The Count walked over to the dessert cart and took a bottle from below. "I didn't have to train him. Sev is docile and submissive by nature... perfect in every way."

Sev remained kneeling, but his cheeks reddened. He could feel Demetrie's lust warming him from where he stood across the room.

"I'd say I have to agree with you there, Demetrie." Michael smiled at Sev, something that seemed almost reassuring.

“Stand up, Sev,” Demetrie said to him, pouring some of the amber liquid from the bottle into a glass.

Sev rose to his feet and moved gracefully to his Master’s side.

“Here, taste this, see what you think.” Demetrie handed the glass to Sev, then poured one for himself and another for Michael.

Sev sniffed at it tentatively. It smelled sharp but sweet, and burned his nostrils.

“Sip it slowly, just take some off your lips.” Demetrie dipped his finger in his own drink and spread the sweet liqueur over Sev’s upper lip.

Watching Demetrie’s face, Sev’s pink tongue ran slowly over the wet amber shimmer. The flavor was like caramel.

Demetrie was breathing through his mouth. “Yes, like that.”

“May I have some more, Master?” Sev asked, his eyes veiled, his voice low and seductive.

Demetrie grinned before taking a sip from his glass, then he kissed Sev, flooding his mouth with the sweet liqueur. It was smooth and warm and delicious with Demetrie’s tongue, and Sev leaned into the kiss, seeking out more flavor from the Count’s heated mouth.

Demetrie broke off slowly. “Forgive me, Michael, but this angel tempts me so.”

“Does he now?” Michael chuckled and took his drink from the cart where Demetrie had left it.

“Master, shall I remove the items from the cart?” Sev asked, still breathless from the kiss.

Demetrie’s dark eyes scanned over Sev’s mouth, then up to his eyes. “I think that would be best.” He stepped back to give Sev the space he needed to get past him and watched as the young man transferred the dishes and alcohol to the low rectangular table centered between two very large leather couches.

Gradually, Demetrie and Michael made their way over, sitting on opposite sides.

“Would you like to join us, Sev?” Michael asked.

Sev’s gaze darted quickly to Demetrie who nodded and patted a spot on the cushion next to him. “Yes, join us. Have some dessert.”

“Demetrie tells me you were a gypsy?” Michael prompted as he watched Sev take a seat.

“I was, Lordship...” Sev automatically drew his legs up, crossing them underneath him on the cushion.

“You may call me Michael, Sev.” Michael sipped at his drink.

“Oh, Your lordship, it would not be right to...”

Demetrie interrupted with his compromise. “You may call him ‘Sir’, Sev.”

“Yes, Master; and thank you, Sir.” Sev inclined his head towards Michael.

Michael’s eyes were on Sev but he was watching Demetrie as well. He’d never seen his friend so enamored with anyone—and that included him. Demetrie barely took his gaze off of the lovely young acrobat, and the attraction was not purely physical. Sev was someone who craved the attention he got from Demetrie, and from what Demetrie had told him, Sev took his punishments well. But far from feeling any kind of jealousy towards them, Michael was glad. Yet he was saddened that Demetrie felt the best thing to do for Sev was to leave him to start a new life of his own making.

“Seven, tell me, how long have you been able to contort your body so?”

Sev had been taking small sips of his drink since he’d sat down. Because alcohol was a new experience to him and he’d had his first tastes on an empty stomach, he was beginning to feel very warm, and when he moved his eyes, it seemed to take the room a few seconds to catch up.

“Sir, I believe since I was born... but I can’t remember that far back, forgive me.” Sev became distracted by contemplating the accuracy of his statement and the odd sound of his voice to his own ears.

“Slow down, Sev.” Demetrie coaxed the nearly empty glass from Sev’s fingers and offered him a small pastry.

Instead of taking the pastry with his hands, Sev nibbled it from Demetrie's fingers, making certain to lick then suck them clean. He felt very lewd and sensual, forgetting his surroundings as he closed his eyes and uttered a soft moan.

"Michael..." Demetrie hesitated, holding himself in check.

Michael was breathless, already adjusting himself through his trousers. "Please, just pretend I'm not here."

Demetrie did just that—for a while at least. He thrust his fingers gently inside Sev's mouth while his other hand slipped down to cup the boy between his open thighs. Sev sighed and lifted his hips, pressing his growing erection to Demetrie's warm, solid palm.

In one swift movement, Demetrie had pulled his fingers away and captured Sev's mouth with his own. He pushed him backwards on the leather sofa, and it groaned softly beneath their weight. Briefly, Demetrie's fingers held Sev's jaw, feeling the movement as they fed from one another with tongues and teeth and breath.

Sev's body felt strangely numb and overly receptive at the same time. It took his brain a few seconds to catch up with the sensations Demetrie was eliciting as his fingers caressed and explored, and clothing began falling away.

Demetrie was lying partially on top of him, kissing and nipping at his jaw and neck as one hand worked along Sev's bare cock. Sev felt Demetrie's words hot and moist in his ear. "Sev, look at him..."

Sev could only open his eyes to thin slits, but he watched Michael through his lashes, saw Michael's lips swollen with arousal, and his hand rubbing his erection outlined in his pants.

"I used to make love to that man's body; I want you to love him with your eyes as I touch your body and make love to you. Will you do that for him, Sev?"

"I will, Master," Sev answered without reservation, pleased to share the pleasure Demetrie gave to him with someone who understood it well.

Although, it was going to be difficult to keep from squeezing his eyes shut when Demetrie did things to his body that thrilled him down to his toes.

“May I come closer?” Michael asked Sev.

Demetrie was at Sev’s nipple, lazily circling it with his tongue as Sev’s hands stroked his Master’s silky black hair. “Tell him what you want, Sev. It’s up to you; whatever will bring you pleasure.” Demetrie’s voice resonated through Sev’s chest, his breath blowing across the moisture his tongue had left behind as he spoke.

“Yes,” Sev said to Michael. “Come closer.”

Michael moved the table back far enough to sit down, but close enough that he could easily see, hear, and possibly touch everything. He spread his legs and unfastened his trousers, giving his erection some much needed space as Demetrie slid further down Sev’s body, tasting him as he went.

“His skin... such a lovely color,” Michael sighed, looking over Sev’s bare body.

“Michael has a beautiful cock, Sev,” Demetrie murmured as he laved the skin around Sev’s navel.

“I want to see it...” Sev whispered, his eyes reaching Michael’s face.

Michael smiled, almost shyly, and worked himself free from his clothing. He was attractive; not as large as Demetrie, but still a respectable size, with a slightly less prominent head set atop a pale shaft. His pubic hair was golden, a little darker than the hair on his head.

Sev momentarily lost focus as his own cock was caressed by Demetrie’s skilled tongue.

Michael drew in a stammering breath, his hand beginning to work again between his legs.

“All of you... I want to see all of you,” Sev murmured, then arched his back as Demetrie took him deep inside his mouth.

Michael rid himself of his clothing, and stood near them, blushing like a virgin bride as his erection beat along his belly.

“Master, you as well.” Sev looked down the length of his body at Demetrie, who gazed back up at him, his lips encircling Sev’s throbbing cock.

“Let me help,” Michael volunteered, so that Demetrie didn’t have to move away from the object of his affection. Demetrie had already removed his shirt, and Michael worked him out of his pants, placing a tiny kiss in the small of Demetrie’s back.

“It’s been so long since I’ve seen this beautiful ass of yours.” He smiled.

“Touch him,” Sev murmured, meeting Michael’s eyes.

“Really? It’s all right?” Michael’s tone was imbued with hesitation, but his eyes blazed with lust.

Sev gave a little nod and Michael caressed Demetrie’s back and buttocks, something that must have felt good because Demetrie’s soft growl vibrated through Sev’s shaft.

“May I touch you too?” Michael asked Sev’s permission.

Again Sev looked down to Demetrie who pulled his mouth away briefly, “It is all right with me, Sev, but this is all up to you.” Then he moved down to suck on Sev’s tight balls.

Sev groaned, his eyes rolling back as he nodded his approval to Michael.

Michael was not greedy or lascivious in his touching; he moved around the lovers on the sofa, his warm hands caressing their skin where their bodies came together, and where they were apart.

“Let’s take this someplace with a little more room,” Demetrie declared, pulling Sev up from the sofa.

Sev squirmed and giggled as the leather, made sticky by his light sweat, peeled from his back. He sighed as he was lifted against his Master’s chest and carried to the thick rug near the fireplace.

Michael was already seated and waiting. He had brought pillows and laid them down—one for Sev’s head and one for his hips.

Demetrie smiled at his friend as he lay Sev down beneath him on the rug, resuming their earlier position. “Michael is such a good attendant, he would make a fine slave, don’t you think, my Seven?”

Sev saw Michael’s cheeks flush and his eyes flare with excitement. “Yes, Master, he would.” Sev smiled at him as well, guessing that this was probably a secret fantasy of Michael’s.

“Make him your slave tonight, my Seven; tell Michael what you’d like him to do.” Demetrie’s lips were against Sev’s cheek as his dark eyes held Michael’s pleading gaze. Michael looked imploringly at Sev, anxious for permission and instruction.

“Love us,” Sev told him, and was rewarded for his charity by Demetrie’s lips pressing down onto his.

Sev groaned into Demetrie’s mouth, his hands running over his back. He met Michael’s hand and gripped it, squeezing it like a lifeline as Demetrie’s kiss sent him spinning below the waves.

Michael was a gentle lover. Where Demetrie was possessive and fierce in his passion, Michael was generous and soft. He lay down beside them, content to give light caresses, supplementing rather than invading their lovemaking. He knew instinctively where the lines were drawn, and never attempted to cross them.

Demetrie resumed his descent down Sev’s body before he settled between his legs. He lifted the boy’s lean, muscled thighs up, pulling them over his shoulders as he tilted Sev’s hips and began to tongue his pinched rim. Sev moaned, curving his spine like a bow as the sensation traveled all the way up through his skull.

Michael was there, stroking Sev’s face, moving fingers in feather-light caresses over his neck, his chest; barely pinching his nipples as Demetrie devoured him below.

Sev felt cherished, spoiled by these two men who were day and night.

Demetrie speared Sev’s anus with his tongue, and grabbed hold of Sev’s leaking cock.

“So exquisite,” Michael murmured, and he clasped his hand with Demetrie’s, both of them gripping Sev’s shaft. Their hands worked in unison, stroking him; one firm, the other light, and together they were driving him out of his mind.

“Mm-Master!” Sev gasped, “not yet, please! Don’t let me come yet!”

Demetrie paused. “Do you want the cord, Sev?” Both hands halted their movement, but had not yet released him.

Sev swallowed hard, nodding his head. “Please...”

“Michael,” Demetrie said softly, “in my left front pocket, you’ll find a red satin cord.”

Michael nodded and retrieved the cord from Demetrie’s discarded trousers, bringing it back.

Demetrie quickly wound it around the base of Sev’s cock, again setting it with a quick-release knot. “Better, Sev?”

Sev nodded vigorously. “Thank you, Master; thank you, Sir.”

“Does it hurt?” Michael’s voice was soft, and he caressed Sev’s hair.

Sev heard and appreciated the compassion he offered. “Yes, Sir... but it’s good.” He grunted with the effort to manage the tension already building in his cock.

Demetrie chuckled softly and took up his prior position between Sev’s legs, tonguing his hole. Michael, fascinated by Sev’s foreskin, examined him closely as he caressed Sev’s swollen rod with one hand and himself with the other.

Sev’s eyes rolled up into his skull.

“Sev,” Demetrie asked between licks, “I would like to start fucking you slowly, but I want to watch you suck Michael’s cock while I do... would you like that?”

Sev’s cock thumped his belly as he throbbed with the thought of it. “Yes, Master... Oh yes.”

Michael sat up, his eyes darting between them. “Is it really all right?” He wet his lips with his tongue, and Sev saw his cock twitch in anticipation.

“If Sev says it’s all right, then it’s all right.” Demetrie got to his knees, smiling reassuringly.

“Sir, on your back, please,” Sev said with a smile but a tremble in his voice. His cock was red and engorged from keeping his orgasm trapped behind the silken snare.

Michael swallowed hard, blinking in disbelief, though lying back as he’d been told.

Sev rolled over and got onto all fours, crawling towards Michael as he watched Demetrie over his shoulder.

The Count’s chest rose and fell as his breathing quickened. He stroked his long cock, and watched Sev go down on his friend.

Just the brush of Sev’s warm lips on Michael’s shaft was enough to bring a trickle of precome from his head. He whimpered softly as Sev took him into the hot cave of his mouth and began to suck him.

“Oh Christ,” Michael let out a small sob, “it’s been a decade since... aaahhhh.” His thoughts dissolved as soft, pliant lips glided over his cock, and Sev’s hand gently massaged his scrotum. From behind Sev, Michael saw Demetrie approach, his eyes darkened with desire as he sandwiched his erection between the smooth globes of Sev’s ass.

Sev moaned into Michael’s cock and Michael made fists of his hands, clutching the plush rug beneath him. He could feel the instant that Demetrie fed his cock inside of Sev; the boy gave a soft whimper and sucked Michael hard, his face pressed against his groin.

Michael fought to keep his eyes open, wanting to watch Demetrie fuck Sev, as *they* had once fucked; knowing that *he* had never been so beautiful, so receptive, as this angel.

When Demetrie thrust from behind, rocking Sev’s talented mouth over Michael’s length, it was too incredible to hold back any longer. Michael came with a cry, his hips thrusting involuntarily upwards as he released the most

powerful orgasm of his life down Sev's throat. To his astonishment, Sev swallowed it all down, then smiled up at him, his eyes slanted and lips red like a perfect concubine.

"Oh..." Michael sighed, tears forming in his eyes before he closed them. He heard movement, and when he peeked through his glistening lashes, he saw that Demetrie was on his back beside him, and Sev was just lowering himself onto Demetrie's cock.

"Here Master, taste him," Sev murmured, leaning down to kiss Demetrie.

Michael blushed as his flavor was shared between them.

"Still delicious," Demetrie whispered to Michael as Sev sat up, but Michael was too stunned to speak. It was as close to a kiss as he'd ever get from either of them, yet he was honored to have felt like a part of it all.

He watched them together, Sev rocking and rising on Demetrie's cock, his face a mask of ecstasy. Demetrie's eyes were watching Sev's face; one hand pressed to Sev's thigh while the other very gently caressed his straining erection with only fingertips, knowing that his sensitivity was at its peak.

Whether it was a signal from Sev's body or a fortunate coincidence, Demetrie yanked out the knot barely a heartbeat before Sev's face contorted and his body spasmed through an incredible orgasm.

"Aaaah!" Sev felt like he'd been pulled taut then snapped back as his climax exploded out of him. It was intense to the verge of pain; his come jetted out of his cock, arcing upwards to land on Demetrie's chest.

Demetrie loved to watch Sev in the throes of climax, his body was tuned to orgasm like harp strings, and he felt every vibration of Sev's song. Demetrie held Sev's hips to keep him in place as Sev's ass clenched tightly around his cock. When Demetrie came, it was so powerful it brought tears to his eyes. He caught Sev, bringing him against his chest as he released inside of him, holding him tightly, and wishing he never had to let him go.

"My Seven," Demetrie murmured against his neck, breathing in the scent of him.

Michael dozed, listening to the soft sighs and murmurs they exchanged afterwards. Demetrie was in love, and he was a fool if he considered letting this young man go.

Demetrie and Michael sat talking quietly before saying goodnight. Demetrie had put on his pants, wrapping a sleeping Sev up in his shirt, and now sat smoking in a chair by the window.

“I’ll sign your paperwork in the morning,” Michael sighed, combing his hair with his fingers. “You know I never expected...”

“Neither did I.” Demetrie chuckled softly.

“Should we blame it on the wine?”

“No.” Demetrie shook his head. “Blame it on that boy.”

They sat in silent contemplation of the evening for a few moments, but it was Michael who spoke first. “Promise me you won’t walk out of his life without giving him the option to be with you.”

“I...” Demetrie faltered in his argument and pursed his lips, turning to look outside.

“You know,” Michael said, sliding one of Demetrie’s cigars out of the humidor on the table, “when you first came to me and told me about Seven, I thought you really had lost your mind.” He drew the cigar under his nose, inhaling the sweet scent of the tobacco before clipping the end and sliding it between his lips. He leaned over as Demetrie held his lighter for him. “After meeting him—even before this,” Michael gestured with his hand, “I’m certain you *are* crazy because you talk about letting him go.”

“Michael, he deserves to choose his own path...”

“Then give him the choice.”

Demetrie shrugged, but said nothing.

Michael took a deep drag on his cigar, then contemplated the glowing cherry as he made smoke rings from his mouth. “I would be lying if I said that I would give anything to have that in my life. I’m a coward, Demetrie; I

wouldn't know what to do with someone like Seven and I'd end up pissing it away. That young man is in love with you, and I know you're in love with him. I never saw those kinds of looks that you were giving him when you and I were a thing."

"We were young," Demetrie mumbled, uncertain of how else to respond, so he changed the subject. "Seriously, it's been a decade since you've had a blow job?"

Michael tapped his ash into the brass tray on the table. "Well, let's do the math. I'm thirty, I married Rebecca five years ago. Five years before that was the last time you and I had sex."

"Hey, you called it off," Demetrie reminded him.

"Yes, I did. Because I was scared to death of what would happen if my father found out. You never seemed to have that problem."

"I'd spent most of my life being scared to death of my father; by that point I really didn't give a shit about who thought what."

Michael smiled, somewhere between arrogant and flirtatious. "I know; that's what made you so irresistible. You were—*are*—such a bad boy. And now you've got yourself a fallen angel. What did I get? Absolutely nothing; because I wasn't willing to risk losing what I already had."

"You mean your money and titles."

"I'll die a lonely man with the same hand of cards I started with."

Demetrie chuffed softly, thinking about the deck that had brought him to Sev.

Michael examined his friend closely, coming suddenly to a realization. "You're scared of being rejected, aren't you?"

"What?" Demetrie's eyes shifted towards Michael, towards Sev, then back to his own dark reflection in the window. He wanted to claim that Michael's observation was ridiculous, but couldn't bring himself to deny it. "Yes, Michael." Demetrie crushed out his cigar. "If given the opportunity to return to the gypsies, I think that's what Sev will do, and I wouldn't blame him. He was

taken from them unfairly—the only family he’s known. It would be wrong for me to keep him for myself. I worry that if I give him a choice, he might reject me outright, or choose me because he feels a sense of loyalty, which I can’t comprehend. Happy now?”

Michael stared wistfully at his oldest and only true friend. “No. I’ll never be happy, but that’s a decision I have made, and I must live without regretting it. Your decision to walk away without saying a word, that is something, I promise you, you will regret for the rest of your life.” Michael crushed his cigar out as well and stood up, stretching his spine. “Thank you for tonight, Demetrie. Thank you both. You’ve given me some bittersweet and beautiful memories.” His smile was melancholy as he turned and left the room.

CHAPTER 9

Sev woke slowly to the delicious warmth of a body wrapped around him from behind, and a splitting headache. He moaned softly.

“There’s some aspirin and water on the nightstand.” Demetrie’s voice vibrated against his back.

“Mm-Master.” Sev knew he should be on his knees to greet Demetrie, but his crushing headache and the heavy arm draped across him prevented him from moving.

“I’m sorry I got you drunk last night. I hope you don’t regret—”

“Master, no... it was my pleasure to serve you... both of you.”

Demetrie chuckled softly, his voice graveled from smoke and sleep. He sat up first, reaching across Sev to bring him the means to cure his hangover. “Here, take this, then have a shower and get dressed. Come downstairs by ten o’clock; Michael is leaving today.”

“Yes, Master,” Sev said and sat up with a measure of difficulty. He was aware of Demetrie watching him closely and was initially insecure, then Demetrie’s big hand brushed Sev’s hair out of his face. Sev turned to him, expecting he had something to say, but after a few moments, Demetrie sighed and got out of the bed,

“I’ll see you downstairs by ten.”

Sev finally managed to get himself moving with little time to spare; just enough to say goodbye to Michael, who kissed his hand and thanked him for the wonderful evening before he said goodbye and Demetrie walked him out.

Sev followed the two men at a distance, wanting to offer them the respect and privacy that two former lovers deserved. He waited inside the foyer near the staircase, watching them walk outside through the open door.

“You’ll take him too?” Sev heard Demetrie ask Michael as they reached his car. A driver was waiting there to open his door.

Michael turned as they reached the back of the limo. “Of course. I’ll be certain to take good care of him... all of them.”

“Thank you, Michael.”

Michael sighed and offered a weary smile. “If there is anything...”

“Thank you, Michael,” Demetrie repeated; he took his friend’s hands in his own, then brushed his lips over the knuckles. “Goodbye, Michael.”

Michael sighed, his blue eyes sparkling with sentimentality. “Goodbye, Demetrie. Don’t worry, I’ll handle everything here. Please, promise me you’ll contact me as soon as you arrive?”

“I will.”

Sev leaned back against the wall, feeling like his heart had turned to lead and was trying to force its way up into his throat. It was true then; Demetrie planned to give him to Michael, sell the house, and marry. He should have been overjoyed that he’d have such a kind man as Michael to watch over him, but seeing his face every day would remind him of Demetrie, and Sev didn’t think his heart could stand it. Worse than that, he wouldn’t be able to handle knowing that his once powerful Master had given into the expectations of his title. Anger wound around his heartbreak as he tried to force back the vitriol rising to the back of his throat.

“Sev?”

Sev hadn’t heard him come back into the house, and Demetrie’s voice suddenly nearby startled him. Without considering the confines of status, Sev threw his arms around Demetrie and pressed his face into his chest. He was ashamed of his selfishness and anger, expecting that Demetrie would push him away for overstepping his boundaries to such an unforgivable degree. If he did that, then Sev would know he was truly unwanted, and would have no choice but to accept his rejection.

“Oh Sev...” Demetrie’s voice was soft as he wrapped his arms around him, and the sound of it drained away Sev’s anger. He heard the sadness there, the regret that he’d occasionally seen reflected so briefly in Demetrie’s dark eyes.

“Master, you are sending me away...”

Demetrie sighed; he should have known better than to tell the servants anything. “What gives you that idea, Sev?”

“I-I heard about you selling the house... and speaking with Count Ferrier just now. Master, he is a good man, but I would rather not go to him.”

“Why not?” Demetrie was surprised; had he considered such a transfer, he would have thought that Sev would appreciate Michael’s gentle nature to his demanding one.

Sev shook his head. “Master, I would rather be sent to the mines than to be reminded every day that I was unworthy to remain with you...”

“What? Sev... no, no it isn’t that. It’s not any of that. Michael is giving Stanley a position in his household. You won’t need to go anywhere you don’t want to.” Demetrie kissed Sev’s temple. “I am leaving, Sev. I am going away. I’m not getting married and I can’t be part of the aristocracy any longer.”

“But—”

“Please, Sev, let me finish.” Demetrie released him, moving away, but not very far.

Sev bit his lower lip to keep from speaking out of turn.

“Sev, you have brought so much joy and comfort into my life that I have decided to do my best to offer you the same. From now on, you are Count Seven Silvastrano. You have my title and my name, and are now safe and free to do as you please. It means that you don’t need me—or anybody—to protect you anymore.”

Demetrie watched Sev’s face, waiting for him to absorb all of the new information. He expected shock, disbelief, but not the anger.

“No! I don’t want that!” Sev realized he must sound like a petulant child but he didn’t care.

“Sev... I thought... I thought this would make you happy... not having to ever worry again about depending on someone else...”

“Well it doesn’t make me happy! Master, all I want is to stay with you! If I am truly free now to do as I please then let me come with you!” Sev couldn’t

stop the tears as they ran unchecked from his eyes. He was biting his lip, his fists clenching as he tried to retain any last shred of stoicism. Finally, he shook his head, realizing that if he didn't express the truth to Demetrie now, he may never get another chance; consequences didn't matter at this point, because he had nothing else to lose, "How can I be happy without you? I love you!"

Demetrie felt his chest ache with Sev's confession. "Sev, I am going to live in Ishmay; the island is like a ghetto... there will be no luxury... are you certain that's what you want?"

"Yes," Sev said firmly as the tears still ran fresh from his eyes. "Master, if you love me, then that's all I could ever need."

Demetrie searched the young man's earnest and beautiful face. Michael was right—he understood Demetrie's heart better than he understood it himself. For the first time in the young aristocrat's life, Demetrie believed that he could achieve something beyond resignation; he believed that he could know joy. He nodded, swallowing the sensation of his heart expanding in his chest, and pulled Sev into his arms. "I do love you, Seven; you mean everything to me. If it's what you want, I'd be happy to live anywhere with you."

EPILOGUE

“Good morning, Master.”

Demetrie squinted up at Sev as he stood haloed by sunlight near the open doorway.

They’d been in Ishmay a little over a year now; the climate and culture seemed to have made Sev blossom into something even more beautiful than he’d been in Athena. His skin had darkened, and his pale brown hair was now highlighted with streaks of gold.

Demetrie had changed as well, his black hair much longer, and his skin now a deep coppery bronze after suffering the first sunburn of his life. While the sunburn had been a painful affair, Sev had nearly made it worthwhile by how well he’d taken care of Demetrie.

As usual, Sev was barefoot, wearing only shorts and a sleeveless shirt that he had rolled up and knotted above his waist. He had small bits of wilted flowers in his hair. The children—especially the girls—flocked to Sev and loved to pretty him up like one of their own. In this world, Sev was an exotic and beautiful angel, just as he’d always been to Demetrie.

“You don’t have to call me Master—if anything, little Count, I should be calling you Master now... and what have I told you about leaving the house like that?”

“Not call you Master?” Sev offered a mischievous grin. “But if you aren’t my Master, then you won’t be able to punish me for leaving the house dressed inappropriately... or talking back to you.”

Demetrie stretched out and grabbed Sev’s arm, pulling him down into bed and rolling on top of him. “You’re right, forget I said anything.”

Sev grinned and wriggled his body beneath him, running his fingers through Demetrie’s long, black hair. His smile faltered, and he licked his lips as he met Demetrie’s heated gaze.

“I love you, Sev,” Demetrie murmured. He couldn’t believe that he’d nearly been fool enough to let this young man go. If he ever saw Michael

again, he'd thank him for forcing him to reconsider. Demetrie took hold of one of Sev's hands, gently kissing the rope-burns accidentally left on his wrist from the night before.

"I love you, Master," Sev sighed, "now, punish me."

THE END

Author Bio

Lia Black tends to do everything the hard way; beginning with being born ass-first into the world and now raising a pre-teen by herself in upstate New York. Her career choices are no less extreme, including occupations of fine artist, computer geek, firefighter, and mortician's assistant—just to name a few.

Black's creative mind has been lovingly described as a “glorious kaleidoscope of fuckedupery.” Her characters often suffer through the worlds she creates for them, which leaves them a little cranky and sometimes less lovable than others in the slash-fiction genre. Yet Black swears that someday, “there will be comedy.”

Black's first story was published in 2010, in Better Sex's Best International Erotic Fiction. Her first m/m romance novel, Spiretown, is available as a Kindle edition through Amazon and paperback via multiple retailers worldwide

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