



A LOVE'S LANDSCAPES STORY

FIGHTING
DIRTY

Olley White

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

FIGHTING DIRTY

By Olley White

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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 these authors 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's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, 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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M/M Romance Group Publication

FIGHTING DIRTY

By Olley White

Photo Description

The photo is of a man in his early twenties. Naked from the waist up, his dark hair is damp and tangled and his olive skin mud-splattered. With dark, dark eyes, perfect full lips and a defined, smooth chest, he is truly beautiful—but there is something haunting about him. His brooding gaze, trained on something just behind the photographer, shows determination... and maybe just a little bit of sorrow.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I won the tournament, he came in second...

I didn't even compete to win, but once he was my final opponent, I had to give all I have in me, to prove to him I'm worthy.

I always admired him from afar, but dreamed about him up close and this tournament was my chance to get near him. All I ever wanted was for him to get to know me and maybe, just maybe, something could grow? But I guess I blew it already, given the dirty looks he sends me...

Please give my guys a HEA... otherwise, feel free to make their story as hot and dirty as you want :)

Sincerely,

Tina

Story Info

Genre: historical, other world

Tags: slow burn/UST, fighting, class differences, first time, enemies to lovers

Word Count: 8,375

Acknowledgement

I have loved every minute of this writing challenge and would like to thank Tina, firstly, for such a great prompt.

I wouldn't have been able to do this without the support of my fellow Unicorns who, underneath all the smut, have hearts of gold and are generous to a fault. As morale-boosters, question-answerers and beta-readers they are amazing. Thanks Uni's, you're the best.

A big thanks to Natasha Snow for my beautiful cover—I love it hard.

Of course I can't thank my husband and children enough; they have to put up with me when I'm not fully present in this land. Many a tea's been burnt because I've "just had to get this idea down". Thanks guys, I love you so, so much.

FIGHTING DIRTY

By Olley White

Ethan

Ethan Reed slammed his opponent down and the crowd cheered, he'd been caught out before though, so he didn't let his gaze falter. Sure enough, as the chanting started, a mud-covered hand shot out, reaching for Ethan's ankle. Moving just fast enough, he avoided being pulled to the ground beside his winded challenger and waited for the horn to sound, indicating the end of this round. After endless moments, the shrill resonance of victory filled the air in a loud, continuous blast. More roars erupted from the mass of people watching and waves of relief washed over Ethan. His arm was yanked into the air by the tourney judge, no care taken to ease the aches and injuries he'd accrued. Banners of all colours waved in the burning sun, blues and golds from supporters of the King and every colour imaginable representing the ruling houses of each province.

Ethan forced a smile to his face and waited. As soon as his arm was released he went to the victors' tent and gulped at a pitcher of water. His body was battered and bruised, his side ached and his arm felt as if it was on fire—ale was what he really craved, but he knew he couldn't afford to have his wits dulled. He was in the final battle, he'd made it this far, but judgment, not luck, had been his guide. While others had relied on strength or reputation alone, he'd studied his opponents, worked out their strengths and weaknesses, their foibles and blind-spots. Everyone had them; even the strongest of adversaries had flaws. So, as soon as he knew his way out of this goddess-awful life was to win the tournament, he'd set about doing just that. The prize? A place in the King's army—places usually reserved only for the rich, for the sons and daughters of the noble and wealthy. Peasants were expected to farm, to labour, to bow down to those of higher class. They lived in one-room mud huts that offered no privacy, and they were to do whatever the noble classes wished. They had barely any more rights than animals, and the luck of each settlement depended on the man or woman in charge.

Some were more fortunate, they were ignored by and large, left to carry on with the daily grind of their lives, producing food and heat bricks and other

necessities that were demanded of them. For some though, luck was a word that may as well have not been invented. They were owned by their nobles, every last hair on their heads belonged to them and no violation was too great. Some worked them beyond exhaustion, beyond endurance, beyond life, discarding dead bodies with no more care than the livestock they slaughtered for food. Yet this still was not the worst type of aristocracy. The worst, the very worst, enjoyed humiliating and using their peasants for their own pleasure and enjoyment. No act was too bawdy or too risky or too degrading and games of humiliation went on in never-ending cycles, with rivalry between the ruling classes to see who could do the worst. Yet, as long as they weren't revolting and stayed loyal to him, the King did nothing. This tourney was Ethan's chance to get out—and more than that, to maybe make a change.

Forcing himself to stop drinking, Ethan slowly checked over his injuries. His legs were fine, but once he'd scraped some of the mud away from his torso, he could see a darkening of the skin across his side. He applied pressure with his hands, testing the extent of the damage, and while it was painful, he was pretty sure he'd not cracked any ribs. His left arm was a different matter. The dull ache turned into fiery tendrils of pain that spiked down his arm whenever he tried to move it. He'd felt like this before, not six moons gone, when he'd tried to catch a neighbour's bull about to slip out of its pasture. The pain had been much the same and the healer had said his shoulder had become misaligned and shown him how to hit it against a wall to get it back in position. He gritted his teeth and went to the broad oak pole in the centre of the tent. Before he could think what he was doing he slammed into the post, a hiss of pain escaping as he did. Agony speared through his shoulder and then it was gone, replaced by a throbbing ache. *That* he could live with; he knew once he got back in the circle, and was pumped and focused on the fight, even that pain would fade. And truly, what was a bit of pain compared to a lifetime away from Lord Granston—the most vindictive, cruel nobleman of them all?

Reassured that he'd sustained no injuries that would prevent him from winning, Ethan started to slowly loosen his limbs and relax his mind. He sifted through the other possible candidates for the final; he was pretty sure it would be Wily he was fighting. Wily was, just as his name suggested, cunning. Like Ethan, he watched and used the knowledge he gained to his advantage. He was also not above sly manoeuvres, those not outlawed as such but considered dirty and shameful by the masses, particularly the nobility. Wily frankly didn't care and, by that standard alone, Ethan had figured him to be his final opponent.

Music drifted in from outside the tent, pipes and bells accompanied by the bawdy laughter and drunken singing of peasants allowed a day out of their usual drudgery. One day every five years was all they got. In his fifteenth earth year, when last the tourney had taken place, Ethan had sworn he would be its next winner. He would be the next one to escape this life. And so it was—one more fight between him and his freedom, or the closest thing to freedom he would ever get. Then, above the noise of the masses, the horn sounded again. A long deep note followed by two short trills. Time for the final round. An armoured man pulled back the flaps of the tent, his muscled stomach encased in the iron of the King's men, tanned flesh showing at the sides, thick thighs and long legs not hidden at all. It was a feast for the eyes. Ethan couldn't wait until he wore this uniform and spent every day with men in the same attire. The final low blow of the horn sounded and Ethan silently followed the guard out. The crowd erupted in cheers as he made his way to the circle.

The sun was high in the sky, a burning, blistering mass of heat, but the ground underfoot bore witness to the rain that had fallen in the preceding weeks. Ethan didn't mind, the mud that splattered his body saved his skin from the burning sun and was a good aid to felling opponents, especially those who relied on strength. The boggy ground had been more friend than foe these past two days. He stood in the circle, eyeing the ground for the muddiest parts while he waited for his opponent. Another fanfare and cheer from the crowd and Ethan watched for the dark curls and slender build of Wily to appear from behind the guards of the other victor's tent. Instead, the tall frame and cropped blond hair of a far too familiar figure entered the ring and Ethan felt his heart sink. Bile welled in his stomach, swallowing deeply he forced it down and made rapid calculations in his head.

Charlie Fitzwilliam, Fitz to all and sundry, nephew of Lord Granston but his uncle's polar opposite in every single way. While Granston was mean and conniving and one of the most sadistic men to ever walk the goddess' earth, Fitz was kind and caring and spoke to the bottom classes as if they were human beings. He asked the farmers their opinions about the crops and livestock. He thanked the heat labourers as they dug the black heat bricks from the ground, which were used by the nobles to stave off the frigid winter. He didn't seem to see the differences between the bottom classes, the merchant classes and the nobility—or if he did, he chose to ignore them as much as possible. He was the most valiant man Ethan had ever known and he was the one who had caused endless sodden patches in Ethan's straw mattress each night.

“Ready,” bellowed the tourney judge. Fitz nodded, a look of sheer determination on his face that Ethan had never seen before. His green eyes glistened in the sun, his mouth set in a firm line across his face. Even without his easy-going charm, he was easily the most beautiful man Ethan had ever seen.

“Ready,” roared the judge again and Ethan shook himself realising they were waiting for his consensual nod. Dazed, he nodded, yet all the while his head was screaming, *No, no I'm not ready for this fight!* A bell rang loud and clear and Fitz slowly edged towards him. Ethan stepped sideways, keeping the other man in his sight but not willing to make the first move, as his brain scrambled to work out what the fuck was going on. Fitz didn't need to fight, he was one of the noble classes, he could join the King's army any time he wanted. Hell, Granston's family was so highly placed in the nobility, he could probably join the King's personal guardians if that was his desire.

The two men continued to circle each other, each waiting for their opponent to make the first move. Resolve was written across Fitz's face and the crowd began to hiss at the slow action. Catcalls and chants were uttered.

“This is a tourney not a fucking mating ritual,” jeered one man, raising his tankard in the air as others around him hooted in agreement. “If we wanted to see the love dance we'd just stand outside Mistress Viola's on a Friday night.” Laughter tumbled from the crowd and several of Mistress Viola's best prostitutes whooped along with them. Keeping his eyes on Fitz, Ethan tried not to be distracted, that would be his downfall, he knew. Luckily though, he had blocked out the crowd enough that, even if his favourite of Mistress Viola's men were standing there, he would not have noticed.

Patience is your friend, he told himself, refusing to be drawn in to make the first move. Those who made the first move were far less likely to win, in his studied opinion.

“C'mon Fitz,” the high squeaky voice of the goat herder's lady called, and the sentiment was echoed by the deep-throated call of her son, Brendan. Why were people from *his* hamlet in the crowd, cheering on a noble? Then it hit Ethan why Fitz was fighting. Everyone eligible to fight could, and, once they'd registered to do so, if any ill befell them before the tourney, they were allowed to ask for a replacement. The sticking point was that the replacement had to be the same age—and generally everyone of eligible age was fighting already. A one-in-a-million chance to better yourself, the only chance you'd get, was not to be sneezed at, so finding anyone who would be willing to take your place

was virtually impossible. All your peers would be fighting and nobody above the bottom class would be interested. Except, apparently, the generous-to-a-fault Fitz. Brendan, the goat herder, had been suffering from the sweating sickness, Ethan recalled, as he moved his feet slowly through the boggy ground. Although he'd recovered, Brendan's strength was diminished—Fitz wouldn't have liked to see this injustice happen. Ethan knew enough of him to understand that.

It seemed luck favoured Ethan today, for Brendan's calls distracted Fitz enough that he let himself be swayed by his thankless task and made a move. He stepped towards Ethan and grabbed his upper arms, squeezing tightly and pulling him down. Using his status to intimidate must have been all that got Fitz this far because Ethan effortlessly kicked the other man's legs from under him and knocked him to the ground. He followed him down, knees straddling Fitz and pinning his arms above his head.

Oh fucking goddess, Ethan thought, for, even as soft mud squelched beneath his legs and Fitz bucked against him trying to throw him off, all the blood in his body started to drain south. He leaned his weight forward, aware of nothing but the bulge grazing his groin and the hard muscles of the other man's stomach. Vaguely, somewhere in the back of his mind, he could hear the crowd counting down with the judge. Ethan needed to keep Fitz pinned for a twenty count in order to win the first set, but all he could think of was the hot body beneath him and the grass-green eyes glaring up at him. He tried to take a deep breath to clear his mind but Fitz wriggled again, using his strength to try and throw Ethan off. Fitz pushed at the arms that had his own pinned down and this was Ethan's saving grace. At the force, the dull ache in his shoulder turned into a blaze of pain that drew his thoughts away from the hot, solid body beneath him and back to the task at hand. Forcing through the pain, Ethan returned the pressure, and, as the crowd counted five, four, three, two, one, he focused purely on winning this round. Now was not the time for lust, now was his only ever chance at this. Now he had to remain centred.

The horn blew to signal the end of the round and Ethan finally allowed himself to move off of Fitz. As soon as the muscled body slipped from under him, he felt bereft. Rolling his shoulder to loosen the joint, he grimaced through the throbbing and stood back at the opposite side of the circle from Fitz. People from his hamlet were repeating his name, he might be the only one to actually leave the hell they called home, but it would feel like a victory to them all. One of *them* had gotten out. One of *them* was bettering himself. Some of the goat

herder's family were calling Fitz's name, but mostly jeers were thrown in his direction—niceness didn't count when you were preventing one of theirs from winning.

The bell rang again and Ethan moved swiftly to the centre. This was the time to make the first move, Fitz would be dazed and reassessing after his loss in the first round; he'd be expecting the cautious start from before. Heading straight for Fitz, Ethan swung his leg out, hoping to sweep his opponent's feet away as before. But Fitz was quicker than Ethan had anticipated and moved sharply right, avoiding Ethan's kick and grabbing hold of him, pulling him into his chest, using his extra height and strength to his advantage. Even as Ethan was cursing his own slowness and twisting in order to break Fitz's grip on him, his heart started thumping harder at the closeness of the other man. Fitz wrestled him closer still and grabbed him in a bear hug. Ethan's heart banged in his chest as he struggled to get free. A twist, a bend of the knee, then soft mud squidged under Ethan's back.

Before Fitz could pin him fully, Ethan bucked and flipped, trying to hold Fitz as he had done in the last set. But slimy mud oozed under his hands and he couldn't grip properly. In a determined move, Fitz flipped him again, holding him flat beneath the full length of his body. Strong forearms restrained him as hands gripped his wrists. Fitz was a big man, burly and with enough bulk to make Ethan's efforts pointless. After just seconds, he stopped struggling, conserved his energy for the next round, and tried to ignore the honey-mead-sweetened puffs of breath that wisped across his face and the mud-streaked nipples that brushed against his. He tried not to see his own desire reflected in Fitz's eyes as their bodies lay heavily together. It was probably just his imagination, a trick of the light, a futile glimmer of hope that was all of his own making.

His heart thumped in time with the crowd counting down and Fitz moved his head slightly so he was staring straight into Ethan's eyes. For a moment, time stopped. For a moment, *everything* became those bright emerald eyes that were laced with an unmistakable look of lust. For a moment, the crowd disappeared and there was only him and Fitz and want. Then the horn blew and while Ethan had virtually forgotten the who and why of everything, apparently Fitz hadn't. He rolled off Ethan and raised his arms to the cheering crowd, victor of this round.

The aroma of beer and cheap, smoked meat wafted across the circle, and the crowd hummed a steady background noise in Ethan's head. One all; the score

echoed through his brain, repeating and repeating as he tried to prepare himself for the final round. It was the first time he had lost in the whole competition. He'd not had to complete a third round yet. It was because he'd been unprepared for Fitz, he told himself as he circled the edge of the ring warily. It was because he hadn't studied him, didn't know his strengths and weaknesses, his techniques. He acknowledged the lies almost as soon as he'd thought them—none of that was throwing him off this fight. Lust was to blame, pure and simple.

Lust was all, was everything: the feeling of that solid muscled body on top of his, the cropped golden hair, and the piercing green eyes. The perfect lips and hot breath that made him yearn to be kissed. The broad, smooth chest and the trail of hair that led beneath his leather half trousers. It was lust that wracked his body and he could not—*would not*—lose this tourney because of wanton desire. With all the mental strength he possessed, he pushed away all of those thoughts and concentrated purely on Fitz being his opponent.

As soon as the bell rang, Ethan moved. Quick and slick and down low he bumped Fitz, pushing to where he knew the ground would be in his favour. Feeling the roughness of turf under the soles of his feet, he knew he was backing Fitz into the mud. Fitz tried to push back, to fight against Ethan, but the oozing mud underfoot allowed him no purchase at all. Using his lesser strength and nature's own gift as an aid, Ethan did not let up. Planting his feet as firmly in the grass as he could, he kept the pressure up, feeling Fitz flailing to get a grip, to find somewhere he could get enough leverage to push back. Nothing was there though. Ethan had angled him to the perfect spot and, as Fitz's feet sank slowly into the mud he was unable to keep his grip firm. His opponent's pushing changed to clinging as the ground slid underneath him and he fell with a splash into the mud pit. Ethan felt the wind knock out of Fitz as he landed on top of him, and while the other man struggled to gain his breath, Ethan had no problem keeping him pinned to the ground.

The twenty count was screamed loudly by the crowd, cheering and jeering and overwhelming support for Ethan drowned out the official's bellowing voice. *Nine*. The crowd yelled as alertness reasserted itself in Fitz's eyes. *Eight*. And Fitz looked at Ethan, his face an unreadable mass of emotion. *Seven*. Resignation reigned—Ethan needed this more than him, it was as readable in his expression as if it were scribed in clay. Ethan had done it, he was going to win, he was moving out of this hellish life forever. He loosened his grip, not a

lot just a little. Eyes filled with both passion and compassion stared into his. A wordless conversation took place and the crowd disappeared. Then...

...*Six*... "C'mon Fitz." One lone voice called his name. The shrill, wearied tones of Brendan's mother—even Ethan could hear the hope that was draining from her voice as she called, the wish of her son leaving the only life she could afford him—echoed plaintively across the circle. Shutting his eyes to Ethan's gaze, Fitz started to fight again. *Five*. His arms moved and his body bucked, but Ethan was quick enough. Fitz may have the strength advantage, but for even the strongest of men it was nigh on impossible to move from the position Ethan had pinned him in. Especially with mud sucking him down.

Four. And determination writ itself across Fitz's face. *Three*. More calls from the goat herders, and pain fought determination to shape Fitz's features. Not physical pain, but the pain of an honourable man letting down those less fortunate than him. For less than a beat, Ethan faltered, hating the look on Fitz's face; then... *Two*. His name was chanted loudly. *One*. His move out of here was guaranteed.

The crowd roared, his name was called and sung and yelled from all corners of the crowd. The victory he had longed for, yearned for, pined for, these past five years, was his—but it was a victory more hollow than even his darkest thoughts would have allowed. Disappointment and disgust was all Ethan could see as Fitz opened his eyes and stared at him, and that tore his soul in two. Would it be worth leaving this life if that haunting disappointment and hatred was going to follow him—wouldn't that be a torture as bad as the drudgery to which he was accustomed?

The tourney judge was calling his name, the name of the victor, of the army's new man, but still they lay together entangled in the mud, Ethan willing the look of revulsion to be gone from Fitz. Instead, Fitz sighed and, shaking his head, pushed Ethan away. Limp, he let himself tumble to the ground until he was seized by two of Mistress Viola's favourite workers. He let them lead him to the judge, let the celebrations take place around him. He accepted the wine and gifts of food, accepted with the charm that showed him to be a soldier of the King's army. The King would not lower himself enough to come to a tourney, but some of the minor members of the royal house were in the regal tent and Ethan let himself be introduced to them. He knew he responded, he knew he did what was expected of him, but all he could think about was the disgust that had passed over Fitz's face.

Fitz

As Ethan was led away by Lady Viola's tempters, Fitz moved silently to the edge of the crowd, over towards Brendan's family. The gathering, emboldened by the ale, jeered at him, but he straightened his back and held his head high. He'd done his best, he'd fought his hardest. A tiny bit of him acknowledged that he'd nearly given in to the other man. As he'd lain trapped beneath the lithe body and stared at the smooth, dirt-splattered chest, then met the darkest, most beautiful eyes he'd ever encountered, he'd longed to run his hands through Ethan's tangled, mud-encrusted hair, desired nothing more than to pull him forward and taste him. To be able to press his lips against that luscious, full mouth and ravage it. For that small moment in time, he *hadn't* given his best; for that moment in time, he had been willing to give it all up for just a taste of the man on top of him.

Then, the voice of Brendan's mother had risen above the crowd, and his honour had marched firmly back into place. He had promised his best and he never went back on a promise. Closing his eyes against the beauty of the other man, he'd struggled against the heavy grip, wriggled to try and free himself, to try and get Brendan the place in the army he so yearned for. But time was against him and as the masses had counted down he'd known the fight was lost. The victor was named—Ethan; the name of the man who was stirring a longing in Fitz like no other had. Ethan, the man who had stolen victory from him.

He'd lain there, Ethan's heavy weight resting atop him, and he was aware of every piece of skin that touched, every muscle in both his body *and* Ethan's. Brendan's ma called out again, a hate-filled cry laced with the distraught hysteria only a parent could know. It cut him in two—he had let them down, he'd hesitated however briefly and lost the tourney, lost Brendan his chance at bettering himself. Disgust welled up inside, hatred at his lack of mental strength. He had become all he detested, a man who'd let lust rule over honour, a man who had abandoned his promise because of the stirring in his groin.

So Fitz continued towards the goat herder's family, telling himself those few seconds didn't count, that he'd lost fairly by then anyway—and he knew he would try and justify himself to them, because if they accepted his reasoning then maybe *he* could accept it too.

“Ya lost. To a reed collector. He's half frogman, al'ays in the water, and you lost to him.” Spittle flew at him from between the rotten teeth of Brendan's ma.

"I did my best, Ma'am," Fitz said, bowing his head slightly, knowing her words came from grief.

"Ya lost," she said again, spitting in the muddy ground beside them.

"Leave it, Ma," Brendan said, tugging at his mother's arm. "Nothing changes for me. It ain't like I don't know this life."

"I told your da', I did, I told him this was a half-cocked idea. You mayn't be big Bren, but you're strong. You can wrestle the goats well 'nuff. You'd've squashed frog-boy and won, but your da' thought getting a noble to fight would be best. 'Ev'ryone'd be too scared to win 'gainst him,' he said. Ev'ryone 'cept a frog, mayhaps."

Fitz listened to the craggy-faced woman and her son, trying desperately to unravel what she was saying. If he'd got it right, Brendan didn't really need someone to fight for him, it had all been a falsehood. Cold rage wormed through him, any feeling of dishonour or shame he'd had dissipated. Without another word he turned away to find Ethan, the man who'd won and who deserved the victory.

He found him in the bathing tent. Mistress Viola's best were still beside him. The woman and man were both as naked as the day they were born and both had the most beautiful bodies imaginable. Only the best, the most desirable, were entitled to work for Mistress Viola. Ethan lounged in a chair, a tankard of ale in his hand, ignoring the ministrations of the two.

The woman stroked down his mud-caked chest and whispered in his ear. Ethan shook his head and muttered something. Though Fitz couldn't hear what, he guessed from the woman's pout and the way she moved away from the winner, that he wasn't interested. The male let a sly smile creep across his face—his interest in Ethan was plain for anyone to see. A cock any man would be proud of bobbed fully erect, inches away from Ethan's face. It was plain Ethan was more interested in this one of Mistress Viola's best, but still he pushed the man away. Ignoring the gesture, the man pawed at him, straddling his lap and wrapping his hands 'round the back of Ethan's neck, pulling him forward for a kiss.

A cold, jealous rage coursed through Fitz—a feeling unlike anything he'd ever felt before. He heard himself call out, heard the authority of the nobleman he was, and found himself striding through the tent towards the trio before he'd even stopped to think.

“You can leave now.” He dismissed Mistress Viola’s two, who, despite their pouts, knew their place in the class system.

“What if I don’t want them to leave?” asked Ethan, sitting up straight in his chair, his fatigued eyes suddenly alive and glinting.

“Oh, I think you do.” There was a dangerous edge to Fitz’s voice that he didn’t even recognise himself. Fitz, laughingly called ‘Fitz-the-nice’ by most of his uncle’s court, didn’t feel the slightest bit nice any more. He felt horny and possessive and he wanted Ethan all to himself.

“I said leave,” he warned, and the two lurking in the open flap of the tent did. A guard poked his head in, but before he could ask the tourney winner if he was okay, Fitz spoke again. “You are to shut the flap and not let anyone in unless I specifically ask you to.” The guard bowed his assent and let the canvas flaps of the tent fall closed, and then it was just Fitz and Ethan in the flickering candlelight of the bath tent.

Ethan

Heart pounding and limbs aching, Ethan watched as Fitz asserted his authority. They were of the same class now, or close enough to make no difference, but Ethan keenly felt the other man’s influence in a way he’d not before. ‘Fitz-the-nice’ had an edge to his voice that Ethan liked—a lot. He felt his cock stir and was thankful he was still in his leather half trousers; he couldn’t hide the tenting, but in the flickering candlelight it might not be too obvious.

He stared at Fitz, searching for the signs of disgust that had been etched on his face not a half turn of the clock earlier. Nothing was there to see but the kindness he usually wore... except... Ethan frowned, something *was* different. Brazenly, he continued to stare—he was this man’s equal now, after all. With interest, he noted the wide pupils and slightly-parted lips. This was kindness laced with a little lust. Blood surged in his groin, throbbing and hardening him. Those eyes, fuck, those eyes...

“I am glad you were victor in the tournament,” said Fitz, kneeling beside Ethan’s chair. “You deserved to win, you fought well. The King’s army will be a better place with a man like you in it.” He placed his hand on Ethan’s knee, slowly, as if he were afraid he would be rejected. Ethan shifted slightly, trying

to loosen his trousers so he'd feel less confined. Hurt surged through his shoulder as he moved, and he let out a pain-filled groan.

"You're hurt?" Fitz ignored Ethan's shaking head and ran his hands lightly over the other man's body as if trying to determine where the injury was. He only succeeded in making Ethan even more uncomfortable. "Tell me where?" Fitz asked. "Do you need a healer?"

"No, I'll be fine. It's just a few aches and pains." Ethan's breath hitched as he spoke, Fitz was so damn near. He remembered the first time he'd seen Fitz as a boy. He'd been following his uncle's entourage through the market square when a boy of perhaps seven or maybe eight had been barrelled out of the way by the guards. The basket of fruit the boy had been carrying spilt and apples rolled everywhere. Once all the nobles had passed, Fitz stopped and came back to help Ethan and the boy pick up the fruit. There'd been many small encounters like this over the years, and Ethan remembered each one—he was under no illusion, though, that Fitz would know who he was.

"The hot water will be good for your aches. I can help you bathe." Fitz's voice faltered as he said the words. Reaching out, he caressed Ethan's face as steam rose in spirals from the ornate porcelain bath behind him. This may be a camp, and only temporary, but the King's representatives travelled with only the most desired of accessories. Fitz stood and popped the seal on a bottle of oil. He tipped it into the water and instantly the tent was filled with a sweet, vanilla essence. "Come Ethan, let me clean you."

Entranced by the husky voice, Ethan stood and fumbled with the lacing of his half trousers. "Here." Fitz moved his hands out of the way and pulled the laces for him. He loosened the top of the leather garment and placed his thumbs in, ready to ease them off. The two were standing so close. Ethan could see that the green of Fitz's eyes wasn't as clear as he'd thought, it was broken by tiny amber flecks, like glints of sun. Pale stubble, the same gold as his hair, graced his chin. Lips so perfectly shaped, plump and inviting, parted slightly and made Fitz look more wanton than anyone Mistress Viola had to offer. Ethan closed his eyes and concentrated on breathing. In, out. It was simple really, but with Fitz so close it seemed almost impossible.

Strong fingers pushed into the waist of the trousers and slid them off. Gripping the other man's shoulders for balance, Ethan stepped out of them, unashamed of his hardened cock. Straightening, Fitz stood so close, so near, that his breath whispered across Ethan's face; a promise so sweet, breathing

itself became difficult. He leaned forward and Fitz wrapped his arms around him to pull him even closer.

“Aaah!” Ethan couldn’t stop the exclamation of pain.

“I’ve hurt you?” Concern laced Fitz’s eyes.

“It’s nothing, just a bruise. It will be fine when I’m in the water.” Ethan pulled away, embarrassed at giving into the pain. The water, when he got in, was like nothing he had experienced before. The bottom classes bathed in the river in the summer and just didn’t bathe in the winter. This, this was divine. Warmth wrapped around him, swirling over his limbs and up his torso. Fitz climbed in and knelt behind him, his rigid cock pressing into Ethan’s back, and unused to the forwardness of the upper classes, Ethan froze for a moment. But heat and desire invaded his sanity, stole his fear and helped him relax.

Tipping a little cleaning lather into his hands, Fitz ran them over Ethan’s body and Ethan sighed, sinking into his touch. Strong strokes swept up his back over his shoulders and down his front. A soft moan escaped from Ethan’s lips, his senses were overloaded as they had never been before. Vanilla and sweet, soft and smooth, hard and gentle. Candles flickered and shapes danced around the tent. Fitz’s strong hands rubbed Ethan’s shoulders and Ethan couldn’t help but groan at the nagging ache there.

“Here?” Fitz asked, rubbing in firm motions across the painful area. Long strokes up his neck, then down his arm, talented fingers gently plied the aching joint, soothing away the pain.

“Goddess, that feels good.”

“Oh, I can make you feel a whole lot better than this,” said Fitz softly into his ear, as he moved his hands back down and over Ethan’s stomach. Ethan groaned again—this time with desire. Love and lust were widely celebrated in all forms in both the noble and merchant classes, but those in the bottom class were too overworked and too exhausted to have more than the odd, occasional fumble to release any pent up feelings of lust. Unions in the bottom class were made solely to carry on bloodlines, not to satisfy sexual needs. Young couples who joined together with the intention of bringing children into the world were given easier duties by the higher classes—a way of enticing them into populating the bottom class. After all, the rich and entitled would always need people to toil for them. So, Ethan had never actually felt the loving touch of another man. Night visions causing a need for fresh sleeping straw and occasional quick fumbles were all he had experienced.

Now Fitz's strong hands were running over his thighs and across his stomach, fingers brushing his balls and shaft, feather-light strokes that left him aching. He pushed back against Fitz, longing for more.

"Have you done this before?" Fitz asked, nipping lightly at Ethan's neck.

Ethan shook his head. "Not like this," he said, refusing to let shame slip into his voice. He may have been born in the bottom class, but he had already started his journey up in the world. "Not like this," he repeated, "just hands, rubbing for relief."

"My sleeping tent would be better," said Fitz, after a moment's silence. "Let's get this mud from you now." Ethan accepted a handful of cleansing lather and soaped his body and hair, jolting at the cooling water Fitz used to rinse the suds from him. He climbed from the bath and wrapped himself in a soft length of linen, savouring the gentleness against his skin. Fitz cleaned his own body and wrapped himself up before grabbing Ethan's hand and leading him through the camp to his sleeping tent.

He repeated his instructions to not be disturbed to the guards outside, and dismissed the servants waiting there for him as soon as they'd lit the candles. Once the tent flap was tied up behind them, Ethan was pulled roughly towards Fitz. Hands clasped his cheeks and their faces were just a whisper apart. "Is this what you want?" Fitz asked.

Swallowing hard, Ethan stared into searching green eyes and nodded before closing the gap between them. Rough lips moved against his mouth with need and want. A faint taste of honey-mead and the sweet scent of vanilla. Hard, then gentle, then seeking more. Hands loosened his linen wrap, it fell to the ground and their bodies pressed together. Ethan's chest, smooth, and Fitz's, covered lightly in hair. Ethan trailed his hand up, longing to feel all of Fitz, needing him so much and in so many ways. He ran his fingers in the short hairs at the back of Fitz's neck and pulled him in tighter, kissing harder, nipping lightly at his perfect mouth.

Fitz moaned and his cock twitched against Ethan's stomach. Strong hands clasped Ethan and he found himself being forced to move backwards, until his knees hit something soft and he collapsed back. "My bed," muttered Fitz, pulling away slightly as Ethan gazed up at the silky canopy above him. Swathes of material in deep red and silver were artfully draped above him and the same silky material covered the mattress beneath them. Ethan had no notion what the

mattress was made of, but he knew it wasn't straw as his was. *Or, had been*, he reminded himself. Now he didn't need to have a scratchy straw bed ever again.

Fitz rolled further onto the bed so they were facing each other. "Is this what you want?" he repeated, running his palm flatly over Ethan's chest. Nearly losing the ability to think, Ethan just nodded and submitted to his touch, his back arching as Fitz sucked on his nipples. Pleasure, wanton and lustful, a yearning to touch and to be touched. Hands caressing, lips seeking and searching new places, new treasures. Time became irrelevant; Ethan knew not if one turn of the clock had passed or several. Fitz touched him in places he'd never thought of being touched and he mirrored the actions. A hot mouth encasing his cock caused stars to dance in his head.

This love fun was unlike any he had ever known. Before, it was hands on cocks, rubbing until a need had been satisfied—it had been fast and weary and of limited pleasure. Not that Ethan had realised this until Fitz had started his exploration. He hadn't known the bliss of having his cock sucked, or the musky, unique taste of another man. He hadn't known that gentle bites and a probing tongue could elicit feelings of pure joy. Fitz stopped and reached over Ethan. Grabbing a small vial, he tipped floral-scented oil onto his hands, hands that he stroked over Ethan's thighs and pushed up over his arse. Need rose in Ethan as Fitz caressed the muscled cheeks and fingers dipped towards his most private part. He groaned, called out incoherently as the fingers brushed and probed, teasing and never going as far as Ethan wanted them to.

"Soon," Fitz promised, as he withdrew his touch, leaving Ethan bereft. "Tonight this will be better for you. I need you too much to be gentle and your first time *should* be gentle." Not knowing of what he was talking, Ethan ached with need, a longing that only grew as Fitz rubbed his oil-slick hands over his own backside. Fitz leaned forward and kissed him, then lifted himself above Ethan. Oily fingers wrapped around his cock and rubbed once, twice, and then Fitz was pushing Ethan inside him.

Tight and warm and "Oh goddess!" Ethan cried out, as Fitz slowly moved. Everything was the man moving up and down on him, hard muscled thighs and the tightest, most beautiful arse. Finding Fitz's rhythm, Ethan matched it, aware only of the intensity building inside him. His hands clutched the silk beneath him and he called out, low guttural noises that meant both nothing and everything. Pressure grew, immense and perfect and born of pure need and deep longing. It built and built and grew and grew until there was only the

power pooling in his cock, and then he could hold it no more. An explosion, and every nerve in his body danced and sang.

Slowly, slowly, time returned to normal. He felt Fitz move off of him, then the gentle wiping over his stomach. The cool water brought him back, back to the tent and the red and silver canopy. Back to Fitz. He realised the other man had spilt his seed on his stomach and this was what he was washing gently away. Their eyes met and a slow smile crept across the other man's face. "Is it always like that?" Ethan whispered, afraid of breaking the spell they'd woven.

Fitz shook his head, "It's never been like that." He threw the damp linen onto the ground and climbed beside Ethan, pulling the silky sheet from under them and letting it cover their naked bodies.

"What now?" Ethan asked, staring into Fitz's eyes.

"Now we sleep, Ethan, here together, and tomorrow I see about joining the King's army. But tomorrow is a whole night away, so let's not worry about it yet." Ethan didn't want to sleep, but slumber stole in anyway. The softness of the mattress and the warmth of Fitz enclosed him, and contentment covered him like a blanket. Today, his life was starting again, and what better birth could he have hoped for than this?

Epilogue

Sunday was rest day, an idea Ethan still found hard to comprehend a year after leaving his hamlet. Fitz did his best to make him rest and play, but so many years of conditioning were hard to break. Strolling through the stables, Ethan stopped at the stall of his beloved mare. Crooning softly to her, he offered up some carrot, entered the stall and started to brush her. All the time he talked softly under his breath, and, though he could have told tales of the changes he was making, the influence he had on no one less than the King himself, he instead told his mare his favourite story of all, the one of the night of the tourney, the one where his life changed forever. He spoke briefly of the fighting but mostly of the loving. His mare had heard this story many, many times but Ethan never tired of telling it. Never wearied of speaking about the first time he'd felt Fitz's hands, tasted his lips, learnt what a joy it was to love a man. That night was branded in his brain forever.

"Hush now," his lover's teasing voice interrupted his story. "Poor Bess has heard this account too many times."

“There is never too many times for me to tell this tale,” Ethan responded, admiring Fitz, in his casual Sunday linen, anew.

“Well, I can think of better things for that mouth to be doing other than flapping at a horse’s ear.” Fitz slipped into the stall and closed the gap between them.

“Oh you can, can you? And pray tell me and the goddess what they are.”

“Well, I thought perhaps this for a start,” said Fitz, smiling softly before brushing his lips briefly over Ethan’s.

Ethan returned the smile. “This time, hmm, yes, this time you might be right,” he conceded, touching his own kiss to his lover’s mouth. *Maybe Sundays didn’t need to be all about work*, he thought, before thinking was no longer an option.

The End

Author Bio

*Books with romance, books with sex,
Voodoo books and books with hex,
Fantasy, mystery, humour and crime,
Young adult, adult adult and kids from time to time,
In all their shapes and all their sizes,
I love books in all their guises.*

Olley White is the pseudonym of Lori Powell, an English gal who likes reading too much, housework too little and her family the perfect amount. As she writes YA books under her actual name and doesn't want a youngster stumbling across the ~~smut~~ more adult books she writes, she thought an AKA was the way to go.

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